Cyberspace as White Space

This essay is dedicated to all of those graduate students finishing doctoral programs. I know the road feels perilous, but you have something important to share with the world. Be encouraged and keep pushing!

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Introduction & Theoretical Framework

This paper seeks to explicate the intersections of social dominance theory and

cyberspace; particularly how computer-mediated technology supports and maintains

white racial hegemony. Cyberspace has allowed for a social dominance discourse in a

protected, yet public space, and these posts are often revelatory of a broader belief in the

racial supremacy of whites (Simpson, 2008). Social networkers often feel safer to openly

discuss racial feelings in affinity groups (Foster, 2009). While the concept of race in

cyberspace has been shaped by the idea that online community is raceless or colorless, in

fact, the literature suggests that white supremacy groups have begun to utilize this service

for recruitment, announcements, and mobilization purposes (Levin, 2002; Beckles, 1997;

Douglas, McGarty, Bliuc, & Lala, (2005).

Resistance to diversity change (Henry, Cobb-Roberts, Dorn, Exum, Keller, &

Shircliffe, 2007) is often related to the thought that racial and other cultural minorities are

being permitted to take what "rightfully" belongs to majority groups or individuals

(Haley & Sidanius, 2006). Persons from cultural majority groups often struggle when

confronted by the notion that they belong to identity groups that maintain systems of

power and how those dimensions grant them a dominant social status. Their predominant

status also allows for portions of their own identities to go unexamined which often

hinders their ability to interact with disempowered minority groups. They have difficulty

engaging with the systemic, institutional nature of racial, sexual, religious, national,

linguistic, and ethnic predominance—how they work in society and at the individual

level—even how the intersections of those layered dimensions work (Dru, 2006). To

have better dialogue about the nature of difference, we need to explore and explicate the

structures of predominance to better understand how cultural majorities experience

American society—especially with regard to racial matters. Understanding whiteness and

white racial identity becomes essential to truly grasping social dominance orientation.

Whiteness becomes the prism through which we view concepts of race and racial

identity; the normative nature of predominance, however, precludes most White people

from possessing any understanding of themselves as raced beings (Perry, 2001). As such,

their ability to participate in conversations and educational interventions regarding race is

stilted at best. This lack of experience, perhaps even cognizance of identity, creates an

imbalance whereby ALANA persons (members of the African, Latino, Asian, Native

American diasporas) "own" race and are comfortable talking from a racial vantage point

and White people shy away, thus decreasing the likelihood of constructive and equitable

dialogue (Simpson, 2008). When we are able to have healthy discussions about

Whiteness, we can better understand how we come to notions of White supremacy, how

Whiteness has been privileged through ethnocentrism, and how racial hierarchies were

developed and how they are maintained.

Social Dominance Theory

We live in a land of tremendous disparity - digital divides, cultural divides, socio-

political partisanship - where ever-widening educational achievement gaps persist. Social

scientists have attempted to determine how these divides occur, paying particular

attention to how social hierarchies are developed and sustained (Mann, 1986). The

answer may be found in a deeper understanding of social dominance theory, which

dictates the inherent nature of in-group bias where groups tend to favor greater social

status for their own affinity groups (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006).

Social dominancy theory (SDT) appears to have its foundation in the question of

how social group status is founded and sustained. It examines prejudice and

discrimination from a layered approach involving multiple levels: institutional,

individual, and intergroup (Oetzel, 2009). Findings have indicated processes by which a

dominant group emerges in a given society and how cultural ideology grows out from the

perspective of the dominant group (Doane, 2005). We begin to see a particular society

from the vantage point of the dominant group who then are the "assumed norm" and the

constructed lens through which target groups are judged and subordinated. According to

Pratto, Sidanius, and Levin (2006), hierarchical systems throughout the world are based

on three dimensions: age, gender, and what they call "arbitrary-set" (p.273) dimensions

such as nationality, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. Often though,

individuals within the predominant system are unaware of their own personal power or

vantage, and social dominance discourse is clouded between the institutional and the

individual (Perry, 2001). The quote below suggests the difficulty:

"…the place from which power is exercised is often a hidden place. When we try

to pin it down, the center, elusive as it is, exerts a real, undeniable power over the

whole social framework of our culture, and over the ways that we think about it. .

. persons who deviate from any one of the characteristics that it comprises are apt

to be relatively less politically empowered. . ." (Ferguson & Gever, 1992, 9)

A person's social dominance orientation (SDO) describes the individual's

valuation toward ideas of equity and equality—who should have rights and who should

not (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Social dominance theory has been

extended to determine mechanisms between personal SDO and prejudice, particularly in

relation to predetermined attitudes toward assimilation and the acculturation of foreigners

and immigrants (Levin, Matthews, Guimond, Sidanius, Pratto, Kteily, Pitpitan & Dover,

2011), affirmative action (Haley & Sidanius, 2006), and political orientation (Sidanius,

Pratto, & Bobo, 1996).

Studies related to SDO have revealed a generalized orientation toward a

dominant/subordinate relation in social groups. Rubin & Hewstone (2004), however,

challenged this notion. Their findings suggest an oversimplification of in-group

favoritism. Additionally, those who also critiqued social dominance theory tend to agree

that the theory is socially relevant; the critiques tend to focus on the validity and

reliability of the study questions or procedures (Dru, 2006). Tungen (2010) charges that

SDT and SDO theorists are too broad in their claims making it difficult to make "proper

interpretation of historical and evolutionary data" (1). For instance, SDO is driven by

one's membership in different social groups and is affected by background factors

(socialization, family, war, natural disasters) as well as personality variation and

temperaments.

The American racial-historical context requires an examination of the structural

racism that has been in existence since its founding in the 1600s. Racial exclusion,

extermination, and subjugation of minority groups, at the hands of Whites is a well-

documented truth, but is often ignored in a "the-past-is-the-past" willful blindness. After

all, our history books and governmental documents like the Constitution and the Bill of

Rights and the Declaration of Independence refer to freedom and equality as a right for

all peoples. Whiteness, then, has held the status of valued commodity for several hundred

years; its status has been protected by systems of power. Johnson & Blanchard (2008)

identified several definitions that help to explain social hierarchies. These will be useful

as we move forward in this discussion of racial dominance:

1. **Power.** The accumulation of money, goods, authority, sway, or influence.
   Specifically, the differential ability, based on unequal distribution of
   wealth, influence, or, physical force, to control the economic, political,
   sexual, educational, and other important decisions of others" (p. 17)

2. *Privilege:* an invisible set of unearned rights, benefits, or assets that
   belong to certain individuals simply by virtue of their membership in a
   particular non-target group. Privilege is a dynamic system of overlapping
   benefits which may act to any particular individual's benefit in one set of
   circumstances and to that person's detriment in another. (p. 17)

3. *In-group* (non-target group): the people in each system or relation of
   oppression who are in power in that oppression. Members of non-target
   groups are socialized into the role of being oppressive, becoming
   perpetrators or perpetuators of the cycle of oppression, either actively or
   indirectly. A non-target group may retain its power through force, the
   threat of force, and/or misinformation about the target group. Members of
   non-target groups also have a history of resistance that usually is not
   recognized. (p. 16)

4. *Dominance:* the systematic attitudes and actions of prejudice, superiority,
   and self-righteousness of one group (a non-target group) in relation to
   another (a target group). *Internalized dominance* includes the inability of a

group or individual to see privilege as a member of the non-target group.

(p. 15)

The nature of social dominance (Oetzel, 2009) affords White persons to be

socialized (normed) to believe that they are not raced (McIntosh, 1998; Helms, 2000),

and to be the reference point for all ethnic groups (ALANA persons are *diverse*) thereby

creating (intentional or not) the systematic attitudes and actions of prejudice, superiority,

and self-righteousness of Whites in relation to racial others.

Most White racial identity theories are based on how Whites perceive or interact

with other racial or ethnic groups and therefore do not acknowledge Whiteness as a racial

marker or heritage (Hardiman, 2001; Helms & Cook, 1999; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000).

These models operate from a standpoint of White dominance, conscious or unconscious

attitudes that focus on racial superiority, prejudice, discrimination, or racism, while most

models for ALANA populations are shaped by cultural differences (Hardiman, 2001).

Hardiman contends that White racial identity models for the 21st century should include a

focus that is "directed at White identification with White culture" (2001, p. 111) because

of the "scant attention to the way Whites identify in a cultural sense with their race" (p.

124).

In a racially hierarchical system, as we have in the United States, White is the

color of the marketplace—the center of economics and commerce, education, law and

government, and religion (Mahoney, 1995). Historically, skin color determined access to

the marketplace. One must not negate the economic, social, and political power exerted

from the central position of the marketplace. From within, Whiteness has become moral,

right, and beautiful—the concept by which non-Whites are judged and granted or denied

accesses to the marketplace. Those racial minorities (which initially included the Irish,

Jewish, Italian, and Scottish peoples) were excluded and only granted access by skin

color similarity and by assimilation to the mainstream (Sacks, 1994; Roediger, 2006).

To shine a light on Whiteness is to bring to light the advantages of predominance.

It also helps people understand how puritanical Whiteness has been elevated in our

society, mainly through the notions of ethnocentrism, the belief in the superiority of

Whites, and in the argument of having "earned our way" through meritocracy—the core

of social dominance theories. Persons with high social dominance orientation often

exhibit higher levels of prejudice (Levin, et al, 2010). Recently, negative race-centered

discourse has emerged as one of the sources of prejudicial and discriminatory sentiment

in American culture (Larson, 2005) and therefore it makes sense to examine how

constructions of whiteness and white racial identity inform and are shaped by social

dominance orientation.

Identity in Cyberspace

Most people mistakenly define identity far too simplistically—"who you are"

does not begin to fully encapsulate the concept. Erik Erikson, one of the nation's most

respected thinkers on the subject of human development, suggested that identity is "the

ability to experience one's self as something that has continuity and sameness, and to act

accordingly" (1950, 42). To accomplish this identity, one need more than to ask only

"Who am I?" but also to explore the layered and multiple dimensions of identity to

include race, religion, sexual orientation, nationality and the like. Understanding identity

also includes the question of "who am I not?"

Cyberspace, however, opens opportunities for self-identification in more fluid

manners. In fact, virtual identities can be more complex providing for a more

"disembodied anonymity" (Hardey, 2002, 570). Whether in online gaming (Bessière,

Seay, & Kiesler, 2007), social networking (Williams, 2006), or other mediated

atmosphere, users can construct and negotiate virtual identities. In these cases, users can

choose to identify themselves visually through personal images, the creation of avatars,

and in textual representations. Persons can choose to identify truthfully and accurately,

but they may also decide to create an imagined sense of self; they can describe

themselves and their physical bodies any way they like, which may include representing

self as a different gender, age, race, etc. (Nakamura, 1995). The technology of the

Internet offers its participants unprecedented possibilities for communicating with each

other in real time, and for controlling the conditions of their own self-representations in

ways impossible in face-to-face interactions. How then does one form online personae

(fictional or real) and what are the implications for interpersonal relationships (virtual,

digital, and offline)? (Hardey, 2002; Gross & Acquisti, 2005)

This becomes increasingly important because living in community with others

also influences a person's identity. The Internet, particularly through the development of

Web 2.0 technologies such as wikis, social media, and weblogs, opens possibilities for

the creation of online communities (Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Zin, Reese, 2005).

These communities serve an important function in the creation and maintenance of

personal relationships and group affinity. Being connected provides social bonding

(Cross & Strauss, 1998) and social capital which is related to how personal relationships

are formed in mediated networks and what benefits are derived for those involved

(Williams, 2006).

Understanding personal and social identity in cyberspace includes, then,

examining social participation for individuals and communities. Social network exchange

theory supports the idea of understanding how interpersonal relationship dynamics work

in cyberspace (Kavanaugh, *et al*, 2005). This is important in an effort to explore how

individuals within a local community interact and build relationships in both physical and

virtual communities; this includes how individuals and groups develop social norms.

Online social networks were developed to provide emotional support, access to

information, and bonding between members, or the exclusion of non-group members

(Williams, 2006). Understanding cyberspace culture then includes examining online

networks as modes of communication, meaning-making and community formation

(Hemmi, Bayne, & Land, 2009). Understanding identity within this medium requires

understanding cyberspace within a "communicative process of building up trust, of self-

disclosure, and of exploring the other" (Hardey, 2002, 581).

Construction of Race Identity in Cyberspace

Each person's individual identity is shaped by a number of different forces,

including, but not limited to, parents and other family members, peer groups, social and

religious organizations/leaders, educational providers and institutions, communities, and

media messages. These forces, in many ways, dictate particular meanings and

interpretations of the world around us. A person talks about belonging to a particular

cultural group or identity, but rarely is able to discuss what it means to belong to that

culture. They'll focus primarily on clothing, food, and music styles, but what gets

forgotten or minimized are the beliefs, values, and assumptions of a culture that

motivates the manifested behavior above the surface (Johnson & Blanchard, 2008).

One could easily argue that the American system is one built upon the construct

of racial superiority of Whites—a belief system carried from Europe, but perfected in the

New World. It is also no secret that race is an uncomfortable topic for most people. To

acknowledge America's racial heritage is to also acknowledge the lasting legacy of

racism and racial oppression that is still in operation today. It is interesting that race is

such a taboo topic, especially given that our conversations about the topic are so

simplistic. For the uninitiated, race is simply about skin color. There is a need to explore

the possibilities of raising awareness of the complexity of racial dynamics including the

social actions and process that are affected by the category of race and including identity

formation, racism, discrimination and development of racial ideology.

The foreground of race in cyberspace includes the various ways that digital media

are shaping our conceptions of and experience of race in America. The concepts and

questions to be explored include:

- The digital representation of racial difference (Kretchmer & Carveth, 2001)

- The role of the internet and the web in building and maintaining racial

  communities; (Wilson & Peterson, 2002)

- The digital divide of access to media; (Jansen, 2010) and,

- The roles of hate groups and community activism online.

In a racially hierarchical system, as we have in the United States, white is the

color of the marketplace—the center of economics and commerce, education, law and

government, and religion. Historically, skin color determined access to the marketplace.

One must not negate the economic, social, and political power exerted from the central

position of the marketplace. From within, whiteness has become moral, right, and

beautiful—the concept by which non-whites are judged and granted or denied accesses to

the marketplace (Delgado, 1997).

Whiteness tends to be seen as a blank slate. People of color often are required to

serve as experts on racial matters in academic and social arenas. This phenomenon has

much to do with White students' general lack of understanding of their own racial

identity. Because of their majority status, Whites rarely see themselves as possessing a

race; much less understand how whiteness operates in society.

The White race has been defined as "those Americans who self identify or are

commonly identified as belonging exclusively to the White racial group regardless of the

continental source of that racial ancestry" (Helms & Piper, 1994, p. 126). Studies on

racial identity development for White persons are a relatively new phenomenon within

the past two decades. Whiteness as an area of academic study has taken on greater

prominence in the latter part of the last decade as evidenced in the work of Feagin (2000),

Goodman (2001); Hobgood (2000); McIntosh (1998); and Welman (1993).

The nature of social dominance (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994;

Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006) affords White persons to be socialized (normed) to

believe that they are not raced (McIntosh, 1998; Helms, 2000), and to be the reference

point for all ethnic groups. African, Latino, Asian, Native American (ALANA) persons

are diverse. Most White racial identity theories are based on how Whites perceive or

interact with other racial or ethnic groups and therefore do not acknowledge whiteness as

a racial marker or heritage (Hardiman, 2001; Helms & Cook, 1999; Ortiz & Rhoads,

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culture" (2001, p. 111) because of the "scant attention to the way Whites identify in a

cultural sense with their race" (p. 124).

Whiteness in Cyberspace

Cyberspace has been identified as a "fortress" for whiteness (Back, 2001) because

in everyday life, the absence of race is coded as white (Tal, 1996). In cyberspace, the

"limiting" markers of race on the Internet are illusory, and as Tal suggests, allows for the

"whitinizing of cyberspace." In their seminal book, *Race in Cyberspace*, Kolko,

Nakamura, & Rodman (2000) argue that not only is race often difficult to talk about in

offline communities, but in cyberspace there is a conscious avoidance. Nakamura (2002)

concurs that racelessness, as a concept in cyberspace, equate to a white default racial

identity. McPherson (2000) observed that colorlessness in cyberspace is veiled racism.

In essence, the absence of color privileges whiteness and therefore the white self

becomes the normative self on the internet (Tal, 1996). There are those, like Sardar

(1995) and Ravetz (1996) that suggest that cyberspace culture was envisioned as a

colonial space, socially engineered for the promulgation of racial hierarchy. Harper

(2011) further argues, "cyberspace can be a central site for excavating the invisibility of

covert whiteness (a tacit form of racialized consciousness)" (235). In this manner,

cyberspace has made white supremacy both more powerful and more invisible (Kintz,

2001; Nakamura, 2002) and how "techno-utopian dreams reproduced racist patterns"

(Lovink & Nakamura, 2005, 60). The culture that created and currently dominates the

Internet is white and an outgrowth of that is the digital divide where certain individuals

are underrepresented and others (whites) are privileged (Kretchmer & Carveth, 2001).

Is the Internet post-racial space or does the Internet magnify ethnic and racial

differences between people? Understanding cyberspace cultures must include applying

sociological concepts (race, ethnicity, racism, identity, prejudice) to online behavior and

online communities (Bush, 2011). In our technologically advanced society, dialogue

between individuals and groups has been reduced to quick blurbs on Twitter and

Facebook; rarely do we sit down and face each other to openly discuss important topics.

Furthermore, our "politically correct" culture has created a world where, all too often,

unspoken misconceptions and biases about color, culture and creed become stumbling

blocks to understanding and respect (Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely,

2006). Worse, these barriers can breed intolerance and hate. Regrettably, these

"advances" have hindered our ability to openly and candidly discuss the taboo subjects of

race and racism that often only happen behind closed doors or in secret cliques. The

conversations have moved online (Berger, 1995).

Racial Dominance in Cyberspace

It should not be underestimated the power of communication channels as a factor

in social dominance discourse, especially with regards to the interactions in cyberspace

and in social media. One core value of American culture is the right to free speech and

the Internet, in some ways, has been an un-policed/un-policeable arena. This has been a

boon for white supremacist groups who in the past decade have utilized the Interne to

express their veiwpoints, sell their products, and for the recruitment of new members

(Lee & Leets, 2002; Levin, 2002; Douglas, *et al*, 2005). This phenomenon has been

called "cyberhate" and has been targeted at gays and lesbians (McKenna & Bargh, 1998)

and for the advocacy of terrorists (Ballard, Homik, & McKenzie, 2002; Stanton, 2002).

By and large, however, racial bias and hatred dominates, especially towards African

Americans (Beckles, 1997; Leets, 2001; Zickmund, 1997; Nakamura, 2012).

Implications

It was Frankenberg (1993) which posited whiteness as three interrelated

phenomena that have SDO implications: a) "a location of structural advantage, of race

privilege," b) "a standpoint" from which whites look at themselves, at others, and at

society, and c) "a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed." (1). It

is in this interrelation where whiteness earns its "natural" status, (Tierney, 2006, 609), its

locus of power and control, and its invisibility. How whites come to understand their own

social dominance as well as interact and respond to issues of racial diversity has been the

subject of much research (Vaught, 2008; Foster, 2009; Andersen, 2003; Bonilla-Silva,

2001; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Bush, 2004; Wetherell, 2004), there exists a gap in

the literature using newer media (e.g., Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.) as a discussion starter or

catalyst to discussion. Van Den Berg (2003) suggests the importance of this work

because "discourse is a form of social action" (120); Wetherell (2003) continues this idea,

"discourse is intimately involved in the construction of inequality" (13). This paper has

attempted to construct an argument for the need of research that deeply explores how

computer-mediated technologies privilege whiteness and how the digital divide is more

than just access to techno-equipment.

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