W

Whiteness Theory

Whiteness theory is an approach to the study of race rather than a theory as we normally conceive of it in communication. Whiteness theory is an outgrowth of critical race theory and focuses on what some have referred to as the other side of racism. Following critical race theory's view of race as an ideological social construction, Whiteness theory assumes that race is a historical formation constructed within a specific set of social and material conditions. Race is defined as a socially created classification that frames and influences social relationships between groups who have unequal levels of and access to power. Whiteness can be viewed as a particular position within these social relationships. The study of Whiteness addresses the ways in which Whiteness as a racialized system functions and is reproduced in political and social life as well as how Whiteness as a historically contingent social identity manifests in everyday interaction. Whiteness theory is an important attempt at articulating the functions and influence of Whiteness in the United States and elsewhere.

In the mid-1990s, Whiteness theory was introduced to the field of communication by Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek. Nakayama and Krizek established some of the basic precepts of Whiteness theory via their elaboration of Whiteness as a strategic rhetoric. Others in the field have extended their ideas in useful ways including (a) Whiteness as performance (John Warren, Leda Cooks, Jennifer Simpson), (b) Whiteness as discourse (Lisa A. Flores, Dreama Moon, Melissa Steyn), (c) Whiteness as identity (Ronald Jackson, Judith Martin), (d) White absolutism (Michael Lacy), and (e) postcolonial Whiteness (Raka Shome). In the remainder of this essay, the primary tenets of Whiteness theory will be described: its apparent invisibility, its self-perception as a normative standard, and its source of social privilege.

Whiteness and Invisibility

The first precept of Whiteness theory conceives of Whiteness as invisible, unremarkable, and unmarked—in other words, normal and normative. The notion of invisibility suggests that the workings of Whiteness, White supremacy, and/or White hegemony are not readily apparent, at least not to many White people. Research has shown that white U.S. Americans have a lower degree of self-awareness about race and about their own racial identity than do members of other racial-ethnic groups. Whiteness is often the unspoken, silent marker of normality; it just is. For example, when Whites refer to others, the race of the person referred to is generally not noted unless the person is not White. The assumption is that people are White unless otherwise noted.

Given that race scholarship in the academy has primarily been focused on persons of color, Whiteness as a system, as a discourse, and as an identity has escaped close scrutiny, especially among white scholars. Without a critical examination of Whiteness, we ignore the foundation on which race, racism, and racial inequality have been

built in the United States. As the invisible center, a major strategy of Whiteness scholars in communication has been to unmask, name, and critically examine Whiteness. These efforts include examination of how Whiteness functions in various forms of popular culture such as hip hop, how Whiteness pervades the ways in which we conceive of our intellectual traditions such as has been done in the field of intercultural communication, how Whiteness is performed and reproduced in everyday discourse such as in White families and classrooms, and how Whiteness informs the identities of those in predominantly non-White countries such as India and the Philippines that continue to struggle with postcolonial experiences of Whiteness.

Despite how obvious the invisibility claim seems, it has been questioned by many in the field, especially scholars of color. For peoples of color, the workings of Whiteness are often quite obvious and easy to observe. Important to note in this regard is that this so-called invisibility aspect of Whiteness is relatively new; when White supremacy was being established in the United States, it was strongly marked. For example, posted White only signs were once displayed by many businesses throughout much of the country, there was a White requirement attached to naturalization possibilities up to 1952, and a one-drop rule existed for racial identification and categorization. Indeed, for much of U.S. history, Whites' consciousness of their Whiteness and the ability to invoke the power granted White skin were normative routines and assumptions. Once White supremacy was established and dominant, the strong marking of Whiteness was no longer as necessary. This helps us understand the current popularity of colorblind rhetoric that claims that racism is dead and everyone is created equal, so why all the continued fuss about race. In other words, the so-called invisibility of Whiteness may be, in reality, a historically specific phenomenon and an effect of its hegemony rather than an essential component of its manifestation.

Normative Standard

Not only is Whiteness often unexamined and invisible, but also it is often taken as a standard against which others are measured. Much like how feminist scholarship has highlighted the ways in which men's experiences are often treated as the norm against which women are measured, Whiteness theory asserts that White has operated as an implicit norm, standing for all that is presumed to be right and normal. In other words, Whiteness is the place from which others are defined and evaluated, given that it is white people who hold the power to do so. Because Whites historically have controlled the major institutions of U.S. society, they have been able to appropriate and control the social and cultural mainstream and thus to make White understandings and practices normative. Given the culturally hegemonic position that Whiteness occupies, its seemingly natural and unquestioned status perpetuates and maintains its dominance. In addition, the mainstreaming of Whiteness has had important implications for White racial consciousness. For instance, in their everyday experiences, Whites are less likely to feel socially and culturally different and are much less likely to experience prejudice, discrimination, or other disadvantage as a result of their race. Given that Whiteness often goes unexamined, unnoticed, and taken for granted, Whites often feel a sense of culturelessness and racelessness. This feeling of White racial unconsciousness discourages Whites from perceiving the degree to which Whiteness permeates cultural understandings and institutional practices that, in turn, makes them more resistant to change. In sum, the normalization of Whiteness and White racial unconsciousness work dialectically to produce a social situation that makes unseating White supremacy challenging.

White Privilege

Finally, perhaps one of the most important aspects of Whiteness is its position as a system of racial privilege. The notion of privilege is a two-sided one that includes ideas of advantage as well as disadvantage. On the one hand, privilege may be thought of as a special right or advantage granted to a particular person or group. In this way, one can conceptualize White privilege as something gained by White persons simply by virtue of the racial position into which they are born. Conversely, in another way of thinking, privilege also gives White persons special freedom or immunity from liabilities or burdens to which non-White persons are subject. Taken together, then, White privilege both gives and takes away, both privileges and

exempts, both affirms and denies, and both rewards and penalizes.

And like any dialectical relationship, action on one side of the dialectic affects the other. For example, it makes little sense to talk about White privilege without acknowledging and attending to the disadvantages and penalties that accrue to people of color as a result. In real ways, Whites are granted social and material advantages and exemptions at the expense of people of color. In short, White privilege is founded on and depends on non-White subjugation.

In this view, certain social advantages, courtesies, and expectancies accrue to White skin. For example, Whiteness often enables White-skinned persons to shop in upscale retail shops without being under constant surveillance; to assume if stopped by the police, they will not accidentally be shot; to be able (if desired) to construct a daily life that involves only or primarily interaction with people who look like them; and to not have others assume that their skin color somehow prevents or impedes or challenges their ability to be successful, intelligent, or skilled.

Given that Whiteness is a system of privilege, differently positioned White-skinned individuals within that system will experience racial privilege somewhat differently. For instance, a gay White man must negotiate his White privilege in conjunction with male privilege and the disprivilege of his sexual orientation. Likewise, White skin may not protect White people from being poor, but it will likely ensure that the poverty experienced is different than the poverty experienced by brown-skinned persons. For example, the White poor, in general, are economically, socially, and physically better off than are the Black poor.

Not only does White-skin privilege manifest differently among different types of Whites, it is also a privilege that may be accessed by some people color. Colorism, the privileging of light skin among people of color, is a phenomenon observed in many communities of color, both within and outside the United States. In fact, skin whitening products are huge sellers in Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world. In the United States, slavery and the rape of African women helped to construct a color caste among African Americans today. Although non-Whites might sometimes access or appropriate bits of Whiteness that they can use for their own social advantage, clearly this is situational and does not protect from normative discriminatory practices that non-Whites face on a daily basis.

In sum, Whiteness and its effects can be clearly observed in the ways that Whites construct, frame, and publicly articulate understandings about race. For example, some accounts of Hurricane Katrina were racialized in attempts to demonize or demean Black victims of the storm. Our racial discourse reflects existing social relations and cultural understandings and it is also part of the definitional process by which racial understandings are created and reworked. Most importantly, how Whites view themselves and the dominant ways in which they define racial issues and their position within the U.S. racial hierarchy will shape and influence intergroup relations, political agendas, and potential resolutions.

Dreama G. Moon

See also Critical Race Theory; Critical Rhetoric; Critical Theory; Postcolonial Theory; Power and Power Relations; Racial Formation Theory

Further Readings

Cooks, L. M., & Simpson, J. S. (Eds.). (2007). *Whiteness, pedagogy, performance: Dis/placing race.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Crenshaw, C. (1997). Resisting Whiteness' rhetorical silence. *Western Journal of Communication, 61,* 253-278.

Jackson, R. L., II, Shin, C. I., & Wilson, K. B. (2000). The meaning of Whiteness: Critical implications of communicating and negotiating race. *World Communication, 29,* 69-87.

Moon, D. (1999). White enculturation and bourgeois ideology: The discursive production of "good (White) girls." In T. K. Nakayama & J. N. Martin (Eds.), *Whiteness: The communication of social identity* (pp. 177-197). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Moon, D. G., & Flores, L. A. (2000). Antiracism and the abolition of Whiteness: Rhetorical strategies of domination among "race traitors." *Communication Studies, 51,* 97-116.

Moon, D. G., & Hurst, A. (2007). "Reasonable racism": The "new" White supremacy and Hurricane Katrina. In K. A. Bates & R. Swan (Eds.), *Through the eye of Katrina: Social justice in the United States* (pp. 125-146). Durham: Carolina Academic Press.

Nakayama, T. K., & Krizek, R. L. (1995). Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 81,* 291-309.

Nakayama, T. K. & Martin, J, N. (2007). The "White" problem in intercultural communication research and pedagogy. In L. M. Cooks & J. S. Simpson (Eds.), *Whiteness, pedagogy, performance: Dis/placing race* (pp. 111-137). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Shome, R. (1999). Whiteness and the politics of location. In T. K. Nakayama & J. N. Martin (Eds.), *Whiteness: The communication of social identity* (pp. 107-128). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Steyn, M. E. (2004). Rehabilitating Whiteness disgraced: Afrikaner White talk in post-Apartheid South Africa. *Communication Quarterly, 52,*143-169.

Warren, J. T. (2003). *Performing purity: Whiteness, pedagogy, and the reconstitution of power*. New York *:* Peter Lang.

Whorfian Hypothesis

See Linguistic Relativity

Womanism

Womanism, or womanist theory, is a conceptual framework that captures the history, breadth, continuity, and diversity of Black women in pursuit of human solidarity and social justice. Womanism extends our knowledge of communication by providing a critical context for examining Black women's lived communicative experiences, taking into account the material circumstances and ideological positions of African American (or Black diasporic) women. *Womanism* derived from the old Black folk expression of mothers admonishing their daughters to refrain from womanish behavior. This entry explores the history of womanism, its key tenets, and the contours of womanist thought and its relation to communication theory. The terms *Black* and *African American women* are used interchangeably to represent the interrelatedness of Black diaspora communities.

Origins and Tenets

According to Alice Walker who coined the term *womanist*, a womanist is one who embodies the following characteristics: a preference for women's culture, love for herself and other women, and a commitment to struggle and survival for all people—both women and men. The term *womanism* provided a more culturally appropriate alternative to the term *feminist*, which alienated some Black women, everyday activists, and academics. To be womanist is to position oneself and one's academic scholarship within the global struggle for the emancipation of women, including multiple issues related to health disparities, women's economic status, sexuality, political rights, violence against women, and marital and family status and rights affecting Black women in the United States and globally. Womanism is viewed also as a philosophical perspective. It is a way of thinking, acting, and being in the world—an epistemology, or Black women's ways of knowing.

A womanist is not a separatist, except periodically for health, and is traditionally universalist, redefining all people as people of color to universalize individual struggles. Womanism entails a pluralist version of social integration in which, as Patricia Hill Collins observes, women and men live together like flowers in a garden, without losing their cultural distinctiveness. Womanism is committed to eradicating sexism and racism and other "isms" that plague the human community, such as classicism and heterosexism, while making an ideological space for autonomous movements of self-determination.

Key tenets of womanism include multiple jeopardy, lived experience as a way of knowing and making meaning of the world, and a culture of resistance. Multiple jeopardy refers to the ways in which African American women navigate the contradictions of multiple, interlocking oppressions (e.g., racism, sexism, classicism), and multiple, interdependent identities (e.g., Black, female, working class). Black women's knowledge and meaning-making sensibilities are rooted in lived experience. The experiential aspect of knowledge and meaning forms the everyday theorizing of Black women and is often seen as counterintuitive to Western epistemologies. A culture of resistance has historically challenged and shaped Black women's communication. The culture of resistance marks African American women's personal and collective struggle against racism, patriarchy, and other forms of human oppression while developing means toward self-liberation and a more humane social order.