

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group.

Peggy McIntosh

Through work to bring materials from women's studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are overprivileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. They may say they will work to improve women's status, in the society, the university, or the curriculum, but they can't or won't support the idea of lessening men's. Denials that amount to taboos surround the subject of advantages that men gain from women's disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully acknowledged, lessened, or ended.

Thinking through unacknowledged male privilege as a phenomenon, I realized that, since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there was most likely a phenomenon of white privilege that was similarly denied and protected. As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as some-

thing that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.

I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.

Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable. As we in women's studies work to reveal male privilege and ask men to give up some of their power, so one who writes about having white privilege must ask, "Having described it, what will I do to lessen or end it?"

After I realized the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are justly seen as oppressive, even when we don't see ourselves that way. I began to count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence.

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. My schooling followed the pattern my colleague Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and

average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow "them" to be more like "us."

Daily effects of white privilege

I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions that I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can tell, my African American coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place, and line of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

1. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.

2. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area that I can afford and in which I would want to live.

3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.

4. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.

5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.

6. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.

7. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

8. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.

9. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods

that fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can deal with my hair.

10. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.

11. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.

12. I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.

13. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.

14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

16. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color, who constitute the world's majority, without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.

17. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.

18. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge" I will be facing a person of my race.

19. If a traffic cop pulls me over, or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.

20. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.

21. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.

22. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without

having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.

23. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.

24. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help my race will not work against me.

25. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.

26. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color that more or less match my skin.

Elusive and fugitive

I repeatedly forgot each of the realizations on this list until I wrote it down. For me white privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. If these things are true, this is not such a free country; one's life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own.

In unpacking this invisible knapsack of white privilege, I have listed conditions of daily experience that I once took for granted. Nor did I think of any of these perquisites as bad for the holder. I now think that we need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege, for some of these varieties are only what one would want for everyone in a just society, and others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant, and destructive.

I see a pattern running through the matrix of white privilege, a pattern of assumptions that were passed on to me as a white person. There was one main piece of cultural turf; it was my own turf, and I was among those who could control the turf. My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make. I could think of myself as belonging in major ways and of making social systems work for me.

I could freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms. Being of the main culture, I could also criticize it fairly freely.

In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit, in turn, upon people of color.

For this reason, the word "privilege" now seems to me misleading. We usually think of privilege as being a favored state, whether earned or conferred by birth or luck. Yet some of the conditions I have described here work systematically to overempower certain groups. Such privilege simply *confers dominance* because of one's race or sex.

Earned strength, unearned power

I want, then, to distinguish between earned strength and unearned power conferred systemically. Power from unearned privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate. But not all of the privileges on my list are inevitably damaging. Some, like the expectation that neighbors will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against you in court, should be the norm in a just society. Others, like the privilege to ignore less powerful people, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups.

We might at least start by distinguishing between positive advantages, which we can work to spread, and negative types of advantage, which unless rejected will always reinforce our present hierarchies. For example, the feeling that one belongs within the human circle, as Native Americans say, should not be seen as privilege for a few. Ideally it is an *unearned entitlement*. At present, since only a few have it, it is an *unearned advantage* for them. This paper results

from a process of coming to see that some of the power that I originally saw as attendant on being a human being in the United States consisted in *unearned advantage and conferred dominance*.

I have met very few men who are truly distressed about systemic, unearned male advantage and conferred dominance. And so one question for me and others like me is whether we will be like them, or whether we will get truly distressed, even outraged, about unearned race advantage and conferred dominance, and, if so, what we will do to lessen them. In any case, we need to do more work in identifying how they actually affect our daily lives. Many, perhaps most, of our white students in the United States think that racism doesn't affect them because they are not people of color; they do not see "whiteness" as a racial identity. In addition, since race and sex are not the only advantaging systems at work, we need similarly to examine the daily experience of having age advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion, or sexual orientation.

Difficulties and dangers surrounding the task of finding parallels are many. Since racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not the same, the advantages associated with them should not be seen as the same. In addition, it is hard to disentangle aspects of unearned advantage that rest more on social class, economic class, race, religion, sex, and ethnic identity than on other factors. Still, all of the oppressions are interlocking, as the members of the Combahee River Collective pointed out in their "Black Feminist Statement" of 1977.

One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms, which we can see, and embedded forms, which as a member of the dominant group one is taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was

taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.

Disapproving of the systems won't be enough to change them. I was taught to think that racism could end if white individuals changed their attitudes. But a "white" skin in the United States opens many doors for whites whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us. Individual acts can palliate, but cannot end, these problems.

To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these subjects taboo. Most talk by whites about equal opportunity seems to me now to be about equal opportunity to try to get into a position of dominance while denying that systems of dominance exist.

It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already.

Although systemic change takes many decades, there are pressing questions for me and, I imagine, for some others like me if we raise our daily consciousness on the perquisites of being light-skinned. What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from watching men, it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage, and whether we will use any

of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base. □

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Understanding Whiteness in the United States

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What does it mean to be a white person in the United States? Is there such a thing as a white identity? Is it different from an ethnic identity? Is feeling white different from feeling German American or Italian American? How does being white influence the way we communicate? How is our whiteness expressed in communication?

For many people in the United States, there currently seems to be a degree of confusion and angst about racial and ethnic identity among white people. Some people never think about being white. Some think it seems all right to feel ethnic pride, but not pride in being white. Some feel that they are being forced to think about being white because of issues like affirmative action and "reverse discrimination." This essay attempts to sort out some of these issues and explore the contradictions and tensions in the notion of whiteness as an identity. We also examine how being white in the United States may influence communication, particularly in terms of how this identity develops and is reflected in the labels and words we use to refer to ourselves.

A Communication Perspective of Identity

Let's start with a communication perspective on identity. That is, we all have multiple identities (such as gender, religious, ethnicity, race) that make up our self-concept and how we see our-

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selves. Identities arise from our associations with groups, some voluntary (such as professional and religious affiliations) and some involuntary (such as age and family groups), and then develop through communication with others.

As communication scholars Michael Hecht, Mary Jane Collier, and Sidney Ribeau (1993) have noted, cultural identities are *negotiated, co-created, reinforced, and challenged through communication*. Some identities may be easier to co-create and negotiate than others. For example, does it seem easier to understand and negotiate being female than being white? How is being white negotiated and challenged through communication in today's world?

In addition, as Collier explains earlier in this chapter, our identities are expressed through norms and labels - the communicative behaviors and terms that reflect the core symbols or priorities of our group-associated identities. In this book, a number of essays identify the core symbols and norms of various groups like Japanese, African Americans, and Indians. Are there similar norms, labels, and core symbols that are associated with being white in the United States?

One final thing that we need to keep in mind about identities is that they are dynamic and context-related. I am not just a female, a professor, a white German American. I am all of these, and any one identity may be highlighted or suppressed depending on the situation or context. For example, in some situations, such as when I am the only white person in a conversation or when I am discussing the issue of race, my white identity is highlighted. In other conversations, my professor identity may be emphasized more. We are always in the process of becoming and unbecoming, as we negotiate, develop, and re-form our identities through communication.

Three issues need to be addressed as we apply this communication perspective to understanding white identity: the difference between white racial and ethnic identity, the characteristics of a white identity, and how whites develop a sense of being white.

White Racial and Ethnic Identity

Race Versus Ethnicity

What is the difference between racial and ethnic identity? Many people believe that race has to do with physical characteristics, whereas ethnicity is more a sense of a shared culture, belief system, and origin. However, most scholars now reject the biological argument in favor of a more social approach to understanding race. That is, while there may be some physiological basis for racial categories, it is the way in which these categories are constructed and the meaning attached to racial categories that have a profound influence on communication and how identities are negotiated. What are the arguments against physiological definitions?

First, racial categories vary widely in different parts of the world. One contrast is seen in the United States and South America. In the United States, there are two major racial distinctions (black and white), and this distinction is fairly rigid. People seem to have a sense of who is white and who isn't (for example, "you don't look black") and are uneasy when they are unable to categorize someone of mixed racial origin ("But are you white or Black?"). In contrast, people in Brazil and other South American countries recognize a variety of intermediate racial categories.

A second example of how racial categories are socially constructed is that racial categories have changed throughout U.S. immigration history and some groups have been shifted from one racial category to another at particular points in history. In the eighteenth century, British immigrants struggled to preserve their base of power and even to prevent other Europeans from entering the United States. In the nineteenth century, as more and more southern Europeans immigrated, there was an attempt to classify Irish and Jewish Europeans as nonwhite. Instead, the racial line was drawn around Europe, and those outside (such as the Chinese and Japanese) were then designated as nonwhite (Omi & Winant, 1992). So while the notion of race has some basis in physiology, it probably makes more sense to talk about race formation

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and to think about race as a complex of social meanings that get interpreted through communication, rather than as something fixed, concrete, and objective.

It should also be pointed out that as socially constructed, these categories are relational, exist in relation to each other. Could there be a white without a black category? What does it mean that we tend to see race in the United States in polar categories, white and black? If people do not fit or do not want to fit into these categories, how can they negotiate their identity?

Bounded Versus Dominant/Normative Identities

The relationship between white racial and ethnic identity can be clarified by distinguishing between bounded and dominant identities (Frankenburg, 1993; Trinh, 1986/87). Bounded cultures are those groups we belong to that are specific and not dominant or normative (such as groups defined by religion, gender, ethnicity). For most white people, connections to these groups are clear and easy to talk about. Being Irish American means we celebrate St. Patrick's Day; being Amish means we follow the "Ordnung" (the community rules). Growing up German American may mean working hard for the sake of working and not being very verbally expressive. It's easy to recognize and identify these cultural behaviors.

However, what it means to belong to the dominant or normative white culture is a much more "slippery" construct, more difficult to define, but just as real. It is not often easy to see what cultural practices or norms link white people together. For example, we usually don't think of Thanksgiving as a white American holiday. Part of the "slipperiness" of this identity is related to the dominant or normative aspect of being white.

Identity and Power

Sometimes the more powerful aspects of identity are the most unrecognized, and power is more strongly linked to aspects of identity that are ascribed, or involuntary. For example, when ques-

tioned about identity males will often not mention gender. They just don't think about it, whereas women are more likely to be aware of how gender is a part of their identity.

The same thing may be true about being white. One reason white people don't think about being white is that they may not need to. Communication scholars Tom Nakayama and Robert Krizek (1995) suggest that this lack of consciousness on the part of whites is possible only because of the power associated with being white. The experiences and communication patterns of whites are taken as the norm from which others are marked or measured. The universal norm then becomes invisible. For example, the news media refer to "black leaders" but never to "white leaders." There is "black on black violence," but European conflicts are not referred to as "white on white violence."

What does it mean that the category "white" is seldom referred to and that whites so rarely talk about the meaning of being white? As Krizek reflects

I've gone through life never consciously thinking about labels. I suppose we defined ourselves as one of those people we didn't label, although nobody every said that. We were just white, not black or brown, and I don't really know what that means. No one ever questioned it (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 292).

On the other hand, Nakayama (1993) has written about growing up in the South as a fourth-generation Japanese American, with his identity as an American consistently challenged as people frequently asked him where he was really from and if he spoke English.

Nakayama and Krizek attempt to show how the "invisibility" of whiteness is related to power by analyzing the "rhetoric of whiteness" or how white people talk about being white when explicitly asked. They found that people often resisted discussing how they felt about being white, which they interpret as reflecting an invisible power in which white is not a category of identity, but black African American, or Chicana is.

A second rhetorical strategy was to say that being white was based on negation, that white is "not

something else (not black, brown, yellow or red)." This seems like a neutral way to talk about being white, but they point out that in this strategy white is again the universal against which other colors are marked. Another strategy confuses whiteness with nationality. Whiteness means white American. As one of their respondents noted, "A lot of times when people think of American, I bet you they probably think of white. They probably think it's redundant" (p. 301). What does it mean for all those Americans who are not white?

We can see how difficult it is for people to pin down the meaning of whiteness, but perhaps we'll understand intercultural communication better if we apply the same scrutiny to white identity that we apply to other cultural groups. This lack of awareness on the part of whites may be changing, as we'll discuss later. As issues of race are brought up more and more frequently in the United States (in the O. J. Simpson trial, for example) white people are perhaps thinking more about being white than ever before, and perhaps it will become easier to identify those norms and core symbols of whiteness.

In Chapter 3 Edith Folb argues that there is a relative continuum of power in the United States associated with various identities, ranging from the more powerful groups (whites, males, Protestants, heterosexuals, middle/upper classes, the educated) to less powerful groups (racial minorities, females, religions other than Protestant, gays, the working class, the less educated). And we each may have aspects of our identity that are more or less powerful, depending on which is highlighted in any particular context. Those that are more involuntary or physically marked are more difficult and the most problematic to negotiate.

What happens when our identities are challenged? Growing up as an Amish/Mennonite young woman, I felt marginalized in many social contexts because I was physically marked by a distinctive dress and physical appearance. It was difficult to negotiate anything other than a bounded (Amish) identity. What are the communicative consequences when identities are challenged — when, for example, Asian Americans are asked "Where are you re-

ally from?" or "Do you speak English?" How does it affect the communication between people when the identities of some are often challenged and others (whites) are rarely challenged?

Dimensions of White Identity

An interesting question, then, is whether there is a set of cultural norms and symbols shared by most white people. Many scholars feel that there are uniquely white cultural patterns, but that they are often difficult to discern. Sociologist Ruth Frankenburg suggests that one way to understand whiteness is to view it not as simply a racial or ethnic category but rather as a set of three linked dimensions in which power is a key ingredient. These are modified to emphasize the communicative aspect of identity: a location of structural advantage, a standpoint from which to view ourselves and others, and a set of cultural practices (core symbols, labels, and norms).

Whiteness Is a Location of Structural Privilege

Some scholars argue that white identity is linked to the structural advantage of race privilege within the United States but that the two are not synonymous. All whites do not have power and do not have equal access to power. For example, one can point to times in U.S. history when some white cultural groups were not privileged, but rather were viewed as separate or different, as were the Irish in the early part of the twentieth century and the German Americans during World War II.

However, scholars have pointed out that the memory of marginality in these instances has outlasted the marginality. In the latter part of the twentieth century, European immigrant groups are now assimilated and are "just American." Boundaries between Americanness and whiteness have been much more fluid for "white ethnic" groups than for people of color.

How is this dimension of white identity played out in the everyday lives of white people and their communication with others? Peggy McIntosh (1995)

has tried to identify the ways in which white privilege affects her daily interactions. See if you can list others:

I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.

I can be fairly sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.

I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.

I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

I am never asked to speak for all people of my racial group.

I can worry about racism without it being seen as self-interest or self-seeking.

My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races.

The question then is how does this aspect of white identity influence my communication with others? Perhaps it means that I approach most interactions with a confidence that if I'm nice, most people will be nice back to me. People won't prejudge me as untrustworthy, or "different," or "angry." Or if they see me sitting with other people who are white, they won't think this means I don't want to communicate with people who aren't white. They will judge me and communicate with me as an individual.

Several studies have, in fact, found that whites and African Americans approach interethnic conversations in different ways. Whites rarely talk about issues of power when discussing interethnic communication, whereas it is a more central issue in African American frameworks (Martin, Hecht, & Larkey, 1994). So maybe this is one aspect of being white, the fact that I don't consider power issues in conversations. Perhaps you can think of other ways that privilege may be reflected in whites' communication.

While being white in the United States may mean privilege sometimes, there seems to be an increasing perception that being white does not mean "invisible privilege." Charles A. Gallagher,

who interviewed college students in a large inner-city campus found that white students thought a lot about being white and saw their whiteness not as a privilege but as a liability. They often felt that minority students were getting more breaks and more privileges. They also felt that they were prejudged by students of color as being racist because they were white.

Some whites feel that being white is not very positive, that whiteness represents blandness (like Wonder Bread), and that it is not very interesting in contrast to the cultural "richness" of other cultural groups. This sometimes leads whites to retrieve their ethnic heritage and identity (Italian American, Irish American, and so on). Ethnicity for white Americans can be almost like a garment that is put on or off at will.

Perhaps this change in identity, this growing awareness of a white identity, is occurring because the changing demographics in the United States means that whites are beginning to perceive themselves in the minority. Gallagher (1994) also asked students to estimate the ratio of whites to blacks on campus. Many students reported that they thought the ratio was 30 percent white students, 70 percent black students. The actual ratio was 70 percent white and 30 percent black.

The point here is not the inaccuracy of the perception, or whether whites or minorities are more privileged, but how these perceptions affect intercultural communication. How do we communicate with others if we feel that we are being prejudged as racist? or as privileged? How are these identities negotiated and confirmed or challenged in our intercultural interactions?

Whiteness Is a "Standpoint"

A second dimension of white identity, according to Frankenburg, is a standpoint, a place from which white people look at themselves, at others, and at society. What are some perceptions shared by white people? And how do these perceptions differ from those of other cultural groups?

A dramatic example arose during the trial of the African American celebrity O. J. Simpson, accused of killing his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend Ron Goldman. An ABC News poll, con-

ducted just before the verdict was handed down showed a profound split between white and black perception: 77 percent of whites thought Simpson was guilty, 72 percent of blacks believed he was innocent (Arizona Republic, October 1, 1995, p. A2).

Both whites and blacks saw the same televised trial, the same evidence, heard the same legal arguments; but saw these from two different "standpoints" and arrived at two different conclusions. How could this be? Experts analyzed the two standpoints and tried to understand this dramatic difference in perception in the days immediately following the trial.

Most experts saw the roots of the different perceptions in the different life experiences of African and white Americans. As one columnist explained it:

Most whites thought Fuhrman [the policeman accused of evidence tampering and racism] was a slick act and an exception. Most blacks, especially those in L. A. thought he was no aberration; they've known others like him. (Wilson, 1995, p. 2)

There are numerous other, perhaps, less dramatic examples of how perceptions of whites contrast with those of other U.S. groups. To give just one example, according to a CBS News poll reported in the Arizona Republic, 38 percent of whites versus 27 percent of blacks think race relations in the United States are generally good (October 4, 1995). So something about being white influences how we view the world and ultimately how we communicate with others. As one individual reported in Nakayama and Krizek's study:

"I don't exactly know what it means to be white, but we all know don't we? I mean I never talk about it, but I know that we understand each other at some level. Like when a black guy gets on an elevator or when you have a choice to sit or stand next to a white person or a black person. You pick the white person and you look at each other, the whites and you just know that you've got it better. You don't say anything but you know. It's in the looks." (p. 298)

Of course, not all whites perceive all situations in the same way. Remember that identity is dynamic, negotiated, and context-dependent. Perhaps

it is easier to see shared perceptions in dramatic situations like the Simpson trial or the Rodney King beating and the subsequent trial of white police officers. And even then, it is still difficult to understand how perceptions are related to race.

Again the question comes back to how these varying perceptions, expressions of identity, influence our communication. Are there ways to negotiate these varying perceptions?

Discussions following the O. J. Simpson trial may have presented opportunities for intercultural dialogue and finding some common ground. Blacks saw whites unanimously condemning Mark Fuhrman, and whites heard the same thing from blacks concerning Simpson's pattern of spousal abuse (Arizona Republic, October 1, 1995, p. A22).

Whiteness Is a Set of Core Symbols, Norms, and Labels

Core symbols are those values and priorities of a cultural group that are reflected in the norms of behavior and labels used to describe the group (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993). Often the norms are unmarked; they are not made explicit, and it is hard to identify what norms are uniquely shared by whites. As noted, this difficulty comes partly from the normative and dominant aspect of being white. The dilemma is that white is everything and it is nothing. It is just there, and yet it is difficult to talk about, maybe even embarrassing.

Sometimes, these cultural practices are most clearly visible to those who are not white, to those groups who are excluded. Janet Helms (1990) and others (such as M. Asante, 1973) have attempted to outline values that are shared primarily by white people. For example, they suggest that a strong belief in individualism and an emphasis on linear thinking are two patterns that are most strongly linked to being white and are not universally shared by other cultural groups in the United States.

The labels we attach to ourselves and others that characterize ethnicity and/or race may be seen as a category of core symbols and are another way in which identity is expressed. Labels have meaning and are not neutral.

The questions of labels and identity has been of concern to marginalized groups for a long time. One issue revolves around who has the right to name others. Who has the right to use a label? Again power comes into play, for dominant groups can exercise power in naming others. And it is often difficult for the less powerful groups to control their own labels. It is well known that Native Americans have objected to the use of tribal terms as names for sports groups (Redskins), cars (Jeep Cherokee), and other commercial products. Some African Americans object to Aunt Jemima pancake mix and Uncle Ben's rice. It is not widely known that Quakers objected strenuously to the use of the label "Quaker" in Quaker Oats. Would we like a team called "the Fighting Honkeys"? One response of marginalized groups is to take the pejorative label and make it their own, as gay and lesbian groups did in appropriating and using the label "queer."

Dolores Tanno (1994) describes how her multiple identities are reflected in various labels (Spanish, Mexican American, Latina, Chicana). The Spanish label is one she was given by her family and designates an ancestral origin (Spain). The label Mexican American reflects two important cultures that make up her identity. Latina reflects cultural and historical connectedness with others of Spanish descent (such as Puerto Ricans and South Americans) and the Chicana label promotes political and cultural assertiveness in representing her identity. She stresses that she is all these, that each reveals a different facet of her identity: symbolic, historical, cultural, and political.

Similarly, the labels and meanings for African Americans have evolved over the years. Hecht, Collier, and Ribeau (1993) claim that the shift from black to African American as a self-preferred label is founded in issues of self-determination, strength, progress, and control.

What do white people want to be called? When we asked white college students what labels they preferred to use and preferred others to use, they consistently chose the most "normative," the least specific (Martin, Krizek, Nakayama, & Bradford, 1996). They wanted to be called white, or maybe white American, but not white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. What does it mean if whites resist being

specifically "located" by geography (Anglo) or history (WASP)? Does it express the right of being the normative group, the one that names and categorizes others but is not itself categorized?

However, this may be changing as our "white" identity is being (re)negotiated and defined in contemporary U.S. society. Perhaps these issues of labels will be discussed more by whites. Perhaps we can explore the meanings for various labels — African Americans, white, European American. Or we can learn to negotiate and call people what they want to be called, as Mary Jane Collier suggests, to affirm the identity that each thinks is important.

White Identity Development

How do we develop a sense of whiteness? This sense (just like our sense of gender) develops over time and through communication with others. There seem to be several stages of identity development, not with definite beginnings and ends, but stages nonetheless that represent different positions of understanding who we are.

In the United States, minority group members develop a sense of racial and ethnic identity much earlier than majority group members do. As psychologist Rita Hardiman (1994) describes it:

It has frequently been the case that white students enrolled in my class on racial and cultural issues in counseling expect to be taught all about the cultures of people of color and they are almost always surprised to hear that we will be discussing the white group's experience. Some students remark that they are not white; they are female, or working-class, or Catholic or Jewish, but not white. When challenged, they reluctantly admit that they are white but report that this is the first time they have had to think about what it means for them. (p. 125)

Stage 1: No Social Consciousness

In Hardiman's model, the first stage of identity development is the same for whites and minority groups; in this stage children may be aware of physical differences and some cultural differences but do not feel fearful or hostile and do not feel racially superior. However, eventually they absorb

the message from the social environment (family and society) about racial groups.

Stage 2: Acceptance

The second stage, acceptance, represents the internalization of the messages about racial group membership and the acquisition of a belief in the "normalcy" (superiority) of being white. This may be either a passive acceptance or an active acceptance of the dominant socialization. An important point here is that individuals at this stage are not aware that they have been programmed to accept a particular world view about race. It is simply the way things are and is not questioned.

Passive Acceptance. In the passive acceptance stage, there is no conscious identification with being white. Whites at this stage may hold the following subtly racist views but do not see themselves as being racist. Rather, racism is seen as the holding of extreme attitudes, such as those espoused by the Klu Klux Klan.

1. Minority groups are culturally deprived and need help to assimilate.
2. Affirmative action is reverse discrimination because people of color are being given opportunities that whites have never had.
3. White culture, music, art, and literature is "classical"; works of art by people of color are primitive art, or "crafts."
4. People of color are "culturally different" whereas whites are individuals with no group identity, cultures, or shared experience of racial privilege.

People at this stage usually take one of two passive positions with respect to racial issues and interactions with people of color. They either avoid or adopt a patronizing stance. That is, they may avoid racial issues; avoid being around people of color, or be very polite when they are. Or they may take a patronizing stance, be very solicitous and try to help the less fortunate: "I really feel terrible about the few minority students in my classes. I know it's so hard for them to fit in. I really wish I could figure out some way to make things easier for them."

Active Acceptance. Those whites in the active acceptance stage are very conscious of their whiteness and may express their feelings of superiority collectively (as with a White Student Union.) There may be open resentment toward minorities who are perceived to be more advantaged: "Why do all the black students sit together in the Student Union?"

Some whites never move beyond this phase. If they do, it is usually a result of a number of cumulative events. Hardiman describes the transition of one of her students from the active acceptance stage to the next stage:

(She took) a class in high school on African American authors. . . . She felt that the authors' experiences had happened long ago and that whatever unfairness existed then had been rectified. Later, after entering college and developing some close relationships with Asian American and African American students, she began to have other experiences that contradicted her assumptions about fairness. An incident in her residence hall involving the indiscriminate rounding up of all Black male students by police, and an ensuing protest over that incident, had a particular effect upon her. She described herself as "waking up to the reality" after this incident. (p. 127)

Stage 3: Resistance

The resistance stage represents a major attitudinal shift, from a position that blames victims for their conditions to one that names and blames a white's own dominant group as the source of racial problems. This resistance may take the form of passive resistance, with little behavioral change, or active resistance — an ownership of racism. Individuals may be embarrassed as they recognize that much of their behavior has been racist. Some may try to distance themselves from other whites or gravitate toward communities of color.

In the active resistance stage, whites believe that changing the white community is the responsibility of whites; they shift from being a good "liberal" helper to being an active agent of change. However, as they make the transition to the next stage, they realize that while they may appreciate communities of color, they are not members of those cultures and they feel a need to redefine whiteness.

Stage 4: Redefinition

In this stage, energy is refocused or redirected to redefining whiteness in nonracist terms. Whites come to see that they do not have to accept the definition of white that is placed on them by society. They can move beyond the connection to racism to see positive aspects of being European American and feel more comfortable being white. However, the difficult challenge here is to identify what white culture is. Sometimes this can be done only by coming into contact with and interacting with people of color, before moving on to redefine one's own white identity. A second task is to identify the ways in which racism is harmful to whites and to move beyond thinking that racism affects only people of color.

Stage 5: Internalization

In this stage, whites are finally able to integrate their whiteness into all other facets of their identity, and this affects other aspects of social and personal identity – sex role, religious role, and so on. At this point, there is less consciousness about identity; all aspects are internalized and manifested in spontaneous behavior.

Summary

This essay attempts to initiate a dialogue about what it means to be white in the United States as we approach the twenty-first century. At this time, it seems that there are competing notions about what is involved in white identity. It is seen as both invisible and real. It is seen as both privilege and liability. It is seen as both positive and negative. And all of these dimensions are played out in our communication with others. Our identities are simultaneously shaping and being shaped by our communication.

It seems appropriate to conclude with some questions for reflection and discussion:

1. When was the first time you were aware of your racial identity? How was it talked about with your friends and family as you were growing up?

2. How did your family talk about ethnicity?
3. If you are white, in what contexts do you think about being white? Do you feel white when you are with only white people?
4. What are the communicative consequences of thinking about race in categories like black and white? What do you feel when you can't easily categorize someone as black or white?

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