Whiteness and White Identity Development

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Summary

In response to the tragic deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and others, racial tensions flew high in 2014. Differing life experiences and worldviews caused lines to be drawn in the sand. As people passionately defended what they believed in, "others" seemed to not understand. While this article cannot begin to unpack the events of the last year, it offers a humble primer on whiteness that can help both whites and people of color understand how the race of a white person in the United States (or dominantly white societies) shapes the way they see and engage with the world.

Defining Whiteness as a Socially Constructed Ideology

"Whiteness" is a term that describes the ideology of those who have been racially identified as white. Whiteness, as with race, is a socially constructed reality. In other words, the meaning of one's skin color and how it shapes a person's worldview and lived experience is not inherent in an individual but determined by society. This is supported by the fact that the definition of the white race has changed over time and has been determined by the people in power. For example, in the 20th century, the Irish, Italians, Greeks, Jews, and people from Eastern Europe were considered "non-white." As a result, they were oppressed like people of color. They gained privilege only when those in power expanded the definition of whiteness to include their nationality (Johnson, p. 18). This is not to say the Europeans ever suffered the injustice of Africans brought to this country as slaves or the same disdain that other "people of color" have experienced; it rather shows the tendency of privileged whites to discriminate.

Dimensions of Whiteness

There are three primary elements of whiteness contributing to whites having power and privilege. These elements serve both as benefits and obstacles to whites. The first is white normativity, the power to define social norms. As a result, whites come to understand correct living according to this standard and devalue anything that deviates from it, even if it is not inherently better. For example, I grew up in a white religious education system and was trained to preach using a method developed by whites. While attending a black church, at times, I found myself wanting the sermon to be more expository and felt like it not only strayed too far from my linear way of thinking but also the biblical text itself. Upon reflection, however, I came to see the vitality, enthusiasm, participatory nature and flow of this black preaching style as an asset. I concluded that the style itself does not compromise the integrity of the biblical text. Though there are obvious benefits to this constructive power, white normativity contributes to whites not seeing the value in other cultures. As a result, they are more likely to disrespect others and less likely to be able to appreciate and utilize a way of seeing or doing things that may ultimately be best.

The second element of whiteness contributing to the power and privilege of whites is structural advantage. This means that, in the United States, whites have numerical dominance and disproportionate control and influence in political and economic spheres. This "institutionalization of white privilege means whites are afforded benefits far less accessible to racial minorities as a result of policies, laws, and customary behaviors in a society" (Edwards, p. 10). Peggy McIntosh, in her classic work, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack,* identifies benefits she's received. These include being able to be with people of her own race most of the time, finding food at the grocery store that is familiar to her ethnic cuisine, going shopping without being followed or finding her race widely represented in the media and educational resources (McIntosh, 1989). Better access to education, healthcare, higher paying jobs, and justice could also be added to this list. Most significantly, whites can choose to not "see" race. They are positioned such that they will receive privileges regardless of whether they recognize their power or how they contribute to injustice (Johnson, p. 25-27).

The final element that contributes to whites' power and privilege is white transparency: "'the tendency of whites not to think… about norms, behaviors, experiences, or perspectives that are white-specific.' It is a lack of racial conscious" (Edwards, p. 10). Among college students, for instance, "whites reported significantly less often than Blacks that they think about their racial identity and significantly more that they never do" (Bush, p. 56). I have found this true in my own life. For example, I almost never thought of myself as white, didn't see how I was privileged on account of my race, and couldn't have described my white culture until I moved into a predominately black neighborhood. Relocating helped me become more aware of how my worldview, social status, and actions differed from people of color and were shaped by my being white. This lack of awareness makes the aforementioned elements and their potential counter-productive consequences difficult to see and change. As a result, whites can oppress others without being "bad people," oppressive personally, or feeling like they are contributing to the problem. At the same time, just because whites struggle to see their race and the impact it has on them and others, does not mean that they are not responsible for their actions or the influence of their race. The good news is that whites can increase their level of racial

awareness through actions and reflection. Actions include exploring resources produced by or about other races, developing relationships with people across racial lines, positioning oneself in a context where they are the numerical minority, or exploring the field of whiteness studies. Doing so better equips whites to positively engage in a racialized society (see note below).

Stages of White Identity Development

All whites are at different stages in the journey of white identity development through which they become aware of their race and make it a part of their identity. While there are multiple models that attempt to describe this process, the author has found the following model by Derald Wing Sue and David Sue to be most helpful (Sue & Sue, p. 330-335).

- **Naiveté Phase:** The first phase occurs when people are very young (birth to no later than 5) and have not yet been socialized to understand the meanings and dynamics of race. This phase ends when whites develop a more positive association with people of their own race on account of the influences of significant others and the media.
- **Conformity Phase:** In this phase, most whites are largely unaware of their race and see their values and norms as universal. They have limited accurate knowledge about other ethnic groups and rely on stereotypes to inform their perceptions. Consciously or unconsciously, whites believe that they are racially superior and thus that it is okay to treat people of color as inferior. At the same time, lest they proudly proclaim a racist identity, they do not perceive themselves to be racist. They see themselves as good and normal and others' behavior as problematic because it deviates from their norm.
- **Dissonance Phase:** The dissonance phase begins when an individual faces the inconsistencies in their beliefs. An example of this is when a person discovers that, despite the fact that they think they are not prejudiced, they experience fear when they find out that their daughter is dating a black person or discomfort when a Hispanic family moves in next door. In most cases, these experiences lead people to recognize their whiteness and see conflict between their professed values and behavior. This dissonance may result in anger, depression, guilt or shame. At this point, whites either retreat into their former beliefs, often holding them more strongly, or progress in their racial identity development. Whether a person progresses or not is influenced by the support they have to move ahead from people like friends and family compared to the fear, guilt, discomfort, and rejection, pulling them back.
- **Resistance and Immersion Phase:** The white person now sees racism and is increasingly aware of how it manifests in the world around them. Recognizing how racism operates in US culture and institutions is what Sue and Sue identify as the hallmark of this phase. In addition, the individual considers how they are both privileged and racist. These experiences often contribute to anger towards family, friends, institutions, and social values that don't uphold America's democratic ideals. It also leads to guilt and shame towards oneself on account of one's role in racism. These feelings may also cause an individual to either serve as a paternalist protector or over-identify with another racial group. Again, this will result either in people regressing to previous phases or further developing their identity.

- **Introspective Phase:** This is a time of reflection where a person asks what it means to be white. This often leads them into dialogue with both other whites and people of color. Knowing that they will never fully understand the experience of non-whites yet feeling disconnected from other Euro-Americans, they may experience feelings of disconnectedness, isolation, confusion, and loss.
- **Integrative Awareness Phase:** The individual now sees himself or herself as a racial being, is aware of socio-political influences regarding racism, appreciates racial diversity, and is becoming more committed towards fighting oppression. In this phase, white identity both emerges and becomes internalized. This is manifest in their being comfortable around people of other racial groups and feeling connected with them. Most importantly, Sue and Sue assert, is the sense of security and strength that empowers them to challenge the racial status quo.
- **Commitment to Antiracist Action:** This phase is defined by action. Such action may include objecting to racist jokes, educating friends on race, standing up against racist behavior or working to change social policy. This may be a lonely and difficult journey as social forces pressure whites to return to a former phase of development. Maintaining a non-racist identity requires whites to become immunized to social pressure for conformity and build alliances with people of color and other racially aware whites.

Conclusion

Whiteness is a socially constructed ideology that confers power and privilege on those identified as being of the white race. Such power and privilege manifests itself in whites being able to shape social norms, receive preferential treatment from social systems, and receive these benefits without having to be aware of their race. This means that "good," well-intentioned whites have the potential to harm others and themselves without their awareness. This lack of awareness, however, does not remove their responsibility. The good news is that whites can become more aware of their racial identity through interracial interactions and reflection. As they do, they may progress in their white identity development, the phases of which are articulated above by Sue and Sue.

Whiteness is a complex and largely unconscious reality that has a far-reaching impact on both whites and people of color. Neither whites, nor any race, are inherently better or worse than any other, but through developing their racial identity whites can raise their level of consciousness to be more likely to evade the unintentional, counter-productive consequences of whiteness.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you see white normativity, white structural advantage, and white transparency operating in your own life and in the world around you?
2. If you are white, where do you see yourself on Sue and Sue's model of white identity development? If you are not white, where on this spectrum would you place some of the whites around you?

3. Do you feel that Sue and Sue's phases accurately describe what you have either personally experienced or seen in regard to white identity development?
4. How has reading this article shaped the way you see, experience, and/or respond to whiteness?

Implications

1. Race is a social construct and no race is inherently better or worse than another.
2. Whites benefit from power and privilege of which they are often unaware. This may result in "good," well-intentioned whites contributing to racial oppression that they did not intend, but for which they are still responsible.
3. Whites can develop their racial identity through an ongoing process that involves reflection and cross-racial interaction. Doing so helps them be better equipped to engage more positively in a racialized world.

Sources

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Notes: A racialized society, is one "wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities and social relationships… It allocates different economic, political, social and even psychological rewards to groups along…socially constructed… racial lines" (Emerson and Smith, p. 7).