

Frankenberg (1993) "Social Construction of Whiteness"

Main Point

Discusses issues dealing with how white women conceptualize race, race differences, and forms of racism. Chapter 6 focuses on the conscious processes that white women use to internalize the definition of race and how it affects their daily lives through interactions, feelings of self acceptance, and their impacts in society. White women see race as something that has to be processed or thought through based on their past experiences with race in a certain context of race relations. This previous encounters often leads white women to self-questioning often of guilt, political activism, or rationalization of the racial status quo. Chapter 7 furthers white women's internalization of race and culture by focusing on white women's perspectives of white culture and white privilege. The author stresses that whiteness is a culture in itself and that in order to critically analyze dominant conceptions of white culture, white women must think about race from a racially identified body that is racially positioned in society.

Central Issues and Concepts:

- There are three forms/phases of **US Race Discourses** that occur simultaneously or separate in different contexts. However, they are inter-related as they all deal with internalizing racism. *Essentialist Racism, Color- and power evasiveness, and Race-cognizant reassertions and reorientation:*

1. Essentialist racism – This discourse marked the inception of racism in U.S. history and it influences the other two discourses. In this mode of thinking, there is white complicity with racism and engagement of notions of superiority of one group vs. another. White privilege is embraced and accepted.
2. Color and Power Evasiveness: This discourse warrants the production of a white person that internalizes himself to be innocent of racism; there is the evasion of white guilt and an attempt to abolish race differences by means of evading the naming of differences in power structures (economic, political, and social inequality to resources). In addition, this discourse tries to claim that there is no real difference in power or privilege.
3. Race Cognizance: This discourse has an internalization of white guilt that translates to political activism and social responsibility. First, there must be solidarity in that white people must unite with anti-racist agendas. Second, there needs to be a focus on structural and institutional change, not the subject (i.e. not white people, but white privilege in infrastructure). Last, there must not be assumptions or “subjective politics” on what is appropriate behavior, not compromising self-identity.

- **White Culture vs. No Culture** - White culture is a culture, even if it is synonymous with American culture. In fact without white culture, there would be no history of the United States. – Rather than viewing white culture as no culture, Frankenberg suggest focusing on why white culture is unidentifiable. Whiteness as a cultural space is the normative culture due to the legacy of colonialism. Other populations, or people of color were thought of as the “other” races and the “norm” race was white. Thus, when the minority cultures developed, they developed in

resistance to what was deemed the normative culture, distinguishing them as different. These minority or “bounded” cultures have created white culture as the counter culture to the others.

•**White Pride vs. Racism** – In white culture discourse, there is often skepticism to show “white pride” without one’s motives seeming racist or superior. This can alter race relations for the worse. Thus, many whites settle for American pride, which is inherently their culture anyway.

•**Ethnicity**- While many whites can identify with ethnicities, there is close examination of the Jewish population. This group shows how an ethnic group that possesses that phenotype deemed socially significant to be “white” can be accepted as white, but not feel as though they belong due to their rich cultural heritage.

•**Other Modes of Belonging**- When whiteness is accepted as the normative culture, many whites still wish to set themselves apart. Religion, ethnic heritage, birthplace origins, careers, and class are used.

Two Key Quotes:

“When these white feminists saw racism, they referred not only to the external world and the experience of people of color, but also to new senses of self: a sharpened awareness of how racism had structured their own lives and of the extent to which their own thinking had been, and continued to be, informed by racism.” (p. 162)

“Well what does white mean? One thing is, it’s taken for granted... [To be white means to] have some sort of advantage or privilege, even if it’s something as simple as not having a definition.” (p.197)

Two Questions:

-- In terms of internalizing race, the author has no perspective of a white woman that is perfectly fine with being in the dominant majority and sees no reason to think that essentialist racism is an adequate way to view society. Does she not feel that this perspective is relevant and contributes to race relations in a more concrete form than just an ideological legacy shaping internalized race among white women?

--White women have acknowledged that they can acknowledge whiteness as a culture, but still feel that it is a culture by default of the other more racialized cultures. However, are white women willing to give up the white privilege, the power status, and cultural capital that accompany their “cultureless whiteness” in exchange for an ethnic culture? Further, while they acknowledge and complain that “whiteness” is a default American culture, do white women truly have a problem with not having an ethnic culture similar to that of minority groups?