A decade ago, most white Americans believed that racism was no longer a problem in the United States, that racism disappeared when legal segregation was abolished with the civil rights legislation of the 1960s (Blauner 1994). Today, the claim that racism is a thing of the past continues to have a strong hold on the white American psyche. Indeed, conservative writers like to point out that racism has declined precipitously since the mid-1960s and that people today are treated equally (see Thernstrom & Thernstrom 2003; McWhorter 2006). This view, however, is shortsighted in that it considers only blatant expressions of racism, and it presumes equal treatment for people who do not share equal footing. This view ignores the gap between black and white life chances that still stands, a gap that results largely from covert forms of racism, some of which is performed by well-meaning white people. The thinking expressed in this chapter extends to all racial and ethnic minority groups; however, because the research was limited to racism against African Americans, references are limited to that group.

This chapter has three threads. The first reveals the presence of silent racism—the negative thoughts, images, and assumptions about African Americans—that exists in the minds of well-meaning white people who see themselves, and would be seen by other white people, as “not racist” (Trepagnier 2006:3). Evidence of silent racism forces us to question the commonsense, categorical thinking used to think about racism today, namely, that people are either racist or not racist. The second thread shows how passivity in well-meaning white people works with silent racism in the production of institutional racism. Together, silent racism and passivity maintain the racial and ethnic inequality that persists in the U.S. despite laws intended to lessen it. And finally, the third thread in this chapter illustrates that increasing race awareness in well-meaning white people, a topic generally overlooked by race theorists, is more important than trying to eliminate racism. Together these three threads construct a new way of thinking about racism in the 21st century.
Silent Racism

Silent racism stems from the racist ideology that permeates U.S. society and inhabits the minds of all white people, making silent racism a cultural phenomenon. This does not imply that all whites are affected by silent racism in a similar way; however, it does imply that all whites are infected. Silent racism is not the same as prejudice, which refers to an individual’s attitude about particular social groups. In contrast, silent racism is not an attitude; it is a cultural artifact of U.S. society. Silent racism refers to the shared images and assumptions of members of the dominant group about subordinate groups (Blumer 1958)—that is, the shared images and assumptions held by white Americans about black Americans and other people of color.

This line of thinking leads to scrutiny of an erroneous way of thinking about racism prevalent in the minds of many, including racial progressives: the idea that people are either racist or not racist. The study of silent racism sought out well-meaning white women willing to talk about their own racism. The approach required openness about a topic that is rarely discussed, and yet people were eager to join the study. Twenty-five women participated in eight focus groups, and kept their thoughts about racism in a journal for three weeks following their discussion. Their stories indicate that silent racism does exist in the minds of well-meaning white people. Participants either acknowledged their own silent racism or demonstrated it in the study, indicating that the not racist category is both inaccurate and deceptive (Trepagnier 2001 and 2006).

Categorical thinking regarding racism does not accurately portray racism held by white Americans today because the oppositional categories, while they highlight blatant racism, hide silent racism and other forms that are not explicit. And yet, these subtle forms of racism do more to maintain racial inequality than blatant forms of racism, which are not portrayed by the categories. Transforming the oppositional categories racist and not racist into a continuum labeled more racist at one end and less racist at the other would illustrate that racism is a matter of degree—some is egregious and some is subtle. Even more important, a racism continuum would illuminate the fact that no one is literally not racist, suggesting instead that some racism is routine, informing the conduct of people going about their everyday lives. Everyday racism refers to the routine actions taken by whites that have negative effects for blacks (Essed 1991).