

Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society

Whiteness, Measuring

Contributors: Richard T. Schaefer
Print Pub. Date: 2008
Online Pub. Date: April 25, 2008
Print ISBN: 9781412926942
Online ISBN: 9781412963879
DOI: 10.4135/9781412963879
Print pages: 1399-1402

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

10.4135/9781412963879.n590

One of the most striking developments in the field of racial and ethnic studies over the past 15 to 20 years has been work on the topic of whiteness. Research on White culture and identity is not entirely new. Scholars of color have a long and distinguished history of writing about White Americans and their problematic place in the racial hierarchy (in the 1940s, Richard Wright famously said, "There isn't any Negro problem, there is only a White problem"). And mainstream social scientists have tracked the racial attitudes and opinions of Whites for decades. What is new about "whiteness studies" is its attention to the understandings of Whites, or the lack thereof, of their own racial identities and culture and the privileges that go along with them.

The work, the bulk of which has been historical and qualitative, has provoked a good deal of controversy. Even among whiteness scholars, divisions have emerged between those who focus on White cultural practices and self-conceptions and those who emphasize broader social contexts and racial ideologies. [p. 1399 ↓] Many of the debates, both inside and outside of the field, stem from basic challenges of data and measurement. The dearth of broad quantitative information and analysis has left open many questions about the nature and pervasiveness of "whiteness" in contemporary U.S. culture. A somewhat more fundamental problem is the difficulty of specifying and operationalizing key concepts and ideas. How, for example, does one measure the salience of an identity that is assumed to be hidden or taken for granted? How can the claim that Whites don't see White advantage be documented without calling attention to these privileges in the first place?

To illustrate and address these measurement challenges, three key theoretical issues from the literature are posited and examined in this entry. The first two involve core propositions about the relative importance of White identity and the visibility and understanding of privilege among Whites. The third is a set of claims about deeper cultural ideologies and norms. Strategies for operationalizing and measuring these concepts and claims using traditional survey methodology are discussed. Then, data from a 2003 survey conducted at the University of Minnesota under the auspices of the American Mosaic Project are provided. The goal is to provide a basic conceptual framework, set of procedures, and recent findings to illustrate the challenges and possibilities of bringing empirical data to bear on the study of whiteness.

White Identity

One of the first and most basic claims from whiteness scholars is that White Americans have very little racial awareness of or consciousness about themselves. Being White, in this view, is essentially invisible to those who inhabit that racial category. Often conflated with collective designations of “American” or “human,” whiteness is hidden, unmarked, or taken for granted—as much the absence of an identity as an identity itself. Race becomes something only others have. Even when asked directly about what it means to be White, many White Americans have little of consequence or substance to offer.

Of the three sets of propositions about whiteness discussed here, those relating to the invisibility of White identity are the most straightforward to deal with empirically. Some social psychologists use variations on the identity scales originally developed for minority groups. Another way to operationalize these claims is to simply ask Whites to assess the importance of their racial identity and culture and then compare their aggregated responses with those of respondents from other races and ethnic groups. Such an approach supplies basic, baseline data on the extent to which Whites see being White as a part of their identity (as opposed to the assumptions of invisibility from the field).

On the American Mosaic questionnaire, respondents were asked about the importance of their own racial identity, in terms of both the present (“How important is this identity to you?”) and the past (“How important was [your racial identity] growing up?”). About 37% of Whites reported that their racial identity was “very important” to them at present, compared with 72% for non-Whites. Also taking into account those who answered “somewhat important” increases the percentage of Whites who believed their White racial identity to be of some significance to 74% (compared with 90% for non-Whites). Similarly, Whites were far less likely than non-Whites to say that their racial identity was important to them in childhood and adolescence: 26% of Whites said that being White was very important growing up, while 57% of non-Whites made that assertion.

These data and measures have clear implications for theories of whiteness. The results suggest that throughout life, a majority of Whites see their own racial identity as

less important than do members of other racial and ethnic groups. At the same time, however, the results suggest that White identity is far from invisible. Not only did many more respondents say that their White identity was important to them than whiteness theorists would have anticipated, they were also quite concerned about the preservation of White racial culture.

To get at culture (as distinct from identity), respondents were asked whether they believed their racial group has a culture that should be preserved, a question that has frequently been asked of ethnic and racial minorities on conventional surveys. About 77% of White respondents affirmed the desire to preserve their racial culture. While not as overwhelming as for non-Whites (91% of whom answered “yes”), this result nonetheless suggests the need to reexamine basic presuppositions about the invisibility and “taken-for-grantedness” of whiteness.

Understanding of Privilege

Whiteness scholars have also postulated that Whites are less willing or able to see the structural advantages [p. 1400 ↓] that are accorded to them than are members of other racial groups. Theories about the visibility and understanding of White privilege are quite challenging to operationalize. The basic problem is how to ask about something that is presumed to be unrealized without giving away the answer in the question.

The survey researcher has two options. The first is to ask White respondents questions that directly assess their awareness of being advantaged by race. This procedure would provide a concrete measure of awareness of White privilege for Whites, especially if used in comparison to the rates of awareness for other racial groups. However, it does not allow for deeper analysis of understandings of White privilege. (In fact, if White respondents fail to acknowledge privilege—as many would, according to prevailing theories—nothing else can be asked or analyzed.)

The second approach to assessing awareness and understanding of White privilege is to assert the existence of White advantages and then explore respondents' understanding of the sources, extent, and consequences of these advantages. While

not a direct measure of awareness, this procedure would afford rich information on understandings and conceptions of White advantage.

The Mosaic survey took the latter route. It first asserted the existence of White advantage (“On average, White Americans have better jobs, income, and housing than others”) and then asked respondents a series of questions about the perceived importance of factors frequently used to explain social inequality. These factors included prejudice and discrimination, laws and institutions, access to better schools and connections, effort and hard work, and differences in family upbringing. Responses to these items provide basic empirical data on how Americans explain White advantages and how these explanations differ between White and non-White respondents. The survey also employed an experimental, split-ballot design wherein half of the survey respondents were asked to explain White advantage (as just described), while the other half were asked to explain African American disadvantage using the same set of factors (a more traditional framing and standard approach).

Several key findings emerged from these items. First, a majority of White respondents acknowledged factors such as “prejudice and discrimination” as well as “access to schools and other social connections” as factors contributing to their own advantages—62% and 83%, respectively. However, White respondents were, on average, somewhat less likely than non-Whites to acknowledge the importance of these factors. By way of comparison, 79% of non-Whites attributed White advantages to prejudice and discrimination, and 91% said that access to schools and social connections play a role. Perhaps even more revealing, 46% of White respondents did not believe that laws and institutions contribute significantly to the advantages of Whites in society, while 81% of non-White respondents did. In other words, many White respondents acknowledged that their advantages were influenced by factors such as prejudice and other social inequities, but—in stark contrast to the beliefs of non-Whites—not by U.S. laws and institutions.

Finally, the split-ballot design, which posed parallel questions about White advantage and Black disadvantage, revealed that White respondents' understandings of White privilege did not directly mirror conceptions of African American disadvantage. Most striking in this respect is that White respondents were more likely to say that prejudice and discrimination contribute to racial inequality when posed in terms of Black

disadvantage (75%) than when connected with White advantage (62%); conversely, Whites were more likely to attribute their collective success to effort and hard work (89%) than they were to blame African Americans on that score for their disadvantages (62%).

These findings, derived from several innovative survey items, provide data and direction for future research into how White Americans think about and understand racial privilege, both on their own terms and in comparison to other racial groups.

Cultural Ideologies and Norms

A third set of claims about whiteness that come out of the literature has to do with norms and ideologies about culture, social justice, and racial equality. These claims can be divided into two general categories: White adherence to color-blind ideals and the taken-for-grantedness of White cultural norms and practices, what is sometimes referred to as “White normativity.” Because they are presumed to be deeply held and built into the culture, these aspects of whiteness are among the most difficult to operationalize and measure, especially using traditional survey methods that rely upon individual respondents and their more or less self-conscious understandings.

In terms of color-blind ideals, the basic argument by whiteness theorists is that Whites adhere to [p. 1401 ↓] individualistic values and meritocratic ideals that limit their ability to see the collective factors and structural forces that are the root of all racial phenomena. Adherence to color-blind ideals can be measured in a variety of ways. One approach is to draw upon standard survey questions relating to core beliefs about individual freedom, moral values, and the role of groups in U.S. society. Often used by racial attitudes researchers interested in “principled conservatism,” items on special merit, government assistance, and affirmative action programs also afford insight into the nature and limits of individualist, color-blind ideals.

Another technique for assessing color blindness involves asking respondents about social factors such as favoritism, hard work, upbringing, and access to institutions that might have helped them personally to get ahead in life. In tandem with questions about

group-based equalities outlined above, these items give purchase to the extent to which White respondents adhere to individualist ideologies in explaining their own success.

Responses to such batteries of questions on the Mosaic survey did not provide support for whiteness theories about White adherence to color-blind ideologies. This is not, however, because White respondents did not hold color-blind ideologies and values. Rather, it is because respondents of all races held the individualist, meritocratic ideals and visions associated with color blindness. If color blindness is in any way unique among White individuals in the United States, it would appear that other data and techniques are required to document that claim and assess its relationship to whiteness more generally.

Related to claims about color-blind ideologies in whiteness theory are notions about the normativity of White culture—the way in which White values, assumptions, and practices are intimately conflated with the dominant beliefs and behaviors of the society as a whole. In other words, White Americans are privileged not only by the color of their skin but also by a mainstream culture that allows them to feel comfortable, natural, and normal. Claims about White cultural norms (or any cultural norms, for that matter) are among the most difficult to operationalize using survey methods, almost always requiring indirect indicators and proxy measures.

Questions about expectations for assimilation are one technique. What practices or standards do newcomers (or outsiders) need to adopt or adapt to in order to fit in? Over 90% of respondents to the Mosaic survey, for example, said that new immigrants need to learn English, and about two-thirds believed that immigrants should celebrate American holidays and traditions. (This held for Whites and non-Whites alike.)

Nine of ten Mosaic respondents also agreed that Americans need to share a basic set of moral values. However, such items tend to be awkward to frame and interpret in explicitly racial terms. An experimental item on the Mosaic survey asked respondents whether they would characterize the United States today as a “White nation.” The results are intriguing but far from definitive: 34% of non-White respondents said “yes,” compared with 26% of White respondents. Powerful and pervasive as White cultural norms and ideals may be, conventional quantitative data and techniques are probably not the best way to grasp them or understand their broader social impacts.

Douglas Hartmann, and Paul R. Croll

10.4135/9781412963879.n590

See also

Further Readings

Doane, Ashley W., Jr. "Dominant Group Identity in the United States: The Role of 'Hidden' Ethnicity in Intergroup Relations." *Sociological Quarterly* vol. 38 1997. pp. 375–397.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1997.tb00483.x>

Hartmann, Douglas, Penny Edgell, and Joseph Gerteis. 2003. American Mosaic Project Survey [Electronic data file] . Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Department of Sociology.

Helms, Janet E., and Robert T. Carter. 1990. "Development of the White Racial Identity Attitude Scale." Pp. pp. 67–80 in *Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research, and Practice* , edited by J. Helms, ed. : Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Lewis, Amanda E. "‘What Group?’ Studying Whites and Whiteness in the Era of Colorblindness." *Sociological Theory* vol. 22 2004. pp. 623–646.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.0735-2751.2004.00237.x>

McDermott, Monica, and Frank L. Samson. "White Racial and Ethnic Identity in the United States." *Annual Review of Sociology* vol. 31 2005. pp. 245–261.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.31.041304.122322>