PART I

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON COVERT RACISM
Racism has historically been one of the most prominent American cultural frames (shared group constructions of reality) and has played a major role in determining how whites perceive and act toward blacks. Basically, racism is an ideology of racial domination that features two things: (1) beliefs that one race is either biologically or culturally inferior to another and (2) the use of such beliefs to rationalize or prescribe the way that the “inferior” race should be treated in this society as well as to explain their social position as a group and their collective accomplishments. In the United States today there is no question that the more categorical forms of racist ideology—in particular, those that assert the biogenetic inferiority of blacks—have declined significantly, even though they still may be embedded in institutional norms and practices, e.g., school tracking, the practice of grouping students of similar capability for instruction, which not only tends to segregate African American students, but often results in placing some black students in lower level classes even though they have the cultural capital—requisite skills for learning—to compete with students in higher level classes.1

However, there has emerged a form of what Lawrence Bobo and his colleagues refer to as “laissez faire racism,” a perception that blacks are responsible for their own economic predicament and therefore undeserving of special government support.2 The idea that the federal government “has a special obligation to help improve the living standards of blacks” because they “have been discriminated against for so long”

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* Parts of this paper are based on my book, More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City, Norton Press, 2009.