Being White in America: Development of a Scale

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The identity of Whites, or Whiteness, in U.S. society has affected interaction between the included and the unincluded and stimulated scholarly discourses from various perspectives. In this study, the concept of Whiteness is examined and operationalized via the newly developed, Being White in America Scale (BWAS). The BWAS was developed by the authors for empirically testing differences in the awareness of Whiteness between Whites and non-Whites. Three-hundred and fifty-five White and 270 non-White college students responded to an online survey containing the BWAS. The results provide empirical evidence for the postulation that non-Whites perceive the privileged positionality of Whites more conspicuously than do Whites themselves. Implications for future research using the BWAS are discussed.

KEYTERMS Whiteness, Being White in America Scale, race, Whites, non-Whites

As a concept, race has been frequently used, but loosely defined, although its existence has affected the identity of many individuals (Jackson & Garner, 1998). The research literature has dealt with the concept from biological and socio-historical perspectives. The biological origin of “racializing” humans is often traced to the classification of Homo sapiens into four subspecies (Americanus, Europaeus, Asiaticus, and Afer) by Swedish botanist and taxonomist Carolus Linnaeus in the 18th century (Banton, 1999; Marks, 1994; Olson, 1994). From a biological perspective, race refers to a large body of people characterized by similarities in inherited biological characteristics, especially physical traits including skin color, facial features, and hair texture/color (Campbell, 1976; Mukhopadhyay & Henze, 2003; Webster, 1992). In the past, race was considered a “scientific” classification of biological types of humans that “corresponded to psychological and social differences” (Webster, 1992). Most scientists today, however, have abandoned the concept of biological race as a meaningful scientific notion (Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, & Piazza, 1994). The concept of race used in categorizing and stereotyping human beings is regarded as having no biological (i.e., genetic) basis, but merely representing a social and cultural construct for

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typologizing human variation. Evidence of the validity of the more accepted socio-historical perspective is the fact that racial categories have varied over time and across cultures (Omi & Winant, 1986).

Dyer (1997) traced the concept of White to Johan Boemus who earlier proposed that Whites were descended from the sons of Noah: Shem, and Japheth. Hayman and Levit (1997) argued that in the United States as European Americans became the majority, their culture became “less visible” to the European Americans themselves. Katz (1985) contended that White culture in the United States resulted from a synthesis of ideas, values, and beliefs inherited from these European ethnic groups. White culture became the foundation of U.S. social norms and organizations and Whites, as the privileged group, took their identity as the norm. The concept did successfully unite many people across class and national cultures (Dyer, 1997) while excluding others.

However, a sense of “being White,” Allen (1994) argued, did not develop until the 19th century as part of a developing U.S. identity in contrast to indigenous “Reds” and imported “Blacks.” Fanon (1967) argued that Whiteness was discursively constructed through oppositional construction of Black identity. In fact, in U.S. culture, White identity is based on the othering of all non-Whites (Jandt & Tanno, 2001). In the United States, the first census was supervised by Thomas Jefferson in 1790. People were counted as free Whites, slaves, or “others.” U.S. culture has used a variety of “color” words—black, brown, red, and yellow—to categorize, racialize, and hierarchically rank non-Whites. Whiteness evolved as a distinct, pure race, superior to all others. Some anthropologists argued that virtually all cultures in all parts of the world regarded White skin as desirable (e.g., Coon & Hunt, 1965). Nevertheless, Beidelman (1966) showed that in southeast African cultures both White and Black had negative and positive connotations.

Earlier in 1969, communication scholar Bosmajian argued that the predominant positive associations with the word White and the predominant negative associations with the word Black are a form of White racism. Martin Luther King (1967) addressed the issue in his last book before his death as did Black activist Eldridge Cleaver. In 1962, Eldridge Cleaver wrote in The Negro History Bulletin:

The very words that we use indicate that we have set a premium on the Caucasian ideal of beauty. When discussing interracial relations, we speak of “white people” and “non-white people.” We will refer to people all over the world as “white” and “non-white.” Notice that that particular choice of words gives precedence to “white people” by making them a center—a standard—to which “non-white” bears a negative relation. Notice the different connotations when we turn it around and say “colored” and “non-colored” or “black” and “non-black.” (p. 129)

Recent research has gone beyond calling the discourse of Whiteness as racism and has examined the discourse as imperialism, expanding the insights of early thinkers such as Marcus Garvey (1927) and Frantz Fanon (1967) (e.g., Frankenberg, 1993; Roediger, 1992; Shome, 1996, 1999). Shome (1999) argued that Whiteness is a global discursive practice resulting from colonialism and neocolonialism.

Reflecting a socio-historical understanding of race, European Americans today recognize and prefer the label White over other terms. According to a U.S. Labor Department survey of approximately 60,000 households as to how they prefer to be identified of people not belonging to Asian American, American Indian, Black, Hispanic, or multira-
cial, the most favorite term chosen by 61.7% of the participants was White (Caucasian and no preference each had 16.5%). Martin, Krizek, Nakayama, & Bradford (1996) found the same result in a study of 371 college students across the United States.

Although the term White is recognized, Katz and Ivey (1977) contended that Whites in the United States tend not to consciously recognize the existence of the dominant White culture. Dyer (1997) noted this assumption in the habitual speech and writing of White people. Whereas Whites may speak of the race of their friends and colleagues in a friendly and accepting manner, they do not mention the Whiteness of the White people to which they refer. Dyer (1997) attributed this to the assumption that “whites are people, whereas other colours are something else,” endemic to White culture (p. 2). McIntosh (1994) labeled this White privilege. On the other hand, non-Whites may be much more conscious of White privilege. Hiroshi Wagatsuma (1967), for example, wrote of Japanese college students in California who date only White boys because “white skin meant to them purity, advanced civilization and spiritual cleanliness” (p. 422). It has also been observed that we tend to have more difficulty in recognizing different types of people who we think belong to another racial group than to our own racial group. In an early study conducted by Terrence Luce (1974), Whites, Asians, and Blacks were all found to have difficulty identifying different individuals of other races, whereas they performed much better in recognizing those of their own race. Thus, it is possible that to members of non-White racial groups, Whites may be perceived to all look alike and have common characteristics.

Jackson and Heckman (2002) used social constructivism to argue that “people use observations within a given society as a template for appropriate behavior in that society . . . In other words, the social construction of race is the perceptual component that translates into social cognition based upon the visible recognition of difference” (p. 436). Perceived skin color incites socially constructed biases through which people observe and evaluate one another, and Whiteness, as a discursive practice, embraces concepts of privilege, power, authority, normalcy, legitimacy, beauty, purity, and refinement. This appeals to non-Whites apparently as the visible, vivid opposite of their own relatively deprived everyday existence, but to Whites rather vaguely as invisible and deniable features of blissful belonging.

Whiteness and non-whiteness have been studied by communication scholars in various forms of inquiry. Critical, cultural, and rhetorical analyses on whiteness, for example, have often been undertaken in the form of either Whites discussing Whiteness or non-Whites critiquing Whiteness (Jackson, Shin, & Wilson, 2000). A number of empirical investigations have also been conducted on media stereotyping of Whites and non-Whites. Dixon (2001) noted that the mass media may contribute to the perpetuation of the “color line” by reinforcing stereotypical beliefs about people of various racial categories. Media racial stereotyping can affect the identity and self-esteem of those portrayed and interactions between racial groups (Gorham, 1999; Merskin, 1998; Keshishian, 2000; Vergeer, Lubbers, & Scheepers, 2000). Content analysis studies on media portrayals of racial groups have reported that Whites tend to be seen more frequently as competent, law-abiding, and refined, whereas non-Whites, especially Blacks, are often portrayed as incompetent, law-breaking, unrefined, and unbecoming in news, advertisement, and entertainment media (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002; Henderson & Baldasty, 2003). Media researchers have also begun to document empirical evidence
for the effects of media stereotyping of Whites and non-Whites on the audience (e.g., Appiah, 2001; Oliver, 1999; Oliver & Fonash, 2002; Vergeer et al., 2000).

Although many writers and researchers have persistently contended that Whites are privileged and dominant in the United States and that the awareness of Whiteness is greater among non-Whites than among Whites, there has been no scientific instrument to validate these claims. It is also noted that media affects research dealing with racial stereotyping has not yet used specific measures of Whiteness perception as one of the consequences of media portrayals of Whites and non-Whites. Thus, the primary purpose of this exploratory investigation is to empirically reify and index the perception of “Whiteness” or, more specifically, that of being a White person in U.S. society, as resulting from various types of communication encounters involving real and mediated channels. In particular, this exploratory investigation operationalizes the long-held concept of Whiteness in empirical terms and test the differences in perceptions of Whiteness between Whites and non-Whites. In this study, the concept of Whiteness is defined as the identity of Whites (i.e., Caucasians who are not identified as Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Arabs, Native Americans, or multi-racial people) as having distinctness, dominance, normalcy, privilege, superiority, and unsociability in U.S. society. Hence, as suggested by the literature, the following hypothesis and research questions were formulated for empirical verification:

H1: Non-Whites and Whites differ in their perceptions of Whiteness.

RQ1: Do perceptions of Whiteness vary according to gender?

RQ2: Is there an interaction effect between race and gender on perceptions of Whiteness?

Method

Participants

A total of 704 students enrolled at a mid-size West Coast university participated in the survey. Of the respondents, 209 were men and 491 women (4 respondents did not specify their gender). Three hundred and fifty-five respondents were White, 153 Hispanic, 52 African American, 52 Asian, and 13 Native American. Seventy-nine respondents who did not specify their race were excluded from the analysis. The mean age of the respondents was 29.9 yrs (SD = 10.2). There were no significant differences in gender composition across the five racial groups. Because of their small number, Native Americans were not included in inter-group comparisons.

Procedure

Survey respondents were recruited through a campus bulk e-mail, addressed to all undergraduate and graduate students of the university, that included a solicitation for voluntary research participation and a web link for the online survey. The e-mail message informed the students of the purpose of the study, the approval status for the use of human participants by the pertinent University Committee, and the voluntary nature of their participation by stating, “Please remember that your participation is purely voluntary. Do not participate in the study if you feel uncomfortable answering any of the question
items.” Survey respondents needed to click the web link to access the self-administered questionnaire and mark their answers using a mouse for each of closed-ended question items. For fill-in-the-blank questions (e.g., age), respondents typed in their answers. Upon completion, the respondent clicked the “submit” button and his/her responses were automatically delivered to a designated e-mail box to which the researchers had access. Finally, an automatic messaging system sent them a debriefing message with an expression of appreciation. The responses that were originally received in a text file format were then converted into a format acceptable by the SPSS program for statistical analysis.

**Instrument**

The perception of Whiteness was measured by the BWAS (Being White in America Scale), first developed by the authors. The BWAS is a 25-item Likert-type measure in which respondents indicate their agreement or disagreement with each of the 25 statements relating to Whiteness on a 5-point scale anchored by 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). In particular, the instrument measures the extent to which a person perceives White people to be distinct, dominant, privileged, legitimate, superior, and unsociable, compared to other racial groups in the United States. For example, the BWAS includes statements such as “White people have privilege in the United States,” “Being White doesn’t mean much in the United States (R),” “White people are regarded as superior to people of other racial groups in the United States,” and “Whites tend to choose to interact with other Whites rather than non-Whites in social situations.” An internal reliability of the scale in the present data was $\alpha = .90$.

**Analysis**

Scores in the BWAS items were first factor analyzed for White participants and for non-White participants. To maximize the utility of the scale measuring Whiteness, factor structures for the two participant groups were scrutinized for possible elimination of items that loaded low in either of the analyses. To test the significance of the differences between Whites and non-Whites (H1), between males and females (RQ1), and of interaction between race and gender (RQ2), a two-way (Race $\times$ Gender) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted.

**Results**

A principal components factor analysis was conducted on the 25 items of the BWAS separately for White and for non-White participants. The unrotated factor analysis based on the responses of White participants produced four components (Eigenvalue $> 1.0$) with 21 of the 25 items loading relatively highly ($> .40$) and principally (i.e., not loading higher on any other factor) on the initial factor (Eigenvalue $= 10.43$; cumulative percent of variance $= 41.7$; see Table 1). Similarly for the non-White participants, five components were extracted from the analysis with 22 of the 25 items loading on the primary factor (Eigenvalue $= 8.82$; cumulative percent of variance $= 35.3$). Preliminary t tests on mean differences for each of the BWAS items between White and non-White participants are also presented in Table 1. The 20 items that loaded principally on the initial factors of
Table 1  Factor Loadings\(^{1}\) and Mean Scores of the Being White in America Scale Items for White and Non-White Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th>Non-Whites</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Factor loading(^{a}) M (SD)</td>
<td>Factor Loading(^{b}) M (SD)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. White people have privilege in the United States.</td>
<td>.70 3.38 (1.19)</td>
<td>.68 4.00 (.95)</td>
<td>-7.08***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. White people are not much different than people of other racial groups in the United States. (R)(^{2})</td>
<td>.26 2.48 (1.12)</td>
<td>.26 2.69 (1.21)</td>
<td>-2.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. White people tend to distance themselves from other racial groups in the United States.</td>
<td>.73 2.92 (1.10)</td>
<td>.61 3.36 (1.00)</td>
<td>-5.19***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Many rules and laws in this society have been formulated according to the standards of White people.</td>
<td>.65 3.42 (1.21)</td>
<td>.64 3.96 (1.06)</td>
<td>-5.85***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. When people refer to “Americans,” it is usually Whites that they have in mind.</td>
<td>.71 2.57 (1.28)</td>
<td>.66 3.43 (1.25)</td>
<td>-8.44***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. In the United States, being White determines how a person is treated in everyday life.</td>
<td>.75 2.77 (1.25)</td>
<td>.74 3.44 (1.16)</td>
<td>-6.81***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The U.S. society is largely permeated by the values and norms of White Americans.</td>
<td>.77 3.22 (1.21)</td>
<td>.68 3.71 (1.01)</td>
<td>-5.32***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Being White doesn’t mean much in the United States. (R)</td>
<td>.76 3.39 (1.10)</td>
<td>.64 3.94 (.88)</td>
<td>-6.81***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Whites are the most powerful racial group in the United States.</td>
<td>.70 3.27 (1.23)</td>
<td>.63 3.80 (1.14)</td>
<td>-5.58***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Whites can achieve the most success economically in the United States.</td>
<td>.75 2.82 (1.21)</td>
<td>.66 3.36 (1.21)</td>
<td>-5.54***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. The politics in the United States are dominated by Whites.</td>
<td>.62 3.84 (1.07)</td>
<td>.59 4.24 (.83)</td>
<td>-5.09***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. The current social status of Whites in the United States is almost impenetrable.</td>
<td>.76 2.42 (1.05)</td>
<td>.67 2.93 (.97)</td>
<td>-6.26***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. In the United States, Whites are considered more intelligent than people of other races.</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>2.40 (1.14)</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. White people are regarded as superior to people of other racial groups in the United States.</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>2.53 (1.19)</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. It is quite easy for me to distinguish Whites from non-Whites.</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>3.13 (1.16)</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Attempting to label Caucasians separately is simply nonsense. (R)</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>2.64 (1.09)</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. U.S. media assume that readers and users are Whites.</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>2.51 (1.10)</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Whites tend to be over-represented in U.S. television shows and movies.</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>3.17 (1.20)</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Whites draw more positive attention from news media in the United States.</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>2.95 (1.18)</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Whites tend to mingle much better with Whites than with non-Whites.</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>2.99 (1.15)</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Whites do get along with non-Whites. (R)</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>2.47 (1.31)</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. White people feel comfortable with the presence of non-Whites at social gatherings. (R)</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>2.17 (.86)</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. There are always some irreconcilable differences between Whites and non-Whites in the United States.</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>3.03 (1.14)</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Whites tend to choose to interact with other Whites rather than with non-Whites in social situations.</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>2.83 (1.08)</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. There is a wall between Whites and non-Whites in the United States.</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>2.73 (1.17)</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Scores are based on a 5-point scale (minimum = 1, maximum = 5). 1Loadings on the first unrotated factor of a principle component analysis. 2Scores were reversed for negative items. aEigenvalue = 10.43; cumulative percent of variance = 41.7 (n = 345). bEigenvalue = 8.82; cumulative percent of variance = 35.3 (n = 260). *p < .05. ***p < .001. n.s. = not significant (p > .05).
both analyses were then combined and averaged to construct an index of Whiteness, whereas were excluded five items (i.e., Items 2, 15, 16, 21, and 23) that did not meet the criteria on either of the analyses. The Whiteness index exhibited internal reliabilities of $\alpha = .95$ for the White group, $\alpha = .92$ for the non-White group, and $\alpha = .95$ for the two groups combined. A one-way ANOVA indicated that there were no significant differences in mean scores of the Whiteness index among Blacks ($M = 3.73, SD = .67$), Hispanics ($M = 3.31, SD = .73$), and Asians ($M = 3.42, SD = .55$); $F(2, 244) = 2.99, p > .05$. The results of one sample t tests showed that the mean scores of Blacks, $t(50) = 7.80, p < .000$, Hispanics, $t(144) = 8.49, p < .000$, and Asians, $t(50) = 5.43, p < .000$, were significantly higher than the scale mid-point ($3.00$). The scale mid-point represents the neutrality of the participant’s position on Whiteness. Hence, scores higher than the mid-point indicate the acknowledgement of White racial privilege, whereas scores lower than the mid-point can be interpreted as the denial of the advantageous status. The results suggest that all three non-White groups tend to believe that Whites are privileged and dominant in U.S. society.

To test the hypothesis and research questions of the present investigation, we conducted a two-way (Race $\times$ Gender) ANOVA. Hypothesis 1 predicted differences between non-Whites and Whites in their perceptions of Whiteness. The two-way ANOVA showed that there was a significant main effect for race (i.e., Whites vs. non-Whites), $F = 69.05, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$. Specifically, non-Whites ($M = 3.51, SD = .70$) were found to be significantly higher in the awareness of Whiteness than Whites ($M = 2.96, SD = .83$); $t(603) = -8.62, p < .001$ (see Table 2). Hence, Hypothesis 1 is supported by the current data. Further, a post hoc one-sample t test on scores of Whiteness revealed that the non-White participants scored significantly higher than the scale mid-point ($3.00$), $t(259) = 11.72, p < .000$. This indicates that the non-White participants tended to agree with the privileged positionality of Whites in U.S. society. Another one-sample t test on the scores of White participants yielded that their scores were slightly lower, but not significantly different than the mid-point, $t(344) = - .896, p = .371$. That is, White participants tended to take a neutral position on the assertion of White racial privilege in U.S. society (i.e., neither agreeing nor disagreeing with statements attesting the presumed racial dominance). Thus, the results provide empirical evidence for the claims that non-Whites are more aware than Whites of the privileged status of White people and that Whites do not tend to acknowledge the advantageous position of themselves in U.S. society.

Table 2  Mean Scores of the Being White in America Scale Index for Whites and Non-Whites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Whites</th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>345a</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Scores are based on a 5-point scale ($minimum = 1$, $maximum = 5$). The results of ANOVA revealed that the main effect of race was significant ($F = 69.05, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$), but not that of gender. There was no significant interaction between race and gender. 
*aTwo white and one non-white participants did not specify their gender. 
***$p < .001$. 

RQ1 concerns gender differences in the perceptions of White racial privilege. The two-way ANOVA showed that there was no significant main effect for the gender of participants ($F= 0.56, p = .454, \eta^2 = .001$). That is, the current data indicates that there are no notable differences between male and female participants in their perceptions of White racial privilege in U.S. society. Thus, this finding negates any speculation that there can be more awareness by one gender than by the other. Finally, RQ2 relates to interaction between race and gender on perceptions of Whiteness. The results of the ANOVA showed no interaction effect between race and gender ($F= 1.42, p = .233, \eta^2 = .002$). In other words, although non-White participants generally showed greater awareness of White racial privilege, their gender did not augment or diminish the level of awareness. Similarly, gender effects were not identified with the responses of White participants. Hence, the results of the present investigation empirically demonstrate significant differences in the perceptions of White racial privilege between non-White and White participants, but not between male and female participants for both Whites and non-Whites.

**Discussion**

The primary goal of the present study was to examine differences in the perception of White identity between Whites and non-Whites, while developing an empirical index of Whiteness that can be used in future research dealing with relationships between Whiteness and other communication constructs. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) argued that “White’ is a relatively uncharted territory that has remained invisible as it continues to influence the identity of those both within and without its domain” (p. 291). Recently, communication scholars have engaged in an interesting line of research on White identity. The research involves critical, rhetorical, and qualitative analyses on the labeling and identity perception of White people (or those who are not identified as Asian, Arab, American Indian, Black, Hispanic, or multiracial) by Whites themselves (e.g., Jackson & Heckman, 2002; Martin et al., 1996; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). This line of inquiry can be enriched by incorporating research on non-Whites’ understanding of White identity. The present investigation was designed to compare Whites’ and non-Whites’ perceptions of Whiteness in U.S. society, while adding some empirical, quantitative component to the inquiry, purporting to unveil the realm of White as a racial category. As with other types of methodologies, empirical research can have its own shortcomings. However, an empirical approach to the issue of Whiteness as shown in this study would enable researchers to undertake large-scale, systematic observations. In this process, theoretical explanations could also be formulated regarding Whiteness and other communication constructs.

We agree with Jackson and Heckman (2002) that Whiteness is socially constructed and constantly negotiated in everyday communication encounters between Whites and non-Whites. These encounters may take various forms of real and mediated contact, depending on relevant practices and preferences in a society. Whiteness can have different meanings in different multi-racial societies that may have established their own socio-historical contexts related to the positionality of White members. It is also plausible that within the boundaries of a society such as the United States, Whites and non-Whites have different perceptions of Whiteness. The present study provides empirical evidence for this proposition. Specifically, the findings support the postulation that non-Whites tend to
perceive the privileged and dominant positionality of Whites more conspicuously than do Whites.

Race is an illusory, but inextinguishable concept, and so is whiteness. They both came into existence as a result of humans not fully realizing the limited nature of what they regarded as attempts to theorize mundane experiences in reducing uncertainty about others. As Zack (1993) argued, it is possible that there are greater differences between two people within a racial category than between two people of different racial categories. In fact, research has found only a small percentage of the differences between individuals to be accounted for by genes that we associate with race (Olson, 1994). Nonetheless, under the aggrandized, faulty assumption about genetic differences between races, various types of classifications, most notably Whites and non-Whites, have been historically imposed on the construction of psychological and cultural meanings for the categorized, often expedited by implicit motives for the conservation of social, economic, and political vantages. Some scholars and writers hold that this seemingly inhumane practice of racial categorization must be stopped immediately at every possible level. Ward Connerly, for example, proposed the Racial Privacy Initiative (RPI), which would prohibit government, state, and local agencies from classifying individuals by race, color, ethnicity, or national origin (Connerly, 2001; Flores & Moon, 2002). He contended that freeing people from “the costly and poisonous identity politics and the racial spoils systems that define our political process” will eventually bring Americans together to establish “one nation indivisible” (p. 26).

On the other hand, some maintain that racial categorizations need to be sustained and recognized until practices of racial injustice are completely obviated in every sector of our society and necessary compensations are made for those who have been historically disadvantaged by the categorizations. Flores and Moon (2002), for example, argued that critical attention needs to be directed to the tensions “wrought by the racial paradox” to promote productive assessments and theorizations of race. Our persistent discourse on “racialization” has actually led to outlawing many apparent practices of racial discrimination that are deemed unacceptable in public and institutional settings in U.S. society. However, it is observed that racial prejudice is still existent, more openly in private settings and more subtly in public settings (e.g., Asante, 1998). Hence, it would be rather illogical to completely ignore or attempt to nullify the presence of such ill-fated conceptions as race and Whiteness already embedded in everyday episodes of person perception and judgment than to scrutinize and rectify every aspect of its nature for the betterment of society.

There are some limitations in this study that need to be acknowledged. Our sample consists of students enrolled at one mid-size university in the West Coast, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Also, the fact that the data were collected through an online survey on a voluntary basis is another limitation. It is possible that after scanning the question items, only those who became interested in expressing their opinions submitted their responses. Considering these possible limitations of the present investigation, the findings must be interpreted with caution and tentativeness. Nevertheless, it is important to note that future research would benefit from the utilization of the BWAS, a measurement instrument that empirically indexes the identity of Whites as a racial category.

There are some areas of inquiry that future studies using the BWAS may further explore. First, future research using the BWAS needs to examine the relationship between
media uses and the perception of Whiteness. For example, it would be worthwhile to investigate whether exposure to certain media depictions of Whites leads to the perception of Whiteness as portrayed or “cultivated” by the media. This line of research will be able to empirically verify the claims made by critical and cultural scholars regarding media influences on social perception. Second, research on Whiteness and non-Whiteness can be extended to the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Cyberspace interactions relying on textual messages have been often seen as relatively free from the intervention of racial prejudice because people interact without recognizing the race of one another unless they choose to disclose it. However, as Kang (2003) suggested, it should be noted that racial cues (e.g., language, grammar, diction, and names) and racial judgment continue to exist even in online textual information. Interactants may pick up some cues from textual messages, generalize them to infer the race of their partner, and activate racial meanings, often subconsciously. Hence, investigations on perceptions of Whiteness and non-Whiteness either as a factor influencing CMC or as an outcome of CMC would be another interesting area of future research. Finally, we suggest that future replications of the inquiry examine various populations and use the BWAS to a larger extent in developing theoretical explanations on interracial communication in order to enhance our understanding of the perception of race and Whiteness and subsequent effects on interracial interaction. As Jackson and Heckman (2002) argued, the important issue is not what we can do without race but what we can do with it.

References


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