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Understanding Whiteness in the United States

JUDITH N. MARTIN

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, ethnically race) that make up our self-concept and how we see our-

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 Hech, 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 so 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 interpreted 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 Folt 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 racialized the marginally. 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 hear 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 as 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-hatred or self-secting.

My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers 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 unwelcome 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 intercultural conversations in different ways. Whites rarely talk about issues of power when discussing intercultural communication, whereas it is a more central issue in African American frameworks (Marin, Hecht, & Larky, 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 revere 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 student, 70 percent black student. 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:

Most whites thought Fuhrman (the policeman accused of evidence tampering and racism) was a sick 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. 296)

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 riot 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. Blackthorn saw whites unanimously condemning Mark Fuhrman, and whites heard the same thing from blacks concerning Simpson's pattern of sexual 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 more 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 Honkers"? 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 distinctiveness 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. Hecchi, 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 "labeled" 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 enroll 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 student remark that they are not white; they are Jewish, 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 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 inability. 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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