Blinded by Whiteness:
The Development of White College Students' Racial Awareness

MARK A. CHESLER, MELISSA PEET, AND TODD SEVIG

The research on White university students on which this article is based explains some of the formation of racial identity for White people. This research also explores the challenges to constructions of Whiteness that White college students may experience. The research indicates the important of developing educational programs that enable White students to challenge dominant constructions of race.

Racial identity is the meaning attached to self as a member of a group or collectivity in racial situations, and individuals may express this identity differently in different circumstances (Cornell and Hartman 1998). Since identity is formed by class and gender as well as race, there are many ways of being white or any other race/ethnicity. Racial attitudes and changing attitudes are the statements of a person's preferred views or positions about others and about contemporary (or historic) policies and events. Attitudes are also shaped by one's social location and are expressed differently in different circumstances. Social and institutional structures and cultures provide the limits and opportunities for both the creation of racial identities and the formation and expression of racial attitudes.

Throughout, we present the voices of white students attending the University of Michigan, a university with a tradition of student, faculty, and administrative engagement with issues of racism and affirmative action. Recently, Michigan has become one of the nation's battlegrounds for competing narratives and institutional policies around racial matters. The data reported here were gathered from white students of varied backgrounds in individual and small-group interviews conducted between 1996 and 2000. Although they are not geographically, temporally, or in terms of cohort representative of other white students' racial consciousness, they are useful windows into the ways in which racial processes become visible and are expressed.

BACKGROUND

The social and cultural context of the modern university is one of racial plurality but also of racial separatism and tension. Students come to these settings from racially separated and often segregated neighborhoods and communities (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Massey and Denton 1993). For many, the university is the first place in which they have sustained contact with a substantial number of students of another race. Although there are more numerous formal and informal opportunities for racial interaction and growth in the university than in most secondary educational environs, white students' lives in these environs are often not very different from their separated lives in previous home and school communities (Hurtado et al. 1994).

In these collegiate circumstances, white students are often confronted for the first time with the need to think about their own racial location. Having been socialized and educated at home, in their neighborhoods, through the media, and in previous schooling to expect people of color to be different, less competent, and potentially threatening, most young white people are ignorant, curious, and awkward in the presence of "others." Some may be aware of their racial group membership and identity, but others may be relatively unaware. Furthermore, during this developmental stage of late adolescence and early adulthood, students' identities as racial beings, as well as their racial attitudes, are subject to challenge and change. Hence it is important to understand the potential developmental trajectory of students' views as they move from their communities of origin to and through diverse collegiate experiences.

Recent explorations of whiteness suggest that changes in the economic, political, and cultural landscape have promoted greater self-consciousness about race. As a result, for many students the invisibility of whiteness, the notion that white is normal and natural, has become harder to sustain. Challenges to white ignorance and/or privilege have also increased some whites' sense of threat to their place in the social order and to their assumptions about their lives and society (Feagin and Vera 1995; Pincus 2000; Winant 1997). Discussions of historic privilege, structural inequality, and racial oppression have caused some white students (and college administrators and faculties as well) to question their enmeshment in pervasive (if unintended) patterns of institutional discrimination. In addition, institutions that now see the education of a diverse citizenry as integral to their missions of education and public service are struggling to make changes in the demographics of their faculty and student bodies, curricular designs, pedagogical tactics, student financial aid programs, and support services.

CONTEMPORARY THEORIES OF WHITE RACIAL ATTITUDES AND IDENTITIES

In the context of these shifts and struggles, scholars have described and explained the genesis and nature of whiteness and white racial attitudes and experiences as well as the developmental aspects of white racial identity and consciousness.

When understood in the context of larger patterns of institutional racism and changing cultural narratives about race, these identity and attitude frames are useful guides—heuristic devices—to understanding white racial consciousness and conceptions of whiteness itself. However, almost all interpretations and typologies of white attitudes and identities focus on their views of "the other" rather than on views of oneself or one's own racial group. That is, surveys of racial attitudes generally ask white people about their views of or prospective behavior toward people of color or race-related policies, seldom inquiring into whites' views of their own racial selves or of their earned/unearned status (i.e., privileges).

Similarly, most white identity development models focus on how whites view people of color rather than themselves; thus their racial identity is conceived as a reflection of their views of "the other." The stance that overlooks one's own race and focuses on others' can itself be seen as a manifestation of the "naturalness" and dominance of whiteness. Certainly one's views of the other and of the self are interactive, and people learn about their racial identity and attitudes in an interactive context, but one's views of others (or of the meaning of others' race) and one's view of themselves (or of the meaning of their own race) are not the same thing.

The notion of white racial "identity stages" suggests a developmental process that generally proceeds as follows (Helms 1990; Rowe et al. 1994): 1) from racial unawareness or conformity to traditional racial stereotypes, sometimes called an "unachieved" racial identity; 2) through questioning of these prior familial and societal messages, with attendant confusion, dissonance, and perhaps even "over-identification" with the other and attendant rebellion; 3) to retrogressive reintegration, where white culture is idealized, others are rejected, and a racially "dominative" ideology holds forth; 4) into a generally liberal (sometimes called pseudo-) acceptance or tolerance of people of color, often accompanied by adherence to notions of "color blindness" or denial and conflict around remaining prejudices; and, 5) it is hoped to an antiracist stance, wherein understanding of others' oppression and one's own privilege is (more or less) fully integrated into a personal worldview called an "autonomous" or "integrative" white racial identity....

Given increased collegiate attention to racial injustice and the desire of some people and advocacy groups to challenge institutional racism, it is not surprising that some young white collegians are becoming more conscious of their racial membership and its privileges. Such consciousness is likely to be painful, as it requires acknowledging both systemic advantage and personal privilege and enmeshment (historically and contemporarily) in structural or institutional discrimination and oppression. A few scholars have pointed to the emergence of a "liberationist" or "antiracist" form of white racial attitudes, wherein white people acknowledge and grapple with their accumulated racial privilege and their role (intentional or not) in sustaining white advantage and the domination over people of color. The racial identity literature refers to this belief/action system as an integrated, autonomous, introspective, or antiracist racial consciousness....

WHAT DO WHITE STUDENTS BRING WITH THEM TO THE UNIVERSITY?

In interviews, white students [we interviewed] discussed the neighborhood and schools in which they grew up and the effect these largely segregated experiences had on their conceptions of themselves, race, and racism. The major themes that characterize their precollege experience are lack of exposure, subtle and overt racism, racial tokenism, and lack of successful role models of people of color.

I never really think about the fact that I am white. I just think that it is fortunate that we don't have to think about it, you know what I mean? It is one of the perks of being white.

I consider myself white, but I don't think about it. The only time I think about it is when we have to do these dumb forms and think about what race we are.

According to Janet Helms (1990:3), racial identity is "a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular group." If the students above never thought about being white and didn't feel a sense of shared racial heritage, they could not possibly develop a self-conscious racial identity; they were at the unaware stage.

White students consistently indicated that their lack of prior contact with people of color, even in the midst of liberal rhetoric, failed to prepare them to engage meaningfully about race:

I grew up in a very white community, and the church was really white. We talked about other cultures, but it was all about boys and girls are equal and worthy and so are people of different colors. It was all about "everything's OK."

Where I grew up, everybody was white, and even though I knew (on some level) that not everyone was white, we never really had to deal with it, and so we didn't.

A few students reported coming from more diverse neighborhoods and schools, but they too indicated a relatively low level of sustained interaction or conscious educational attention to issues of diversity and intergroup relations. In these "more diverse" settings, racial segregation was still the normative experience for white students (as well as for students of color):

[The city] is very segregated in terms of housing, and there's all different kinds of people who live here. But there isn't a tremendous amount of communication and social interaction between the groups ... unless you played sports or you were involved in something else, because it was tracked. Almost all of the kids on the college track were white and almost all of the kids on the other tracks were black ... and then there were also Asian kids and they were generally in the white track.

This lack of meaningful contact with people from other races was often coupled with various forms of both subtle and overt racism. If fact, many students' comments indicate that intergroup separation supported the home and media-based racism they were exposed to, creating and sustaining conditions wherein remnants of "old-fashioned racism" and an identity stage of unawareness and acceptance of stereotypes could be maintained:

So I grew up with my dad particularly being really racist, he didn't really say much about any other group except Black people. "Nigger" was a common word in my family. I knew that there was the black side of town, there was the black neighborhood, and then the rest of it was white, and that's what I grew up in.... But we never had any personal interactions with anybody [from the black neighborhood].

My whole town was white except for a few families who migrated from Mexico to work. I had the clear sense that they weren't supposed to be there. They were like some unspoken exception that was supposed to be invisible.

In addition to the lack of contact in school and neighborhood and the various forms of racism that students were exposed to, several students indicated that when they did learn about people from other races, they were usually token efforts of inclusion:

The only thing I learned in school was that [George] Washington Carver was a black man and he discovered peanuts or something like that. I think we might have peripherally dealt with Martin Luther King. But four years, two years of history, two years of government, we really didn't touch on African-American or any other issues at all ... that just didn't even exist as far as anybody was concerned. In elementary school we dealt with the Indians. You know, you put your hand on a piece of paper and you draw around it and you cut it out and you make a turkey, or you make little Indian hats and things like that with feathers.

Finally, even students who experienced token efforts of inclusion as unsatisfactory found little opportunity to formulate openly meaningful questions about race. Several students commented that when they did have racial questions and concerns during their high school years, they were simply told that there was "nothing to talk about":

The message that I got from the white teachers at the school and other people was that the way not to be racist was to just pretend that you don't see any differences between people. And so everybody had feelings about race, but nobody talked, there was no place to talk about those things. And you only have to just treat everybody as an individual and everything will be fine.

In my high school government class I asked a question about the Civil Rights movement and racism. The answer I got was basically that it was bad back then, but now everything was fine.

Growing up with everyday processes of segregation, lacking contact with racially (or socioeconomically) different peers, being exposed to various forms of racism and racial tokenism, and not being educated meaningfully about race and racism deeply affect white students' social identity—their sense of themselves as well as their relations with others. In their homes, schools, and communities these students acquired habitual attitudes, expectations, and ways of making meaning about their world. White students were socialized to not see themselves as having a race and did not understand their own (and their communities') exclusionary attitudes and behaviors....

WHITE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES ON CAMPUS: NEW CHALLENGES TO WHITENESS

Students' precollege socialization forms a grid of attitudes and expectations about race and whiteness that is often reenacted and reified through their collegiate experience. As several white students reported, once in college they still did not think about themselves as being white—even in the presence of diversity; no one and no program invited or required them to. Hence, as the racial majority on campus and the dominant group within the larger society, the experience of knowing themselves as white was primarily reactive. That is, white students' numerical and cultural dominance protected them from having to know or understand others' experiences. Consequently, in order to "see" their race, they had to have a critical encounter or be consciously challenged to think and reflect about the particular experiences (perhaps privileges) that they had as a result of their racial position. Unless this challenge occurs at a conscious level, their own racial identity remains unknown and invisible during their college years.

Even when white students do have a critical encounter that raises their awareness of their race, they may not have the skills and consciousness (or instructional and experiential assistance) to deal with or act on it productively. Compare, for instance, the level of insight conveyed in these two excerpts:

I don't understand why all the black students sit together in the dining hall. They complain about people being racist, but isn't that racist?

Something I see is that the different races tend to stick with people like themselves. Once, in a class, I asked why all the black students sit together in the dormitory cafeteria. A black student then asked: "Well, why do you think all the white kids sit together?" I was speechless. I thought that was a dumb question until I realized that I see white people sitting together as normal and black people sitting together as a problem...

These comments reflect larger social assumptions about race relations on campus, wherein the prevailing myth has been that minority students are "self-segregating" and the exclusionary behaviors of the majority white group remain unseen (Tatum 1997). However, longitudinal research with over 200,000 students from 172 institutions found that it was white students who displayed the most exclusionary behaviors—particularly when it came to dating (Hurtado et al. 1994). Thus the view that minority students are self-segregating is clearly a skewed perspective that does not take into consideration the separatist and/or exclusionary behaviors of white students. It also fails to account for the ways in which institutional norms and cultures help students misinterpret patterns of interracial interaction.

Other white behaviors took the form of promoting or reacting to patterns of racial marginalization and separation in daily interactions in classrooms, social events, or casual encounters. The result, of course, continues to be minimal opportunity for sustained interaction:

My black friend invited me to a party with her. And the first thing I could think of was how many white people are usually there. I remembered thinking, this is probably going to be uncomfortable, and I would rather just go out with my white friends. I'm feeling apprehensive about meeting their friends and therefore spending time with them.

I used to feel very guilty thinking I don't have many diverse friends. I thought: "I have to go out and get a black friend."

Some white students reported finding these and other situations so discomforting that they began to express resentment against students of color. This type of resentment is supported by the discourse of whites as victims:

I think white males have a hard time because we are constantly blamed for being power-holding oppressors, yet we are not given many concrete ways to change. Then we just feel guilty or rebel.

I think that black people use their race to get jobs. I've seen it happen. My friend should have had this job as a resident advisor, but a black guy got it instead. There's no way the black guy was qualified.

The particular reference to "my friend" in the excerpt above is referred to by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva as one of the main "story lines of color blindness" (2001:159). Views such as these, expressing the emergence of a self-interested form of racial awareness, are consistent with Lawrence Bobo's [Editor's note: See article II in this volume] discussion of the group-position frame of racial attitudes.

Hence we encounter the view of the white person as the "new victim" of racism or as the target of "reverse discrimination" (Gallagher 1995; Pincus 2000). Victimhood, like all racial identities and views, is historically situated, and current public discourse about affirmative action and other race-based remedies stimulates and supports its development and expression. A lack of understanding of one's own prejudices, the realities of racial discrimination, and the advantages whites

have leads to the view that minority advance is unmerited and a reflection of special privilege. The result often is aversive or self-interested racism that facilitates the interpretation of interracial encounters or circumstances as overprivileging minorities and victimizing whites. This also is referred to as the reintegrative or dominative stage of white racial identity.

The inability to understand racial membership is compounded by denial of any racial prejudice or racism. As a result of professed innocence about the meaning and implications of their own racial status and privileges, white students are often "blind" to the reality and status of students of color and regard themselves as "color-blind." If white students do not understand the personal or structural implications of being white and are unable to see how their racial behaviors affect others, they blindly negotiate racial encounters with the sense that all that matters is their good intentions. Their structural position of racial dominance, together with precollege socialization and color-blind ideology, makes it very difficult to distinguish between good intentions (or innocence) and a reflective consciousness that can enact just racial encounters.

I am a pretty open person and someone who wouldn't even think about race, who would try to be color-blind.

When I was asked in a class to describe my beliefs about race, it was easy. I said that I think that the whole idea of race has gone too far, that we need to stop thinking about race and start remembering that everyone is an individual.

Robert Terry (1981) identifies this pervasive color-blind ideology as an attempt to ignore or deny the relevance of race by emphasizing everyone's "humanness." Others have pointed out that the changing discourse of affirmative action—from a need to remediate past injustice to a concern about reverse discrimination—has affected how white people construct racial meaning. The new discourse of white victimhood not only acts to obscure the experiences of students of color but also further reinforces barriers to white students' ability to acknowledge their own racial identity as members of the dominant or privileged group.

Despite these reports of unawareness, negativity, blindness, and victimhood, there are also signs that some white students develop more sophisticated and progressive views of race. As they encounter themselves and others, some white students report moving out of the stage of "conformity" or "dissonance," going beyond "color blindness," and acknowledging their racism, prejudices, and stereotyped assumptions or expectations. This occurs partly as a function of structured educational experiences and informal contacts:

It took me a long time to be able to get to a point where I can say that I have prejudices.

Something I learned is that people have stereotypes. I learned that having stereotypes about other groups is part of the environment that we grow up in.

For a number of white students, these realizations led to a sense of shame or guilt; several scholars have also referred to these responses as the symbolic or emotional "costs" of white racism (Feagin and Vera 1995; Rose 1991):

But I was so guilt-ridden, just horribly liberal guilt-ridden, paralyzed and unable to act. I was totally blowing every little minor interaction that I had with people of color way out of proportion and thinking that this determines whether or not I'm a good white person or a bad white person, and whether I'm racist or not. I saw how hard it was for me to stop doing that and start being more productive. And how hard it was for me to not be scared.

Such strong feelings, when combined in sensitive ways (as contrasted with self-pitying or defensive ways) with new educational input, helped some white students understand some of the privileges that were normally accorded them as a function of their white skin color (and associated socioeconomic and educational status):

I learned that being white, they're so many privileges that I didn't even know of ... like loans from the bank, not being stopped by the police, and other things me and white kids can get away with.

I had not noticed the extent to which white privilege has affected and continues to affect many aspects of my everyday life. I thought "I" had accomplished so much, but how much of where I am is due to my accumulated privilege—my family, economic status, school advantages? ...

Innovative educational programs must be designed and implemented to address these issues in students' racial identities and attitudes. However, even such innovations will not be effective or sustained without parallel changes in the operations of departments and the larger collegiate or university environment. Without changes in this broader organizational landscape, it is unlikely that individual white students' attitudes will change or that their racial identities will continue to "progress"—or that such change programs, if initiated, can be maintained. Moreover, students' consciousness and the academy itself are enmeshed in our society's continuing struggle with racial discrimination and racial privilege. There are real limits for any change toward more liberationist or antiracist white identities or racial attitudes within a highly racialized and racist society and higher educational system.

REFERENCES

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, and Tyrone A. Forman, 2000. "'I Am Not a Racist But ...': Mapping White College Students' Racial Ideology in the USA." *Discourse & Society* 11: 50–85.

Cornell, Stephen and D. Hartman, 1998. *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge.

Feagin, Joe R., and Hernán Vera. 1995. *White Racism: The Basics*. New York: Routledge.

Gallagher, Charles A. 1995. "White Reconstruction in the University." *Socialist Revolution* 94(1-2): 165–187.

Helms, Janet E., ed. 1990. *Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research and Practice*. New York: Greenwood.

Hurtado, S., Dey, E., & L. Trevino, 1994. "Exclusion or Self-Segregation: Interaction Across Racial/Ethnic Groups On Campus." Presented to meetings of the American Educational Research Association. New Orleans, LA.

Massey, Douglas S., and Nancy A. Denton, 1993. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pincus, Fred. 2000. "Reverse Discrimination vs. White Privilege: An Empirical Study of Alleged Victims of Affirmative Action." *Race and Society* 3:1–22.

Rose, L. 1991. "White Identify and Counseling White Allies about Racism. Pp. 24–47 in *The Impact of Racism on White Americans*. 2nd ed. ed. B. Bowser and R. Hunt. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rowe, W., S. Bennet, and D. Atkinson. 1994. "White Racial Identity Models: A Critique and Alternative Proposal." *The Counseling Psychologist* 22:129–146.

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. 1997. *Why Are The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race*. New York: Basic.

Terry, Robert W. 1981. "The Negative Impact on White Values." Pp. 119–151 in *Impacts of Racism on White Americans*, ed. Benjamin P. Bowser and Raymond G. Hunt. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Winant, Howard 1997. "Behind Blue Eyes: Whiteness and Contemporary U.S. Racial Politics." Pp. 40–53 in *Off White: Readings on Race, Power and Society*. Ed. Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, Linda C. Powell, and L. Mun Wong. New York: Routledge.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the different phases that Chesler and his colleagues identify as affecting the development of White people's racial identity?

2. Chesler and his colleagues identify definite patterns in the attitudes of White students as they encounter new racial experiences in the college setting. Have you seen evidence of these same patterns in your observations of White students on your campus? How are they similar and/or different?