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## Colorblind Racism and Market-Based Development

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**ABSTRACT** Over the past two decades, the range of efforts to address global poverty and development has expanded dramatically. Yet, many of these approaches foreground market-based development and extend harmful neoliberal practices. Scholars have critiqued these practices for expanding capitalism to new realms, while others are more optimistic about the potential benefits of markets. In this study, I add a racial analysis to this conversation, arguing that colorblind racism plays a key role in justifying market-based development practices and obscuring enduring racial inequalities in development. I focus on a growing subfield of development—development engineering education—to demonstrate how colorblind racism informs students’ and practitioners’ approaches to development. Through interviews and observations of two development engineering programs and affiliated development organizations, I found that students and practitioners employed colorblind frameworks to legitimize market-based development, embracing the market as a seemingly race-neutral mechanism, in contrast to the overt racism that they connected to development aid. This research shows that to understand the popularity of neoliberal approaches to development, it is necessary to attend to how colorblind racism lends support to market-based practices. Further, this study illustrates the need to address multiple and mutating forms of racism in development. **KEYWORDS** colorblindness, development, markets, neoliberalism, race, racism

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OVER THE PAST DECADES, efforts to reduce global poverty have expanded dramatically, forming a vast array of opportunities to address development concerns (Roy et al. 2016). Programs such as development engineering have appeared in many leading universities, as students increasingly pursue education and careers in the development field (Nieuwma and Riley 2010; Roy et al. 2016). Indeed, interest in global poverty and development has become so prominent that Ananya Roy and her colleagues (2016:27) have argued that “the emergence of poverty as a public concern of global scale is one of the defining features of the end of the twentieth century and the start of the new millennium.” This rising interest represents a potent opportunity to work toward a more equitable world.

Yet, despite the range of opportunities to *solve* global poverty, critics point out that few of these efforts question or address what *causes* poverty (Roy et al. 2016). For example, Roy and her colleagues argue that one of the great contradictions of development efforts is that it is often “assumed that the very relations of impoverishment—such as the market economy—can be repurposed to mitigate poverty” (49). While no longer advocating neoliberal “shock therapy” (Klein 2007:7), many development efforts continue to present market-based engagement as a solution to various development needs

(Roy et al. 2016). These market-based development practices draw on central tenets of neoliberal ideology, including the belief that participation in the market is the best means to improve social well-being (Harvey 2005).

Concern with market-based development has elicited a broad range of responses, including strong condemnation as well as a more optimistic embrace of the market's potential. As a brief overview of this debate, on the one hand, those who oppose market-based development express concerns over the intensification of inequalities under neoliberal policies, the reduction of collective needs to individual efforts, the extension of the market into new realms, and exploitative labor practices (Goldman 2005; Harvey 2005; Karim 2008; Wilson 2012). Yet, despite these negative effects, development institutions have furthered market-based development approaches through coercive practices as well as co-opting critiques of neoliberalism by selectively incorporating concerns such as community participation and empowerment (Cornwall and Brock 2005; Downey 2015; Goldman 2005; Leal 2007; Harvey 2005; Phillips and Ilcan 2004). On the other hand, those who are more optimistic about market-based methods of development argue for more nuanced attention to the heterogeneous effects of market-based policies, rather than outright condemnation. For example, some scholars contend that microlending programs can democratize credit, enhance social capital among women, increase gender parity in the public sphere, and offer alternatives to the failures of statist development policies (Sanyal 2014; Yunus 2007).

However, what is frequently missing from these debates about market-based development is the role of race in shaping economic conditions, and how neoliberal approaches can reproduce racially unequal circumstances. As scholars of race have shown, markets are not race-neutral, and economic processes are shaped by racial processes (Du Bois 1998; Melamed 2015; Omi and Winant 2015; Robinson 2000). Further, development scholars have argued that race has been a central factor in structuring global inequalities, emphasizing how colonial divisions and racial hierarchies have been central to the production of modernity and distinctions between developed and undeveloped, the First and Third worlds, and the global North and South (Escobar 1995; Kothari 2006a, 2006b; Quijano 2000). The constructions of supposedly "natural" racial differences have been used to rationalize slavery, colonization, and other inequalities produced through capitalist development (Mills 1997; Omi and Winant 2015). Therefore, race has been and continues to be a core organizational aspect of social relations. However, despite the significance of race in understanding historical and contemporary inequalities, development scholarship still lacks a thorough engagement with scholarship on race, such as how material conditions in development are shaped by racial structures and ideologies (Kothari 2006a; Pailey 2020; Patel 2020; White 2002; Wilson 2012).

Therefore, in this study I focus on an important and growing subfield of development—development engineering education—to ask, how do students and development practitioners frame market-based development practices as desirable approaches to development? And further, what role do race and racial ideology play in shaping their understanding of development practices?

My central argument is that colorblind racism is a key mechanism through which market-based practices appear appealing and legitimate to development practitioners and students. Colorblind racism (or colorblindness) is the dominant U.S. racial ideology, which upholds racial inequalities by discounting the role of race in shaping social conditions, and reducing racism to overt prejudice, rather than seeing racism as embedded in social structures and institutions (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Colorblind racism perpetuates structural racial inequalities in development by discounting, denying, or omitting attention to the historical and contemporary processes through which unequal resources and value are allotted to socially constructed racial groups.

Specifically, I found that development engineering students and practitioners created divisions between what they perceived as the overt racism of development aid, and the colorblind appeal of market-based development. They expressed support for market-based development because it appeared to offer a more empowering, egalitarian, participatory, and colorblind approach to development, in contrast to the overt racism that they connected to development aid. In the context of this study, “development aid” refers to practices based on donations or grant funding, while “market-based development” refers to approaches which emphasize business and profit-generating practices, such as privatized water and sanitation systems.

I describe three ways that students and practitioners distinguish market-based approaches from development aid: dependency versus empowerment; hierarchy versus equality; and imposition versus participation. I show that each of these distinctions relies on contrasts between overt racism and colorblindness. By employing colorblind frameworks, students and practitioners attempt to resist racial hierarchies, but ultimately perpetuate racism in development by leaving structural racial inequalities unaddressed.

This research contributes to development scholarship by showing how theory on colorblind racism can augment understanding of development processes and inequalities. Specifically, to understand the popularity of market-based approaches, it is necessary to attend to the role of colorblind racism in bolstering neoliberal ideals and practices. Further, this study heeds calls for research illustrating the mechanisms linking racial ideology to material practices (Hughey, Embrick, and Doane 2015; Wilson 2012), and illustrates the importance of attending to the multiple and mutating forms of racism in development. Understanding how inequality is reproduced through intersecting racial and economic processes will better enable us to challenge these injustices.

## CHANGING FORMS OF NEOLIBERALISM IN DEVELOPMENT

Neoliberal practices in development have undergone substantial changes in the past few decades. At the end of the twentieth century, they faced a crisis of legitimacy stemming from the failure of Washington Consensus policies, as well as pressures from oppositional movements (Hart 2001; Sheppard and Leitner 2010). Yet, development made a resurgence at the turn of the twenty-first century, marked by the Millennium Development Goals and concern with global poverty in new institutional contexts, such as the university-based development engineering programs considered here (Hart 2001; Roy

et al. 2016). This shift represented a change in development policy toward increased concern with civil society, social capital, and empowerment (Murray and Overton 2010; Roy 2010; Sheppard and Leitner 2010). However, many scholars argue that this new development agenda is a rearticulation of neoliberal capitalism, rather than an alternative to it (Hart 2001; Roy 2010; Sheppard and Leitner 2010). Indeed, many development organizations continue to advocate empowerment and improvement through participation in markets (Roy et al. 2016). Thus, scholars have investigated the continuing effects of neoliberalism, as well as the processes transforming and upholding neoliberal practices in development.

As I have mentioned, those opposing market-based development argue that it extends capitalism into new realms, increases inequalities and exploitative labor practices, and reduces collective empowerment to individual advances. For example, some researchers have drawn attention to how transnational development institutions use coercive and violent practices to advance neoliberal policies and create new conditions of capital accumulation, resource extraction, and new labor pools (Downey 2015; Harvey 2005). States and industries often employ armed violence to further neoliberal development and pave the way for privatization, mining, and other extractive enterprises (Downey 2015).

Other scholars draw on Gramscian notions of consent to argue that neoliberal practices become dominant by mobilizing support throughout civil society. Development institutions co-opt and rearticulate critiques of neoliberalism by deploying concepts such as participation, sustainability, rights, and empowerment in a depoliticized manner that further institutionalizes neoliberal development practices (Cornwall and Brock 2005; Goldman 2005; Hale 2005; Karim 2008; Kothari 2005; Leal 2007; Phillips and Ilcan 2004; Roy 2010; Wilson 2012). For example, development institutions use the principles of participation and empowerment to underwrite their own legitimacy, yet often reduce these ideals to measurements of market engagement rather than attention to power and resources (Cornwall and Brock 2005; Wilson 2012). And, while many market-based policies bring more attention to women in development, these policies also intensify gender divisions, the feminization of labor, and the disciplining and surveillance of women's lives (Karim 2008; Molyneux 2006; Wilson 2012).

In contrast, those in favor of market-based development argue that markets provide opportunities for economic uplift and empowerment. Practices such as microcredit can be attractive because they combat some of the shortcomings of states and large development institutions, benefit both lenders and participants through expanded access to capital (with high repayment rates), and enhance opportunities for agency and empowerment (Armendáriz de Aghion and Morduch 2005; Yunus 2007). For example, Sanyal (2014) finds that microcredit programs enhance social connections and participation among women, arguing that "regardless of the economic consequences of loan use and the patterns of loan control, the associational aspects of microcredit promotes women's agency in a large proportion of cases and in significant ways" (6). And Valle (2018) demonstrates that in practice, development organizations can employ neoliberal, market-based development approaches while simultaneously applying more radical feminist principles of collectivity and cooperation. Therefore, these scholars argue for more

nanced attention to the multiple consequences and types of neoliberal practices, and to how people navigate the constraints of neoliberalism in ways that can defy total oppression and exploitation.

## RACE, CAPITALISM, AND DEVELOPMENT

However, what is often missing in these debates about market-based practices is attention to the role of race in development, and the entwined structures of race, capitalism, and development. Debates on the effects of neoliberal policies often overlook the racial aspects of these practices, including the intersections between racial and economic inequalities, and the ways that capitalism both produces and relies on racial hierarchy.

As scholars of race and racial capitalism have shown, economic processes are shaped by racial processes, for capitalism mobilizes and feeds on socially-constructed racial differences (Du Bois 1998; Melamed 2015; Omi and Winant 2015; Robinson 2000). Therefore, our understanding of capitalism, development, and modernity is incomplete without attention to the role of race. Racial categories have no biological basis, yet race is a “fundamental organizing principle of social stratification” which affects all social relations, including rights, resources, and justifications for oppression (Omi and Winant 2015:107).

Omi and Winant (2015) have argued that racial categories are formed through racial projects, which link racial representation to the distribution of resources along racial lines. The colonization of the Americas and the rise of slavery were the first massive racial projects, through which Europeans organized people hierarchically into distinct racial groups which formed the justification for slavery and conquest. As both race and decolonial scholars have shown, this racialization was necessary for new systems of domination which used these racial groups to signify positions of power and relations in the political economic system (Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Omi and Winant 2015; Quijano 2000). According to Quijano (2000:216), “Race’ . . . was placed as one of the basic criteria to classify the population in the power structure of the new society, associated with the nature of roles and places in the division of labor and in the control of resources of production.”

Racial classifications not only formed the basis for the division and control of labor and resources, but also established a Eurocentric perspective that relegated non-Europeans to primitive, uncivilized states, and created dualisms of white/nonwhite and civilized/uncivilized (Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Mills 1997; Quijano 2000). Modernity relies on a racial myth that distinguishes white Europeans as “naturally” superior to others and justifies the subordination of people of color (Feagin 2020; McClintock 1995; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Mills 1997; Quijano 2000). This racial worldview naturalizes global inequalities as deriving from supposedly inherent racial differences, rather than exploitative and predatory relations.

Further, scholars have drawn attention to the significance of the spatialization of race in justifying colonial and capitalist interventions. Whites have consistently

categorized non-white populations as inhabiting unproductive, uncivilized space, thus justifying conquest, seizure, and redevelopment (Mills 1997). Therefore, race must be treated as central to the logic and structure of capitalist progress, dispossession, and development.

#### FROM OVERT RACISM TO COLORBLINDNESS

While overt racism characterized much of the period up to the mid-twentieth century, explicit forms of racism have become less salient since World War II. Following the war, the rise in anti-racist and decolonial movements resulted in a break in overt, worldwide white supremacy (Omi and Winant 2015; Winant 2001). However, overt white supremacy has been replaced by more insidious and covert forms of racial rule (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Omi and Winant 2015; Winant 2001). Scholars have argued that *colorblind racism* forms the ideological foundation of the contemporary, covert system of racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Omi and Winant 2015). As extensively theorized by Bonilla-Silva (2014), colorblind racism explains racial inequality as the result of nonracial dynamics, such as class or culture, and reduces racism to a matter of individual prejudice or to an aberration in an otherwise egalitarian society. Colorblind racism relegates racism to a past time and place, rather than treating racial inequality as embedded in structures and institutions.

This shift from overt racism to racial colorblindness perhaps helps explain the scarcity of scholarship in development directly confronting race. White (2002) has argued that development studies and institutions often omit such considerations, producing a “determining silence [on race] that both masks and marks its centrality to the development project” (408). Wilson (2012:3) has similarly described a “profound silence” on race in development scholarship, while Pailey (2020:732) sees a “deliberate and exacting absence of race in scholarly discourse.” Indeed, Patel’s (2020) review of six leading development journals since Kothari’s (2006b) call for greater attention to race and development finds only 24 articles (0.26%) published between 2006 and 2019 that addressed race in a substantial way. Yet race continues to organize development knowledge, structure, and practice in mutating ways (Kothari 2006a; Pailey 2020; White 2002). As Pailey (2020:732) has explained, “development is fundamentally raced, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not.”

In recent studies examining race and development, multiple scholars have found racial inequalities in power dynamics among development practitioners and community members, such as heightened respect for whites’ expertise and authority (Crewe and Fernando 2006; Kothari 2006a, 2006b; Loftsdóttir 2009; Lough and Carter-Black 2015; White 2002, 2006). Pailey (2020) has argued that there is a persistent “white gaze” of development, “which assumes whiteness as the primary referent of power, prestige and progress across the world” (733). This argument is reinforced by research by Turner (2020:138), who found that humanitarian agencies celebrate Syrian refugees who are seen as “closer to whiteness” for their independence and entrepreneurship, while characterizing Black African refugees as passive and dependent. Further, in her in-depth examination of race and

development, Wilson (2012, 2017) has demonstrated how shifts toward women's entrepreneurship in development have reproduced racialized ideas concerning men of color's irresponsibility, and how population control policies in development engage with stereotypes of women of color's supposed "over-fertility."

While these scholars have brought important attention to race and development, there is still a need for more direct correspondence between racial theory and development studies, particularly regarding the relationships between race and economy. Wilson (2012) has called for more scholarship detailing the specific relationships between shifting racial ideologies and changing material conditions in development. For instance, Omi and Winant (2015) and Bonilla-Silva (2014) have argued that colorblindness and neoliberalism are mutually reinforcing, with each providing the ideological foundation for the other. Colorblindness provides the myth of equality on which neoliberal meritocracy depends, bolstering the belief that contemporary inequalities are the result of poor decisions or character, rather than racially unequal conditions. Yet, while scholars have pointed out development's tendency to be colorblind (Kothari 2006a; White 2002), to the best of my knowledge, there is as yet no scholarship empirically applying Bonilla-Silva's (2014) theory of colorblind racism in development research, nor any examining how this relates to neoliberal development forms.

Bonilla-Silva (2014) has identified four principal frames of colorblindness: *abstract liberalism* (using decontextualized references to liberal principles such as "equality" to discount structural racial disadvantages); *naturalization* (reducing racial inequalities to natural differences between racial groups); *cultural racism* (explaining racial inequality as the result of supposed cultural traits, such as laziness), and *minimizing racism* (discounting the ongoing severity of racism and racial inequality). Recent work by Mueller (2017) has expanded on these frames to include *evasion* (precluding conversations about race); *tautological ignorance* (passive ignorance or innocence regarding racism); and *mystifying practical solutions* to racial inequality. In this study, I found that students and practitioners invoked the colorblind frames of abstract liberalism, cultural racism, minimization, and tautological ignorance, often using multiple colorblind frames in combination. I argue that colorblind racism is one significant mechanism through which market-based practices appear appealing and legitimate to development practitioners and students.

In sum, while previous research has examined how neoliberal policies are perpetuated through coercion as well as more subtle co-optation and reframing—for example, in response to criticism that neoliberal practices are undemocratic, development institutions have characterized the market as a participatory mechanism—much of this research has neglected to examine the intersections of racial and economic processes and inequalities. This reflects a broader dearth of engagement with race in development scholarship and practice, despite the significance of race in organizing social relations. In this study, I demonstrate how colorblind racism lends support to neoliberal practices in development, and illustrate some of the contemporary ways that race and racism continue to inform development practice.

## METHODS

This study is based on interviews and observations with U.S.-based development engineering students and affiliated development professionals and organizations, as well as content analysis of program and organization materials. Development engineering is a growing subfield of engineering which trains engineers to address global poverty and development goals, through (for example) constructing, managing, or evaluating water and sanitation systems, transportation infrastructure, or energy systems. While engineering is often associated with objectivity and technicism (Faulkner 2007), development engineering students at U.S.-based universities often take broader curricula in the social sciences (Amadei 2003; Nieuwma and Riley 2010). Indeed, development engineering programs encompass efforts in engineering education to move away from an overly technical approach, embracing social justice and humanitarian concerns (Niles et al. 2020; Riley 2008). In addition to the central role of NGOs in development (Karim 2008), this study highlights how university-based development programs play a significant role in shaping development knowledge and practice (Roy et al. 2016; Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008). Indeed, alumni of the development engineering programs I studied work at large development institutions such as USAID, the World Bank, and the United Nations, in addition to smaller development organizations.

In my analysis, I draw from 42 interviews with development engineering students and faculty, approximately 200 hours of observation of development engineering classes and affiliated events, and content analysis of website and print materials from two U.S.-based development engineering programs and affiliated organizations. This study is a part of a broader research project on development engineering involving multiple research team members who contributed to research design and data collection.<sup>1</sup> Most of the data analyzed for this study were collected by this author, although I also draw from data collected by other team members. I conducted observations of development engineering students as well as affiliated engineering and non-engineering development professionals at conferences, classes, and discussion groups. These ranged in length from one hour to day-long observations. Most of the observations and interviews (approximately 140 hours of observations and 36 interviews) were conducted at one development engineering program, which served as the primary research site and from which most of this study's data are drawn. An additional 60 hours of observation and six interviews at a second development engineering program served to broaden my understanding of the field. Both of the programs studied are well-established, leading programs in development engineering in the United States.

The students in this study all took part in applied work for their degrees, such as an internship or applied course project. Most of these internships took place in Central and South America, Africa, or Southeast Asia, and included work in both urban and rural areas. Students focused on WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene), air quality, and infrastructure, such as designing earthquake-resistant buildings. The context and type of students' work varied, as did the work of organizations featured at affiliated conferences and events, so that students were taught about a variety of development approaches

and environments, including market-based practices. For example, the students and professionals I studied were involved in organizations that marketed, sold, and constructed latrines. The idea behind these market-based practices is that through building profits, rather than relying on state-based development or donations of services, sanitation systems will become more sustainable, for they will be internally supported rather than relying on outside intervention, such as grant funding.

Interview respondents were selected by choosing students in key leadership positions to interview, asking for referrals, and using connections made at observations and events. The interviewees include 6 undergraduate students, 17 Masters students, and 12 PhD students, of whom I identified 7 (20%) as students of color, and 19 (54%) as women.<sup>2</sup> I also interviewed three white faculty members and one white PhD alumnus. While I did not conduct an official demographic survey on the programs studied, based on my observation data, the demographics of my interviewees are similar to the overall racial and gender demographics of the programs at the time of study.

Students' motivations for pursuing development engineering varied. For example, some students wanted to use their resources and education to serve others; some turned to development as a way of rejecting pressures within engineering to work for military or extractive industries. Many were motivated by experiences on mission trips or other service trips through schools or churches, while others had personal experiences with economic inequalities which motivated their work. While an analysis of these differences is beyond the scope of this current study, one important direction for future research is to examine how different backgrounds and motivations for pursuing development work influence approaches to and understanding of development.

Because of the small number of students of color in this study, I am unable to make direct comparisons among different racial groups; instead I focus on themes which resonated across interviews and observations. One limitation of this study is that it primarily focuses on the views of white students and practitioners. Future research should more deeply investigate the views of people from different social locations on development and their engagement with racial ideology. Because of the small number of students of color in these programs, to maintain internal confidentiality (Tolich 2004), I use the term "students of color" in my analysis rather than identifying these participants' racial group or gender; whereas I describe my white interviewees and conference presenters by both race and gender and provide other descriptive details when doing so would not disclose their identities to others.

In my interviews I asked open-ended questions, focusing on students' motivations for entering the field of development engineering, principles of working ethically in development, and what they believe are appropriate approaches to development challenges. I used a semi-structured interview format to allow participants to guide the conversation toward topics they found significant (Rubin and Rubin 2005). One of the strengths of this inductive approach to research was that, while I did not initially anticipate finding these dynamics of race and market-based development when I began this study, I was able to adjust my interview guide as these topics became significant parts of interviews and observations.

While students did engage in some overt racial references during interviews, the dominant context of colorblindness in the United States makes explicit discussions of race difficult, especially with white interviewees, who often have been socialized to have little awareness of their racial group (Lewis 2004). Therefore, rather than starting with direct questions about racial identity, I asked open-ended questions about how students approached differences in power and resources between themselves and their clients, and how students felt their own identity impacted their work. I paid close attention to how students responded with both overt discussion and silences regarding race, power, and difference (Lewis 2004; Sue 2015). For example, I noticed that many white women and men would talk about how their gender, rather than race, impacted their work. Because I shared a white, American identity with many of the interviewees, this may have brought out more colorblind discussions, as our shared whiteness may have contributed to the invisibility of race, given that whiteness is often treated as an unmarked, raceless category. Therefore, I selectively followed up with more direct, probing questions about race in development, and I also facilitated a group discussion with students in which I used readings about race and development to prompt a more targeted racial discussion. In addition, much of the analysis in this study draws from discussions and references to race which came about indirectly, through questions about topics such as ethics in development and effective development practices.

Interviews averaged over an hour in length. With participants' consent, interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. I analyzed the interview transcripts, field notes, and content analysis using qualitative analysis software and a "flexible coding" method (Deterding and Waters 2018). After identifying key themes relating to race, markets, development approaches, and liberal values (such as equality), I engaged in a more detailed analysis of the connections between these themes.

## FINDINGS

### Encountering and Resisting Overt Racial Hierarchy

Many students described a persistent tension in their work stemming from their discomfort with the continuing influence of colonialism and racism in development. These students expressed sentiments similar to many post-development critiques. For example, when I asked a white, female student what she believed to be the major goals of development, she responded by describing the problems she sees with development. She explained:

Those paternalistic attitudes [in development] are still present. . . . For me, I feel like development is fundamentally flawed. You can say, "Okay, we are going to try to help people to try to get infrastructure," but it's still the white people are coming in and telling Africans how to live their lives. That is what colonialism was. . . . It's obviously not as violent or as severe, but I think that those attitudes have not gone away.

Similarly, when describing some of the problems with the development sector, another white, female student expressed discomfort with development because she believes many

development initiatives reflect the “white man’s burden”—a reference to justifications for colonialism—and that idea that white people are going to “save the world.” These students expressed an aversion to and frustration with the continuation of racism in development, even though the racial violence is less overt, or masked as paternalistic benevolence.

In another example, at the end of an interview, I asked a white male student if there was anything else he thought important to share with me. He answered, “Has anybody talked about the white savior? . . . I think that’s what [our] program is producing on the whole.” He continued to explain, “You can see all the students coming out of [our] program, and you can call 80 percent of them with that phrase” (white savior), even though, he clarified, “I don’t think you can find a single person at [our program] who will give you the three-word phrase, ‘colonialism is fine.’” His statement highlights the tension between students’ desire to distance themselves from colonialism, and the seemingly inescapable position of being a “white savior.” Even though no student will openly support colonialism or overt white supremacy, their experiences are still shaped by colonial practices and racial hierarchies. This student even claims that the development engineering program is “producing” white saviors, implying that it plays a key role in perpetuating racism in development. Many of the students who voiced these perspectives explained that, even though they were pursuing advanced degrees in international development, they now were considering alternative careers in domestic engineering work. These statements suggest that the perpetuation of racism in development was a significant factor in why these students were considering alternate careers.

Yet, while these students said that they did not know how to resolve these racial tensions in development, other students, faculty, and development practitioners actively sought to distinguish themselves from negative associations with colonialism and racism in development. They distanced themselves from overt racism in development by ascribing overt racial hierarchies to development aid, while framing market-based development as an alternative, colorblind approach. For example, during a classroom observation, a professor pointed out that referring to development “beneficiaries” sounds “too much like the white man’s burden,” and that it is better to use terms like “clients” and “consumers” instead. That is, the professor used market discourse as a means to resolve racial tensions, and to differentiate market-based development practices from overt racial hierarchies.

In what follows, I show how students and practitioners contend with racism in development by creating distinctions between what they perceive as the overt racism of aid, and the ostensible race-neutrality of markets. I describe three principal ways that students and practitioners distinguished market-based approaches from development aid: dependency versus empowerment; hierarchy versus equality; and imposition versus participation. Each of these distinctions also relies on contrasting racial relations between overt racism and colorblindness. While I have identified three categories, the three sections intersect and overlap.

## DISTINGUISHING MARKET-BASED PRACTICES FROM DEVELOPMENT AID

### Dependency versus Empowerment

One way students and practitioners created racial distinctions between aid and markets was by connecting development aid to dependency and paternalistic whiteness, while framing market-based development as a race-neutral alternative which promotes empowerment. Paternalistic whiteness positions whites as superior to others and refers to the belief that whites have a moral obligation to intervene in the lives of others. The term “dependency” is connected to a broader conversation of dependency theory in development, including critiques of how capitalism produces uneven development between nations (Frank 1966; Ghosh 2001). However, Fraser and Gordon (1994:331) have argued that despite the contributions of dependency theorists, “talk of dependency as a social relation of subordination has become increasingly rare.” Rather, dependency is most frequently invoked in connection to racialized critiques of “welfare dependency” and racial stereotypes about irresponsibility and laziness. Indeed, I found that when students and practitioners critiqued dependency in development, they often used the term in ways that invoked racial stereotypes of Black and Brown passivity and white paternalism.

For example, during an interview with a white, male student pursuing an internship evaluating different models of water privatization, I asked him about the ethical principles he considers to be important in development work. He responded by critiquing aid and donation-based models of development, stating that “there [is] no empowerment, no capacity building. You’re not doing anything to help people bring themselves up. You’re just kind of doing handouts.” He continued to explain,

In development discussions, charity is almost like a cussword because it brings to mind all of these cases where people are just given things, and it’s fostered a lot of dependency. . . . It’s so much easier to just hand someone something than it is to, like, work alongside them, to teach them how to bring themselves out of poverty, . . . removing yourself from the picture and not being the “white savior” for people who need it and rather taking an approach of being a friend to another human being who is struggling.

This student’s response highlights several important frameworks for thinking about the relationship between race and development. He linked development aid to overt racial hierarchy and a “white savior” approach to development, and critiqued aid with pejorative, racialized language, describing it with a negative tone as “handouts” that foster “dependency.” In contrast to the overt racism he associates with aid, he advocated equality between development practitioners and community members who work alongside each other, without “white saviors.”

Yet, while this student advocated equal relationships in development, he also stated that development practitioners should “teach them [communities] how to bring themselves out of poverty.” Thus, this student invokes a *cultural racism* colorblind frame that explains development inequalities as the result of a lack of knowledge, rather than an unequal economic system. Cultural racism colorblind frames attribute inequality to the

supposed traits and practices of different racial groups, such as the idea that certain groups are more proactive about learning than others (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Furthermore, he situates the development practitioner as the expert teacher, contradicting the equal relationship.

This student also expresses the need to “remov[e] yourself from the picture” and become more like a “friend to another human being.” His appeal to equality involves not only rejecting the overtly racist framework of the white savior, but also removing his entire racial identity, therefore becoming a raceless “friend” to another raceless “human being.” By rejecting overt racial hierarchies but failing to account for systemic differences in power and resources, this equalizing rhetoric obscures inequalities between the development engineer and the community members. Thus, this student also employed the *abstract liberalism* frame of colorblindness, asserting a vague and decontextualized relation of equality which discounts racial differences. Abstract liberalism colorblind frames make indistinct appeals to liberal values such as equality to discount inequalities between racial groups or to deny the need to address these inequalities (Bonilla-Silva 2014).

To resolve the racialized dependency and paternalism of aid, students and practitioners contrasted aid with the seemingly race-neutral empowerment of markets. For example, I attended a large, multi-day conference that was organized by the students of the primary development engineering program I studied. The audience and presenters included a range of development NGOs and large organizations such as USAID, and students participated in and attended this conference and interned with some of the development organizations present.

In her keynote address, the white, female CEO of a water and sanitation data management company critiqued “the old way” of “aid-happy and donor-driven” development, which created a “perverse economy” and a “dependency on aid.” As an alternative to the “dependency” of aid, she pointed to the need to “transition services to market provisions,” and said that NGOs should “make the government your client.” At the same conference, a Latino employee of an organization that provides microfinance loans for sanitation products also contrasted paternalistic aid with market mechanisms. He said, for example, “The first and probably most important thing is that [our organization] does not give bathrooms away.” One of his presentation slides stated: “No paternalism (bathrooms gifted).” And another boasted, “The sanitation crisis is solved with market mechanisms, investment, and the involvement of the private sector.” This pervasive discourse reinforced divisions between the racialized dependency and paternalism of aid, and the efficacy and empowerment of markets.

In contrast to the racial hierarchy and dependency associated with aid, practitioners and students embraced the seemingly race-neutral, empowering potential of markets. For example, at this same student-organized conference, a white, female representative of a market-based development organization emphasized how African women can become empowered through market labor. She showed a presentation slide of a “day in the life” of a Ghanaian woman, which categorized daily activities as either “moments of difficulty” or “moments of delight.” Collecting water and wood, and starting a fire, were marked with red circles as “moments of difficulty”; whereas time spent working as a sales agent was

categorized with a yellow smiley face, as a “moment of delight.” The presenter proudly explained that, even though sales add work to these women’s already busy days, being sales agents “gives these women moments of liberation, self-worth, and empowerment.” Furthermore, according to this organization’s website, they advocate “solving poverty with profits,” because aid “disempower[s] people when we do for them what they are capable of doing for themselves.” In contrast to the racialized dependency of aid, this frames participation in the market as a race-neutral way to bring freedom and worth to women’s lives. However, this colorblind, market-based framework for empowerment depoliticized the causes of inequalities. By claiming that these women achieve “empowerment” through providing additional labor in the market, the presenter foreclosed the possibility of other forms of empowerment or desires, framing empowerment as an individual action rather than a social movement involving the redistribution of resources and power.

### Hierarchy versus Equality

Another way that students and practitioners drew boundaries between development aid and market-based development was by ascribing racial hierarchies to aid, while describing markets as facilitating more equal, race-neutral development relations. Many students expressed the importance of seeing themselves as equal to community members and actively rejected racial hierarchies. For example, one white female student expressed discomfort that, in her view, many people still pursue development with the attitude that “we are going to go save the poor, Brown people because we are the white saviors.” When discussing the principles he believes are important in development work, a student of color also emphasized the importance of seeing people equally, explaining that “we’re not inherently better than anyone else. Everyone has value, and everyone is the same.” In another interview, a white male student critiqued the hierarchy in “traditional charity” models, explaining that it is important to take a more egalitarian approach where

you are working alongside someone who is very much the same as you . . . [where you are] more like [a] friend who is helping people lift themselves out of poverty, rather than this big person rising above all of the others, this savior coming into their community and doing it for them.

This student and others criticized donor-based models of aid, which they associated with overt racial hierarchies and unequal relations, and embraced the importance of seeing themselves as equal to the people with whom they work. However, asserting that people have the same inherent worth is different from understanding how discriminatory systems place hierarchical value on different racial groups or acknowledging the different resources and opportunities available to different groups.

I also observed this equalizing rhetoric in other contexts. For example, at a development conference advertised as connecting leaders in development practice, the white, female CEO of another company which trains women from the global South in business skills said that these women will often initially refer to her with honorific language, implying her higher status. She expressed distaste for this, explaining that to counter this

hierarchy, her organization instructs clients and practitioners to all refer to each other as “coach,” because in her view, everyone has something to teach each other. Paradoxically, the presenter establishes her superior point of view *through* her expression of equality—framing the problem of hierarchies as something community members impose on her, rather than the other way around, and therefore positioning the community members as the source of inequalities. She concluded her presentation with a quote that she implied was an African proverb: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Interestingly, at another conference, I heard a white presenter from a different development organization use this exact same quote to conclude her presentation. Thus, the idea that community members and organizations are equal partners working together was prevalent throughout the interviews and observations. However, by failing to address the real differences in resources and power, this discourse of equality often obscured, rather than reduced, racial and economic inequalities. These expressions reflect an *abstract liberalism* framework of equality: rhetorical invocations of equality which gloss over structural and material disadvantages.

Students and practitioners often mobilized the rhetoric of equality in ways that concealed material differences. For example, when I asked a white, male student why he is motivated to pursue development work, he said that traveling and working in developing contexts allows him to “explore my more expansive, universal self.” He continued, “Even though I come from a place of wealth and from America, to go into another community and try to find this equal connect, this level of equality between us, somehow it makes my spirit feel better.” He proceeded to explain that this helps him feel less “guilty” about “living such a privileged life.” Even though he also expressed discomfort that perhaps this point of view is “escapist” and that he might be trying to “ignore who I really am,” he nonetheless employed an *abstract liberalism* colorblind framework to describe his “equal connect” with communities, symbolically detaching himself from his racial and economic privileges. His discourse of equality served as a means to avoid the guilt he associates with his privileges—masking, rather than undoing, these inequalities.

Another white, male student who was working to improve the effectiveness of privatized sanitation systems also described the importance of equal relationships in development. He recalled:

I was out in the field with the community, and I said, “Can you give me a shovel?” And then they said, “Oh, no, no. We will dig the hole for you.” And I said, “No, no, no, just give me a shovel.” And so, you know, I’m the white guy with the money. That’s not really what’s going on, but that’s what they see. And I’m in there getting dirty with them. And they really appreciated that. . . . It really ended up being, you know, “I’m just like you guys. I’m human.”

According to this student, through “getting dirty” with the community members, he expresses that he is able to transcend differences in power and privilege. His reference to “getting dirty” invokes a way of diminishing his whiteness and privilege—as ideas about cleanliness and dirtiness are racialized and classed (Zimring 2015). Contradictorily, the assertion that he is equal to the community members relies on his discrediting their

points of view. His claim of equality discounts the possibility that differences in racial and economic status may influence their relations or privilege certain forms of expertise. By discrediting community members' perception of him as "the white guy with the money," he asserts equality based on a colorblind understanding of their raceless, "human" connection. Thus, this student employs an *abstract liberalism* frame of colorblindness to claim equality, while also using a *minimization* colorblind frame to discount the degree of racial and economic inequality between him and the community with whom he is working. According to Bonilla-Silva (2014), the colorblind frame of minimization suggests that race is no longer a significant factor in shaping social conditions.

The discourse of equality, therefore, served to hide unequal material, political, and social conditions and depoliticize development concerns. While it is important to recognize students' intentions to disrupt hierarchies in development, invoking an abstract and superficial sense of equality forecloses considerations of the causes and effects of inequalities, and students' roles in either challenging or reproducing them. By ascribing racism to overt, hierarchical attitudes and prejudice (such as "we are going to go save the poor, Brown people because we are the white saviors"), students further obscured how inequalities are produced structurally, reducing inequality to individual relations and attitudes, rather than racially unequal systems of opportunities, power, and resources.

Accordingly, students often framed solutions to poverty in terms of individual efforts and entrepreneurship that aligned with neoliberal, market-based models of development, rather than systemic changes. In interviews, they described their role as helping people "help themselves," "lift themselves out of poverty," and "bring themselves up," often through increasing engagement in markets through micro-entrepreneurship, privatization of services, or other market mechanisms. Similar to the language of dependency, this kind of rhetoric invokes the racialized "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mantra of overcoming adversity through individual merit and hard work. Likewise, the discourse of colorblind equality absolves development engineering students from considering how their own privileges are connected to systems that disadvantage others, and allows markets to be seen as rational, appropriate development solutions. I next explore how this colorblind, individualized, and depoliticized understanding of development provides further ideological support for market-based practices.

### Imposition versus Participation

Another way students and practitioners differentiated market-based development from aid was by contrasting the racist imposition of aid to the colorblind participation of markets. Throughout my interviews, many students said that some of the detrimental aspects of development occur when development practitioners impose their ideas about development on communities. For example, during a student discussion group, a white, female student expressed unease that development may be a form of "new colonialism" and that development reproduces harmful, imposing practices and colonial dynamics, even though contemporary motivations may be different.

However, while students pointed to the problems of imposing development ideas and projects on others, they often downplayed the roles of whites in this process, invoking

colorblind frames of white innocence. For example, many students discussed how development problems often stem from when “well-intentioned,” “kind-hearted,” or “well-meaning white people” impose their viewpoints, a process which one white student said “reeks of the colonialist.” Yet, while they pointed to the problems of imposing development ideas and projects on others, by framing the imposition as something done by “well-meaning white people,” they invoked the colorblind frame of *tautological ignorance*, which explains away racial injustices by attributing them to a passive lack of knowledge (Mueller 2017). In this framework, if whites were aware that they were causing harm (through slavery and colonialism, for example), then they would not have done so. This invokes an *a priori* assumption that whites are moral people (Mueller 2017). Tautological ignorance protects whites’ status by allowing them to continue to claim moral and innocent identities, even when acknowledging that whites have engaged in exploitative and harmful practices.

Students’ concerns with the racist and colonial implications of imposing practices prompted them to propose more participatory development solutions, which they linked to market-based approaches. In contrast to hierarchical, “top-down” approaches, which they ascribed to colonial practices and development aid, students and practitioners described the market as a race-neutral, equal, and “bottom-up” development alternative.

For example, a white, male student said that, in one of his earlier exposures to working in development, his organization was focused on perfecting a particular technology, without much consideration for whether it was something local people wanted. He explained, “There was a disjunction in that sense between the folks working there [at the development NGO] and the community that we were trying to serve.” He continued:

You have got to have a really well-functioning technology, but you also have to have a market for it. The whole idea that I also learned about while I was there, which was really cool, is in order to reach people with these beneficial technologies, one way to do it is to make a business out of it. . . . We were creating a product that eventually will be bought by people, and they will invest in it. Therefore, they will really want it, and they’ll use it.

This student concludes that the way to tell whether a community desires a particular development product or service is whether they buy it and invest in it. He presumes that the market is a neutral mechanism through which development services can be evaluated, as well as a democratic mechanism for people to express their wishes and needs.

This point of view was also expressed during a development conference, when a white female presenter argued that in an aid-based model of development, the donor dictates what will be done, and the project is successful if they meet the donor’s goal, whether or not they meet local people’s desires and preferences. However, in a market-based model, the presenter asserted, you have a “feedback loop” between organizations or businesses and clients. This view frames the market as a democratic mechanism and a race-neutral and participatory approach to development. However, it conceals people’s unequal power and participation in markets along such lines as gender, class, nation, and race.

In another example, I asked a student of color who expressed support for market-based development practices what principles he considered important when working with developing communities. He replied by expressing the need to *not* express sentiments such as “Oh, shut up, you savage! I know the best way to solve your issues.” He continued to explain, “We talk a lot as if it’s me or us helping the lowly poor people that don’t know what they’re doing, which is not where we should be coming from. We’re all equal.” This student rejects a hierarchical, imposing approach to development work, asserting that “we’re all equal.” His reference to the “savage” indicates that racism continues to shape his understanding of development, motivating him to distinguish himself from this overtly racist language. Yet at the same time, he employs an *abstract liberalism* colorblind framework, invoking a conception of equality and participation that conceals and discounts the inequalities in resources and power between himself and community members.

In contrast to hierarchical, overtly racialized approaches, in another part of our interview this same student explained that he finds market-based practices appealing because they are based on the desires of community members. Contrasting markets with development aid, he explained, “You’re not just giving things for free, because obviously [in] market-based solutions, that’s the whole point, to avoid that. To have people buy in, literally and figuratively.” He continued:

I’m a fan of market-based [development], because it requires a lot of work, because you have to sell a product, and in order for you to sell a product, you have to figure out what kind of product is in demand. . . . Maybe at some point, we should probably stop spreading capitalism, but the world is so far away from that, that it’s almost selfish to say, “Well, we shouldn’t focus on that type of development, because we shouldn’t spread capitalism”—says the person with a MacBook! [*laughing, sarcastic tone*] . . . So, if a market-based solution is appropriate for that place—which it has to be, otherwise it will fail—I’m all for it.

This statement reflects the idea that markets are driven only by consumer demand (rather than producer or elite interests), where the only reason a product would succeed or fail is people’s desire and level of “buy-in” for a product. For this student, market-based approaches represent more participatory, equalizing, and race-neutral approaches to development, implying that it would be “selfish” and hypocritical to *not* spread capitalism, given that capitalism has created many benefits. This framework echoes Rostow’s (1960) ideas of progress and development, that the problem of poverty is a result of not enough capitalist development, rather than viewing inequality as produced *through* capitalist development (Frank 1966). Further, by framing market-based approaches as equalizing, race-neutral, and democratic, this student and others consider them appealing because they appear to offer a colorblind alternative to their perceptions of the overt racism and imposing practices of development aid.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, I addressed the questions of how development engineering students and practitioners come to see market-based development as desirable development practices,

and the role of racial ideology in shaping students' and practitioners' development approaches. My core argument is that colorblind racism is one key reason that market-based practices appear appealing and legitimate to development practitioners and students. Many students and practitioners find market-based development attractive because it appears to resolve the racial tensions haunting development, allowing students and practitioners to claim moral, non-racist identities and engage in development practices they believe to be beneficial, ethical, and rational. However, while the embrace of market-based development seems to offer an important departure from hierarchical racial relations, the use of colorblind frameworks in regard to equality, empowerment, and participation ultimately perpetuates the racist conditions of development by obscuring the continuing significance of race in shaping global inequalities.

This research contributes to development scholarship by illustrating how debates over the causes and effects of market-based development are incomplete without attention to the role of race and racism in shaping social inequalities. Colorblind racism upholds neoliberal, market-based practices by hiding structural racial inequalities and masking how people do not participate in or benefit from markets equally. However, colorblindness is particularly attractive because it presents the illusion that racial equality can be achieved without whites' having to concede any material resources (Doane 2006). Furthermore, colorblindness fits easily into development discourse for it aligns with technocratic notions of objectivity and neutrality, thus extending a long history of depoliticizing and technicizing development (Ferguson 1994; Mitchell 2002).

Still, it is important to recognize the importance of students' and practitioners' desires to establish more equal relations in development and to increase opportunities for empowerment. Cheung Judge (2020) argues that while equalizing rhetoric in development should be met with skepticism, expressions of equality and friendship can nonetheless represent "intentions to connect across difference" (13). Thus, while critiquing the effects of colorblind racism, it is necessary to hold on to the ideal of equality and non-hierarchical modes of relating. However, challenging racism cannot be reduced to changing racial attitudes or perspectives. Equality cannot be achieved through colorblindness but requires race-conscious structural and material changes to transform the racist structure of the world system (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Feagin 2020; Omi and Winant 2015; Pailey 2020). This could include large-scale interventions such as reparations for colonialism and slavery, and changes to global immigration and trade systems, as well as changes in development organizations that shift power and resources toward people from the global South, and that take seriously the racial aspects of development policies. Further, U.S.-based development engineers might not only address how engineers can contribute to issues such as infrastructure, but also turn their attention to the role of engineering in bolstering U.S. militarism and extractive industries, such as oil and mining, that cause disproportionate harm along racial lines.

While this research identified how colorblind racism is an important aspect of what legitimizes market-based development, this study is not meant to be representative of all the students in these programs, nor all of development engineering as a field. Certainly, there are more critical perspectives on neoliberalism, race, and development in these programs and in engineering more broadly, though such views are still marginal to

engineering as a whole. For example, after data collection finished on this project, during the surge of Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, students in the primary program we studied organized a regularly occurring “anti-racism in development” discussion group. These types of changes represent the optimistic possibility for more race-conscious approaches to development, and the benefits development scholarship and education can gain from learning from racial justice movements such as Black Lives Matter. To address global inequalities, it is necessary not only to question the impact of neoliberalism, but also to attend to how capitalism and racism are linked, and to confront the effects of colorblind racism in development. ■

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### NOTES

1. For more information on this research project, see Niles et al. (2020) and Contreras et al. 2020.
2. Some students were interviewed multiple times over the course of their studies.

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