
According to the theory of racial capitalism, the historical circumstances that enabled the water crisis poisoning the impoverished residents of Flint, MI, and the ways in which officials have handled and interpreted the water crisis, is directly related to the historic and current devaluation of blackness. Today, however, “color-blindness” operates as the racial common sense, and thus produces knowledge and narratives that minimize, deny, or omit the significance of racial inequalities and discrimination in explanations of events such as the water crisis. Through a critical content analysis of newspaper articles published in The Flint Journal, I highlight the interconnectedness between framing, race, and the political economy by investigating how residents, officials, and activists interpret Flint’s water crisis. In a society in which racism is considered unjust and immoral, I specifically examine the discourse surrounding the crisis in relation to Benford and Snow’s (1988; 2000) conceptualization of core framing tasks. Drawing from multiple scholars’ interpretations of racial capitalism, I will show how the core framing tasks used to explain the water crisis compliment and reinforce racial capitalism in the “color-blind” era.
Dirty Water: Racial Capitalism, New Racism, and the Framing of the Flint Water Crisis

by
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To Mary Rogers Stroud.
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A special thanks to my chair, Dr. Kim Ebert, for guidance throughout my college career.

Thank you to my other committee members Dr. Sefano Longo and Dr. Thomas Shriver.

Lastly, thank you to my family, friends, elders, and ancestors.
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INTRODUCTION

In April of 2014, Flint city officials announced plans to temporarily use the Flint River as its primary water source. Before completing one of two precautionary six-month monitoring periods that assessed the quality of Flint’s water, the city found traces of coliform in the water (Goheen 2014; Owczarzak and Felton 2014). In response, the city advised Flint residents located in the northwest side of the city to boil their water before use. In the last months of 2014, Flint residents collectively voiced their desire to stop using water pumped from the Flint River, and General Motors petitioned to use water from the Detroit River because water from the Flint River damaged equipment and automobile parts (Owczarzak, Chapman and Widenmier 2016). In response to the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) February 2015 report of elevated levels of lead in city water, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and water consultant, Veolia, attempted to assuage their concerns about the city’s water. By September, medical professionals and legal scholars expressed their concerns about the amount of lead found in the water, and the city issued a lead advisory. However, the state did not admit their initial false claims until Michigan Governor Rick Snyder was confronted during a congressional hearing in January 2016. In that same month, Governor Snyder and President Obama declared Flint a state of emergency. President Obama allocated $80 million to aid state and local efforts to repair the city’s water system and provide residents with relief (McLeod and Custer 2016; Owczarzak, Chapman and Widenmier 2016).
Concerns voiced by Flint residents about the quality of their water were ignored by every level of government for nearly two years prior to federal action. During that time, and prior to it, decision makers operated in the shadows of their sociopolitical environments. Such anonymity enabled multiple public officials to gamble with public health and safety, undermine democracy, and cost taxpayers millions of dollars (Owczarzak, Chapman and Widenmier 2016). Making the public aware of the conditions of the water, however, does little to explain the framing processes that failed to connect the crisis to structural racism.

In her groundbreaking book, *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander (2009) demonstrated that mass incarceration is a racial caste system. She posed the question, “How could the War on Drugs operate in a discriminatory manner, on such a large scale, when hardly anyone advocates or engages in explicit race discrimination”? (102). Instead of focusing on the criminal justice system, I shift attention toward the political economy. I ask, in a “color-blind” era when public and politicians alike outwardly denounce racial discrimination and racism, how did the Flint water crisis happen and how has it continued to this day in such a racially discriminatory manner? How do people interpret the water crisis and in what ways do activists, officials, and residents acknowledge the racialized structural conditions involved? To address these questions, I investigate the public discourse of the Flint water crisis after it was publicly labeled a crisis. Through a critical content analysis of newspaper articles published in *The Flint Journal*, I highlight the ways in which Benford and Snow’s (1998; 2000) core framing tasks can be used to understand how residents, officials, and activists interpret Flint’s water crisis. In a society in which racism is considered unjust
and immoral, I specifically examine their use of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames in their interpretations of the crisis.

In the following, I discuss the Flint water crisis through the lens of racial capitalism. Then, I demonstrate how various framing tactics can be used to explain a disaster enabled by structural racism under the conditions of new racism. Following, I provide a discussion of the parameters I set around data collection, describe sampling techniques, and explain my coding strategy. Then, in an analysis of discourse surrounding the water crisis, I discuss the way officials, activists, and residents framed the disaster. I conclude with a discussion of the absence of racialized frames in the narratives surrounding the crisis and the implications of minimizing at best and ignoring at worst the role of structural racism in the political economy of cities across the country.

**BACKGROUND: RACIAL CAPITALISM IN FLINT**

In this section, I describe racial capitalism—the process of deriving social or economic value from the racial identity of another person or group—and its basic principles. I then demonstrate the functioning of racial capitalism through a discussion of the history of Flint’s political economy, emphasizing deindustrialization, white flight, and state and corporate investment activities leading up to the water crisis. After which I compare Flint to other communities that have experienced similar environmental injustices.

*Racial Capitalism*

Racial capitalism refers to racism’s development as a material and discursive force with historic agency, that is now embedded in social structures that emerged alongside the
capitalist system, and thus sees racism as “a constituent logic of capitalism” (Robinson 1983:7). Therefore, it recognizes that racism is foundational in the legitimation and institutionalization of generally accepted practices in the political economy. Moreover, it suggests that disasters such as Flint’s water crisis cannot be explained by theories that reduce race to class because racial ideologies are inherently linked to the “development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society” (Rodinson 1983:2). That is, capitalism developed and expanded through racial stories and stereotypes that justified and explained whites’ success and the failure of nonwhites. Ultimately, then, racial capitalism is an intersectional theory that contends the convergence of race, class, and other identities function as exploitable characteristics in the political economy.

Throughout the remainder of this thesis, I will discuss Flint’s water crisis assuming the following principles of racial capitalism: 1) Race is commodified when differential socioeconomic value is assigned to people based on their membership in socially constructed racial categories (Omi and Winant 2015; Leong 2016; and Robinson 1983). 2) Nonwhites are less likely to derive economic resources, status, and power from racial commodification because they rank below whites in the racial hierarchy and do not typically have the power to self-determine or influence the behavior of others (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Robinson 1983). 3) Members of predominantly white institutions are motivated to participate in the commodification of race because it can help them gain status within their respective institutions and fields (Leong 2016; Berrey 2015). 4) In the political economy, whites’
power, status, and economic advantages are managed through diversity projects\(^1\) that allow whites to ignore racial inequalities, racism, and white privilege in institutional settings (Leong 2016; Berrey 2015; Robinson 1983). In the following sections, I show how these principles of racial capitalism can illuminate the historical conditions that allowed the Flint water crisis to happen as well as the current forces that enabled (and continue to enable) the mismanagement of the crisis after it was in full effect.

*Deindustrialization in Flint*

While the industrial activity of General Motors (GM) in Flint and surrounding areas was responsible for thriving local economies during most the twentieth century, it was also the source of the pollution that made water from the Flint River unusable. Utilizing lead in their batteries, paints, lacquers, enamels, welding practices and gasoline, GM contaminated the land, water, and air in Flint and surrounding areas. During that time, the automotive giant enjoyed substantial economic gains (Rosner 2015). The emergence of two economic recessions, new global markets, and innovative production strategies, such as market segmentation and just-in-time inventory management, combined to make GM’s presence in Flint and surrounding areas less profitable (Pulido 2016; Highsmith 2015). Ultimately, the

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\(^1\) Diversity projects provide legitimacy to white institutions as a recruitment tool, a symbol of tolerance and inclusiveness, and a statistical and legal defense against charges of discrimination (Leong 2016; Berrey 2015).
changing corporate environment led to GM’s departure from what is now known as the “rust belt” (Highsmith 2015).

The bulk of GM’s divestment from the rust belt occurred between 1971 and 1991 (Highsmith 2015). During that period, the automobile manufacture implemented an austerity program that triggered high rates of depopulation and unemployment in Flint. By 1975, GM’s policies materialized as a contributor to local unemployment rates ranging from 15 to 20 percent (Highsmith 2015). Ultimately, GM cut its United States workforce by 50 percent, resulting in the loss of approximately 70,000 jobs in Flint (Highsmith 2015; Pulido 2016). In the end, the city’s mobile residents relocated, leaving those with little economic and political power to address urban renewal projects, extreme poverty and crime rates, and threats of financial insolvency (Pulido 2016).

**White Flight and Black Middle-Class Migration**

Today, Flint’s population is poorer and blacker than it has been in its history. According to Pulido (2016), African Americans living in Flint, past and present, felt the effects of GM’s deindustrialization more intensely than white residents because they are relegated as a surplus population through racial capitalism. That is, because the community is predominantly African American, the lives of the people of Flint are devalued by governments, corporations, and mobile citizens to a point that leaves them susceptible to unjust decisions that favor economic solvency over human rights. Elevated levels of unemployment, poverty, and residential segregation suffered by Flint’s African American community is a symptom of racism that can be observed throughout history.
Wilson (1987) clarified the macro-level effects of racialized structural changes and public policies on working class African American communities in the decades following the enactment of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. His research illustrated that during the mid-1970s and early 1980s, family disruption, criminality, and unemployment increased in African American communities, while the number of African Americans receiving welfare benefits remained unchanged. To explain his findings, Wilson (1987) pointed to a period when the United States was transitioning from an industrialized nation to a service based economy. He found that during that period black middle-class flight was a major factor contributing to the concentration of poverty in predominantly African American communities such as Flint.

However, some scholars argue Wilson’s (1987) explanation did not explain the emergence of concentrated poverty in African American communities adequately. For example, Quillian (1999) found the increase of neighborhoods with extreme poverty rates (Flint included), observed during the 1970s and 1980s, was influenced more so by white flight than the departure of affluent African American families from the rust belt. Massey and Denton (1993) also illustrated the role of racial discrimination in producing residential segregation, thus challenging Wilson’s (1987) presumptions. That led Quillian (1999) to conclude that black middle-class outmigration does not fully explain increases in high poverty neighborhoods. Indeed, Flint’s affluent white population contributed to the city’s crisis by migrating to southern and western cities to find work. Their departure resulted in a decreased demand for and thus the value of properties in the community. Their departure also destroyed the tax base of the community because by leaving they took their strong tax base
with them, after which companies disinvested in the area (Pulido 2016; Highsmith 2015). In
addition, the idea that black middle-class outmigration explained increases in high poverty
neighborhoods overlooked the actions whites took (and continue to take) to avoid poor
African American communities, and middle-class people’s desire to live separate from the
poor. It also downplays and ignores the role white institutions played in creating and
exploiting these place-based inequalities (Rothstein 2017). I turn to this discussion next.

The State and Corporate Investors

Flint’s local, state, and federal officials profited socially and economically from
corporate and political actions that disproportionately affected Flint’s poor African American
residents. For example, the conditions suffered by Flint residents during and after the
implementation of GM’s austerity program is attributable to the company’s commitment to
annexation and outsourcing nationally. Michigan’s state legislators, however, also
contributed to the city’s fiscal crisis by offering GM tax abatements and other incentives for
investments in the state’s urban areas. For example, in 1974 the state of Michigan passed
Public Act 198 giving organizations like GM “tax breaks to invest in their local economies
by erecting new buildings, rehabilitating old ones, or purchasing new equipment” (Highsmith
2015:4).

Most poor African American residents had little option but to stay in Flint. For
African Americans, the actions of GM, state legislators, and affluent white residents
translated into an unemployment rate near 50 percent in 1975, and by 1995, they suffered
from a poverty rate of 36.4 percent (almost double the rate experience by white residents).
Between 1970s and 1990s, African Americans in Flint were also disproportionately affected by urban renewal projects intended to address the economic devastation caused by GM’s departure. Made possible by the completion of the Floral Park interchange and Interstate 475, and the actions of the Flint Area Conference, Inc. (FACI), urban renewal projects restricted African Americans’ access to the downtown area, and thus employment opportunities, while inviting new people to the city (Highsmith 2015; Pulido 2016). The failure of urban renewal projects diminished Flint’s post World War II reputation as a company-town making it difficult for the municipality to attract employers, and thus generate taxes.

The results of political reactions to GM’s divestment from Flint, ultimately, prompted Michigan governor Rick Snyder to enact Michigan’s Public Act 436, which put Flint under emergency management in 2011. This effectively undermined the democratic process that produced elected officials at the local level. More importantly it empowered an appointed official to act on behalf of Flint’s polity, which silenced the voice of Flints’ residents by rendering their agency powerless (Jones 2016). Former Emergency Financial Manager, Darnell Earley, rejected a deal to continue using the Detroit River, which was proven to meet public safety and health standards, for financial reasons. Lake Huron was identified as an alternative water source; however, it would take approximately two years for the city to gain access to it, requiring the town to use water from the “notoriously polluted” Flint River (Pulido 2016: 4). That the plan to forgo the use of water from the Detroit River would save the town $18 million over eight years is the only justification for the decision (Pulido 2016).
Ultimately, the city was abandoned by capital (the departure of GM); white citizens (through white flight); the state (the placement of ineffective emergency financial managers); and a federal government that failed to address the aftereffects of deindustrialization, and thus, the source of the water crisis. The city of Flint had little status in the eyes of the state of Michigan because of the historical legacies of racism but also because blackness is devalued and the majority of Flint’s residents are black (Gans 1999; Parisi, Lichter, Taquino 2011; Sears and Savalei 2006). Furthermore, the residents of Flint had few economic resources to leave and little power to decide Flint’s future. The Republican Governor handed over decision-making power to an appointee, who made the decision to switch the water from the Detroit River to the Flint River.

This resulted in the water crisis, a case of environmental racism, a phrase coined by Benjamin Chavis\(^2\) that refers to the consequences (intended and unintended) of environmental policy decisions that expose communities of color to pollutants and other hazardous chemicals disproportionately (Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts 2009). This case of

\(^2\) Benjamin Chavis was the director of the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ when its Commission for Racial Justice conducted the first national-level study on the relationships between communities’ racial and socioeconomic status and the location of hazardous waste sites. The commission concluded that facilities handling hazardous waste were systematically placed in close proximity to communities with predominantly African American and Latino populations.
environmental racism continues today; the mismanagement of the disaster in terms of the lack of efficiency and brevity shows how little Flint and its residents are valued. As a case of environmental racism, the water crisis calls for an examination of government action in relation to communities both similar and dissimilar to Flint.

*Flint in Context*

What has happened in Flint has happened elsewhere or could happen elsewhere. In fact, predominately white communities have experienced environmental injustices, but government actors have tended to respond differently in such contexts. For example, in a study focused on the relationship between a city’s population demographics and state, local, and federal governmental responses to environmental crises, Salinsky (2016) demonstrated that the observed differences in recovery efforts in Flint, MI versus Milwaukee, WI is evidence that there was more at play than economics. In this study, Salinsky compares Flint’s water crisis to the 1993 Cryptosporidium parvum outbreak\(^3\) in Milwaukee. In both cases city water supplies were contaminated with toxins that had their most severe impact on children and the elderly. Moreover, multiple governmental agencies expected to act in the best interest of the public mismanaged both crises. However, minority neighborhoods in Flint were more exposed to contaminated water than those in Milwaukee. Recovery efforts, specifically

\(^3\)Cryptosporidium parvum is a waterborne parasite that causes gastrointestinal illnesses when ingested. Children, elders and people suffering from various illnesses are impact the most when exposed to the parasite (Salinsky 2016).
response times, also differed drastically. In Milwaukee, relatively whiter than Flint, government agencies responded to concerns about water contamination immediately and contained the cryptosporidium outbreak in approximately a week. In contrast, the agencies charged with the management of Flint’s water system failed to comply with the lead and copper rules of 1991, which are a product of the Safe Drinking Water Act in 1986, by supplying the public with contaminated water and withholding information regarding the associated health risks. Those actions prolonged Flint’s crisis for over two years. Notably, cost was found to be an insufficient explanation for the variation in government response times observed in Flint and Milwaukee.

For Dan Kildee, Flint’s U.S. congressional representative, the actions of Flint’s decision makers were indicative of a “philosophy of government” that sees little value in racially stratified lower-class communities (Pulido 2016:5). Marc Edwards of Virginia Tech holds that the harmful contents found in the water was easily detectable by any qualified person. Local and state officials, however, attempted to cover up the crisis by presenting convenience samples of the city’s water as if they were randomly selected, requesting resident’s pre-flush pipes before testing for lead, and falsely claiming to have measures in place to correct the problem (Pulido 2016). Flint residents, then, were provided with lead contaminated water by state and local officials who knew it was polluted. That efforts to repair the city’s water management system have yet to materialize is also disturbing.

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4 Marc Edwards and Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha brought attention to the Flint water crisis.
To date, a handful of scholars have attempted to explain this case (Butler, Scammell, and Benson 2016; Clark 2016; Davis 2016; Laidlaw et al. 2016; Miller and Wesley 2016; Pulido 2016; Salinsky 2016; Schnoor 2016). For example, Davis (2016) showed that corrosive water is only one of the sources of lead affecting Flint residents, especially children, by analyzing records of the city’s water quality and blood lead levels in children in comparison to the suburban neighborhood of Fenton. In addition, Butler, Scammell, and Benson (2016) found that many communities around the country, with racial and economic demographics like those found in Flint, are also victims of failures to meet the standards set by the Safe Drinking Water Act. The authors demonstrate that the “failure of these laws is disproportionately impacting economically depressed communities of color” (Butler, Scammell and Benson 2016:97), including places like Washington, DC, Columbia, South Carolina, Greenville and Durham, North Carolina, Jackson, Mississippi, and Ithaca, New York.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

In the previous section, I examined the Flint water crisis through the lens of racial capitalism. But how do residents, activists, and officials interpret the disaster? In this section, I discuss previous research on framing from two primary lines of research: social movements and racial relations. I discuss social movement framing to shed light on the framing (i.e., diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing) involved in the response to the water crisis. I rely on literature on framing from racial relations to understand the extent to which officials, residents, and activists would interpret the water crisis through a racial lens.
I characterize officials as representing policy-elites (see Skrentny 2006) and corporate leaders (see Mizruchi 2013), two groups who typically dominate framing processes and set the parameters for discourse. Accordingly, they are the primary beneficiaries of racial capitalism because their status gives them access to networks that influence politics and business, such as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) (see Hertel-Fernandez 2014), and control over the predominantly white institutions that implement their strategies. Both activists and residents can represent opposition to officials. However, activists tend to have the support of advocacy organizations and typically serve as spokespeople for residents. Thus, activists tend to have more control over framing processes than residents. Activists include representatives of advocacy organizations, such as celebrities like Mark Ruffalo who came to the city as a representative of the advocacy organization Water Defense. Residents include any person living in Flint or Genesee County, Michigan at any point during the water crisis.

Framing in Social Movements

In general, frames are packages of understandings, meanings, and perceptions people use to make sense of the world around them and the information it produces (Benford and Snow 2000). Frames are developed in a process that gives people and groups some degree of influence in the social construction of reality, making it a contentious progression. Frames, then, “help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experiences and guide action” (Benford and Snow 2000: 614). Actors involved in framing processes, such as politicians, activists, and journalists, contribute to it by using language and
narratives that assist in the assignment of blame, construction of solutions, and mobilization of people when a condition or situation is collectively defined as unacceptable. Benford and Snow (2000) define these as core framing tasks, which include diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing, respectively.

Diagnostic frames are captured in interpretive packages constructed to help people attribute blame to a person, group, or structure when a condition or situation is collectively defined as one that requires change. By default, narratives produced from this frame create space for conflicts between and within social movement organizations. In addition, they require actors to distinguish between the victims and perpetrators of a social problem. I expect that residents, activists and officials will use diagnostic frames to explain the water crisis, but that they will assign blame and identify victims differently.

Prognostic frames, on the other hand, are used in the construction of frames that help people develop a narrative alternative to a condition or situation commonly condemned as undesirable. Such frames empower actors to create narratives where details about how to manage a social problem are more or less explicit. I expect there will be patterns in the way officials use prognostic frames in that they will use such frames to support their explanations of the crisis. I expect activists and residents to use prognostic frames to challenge said solutions, and produce counter-frames for managing the crisis. I will discuss the nature of such frames in the following section.

Motivational frames are used when the goal is to garner a collective response to undesirable social conditions. According to Benford and Snow (2000), motivational frames are attempts
to implore the victims of social injustices, and bystanders, to collectively resist the conditions affecting their wellbeing. Such frames provide direct suggestions for collective action or a rationale for engaging in such activity. Activists and residents are expected to frame the conditions suffered by Flint residents as a crisis in an attempt to provide a rationale for collective action. Additionally, they are expected to call on members of the community to take direct action to assist recovery efforts. I suspect officials will use motivational frames sparingly because they have the potential to undermine their status as politicians or corporate leaders.

Social Position and Racial Frames

Frames emanating from officials, activists, and residents will differ for many reasons, but an important distinction is that these groups occupy different social positions, with varying levels of economic resources, status, and power. Officials are uniquely situated to define the crisis and recovery efforts, and respond to challenges to their use of core framing tasks because they hold the status of either policy-elites or corporate leaders. In either role, officials control critical discourse moments where strategic and discursive framing processes can be contested (Cable, Shriver, and Mix 2008; Guetzkow 2010). Specifically, they control processes where written and oral communication is used to articulate and/or amplify existing frames (Benford and Snow 2000; Guetzkow 2010; Skrentny 2006). Public opinion and policy debates are manipulated, controlled, and directed within parameters influenced by officials; their perception of an issue or event can influence policy solutions and thus social change (Guetzkow 2010; Skrentny 2006).
Research on racial relations and framing suggests a white racial frame,\textsuperscript{5} representing a white “common sense,” influences official frames and the boundaries in which they are produced (Messer, Beamon and Bell 2013). Today the white racial common sense equates to color-blindness—the idea that explicit discussions of racism are inappropriate in public spaces. In his groundbreaking book on the transformation of racism, Bonilla-Silva (2014) outlines color-blind racism, which is a power structure in which the subordination of people of color is maintained through covert, subtle, and institutional forms of discrimination and racism that are difficult to detect and call out. Four central frames of color-blind racism emerged from his analysis of how people talk about race: abstract liberalism, cultural racism, naturalization, and minimization of racism.

The frame of abstract liberalism involves “using ideas associated with political liberalism and economic liberalism in an abstract manner to explain racial matters” (Bonilla-Silva 2014: 76). It masks racism by placing the blame for inequalities on individual or group deficiencies. In doing so it overlooks structural factors associated with racial inequality and justifies white’s superior social standing. Political and economic principles like equal opportunity, meritocracy, and individual choice, and opposition to government intervention

\textsuperscript{5} Feagin (2012:144) defines the white racial frame as the dominant racial frame that is typically developed in “U.S. media, schools, and other social institutions.” White racial framing allows whites to explain systemic racism in a way that rationalizes discrimination and other racist acts.
are key liberal ideas used by whites using abstract liberalism to soften their tone on race and to argue against proactive racial programs. Cultural racism couples with abstract liberalisms because it supports the idea that discrimination is not an acceptable explanation for the inferior social and economic conditions suffered by African Americans, instead cultural deficiencies in the family structure and work ethic are more consequential.

The frame of naturalization “allows whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences” (Bonilla-Silva 2014:76), and it is commonly used to explain things like residential segregation and the absence of interracial relationships as natural occurrences rather than outcomes that are caused in part by racial discrimination. The minimization of racism frame acknowledges the relationship between minorities’ life chances and discrimination, however, the significance of that association is downplayed in a way that suggests discrimination is not a significant factor affecting racial outcomes or that nonwhites racialize issues unduly (Bonilla-Silva 2014).

Because color-blind racism is a part of the dominant racial ideology, I expect that most actors will avoid mentioning race and racism as a factor explaining the Flint Water crisis. In fact, I suspect that the abstract liberalism frame may prevail because it makes discussions of government sponsored crisis relief or any other type of administrative assistance for non-whites unnecessary. Instead, discussions about crisis recovery might focus on the restoration of the economy, employment opportunities, and the small business sector, among other things. Officials might deracialize issues or events, relying on the white racial frame, because it is beneficial to their position. They might also ignore racism and/or
deracialize issues or events because such narratives are a part of the status quo as they are consistent with dominant racial narratives of color-blindness.

However, I expect that some residents and activists that are putting the crisis in historical context might rely on racial frames. In general, residents may rely on a “color-blind” frame because it is a dominant frame, but Flint residents, the majority of which identify as black, may be skeptical of such framings (Robinson 1983; Collins 2000; Feagin 2006; Messer, Beamon and Bell 2013). Therefore, they may challenge official frames when explaining social events, producing counter-frames. Because Flint’s population is primarily African American and female, residents are likely to articulate a black feminist counter-frame. That is, they are likely to articulate a version of the black counter-frame⁶ that amplifies African American mother’s perception of the water crisis. Activists are likely to produce similar frames because they act as spokespersons for residents. However, activists may produce counter-frames that do not amplify African American motherhood with the

⁶Feagin (2010) describes the black counter-frame as oppressed African people’s collective response to Eurocentric framings of social life. He highlights the historic development of the frame by discussing its use during slavery, reconstruction, the Civil rights movement, and present-day academia. In addition, he shows how the frame has been modified to meet the varying needs of African Americans and their supporters. Wingfield and Feagin (2012), for example, describe the black racial frame as narratives of resistance that highlight inequalities and transform racial meanings to fit the African American experience.
same frequency and intensity as residents because they want to frame the crisis in a way that resonates with mainstream society, thus interpreting the crisis through a color-blind lens.

**DATA AND METHODS**

In the framework described above, I relied on past theories to help explain the ways that different actors might frame the water crisis differentially. In this section, I will provide details about the procedures taken to collect, code, and analyze the data under examination. Using *The Flint Journal* as my primary data source, I analyzed quotes from officials, activists, and residents responding to the crisis. I decided to treat quotes, as opposed to complete newspaper articles, as my unit of analysis because the primary focus of the research is on the variations between frames deployed by specific actors in a multi-actor field. I rely, however, on complete newspaper articles to add contextual information in order to make valuable inferences about the frames articulated to explain the crisis. For example, I took notes on key figures involved in the creation and management of the crisis to inform statements about the way blame was attributed to officials differently. Table 1 includes descriptions of some of the key figures discussing the crisis.
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<td>Federal Official</td>
<td>Chief of the EPA when the crisis began. She was accused of showing a lack of urgency when responding to the crisis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Governor Rick Snyder</td>
<td>State Official</td>
<td>Governor of Michigan. He appointed the emergency manager who decided to switch the city’s water source.</td>
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<td>Mayor Karen Weaver</td>
<td>Local official</td>
<td>Mayor of Flint, MI since November 9, 2015. She was elected after the crisis was in effect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Waun</td>
<td>Corporate leader</td>
<td>CEO of C3 Ventures—a manufacturing company that went to Flint during the crisis planning to make car parts from recycled water bottles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marc Edwards</td>
<td>Activist</td>
<td>Virginal Tech professor who conducted test on Flint’s water that confirmed it was contaminated.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection**

Using NewsBank—information provider with 40 years of experience archiving and making accessible various forms of content produced by local, state, regional, national, and international sources—to target reportage from *The Flint Journal*, I located 1,453 articles reporting on the water crisis from April 2014 to September 2016. This period captures coverage on the crisis from the day Flint began receiving water from the Flint River until an arbitrary stopping point I determined because the crisis, and thus coverage regarding it, is currently ongoing. By focusing on this source, I accessed local coverage of the crisis that ultimately mirrors the content found in the reports presented in national mediums (Fogarty 2012). Given intermedia agenda setting tendencies and the influence local populations have on local news media content, I expect that *The Flint Journal* will be consistent with national
media’s intensity and frequency of coverage regarding the crisis while specifying community concerns (McCombs and Funk 2011).

_The Flint Journal_ produced 25, 142, and 1,296 articles in 2014, 2015, and 2016, respectively, with a mention of the words “water crisis” in its title or full text of the article. The low output observed in 2014 can be explained by my decision to use “water crisis” as the initial search term. Because of my interest in how residents, activists, and officials interpreted the events in Flint, and if and how they relied on racial frames, I used the phrase “water crisis” to find an adequate sample to analyze. Though residents were exposed to lead contaminated water in 2014, their circumstances did not garner media attention until it was publicly and nationally labeled a “water crisis,” which was many months after their exposure. Flint residents were also subject to a period of contestation where officials dismissed their claims outright first and denied any wrong doing in the matter later (Pulido 2016). Prior to 2016 when Governor Snyder declared a state of emergency, the media infrequently referred to the events taking place in Flint as a “water crisis.” By the beginning of 2016 Flint’s people saw their complaints about contaminated water put on the national stage and graduate to what is now known as “the Flint water crisis.”

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7 _The Flint Journal’s_ coverage of the water crisis during 2015 captured a period of contestation where officials, activists and residents were engaged in a framing contest over the quality of Flint’s drinking water.
Beginning the initial examination with “water crisis” as the sole search term, I could capture the quotes informative of the discursive strategies used by officials, activists, and residents concerning the water crisis (see Table 2). The purpose of content analysis, however, is to go beyond such superficial observations and explain social phenomena that may be unobservable without a researcher using “statistical knowledge, theory, experience, and intuition to answer their research questions” (Krippendorff 2004:38). With that goal in mind, I used my understanding of the functioning of racial capitalism, framing processes, and color-blind racism to analyze a large sample of newspaper articles covering the emergency. I proceeded with a purposive sample that gave appropriate attention to the articles that were most informative of the practice of racial capitalism in a color-blind society.

**Sampling and Coding**

After I read local coverage of the Flint water crisis to develop an understanding of the context in which it was taking place, I developed a purposive sample to investigate the ways in which officials, residents, and activists potentially discussed elements of Flint’s political economy. In addition to “water crisis,” I searched the following key words: “senator”, “congress”, “government”, “mayor”, and “emergency manager”, “finance”, “budget”, “economy”, and “fiscal.” This resulted in a sample of 139 articles (11 of 139 articles were classified as irrelevant). I coded 128 articles in detail, and I used elements of the remaining 1,324 articles to provide context when relevant.
Table 2. Examples of Coding Schema

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnostic frames: discursive strategies intended to develop interpretive packages that help people attribute blame.</th>
<th>Officials</th>
<th>Activists</th>
<th>Residents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“We know that so much of this happened under an emergency manager... The state plays a role and they have some responsibility to helping us with that.”</td>
<td>“What’s happening in Flint is both a reflection of how both the government, with the water crisis, and the private sector, with the fresh food shortage, have fallen short in serving community needs.”</td>
<td>“I’ve been poisoned by policy... I think Gov. Snyder needs to do something about the water... It’s insane, and he should be fired.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prognostic frames: interpretive packages people use when offering solutions to a social problem and strategies for implementing solution.</th>
<th>Officials</th>
<th>Activists</th>
<th>Residents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Many departments have been involved in addressing the immediate crisis in whatever way they could... At the same time, they have been working on longer-term plans that address Flint’s future prosperity.”</td>
<td>“The Flint Child Health and Development fund is just at the very beginning to raising money—we know we need millions and millions and millions in order to honor the vision of that fund.”</td>
<td>“There’s already been a mistake with the switching over to Flint water... Instead of trying to coat the pipes, could you just start replacing the pipes, starting with the schools, the hospitals?”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivational frames: interpretive packages people use to motivate a collective response to a social problem.</th>
<th>Officials</th>
<th>Activists</th>
<th>Residents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>“This is...where we will have some flexible funds to do some things that the government is not going to do. Philanthropy can play a real important role in this, but we have to make sure that we don’t let the government off the hook.”</td>
<td>These are the people that we put our trust in, you put your confidence and trust in these people and they constantly lie to you... Trust is earned. If you did something to lose my trust you have to earn it again. What they are trying to do is give people a false sense of hope.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using NVivo, I identified 512\(^8\) relevant quotes—the unit of analysis—within the 128 articles. I then coded the source of the quote, including officials, activists, and residents. Next, I coded the frames that emerged from the data. The sampling strategy I described previously had a noteworthy impact on this process. Markedly, none of the racial frames discussed in the previous section, including colorblind frames—abstract liberalism, cultural racism, naturalization, and minimization of racism—emerged from the data. I will elaborate on the significance of this point in the discussion section. However, Benford and Snow’s (2000) core framing tasks emerged from the data. After reading and coding multiple newspaper articles, it became clear that officials, activists and residents used core framing tasks to discuss the water crisis, including diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational. Table 2 provides a description of these frames and examples from the data.

**RESULTS**

Officials, residents, and activists responded to the Flint water crisis by offering solutions (prognostic framing) or assigning blame (diagnostic framing) to some official, business, or body of government. Each group did so by discussing the specific ways the crisis

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\(^8\) Of the 706 quotes found, 194 quotes were ineligible. In an article that discussed a $55 million congressional budget plan that sent $114 in aid to Flint, Minority Floor Leader Sam Singh, D-East Lansing, produced a quote I considered irrelevant because it did not provide information about the crisis: “We can’t claim to be working to provide quality education across our state when we’re refusing to appropriately fund higher education.”
affected them, or the people they represented. In some cases, activists and residents also produced motivational frames in which they called for collective action by directing statements at people who might share their interpretation of the crisis. In the analysis below, I will distinguish between different actors’ use of prognostic, diagnostic, and motivational frames by highlighting variations in the way they discuss the management of the crisis and the impact the disaster is having on Flint residents.

Table 3: Frequencies of Frames

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Officials</th>
<th>Activists</th>
<th>Residents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diagnostic</strong></td>
<td>112 (30.35%)</td>
<td>4 (3.85%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prognostic</strong></td>
<td>212 (57.45%)</td>
<td>71 (68.27%)</td>
<td>22 (56.41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivational</strong></td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>15 (14.42%)</td>
<td>11 (28.21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diagnostic and Prognostic</strong></td>
<td>45 (12.20%)</td>
<td>8 (7.69%)</td>
<td>2 (5.13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diagnostic and Motivational</strong></td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivational and Prognostic</strong></td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>6 (5.77%)</td>
<td>4 (10.26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Coded Quotes</strong></td>
<td>369</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Officials

Table 3 includes the count of quotes and the relative share of frames used by officials, residents, and activists. Comprising approximately 369 of the 512 quotes examined in this study (see Table 3), officials, or the corporate leaders and policy-elites who dominate framing processes, were primarily engaged in prognostic framing. I classified 212 of 369 quotes from officials as an attempt to consciously solve the water crisis, and thus, maybe unconsciously, accrue status as a problem solver or effective politician. Consider the following quotes from an article that focused on the replacement of lead water lines in Flint:

Right now, the focus is on locating the pipes and determining which are made of lead, then proceeding with a plan to replace them, starting with the pipes deemed high-risk
and high priority…Mayor Weaver has stressed that removing the pipes is a priority, and we are working with our partners in the city (Ridley 2016b).

Flint Mayor, Karen Weaver responded:

This is a positive step in the right direction…Going forward, I hope we can work collaboratively to convince state and federal lawmakers to bring additional financial assistance to Flint to meet the city’s immediate and long-term needs, including wraparound services for children, infrastructure, blight elimination and other critical areas (Ridley 2016b).

In those statements, a state and local official produced prognostic frames that focused on infrastructure, financing, and collaborative work between the city and state. Officials also used prognostic framing to discuss access to healthcare as a remedy to the conditions suffered by Flint residents. Consider the following quotes from a federal (U.S. Representative Kildee), state (Governor Snyder), and local (Mayor Weaver) official respectively commenting on the water crisis.

Flint’s most vulnerable residents, including children and pregnant women, now will have greater access to a broad range of health care services to help them mitigate the effects of lead exposure (Emery 2016).

Providing important health resources to Flint residents will help us better mitigate the risks of lead exposure and identify long-term health challenges… Together with the health care community, we are working to ensure that Flint residents receive a full
range of health and social support today and in the future. I appreciate that our federal partners expedited the review and granted this waiver (Emery 2016b).

It is important that every child and pregnant woman in Michigan get excellent health care to ensure the best possible outcomes for newborns and children… This waiver should ensure that Flint’s mothers-to-be and our children are given the correct treatment to mitigate their lead exposure and any negative effects (Emery 2016b).

In each statement, public officials acknowledge the connection between the water crisis and Flint resident’s access to adequate healthcare. By offering more access to healthcare as a way of dealing with the damage the crisis did to residents’ health, officials highlighted the lack of care available in Flint. In this case, prognostic frames also assisted officials in their attempts to define the victims of the water crisis. While every person living, or working, in Flint is a victim of the crisis, children received the most attention in the quotes I analyzed here.

Additional officials prognosticated about the water crisis, attributing blame to those that have not done enough to help, while suggesting abstract solutions to the problem, therefore engaging in diagnostic framing. Consider the following quote from Flint Mayor Karen Weaver:

Governor Rick Snyder has acknowledged that the state and federal government should assist Flint in addressing this problem. But so far, there’s been more promises than action… Meanwhile, the people of Flint are paying a high price—in health
impacts, in economic difficulties and in stressful worry about the future. We need action now (Emery 2016a).

Weaver suggested the water crisis should be addressed by federal government. Moreover, she implied that the crisis was prolonged by a lack of action. Her comment, then, is an example of an official simultaneously engaged in prognostic and diagnostic framing. Representing 45 of 369 quotes from officials, such attempts created space for officials to accrue status by differentiating themselves from the politicians who could be blamed for the crisis. Some capitalized on that political opportunity by calling for specific political actions when discussing the crisis. Consider the following statement from Rep. Matt Cartwright, R-Pennsylvania:

There you are dripping with guilt, but drawing your paycheck, hiring lawyers at the expense of the people and doing your dead level best to spread accountability to others and not being accountable… [P]eople who put dollars over the fundamental safety of people do not belong in government and you need to resign, too, Governor Snyder (Fonger 2016b).

The call for Gov. Snyder’s resignation is a call for political action presented as a logical way to prevent the continuation of the crisis. It follows a statement in which the governor is directly blamed for the crisis. By a calling for political action, Rep. Cartwright capitalized on the correspondence between prognostic and diagnostic framings. In other words, he distanced himself from the politicians responsible for the crisis by proposing a solution that was influenced by the diagnostic frames accepted by other officials. Rep. Jason
Chaffetz, R-Utah and John Mica, R-Florida produced a similar frame in a dialogue where they suggested Environmental Protection Agency Administrator, Gina McCarthy, resign. However, she deflected blame back to state officials, claiming:

They slow walked everything they needed to do and that precluded us from doing what we had to do. We were strong armed. We were misled. We were kept at arm’s length. We couldn’t do our jobs effectively (Fogner 2016b).

When official’s diagnostic framings assigned blame to officials directly, like they did Gina McCarthy and Gov. Snyder, they triggered additional attempts to diagnose the cause of the water crisis. Consider the following quote from Gov. Snyder:

Not a day or night goes by that this tragedy doesn’t weigh on my mind— the questions I should have asked; the answers I should have demanded. That’s why I am so committed to delivering permanent, long-term solutions and the clean, safe drinking water that every Michigan citizen deserves. I’ve accepted responsibility because those people work for me, but it’s something different to have this continuing dialogue to say it was solely us. This could have been stopped sooner if other people could have also spoken up (Fogner 2016b).

Gov. Snyder’s comments challenged diagnostic frames that held state officials accountable for the water crisis. Specifically, he contested the notion that state officials were solely responsible for the crisis. By suggesting his capacity to stop the crisis was hampered by the actions of people he depended on, Gov. Snyder implicated that local officials and corporate leaders helped create the disaster. This could have influenced subsequent attempts
to identify the people responsible for the crisis. Consider the following exchange between Flint’s attorney general, Veolia North American, and Lockwook, Andrews & Newman (which is the law office representing LAN, a company hired by the city in 2013 to test for corrosion control after the city switched to Flint River water):

In Flint, Veolia and LAN were hired to do a job and failed miserably. They violated their legal duties and caused the Flint water crisis to occur, continue and worsen. As a result, the state of Michigan suffered damaged for past, ongoing, and future harm to public health, destruction of public property and cost to public resources (Ridley 2016c).

Attorney General Schuette has never spoken with Veolia North America, interviewed the company’s technical experts or asked any questions about our one-time, one-month contract with Flint…Veolia North America’s engagement with the city was wholly unrelated to the current lead issues (Ridley 2016c).

The attorney general has blatantly mischaracterized the role of LAN’s service to Flint and ignores the findings of every public investigation into this tragedy that the key decisions concerning the treatment of the water from the Flint River were made by the city of Flint and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (Ridley 2016c).

In this example of diagnostic framing, officials suggested the crisis was a product of substandard work from agencies hired to assure the city’s water system did not put public health and safety at risk. The Michigan Department Environmental Quality’s claim that
Veolia and LAN did not perform services as expected implied that the state alone should not be held accountable for the creation of the Flint water crisis.

*Activists*

Accountable for 104 of 512 the quotes examined in this study (see Table 3), activists used a combination of prognostic and diagnostic frames to interpret the Flint water crisis. However, the narratives within quotes from officials influenced the discourse of activists. Activists, then, like officials, discussed the people who should be held accountable for the crisis and the political action that should take place in its wake. Consider the following:

Mothers shouldn’t be up here telling you that they’re losing their hair and that blood is coming out of their ears… Mothers should be taking care of the children of the community. The fact that we have to go back to a Congress that everyone knows won’t do a thing and beg them for money so our mothers can take care of their children is an outrage in the richest country in the (world)… It’s an absolute outrage; it’s a moral indecency (Acosta 2016b).

Like public officials, Ruffalo called for Snyder to resign from office. However, he also called on Congress to act more urgently. His statement is consistent with interpretations of some officials. Ruffalo’s comments also exemplify activists simultaneously engaged in diagnostic and prognostic framing because he stated Snyder should be held responsible for the crisis while urging President Obama to provide aid to its victims. Unlike public officials, however, when activists discuss the crisis in terms of accountability they were more likely to blame all levels of government equally. Moreover, when they proposed solutions to the
crisis, they challenged official’s ability to lead more consistently. When discussing the cause of the Flint water crisis, or its continuation, activists also pointed to official’s inability to view the crisis from the perspective of its victims—residents. For example, when Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha\(^9\) addressed the classification of the city’s children as a “throwaway generation” after research on the effects of lead exposure suggested they would have lifelong health and behavioral issues that could affect their future life chances. She stated: “This is not a throwaway generation…Our children are going to be fine, but they’re going to be even better if we invest in them now” (Ridley 2016d). In another article, she was quoted saying:

> It is a place of hope. We are building hope… Suddenly the city, the state that used to be so proud, was put out there as a sort of petri dish of pollution, corruption, austerity, injustice. They called us tragic, and they called us sad. And I can tell you I felt sad. And I felt angry. And I felt betrayed. But then I got to work, because our focus had to be on our kids (Lawler 2016a).

Dr. Hanna-Attisha’s statements represent one of the more developed prognostic frames produced by activists—71 of 104 activist quotes qualified as prognostic frames (see Table 3). In her first statement, Dr. Hanna-Attisha’s insisted that the government invest in the

\(^9\)Mona Hanna-Attisha, MD is a pediatrician who was labeled a whistleblower after publishing a report titled “Elevated Blood Lead Levels in Children Associated with the Flint Drinking Water Crisis: A Spatial Analysis of Risk and Public Health Response” in February of 2016 in the *American Journal of Public Health* with her research team.
children victimized by the crisis. To support her stance, she then discussed the benefits those investments would have on Flint’s reputation. Ironically, the water crisis was partially created by state and local officials interested in restoring Flint’s image as a company town (see Highsmith 2016). Dr. Hanna-Attisha showed her understanding of that history when she said: “We used to build strong cars, but now we build strong kids” (Lawler 2016a).

Activists who did not have confidence in the government’s desire to implement an effective recovery program discussed alternative ways to help crisis victims. In some cases, their narratives produced motivational frames—15 of 104 activist quotes were motivational frames (see Table 3). However, activists’ motivational frames did not always result in a direct call for collective action. While motivational frames that call the community to arms tell them how to change their circumstances, frames that provide a rationale for collective action only explain why they should mobilize for change. Consider the following quote from documentary filmmaker, and Flint native, Michael Moore: “The riots here, I’m certain, will begin sometime soon. That’s what you or I would do if someone was poisoning OUR kids and the government refused to stop it, right?” (Acosta 2016c). Moore’s comments suggest collective action is inevitable and will ultimately take the form of riots, however, he does not tell Flint residents to organize and rush the streets. No other activist suggested Flint would become violent at any point. However, 7 of 15 activist motivational frames were directed to residents, local businesses or philanthropists who might be willing to mobilize to assist organizations like The Flint Community Grocery in fundraising efforts. Consider the following quote from hip-hop activists Russell Simmons:
What’s happening in Flint is a reflection of how both the government, with the water crisis, and the private sector, with the fresh food shortage, have fallen short in serving community needs. We invite citizens and corporations to join in supporting this effort (Acosta 2016d).

Simmons recognized the government’s failure to address all of the issues affecting crisis victims. Moreover, he highlighted the lack of interest the private sector had in Flint regardless of the water crisis. Lastly, he let the public know that he needed their contributions to help affect change in Flint. Simmons comments provide a rationale for residents and activists to perceive the water crisis differently than the officials who dominate framing processes. They also provide a course of action that can help the community exercise agency.

Residents

Responsible for 39 of the 512 quotes analyzed in this study (see Table 3), residents discussed the Flint water crisis in a manner that amplified their lived experiences while engaged in prognostic, diagnostic, and motivational framing. Ultimately, they challenged the prognostic frames produced by officials and corroborated the diagnostic frames produced by activists and officials. Consider the following statements made by two of Flint’s residents:

These are people that we put our trust in, you put your confidence and trust in these people and they constantly lie to you… Trust is earned. If you did something to lose my trust you have to earn it again. What they are trying to do is give people a false sense of hope. Don’t tell me to trust you… I do not believe them. I do not believe the problem is fixed (Johnson 2016a).
Flint resident Elnora Carthan also said she will never trust the water again. Carthan’s water line was replaced in March, but she said the government officials were not transparent in handling the water crisis, which has left her skeptical about their assurances that some water is safe. “They didn’t even tell us in the beginning… Things will never be the same. I don’t trust the water. I don’t think it’s safe. You want me to believe the water is not poisoned even though it is still breaking me out, even though I’m still getting sick,” she said (Johnson 2016a). The sentiments expressed by Carthan and Jefferson—that the information the government provided them about the water crisis was not factual—was consistent with most resident’s description of the water crisis. While some state and local officials offered solutions without acknowledging the disposition of the Flint community, residents amplified the effects the crisis had on their physical and psychological wellbeing.

In addition, they expressed concern for the financial burden imposed on them because of the water crisis. For example, after receiving monthly water bills of $170 and $180, a Flint resident named Justin called a telephone town hall meeting, where Michigan Lt. Gov. Brian Calley fielded questions about the crisis, and asked to be reimbursed for “water that I can’t feed to my children. This is ridiculous” (Acosta 2016a). Flint resident Melissa Mays had a similar response when commenting on a contract that legitimized the use of tax dollars to fund the legal fees incurred by state officials being investigated for their contributions to Flint’s water crisis.

I mean, we’re suffering and nobody’s paying for our attorney’s. So, we have to pay for his legal defense against what he did to us? Makes absolutely no sense…
Nobody’s paying my kid’s medical bills, nobody’s helping for what they’ve done to us. This is absurd (Lawler 2016c).

Justin and Mays’ statements indirectly challenges official prognostic frames that suggest they have an effective strategy for ending the crisis. Residents expressed such sentiments in 22 out of 39 quotes they produced. Flint mother, LeeAnne Walters’ comments regarding the future impact of the crisis is telling here. “It wasn’t just my son… We all were losing our hair. I lost my eyelashes at one point… Nobody trust the city or the state anymore, they trust Virginia Tech” (Ridley 2016e).

As a mother living in Flint during the water crisis, Walters’ had a unique perspective of the disaster. Like other residents, she made it clear that she did not trust the officials who were actively managing recovery efforts. However, she went on to promote Virginia Tech as a trustworthy source for information about the crisis. Her trust in the institution seems to be the result of a relationship she was forced to developed with Marc Edwards after local and state officials ignored repeated complaints about the quality of the water in Flint. By contesting officials’ initial framing of the water crisis, Walters’ mobilized people who were not directly affected by the phenomenon. Ultimately, her actions created space for residents to produce counter-frames that were also motivational frames. However, only one resident made a clear attempt to mobilize the community. Consider the following statement from former Flint resident, Omar McGee: “I just want to inspire them, and I want them to start dreaming again… They need to start tapping into resources outside of government. They can’t just rely on the government, for obvious reasons. We have to start depending on each
other” (Johnson 2016b). Unfortunately, McGee’s comments were directed at entrepreneurs living in Flint, not the mothers and children affected most by the crisis.

**DISCUSSION**

In summary, officials used prognostic frames to present ways to address a continuation of failed recovery efforts. They focused on the long-term effect the water crisis is expected to have on children and proposed solutions that highlighted the need for healthcare in Flint. They relied on diagnostic frames to blame other officials and set up prognostic frames that called for political action. Activists used diagnostic frames to assign blame to local, state, and federal officials equally. Like officials, they transitioned from diagnostic frames to prognostic frames that focused on political action. They also used motivational frames to rationalize collective action and call on the public to assist fundraising efforts. Residents produced diagnostic frames that identified government officials as people responsible for the crisis. They challenged prognostic frames that called for political action by producing counter-frames that amplified their lack of trust in government solutions and information. Notably, the quotes from officials, activists, and residents did not refer to racism. As a result, no racialized frames emerged from the data.

In the previous section, I analyzed quotes stemming from officials, activists, and residents affected by the Flint water crisis using Benford and Snow’s (2000) conceptualization of core framing tasks. Coupled with research that demonstrated how the decisions that led to the water crisis and prolonged it were rooted in racial capitalism and environmental racism, the frames that emerged from the discourse around the disaster were
in line with Bonilla-Silva’s (2014) argument that color-blind racism is the dominant racial ideology. Specifically, this study suggests color-blindness is a dominant force in this epoch because officials, activists, or residents did not connect the water crisis to systematic racism—they did not use racialized frames in interpreting the crisis. It also suggests there is a complementary relationship between core framing tasks, color-blindness, and racial capitalism that illuminates the interaction between the political economy, race, and framing.

The discourse analyzed in this study is an attempt to explain a case of environmental racism caused by racial capitalism. My primary objective was to provide an understanding of racial capitalism as it operates in the color-blind era, or how one profits from the process when race and racism are ignored. I showed that the Flint water crisis cannot be fully understood without a strong consideration of the historic functioning of racism and racial formations. An examination of this society’s racial history can help us make sense of the water crisis because it exposes intersections between race, class, gender and other identity markers that make various forms of institutional racism difficult to detect. Specifically, it can help us explain how the discourse surrounding the Flint water crisis symbolizes the racial status-quo—color-blindness.

According to Bonilla-Silva (2014), color-blindness affects African Americans and whites differently. For whites, color-blind practices generate frames that explain away the significance of race in social outcomes. Consequentially, they are useful tools for elites who find it beneficial to deracialize a social injustice like the water crisis. While African Americans participate in public discussions dominated by color-blind practices, they do not
rely on color-blind frames to explain racial matters. However, the prevalence of the ideology does complicate their ability to develop an alternative to color-blindness that represents their lived experiences. In sum, color-blind frames allow whites to avoid racial discussions that could have negative socioeconomic impacts while preventing African Americans from using their identity to mobilize against racial injustices.

In Flint, officials used color-blindness to produce diagnostic and prognostic frames that kept public attention away from the relationship between race and the political economy. Activists and residents countered those frames, but they did not capitalize on the opportunity to racialize the water crisis. Ultimately, they spent their time and energy contributing to discussions about past, present, and future political actions instead of producing motivational frames that could incite collective action. In a society where racism is universally considered immoral, racial capitalism thrives because framing processes are controlled by elites who use their power to set political agendas and deracialize social injustices.

In this study, I asked: how did the Flint water crisis happen when racial discrimination and racism are typically viewed as unjust and immoral practices in this society? This research suggests that question can be answered by exploring racial capitalism using the color-blind paradigm. Consider the principles of racial capitalism described above. The first principle states race is commodified when socioeconomic value is linked to socially constructed racial categorizations. However, in the color-blind era, where race politics are frowned upon, this would be difficult to achieve without developing new ways to identify racial groups. Officials overcame that barrier by creating a narrative that did not require them
to discuss Flint’s racial profile. By limiting diagnostic frames to discussions about individuals directly involved in the crisis, officials created a space where the community’s racial history, which includes deindustrialization, white flight, austerity politics, and more, could be ignored. Influenced by those diagnostic frames, official prognostic frames were void of any race specific solutions, they focused on political action instead.

The second principle of racial capitalism holds that nonwhites are disadvantaged because their position in the racial hierarchy restricts their power to self-determine. When discussing racial capitalism, self-determination represents a person or group’s capacity to influence the racialization process that transforms race into a commodity. Restrictions on nonwhites’ self-determination in the color-blind era are compounded by the fact that their racial identity is ignored in public discourse. The absence of racial frames in the discourse produced by residents or activists discussing the Flint water crisis is probably related to their inability to self-determine because it is a clear case of environmental racism. Officials’ control over framing processes can also be a significant variable affecting the use of racial frames.

According to the third principle of racial capitalism, members of predominantly white institutions accept the commodification of race because they believe they can gain status from their participation. In the color-blind era, this requires officials or activists to ignore the significance of race in the creation and continuation of injustices like the Flint water crisis. In this study, activists and officials alike produced prognostic and diagnostic frames that failed to link the crisis to Flint’s racial history. Moreover, they produced frames that amplified their
ability to lead recovery efforts while expressing sympathy for crisis victims. One could assume the bulk of these frames represented sincere responses to the crisis, however, many of the state and local officials being blamed for the crisis expressed such sentiments. The quotes produced by officials, like Governor Snyder, who was universally recognized as one of the officials responsible for the crisis, suggested they were cognizant of the association between their status and the way they framed the crisis.

The fourth and final principle of racial capitalism says whites naturalize and/or minimize their institutionalized privileges, racial inequalities, and racism by implementing diversity projects. In the color-blind era, the abstract liberalism frame can be used to support diversity projects. However, in this study I did not find quotes that were diversity was discussed explicitly. Nevertheless, activists and officials produced narratives that suggested they were conscious of the benefits that correspond with diversity projects. This was realized when members from both groups made statements that emphasized inclusiveness. For example, multiple activists and officials stated the water crisis was personal to them because they lived or worked in Flint at some point, or grew up in a similar town. In the color-blind era, narratives of inclusivity can also symbolize racial tolerance; they operate like abstract liberalism frames that amplify the diversity in a white person’s friendship networks to deflect charges of racism.

Flint officials, activists, and residents used diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames in a way that not only discouraged the racialization of the crisis, it highlighted the dominance of color-blindness. According to Benford and Snow (2000) core framing tasks
enable and restrict one another in a way that shape the framing processes they facilitate. In a study that focused on the relationship between ideologies dominant amongst policy-elites and antipoverty policy making, Guetzkow (2010) provides a relevant example of the interaction between core framing tasks. The study showed how policy-elites used diagnostic frames to identify the victims and causes of a social problem. More importantly, it provided an illustration of the way diagnostic frames “influence and limit the range of policy options” (Guetzkow 2010:177). Officials used their influence over framing processes to avoid discussing race and keep the discourse around the Flint water crisis focused on their leadership skills and political future. Their discursive strategies made it difficult for activists and residents to resist racial capitalism because the water crisis may have to be racialized to motivate collective action. Ultimately, color-blind practices eliminated an opportunity for activists, residents, and passionate officials to discuss the cause of the Flint water crisis—racial capitalism.

As a result, officials, activists, and residents relied on diagnostic framing by amplifying the specific role local, state, and federal officials had in the creation of the water crisis. They utilized prognostic framing by urging officials to work together and more urgently to end the crisis. In doing so, representatives of each group called attention to the severity of the conditions suffered by Flint residents in a way that personalized their circumstances. For example, Mark Ruffalo (activist) pointed to the impact the crisis was having on Flint mother’s capacity to care for their children the same way federal officials did when assigning blame to state officials. Actors fighting for an end to the crisis were restricted
by a diagnostic frame that explained the continuation of the disaster as a breakdown in bureaucracy instead of environmental racism.

**Methodological Limitations**

Significant statements regarding the crisis, such as those made when it was not yet publicly recognized as a crisis, may not be analyzed in this study. This is the direct result of my decision to begin data collection using “water crisis” as my soul search term and, subsequently, use terms that could signify the political economy to develop a sample. Therefore, future research on the framing of the Flint water crisis should focus on a wider range of data sources. My decision to use quotes as my unit of analysis leaves much to be desired regarding the context in which actors made statements about the water crisis. An analysis of transcripts from congressional hearings and newspaper articles would supplement this research because it would permit a comparison between the core framing tasks developed in two contexts where political elites dominated discussions about the policy-decisions that caused the Flint water crisis (Guetzkow 2010).
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