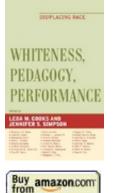**PsycCRITIQUES**

CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY: APA REVIEW OF BOOKS　　　*American Psychological Association*

Are You Aware of White Privilege, and What Are You Doing About It?

A review of

Whiteness, Pedagogy, Performance: Dis/Placing Race

by Leda M. Cooks and Jennifer S. Simpson (Eds.)

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007. 326 pp. ISBN 978-0-7391-1462-9. $80.00

Reviewed by
Thomas Teo
Elissa Rodkey

Theoretical, methodological, and personal relationships between pedagogy and psychology have existed since Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841) advanced both fields. But from the beginning of the institutionalization of both disciplines, this relationship has been based on the primacy of psychology. This made (and still makes) it easier for psychologists to find jobs in education departments than vice versa. A

similar situation can be found in the context of the younger communication, cultural, and performance studies. Yet, this presumed relationship between basic and applied does not make sense from an interdisciplinary point of view, nor does the presumed secondary status of these new disciplines do justice to the theoretical and practical innovations in these fields. The idea that psychologists can learn from these disciplines finds confirmation in Cooks and Simpson's edited book, *Whiteness, Pedagogy, Performance: Dis/Placing Race*, and in its 14 chapters that "analyze cultural practices of whiteness" in educational and popular contexts and "provide the opportunity… to link theoretical frameworks to training, teaching, and performance of white identities" (p. 3).

What Is Whiteness?

To many psychologists the concept of *Whiteness* (and related research) might be unfamiliar, and the taken-for-granted usage of the term in the book may surprise some readers. Several chapter authors point to the emergence of the concept in the 1990s, when, among other authors, Ruth Frankenberg (1993) published *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. But what does the concept mean? Jackson, Warren, Pitts, and Wilson argue in their chapter that "Whiteness is perhaps the most studied and least understood concept in the United States" (p. 69). There is no operational definition of the concept, which would be a methodological demand from psychology, but the book provides theoretical and pragmatic elaborations on the meanings of Whiteness.

Whiteness studies are a response to the idea, applied in academia as well as in the public, that in order to understand the racial problems of the United States it was necessary to study Blacks (or other minorities). In doing so, academia madevethnic minorities into a problem rather than studying the problems that minorities encounter in a dominant culture. Or, as Nakayama and Martin (see pp. 111–112)

emphasize in their chapter, Whiteness studies focus on the people who created the problem in the first place. Yep (see pp. 89–90) provides the most detailed account of the various meanings of Whiteness, ranging from identifying it as an invisible force that has the power to determine what is normal; to a relational category that thrives on its counterconcept of Blackness; to a structural category that provides White people with unearned advantages in the educational, health, political, and legal systems (and many people who enjoy the benefits are not aware of that); to a source of violence and terror for people who are not considered White; to a result of colonialism; and to critical studies of Whiteness that challenge the established order.

It is important to emphasize that Whiteness should not be understood as a racial category. If this were the case, then Whiteness studies would fall into the same trap as do those psychologists who focus on race differences without studying the meaning of race, about where the need for studying differences comes from, and whether interpretations of difference are really determined by data. Critically, it should be mentioned that occasionally the authors in the book seem to move into a racial concept of Whiteness, but, as several chapter authors point out (e.g., Yep, p. 97), Whiteness is a social construction. This issue is most clearly articulated by Rowe and Malhotra, who attempt to unhinge Whiteness from "white bodies" and argue "that whiteness is a process that *we* all negotiate, whether we are white, brown, black, or some combination of the above" (p. 272). This also means that to presume that White people necessarily exhibit Whiteness is untenable (it would mean a freezing of identity and would disable antiracist work by White people) and that it is flawed to think that minority members never benefit from Whiteness.

Psychologists could justifiably argue that they turned away from race psychology a long time ago in order to study prejudice, which explains the attitudes and some behaviors of dominant groups. But prejudice is an individualistic concept, and prejudice studies show that one can find prejudice in all ethnic groups—a result that can be used to reject demands for change ("Why should we change first?"). On the

other hand, Whiteness is a structural category, a critical concept that specifically challenges the assumption that economic and symbolic power is equally distributed among all groups. Indeed, a particular minority individual may have significant prejudices, yet this would not take away from the fact that there are major structural differences in terms of access to resources and institutions and that Whiteness is a source of this access, willingly or unwillingly.

Practicing Whiteness

From a theoretical point of view, the editors suggest "that the signification of whiteness is deeply rooted in cultural and historical understandings of race, but that significations are made meaningful through performance" (p. 17). The discipline of psychology has problems with structural categories that transcend the individual. Thus, it is not surprising that Whiteness has not found its way into the hearts and minds of psychologists. However, the *performance* of Whiteness (Whiteness as practiced) is clearly psychological, and it could provide a straightforward entry point for psychological research and application. Warren and Heuman argue that "we are essentially performing beings, constituted in/through our everyday minute acts" (p. 215). This assumption is thoroughly investigated in the many case examples provided in the book that range from an analysis of student–teacher interactions, multicultural courses, and communication and diversity courses; to high school theater performances—using critical pedagogy (Paolo Freire), parody, role play, inversive performance (in which European Americans pretend to live as African Americans), autoethnography (i.e., a critical reflection on one's background), and so on.

An example of *racial* pedagogy known to many and addressed in the book are Jane Elliott's third-grade class exercises from the 1960s, "Brown Eyes–Blue Eyes," an intervention that was broadcast on national television and used by Harris, Groscurth, and Trego to inspire

their "hands-on activities" (p. 175). These authors developed a so-called "Crayola activity," during which individuals were assigned colors and formed a group identity related to their color, and interviewers were instructed to exhibit explicit prejudice against the interviewees during a process that linked color identities to common racial stereotypes, followed by a debriefing process and a short reflection paper. However, the intention of this activity, namely exposing students (particularly White members) to real-life racism so that they could personalize the teachings on Whiteness, may be different from what the exercise actually achieved. Student reports of confusion or frustration were assumed to be a good sign by the authors, indicating student growth, but could also be interpreted as a failure of the exercise. This is a potential criticism of a number of activities mentioned in the book: Some authors fail to critically evaluate whether proposed exercises actually achieve their intended purposes.

Orbe, Groscurth, Jeffries, and Prater explore the positive and negative consequences of introducing Whiteness into the classroom and study the effects of an instructor's culture, course content, and student diversity on introducing Whiteness. They discuss "language profiling" in their class (people who sound "Black" are being discriminated against on housing and employment opportunities, simply on the basis of how they sound) and demand better training and support for instructors who plan to facilitate discussions of race in the classroom. Miller and Fellows analyze shortcomings and alternatives to the White Racial Identity Development Model and discuss the themes of sensitivity, guilt, and belonging when it comes to identity. Jackson, Warren, Pitts, and Wilson analyze how White graduate teaching assistants negotiate identity and pedagogy. Nakayama and Martin provide meaningful suggestions for postcolonial intercultural studies in which they challenge generalizations about American culture as being limited to mainstream White Americans while excluding minorities.

The chapter by González, Cantú, and González is helpful because it discusses issues that arise when well-intentioned people attempt to challenge the status quo (staging an alternative high school theater

production). Bates does an excellent job in analyzing the actual impact of the movie *The White Man's Burden* on an audience. He uses the movie as an example of racial inversion, when Whites and Blacks exchange their privileged and oppressed roles, which is intended to challenge Whiteness assumptions. Bates does not accept the film's claim to change the way one sees the world and instead critiques the ways in which the binary inversion strategy can actually reinforce White stereotypes about racial realities. His pedagogical suggestion is to show the film in class and to couch it in critical questions and discussion.

Some of our critical remarks should not take away from the fact that the book provides many pedagogical case studies and examples that could be used in the discipline of psychology. Indeed, the case studies and examples also address an important psychosocial issue: the notion of race neutrality and the rejection of the critique of White race privilege by many White students and individuals. The book provides many theoretical and practical tools in order to address statements and expressions by individuals who emphasize that they do not perceive race, that they are neutral when it comes to race, and that there is no advantage in being White in the United States.

Methodology and Problems

From a methodological point of view the studies presented in the book can be located within qualitative research, social analysis, and autoethnography. The last method is relevant because instructors have racial identities, as do their students (the same applies to authors and readers). In support of that idea, Cooks and Simpson, coeditors of the book and both associate professors of communication, provide a detailed account of their own location, their own experiences, and the reason for their interest in this topic. Leda Cooks, a White woman, describes the process of realizing "that to `lack' an identity could in itself be the result of privilege" (p. 8). Jennifer Simpson, also a White woman, describes how she moved from a "standard script of whiteness"

(p. 10) to a critical consciousness regarding race.

Overall, this edited book is innovative, well organized, and clear. It is innovative in terms of analyzing Whiteness and applying it to educational contexts in original ways. It is well organized as far as this is possible in edited books: It is divided into three sections (The Existence and Contours of Performances of Whiteness; Whiteness and Marked Performance of Identity; Performity: Whiteness as Unmarked Norm), but it is not completely clear how the sections relate to the chapters, and the divisions sometimes appear arbitrary, with some neighboring chapters bearing little relation to each other. This is partially due to the variety of style and subject matter encompassed by the book. Finally, the book is clear, assuming that one has some familiarity with the concepts used.

We are concerned that a taken-for-granted attitude toward the concept of Whiteness may prevent an analysis of its shortcomings. Many concepts used in the social sciences (including psychology) are sociohistorically embedded (Danziger, 1997). This also applies to the concept of Whiteness, which can be colocated within the history of the United States. But what happens to Whiteness in a European or South American context? The internationalization of the social sciences requires the theoretical and practical justification of terms that are used in a particular context in order to address the wider meaning of categories (be they traditional or critical). It would have been appropriate—given the critical perspective taken in the book—to discuss this issue. We have concerns that a familiarity with this concept seduces researchers to treat it as a natural category, despite the unambiguous confessions to the contrary. Another problem is that Whiteness as a generic descriptor of White people is in contradiction to its structural meaning and may prevent an understanding of the transformative nature of this concept.

We could not completely agree on the significance of using a category such as Whiteness in psychological studies. This edited book is not psychological but a work that has psychological relevance, as it promotes concepts and practices that can influence psychological

research and application. The disagreement can also function as a general lesson for other potential readers of the book: If one is interested in the sociopolitical relevance of the social sciences, if one is endorsing social action as part of research, if one believes that psychology can help in challenging the social status quo, then one will endorse this book. If one values traditional disciplinary knowledge, if one questions the legitimacy of some radical critique, and if one believes that sociopolitical applications of the social sciences require rigorous theoretical justification, then one will not like this book. However, the authors agree that psychology's contribution to Whiteness studies may ultimately lie in a theoretical action: developing a term that does justice to the social and psychological issues of the problem as well as to the sociohistorical embeddedness of meaning.

References

Danziger, K. (1997). *Naming the mind: How psychology found its language*. London: Sage.

Frankenberg, R. (1993). *White women, race matters: The social construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.