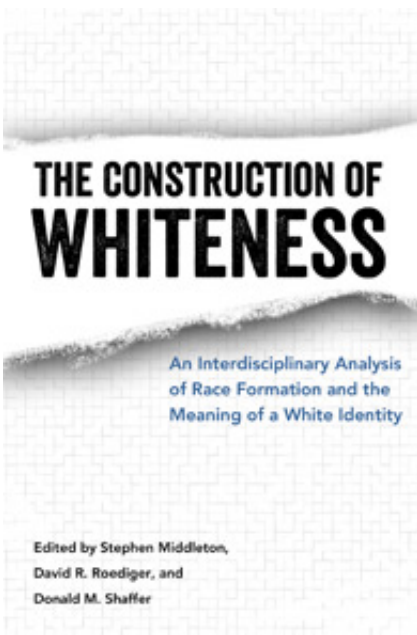


Book examines how circumstances, institutions cause people to identify by race

June 23 2016, by George Diepenbrock



Credit: University of Kansas

Recent discussions and protests on American race-related issues seem to have taken into the mainstream ideas that were largely confined to academic circles, said David Roediger, a KU Foundation Professor in American studies and history.

That's particularly true of the critical study of whiteness and how this type of racial privilege surfaces, particularly in institutional social, cultural, political and economic practices, said Roediger, who co-edited

the book "The Construction of Whiteness: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Race Formation and the meaning of a White Identity" by University Press of Mississippi.

"The classic way to study race relations has too often been to say something is a problem attached to black people or a problem for Latino people, but for white people, not so much," Roediger said. "In this book we try to say there's actually some kind of cost of being in the dominant position in those relationships and doing things that seem to be required to keep that system of domination going."

Nine essays by scholars in the book examine the history of whiteness and its relationship with structures of inequality in America.

Roediger said the idea has become important after events that have put the public focus on how police, the court system, schools and other institutions treat minorities. For example, the shooting of black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, by white police officer Darren Wilson, raised new questions on race.

"People started thinking whether it matters what a white policeman thinks about the people he's interacting with," Roediger said. "Does his racial identity matter as much as Michael Brown's racial identity?"

In his 2015 book, "Between the World and Me," which is this year's KU Common Book, Ta-Nehisi Coates addresses "people who think they are white" or "believe themselves white" instead of directly identifying "white people," Roediger said, adding that Coates expresses the central idea of the academic critical study of whiteness.

"People who do this work are not trying to say that racial identities are real and fixed and talk all the time about white people because we think there are distinct races that are naturally different from each other.

We're interested in the ways circumstances and institutions cause people to identify as white," Roediger said.

Counseling psychologists have examined awareness of racial differences as one step of progress on racism, though Roediger said ideally that would lead one step further to taking action to institute social change and stop racist practices.

In a chapter he authored for the book, Roediger examines the dynamic of disabled Civil War veterans, free slaves and the difficulties they faced in post-war America. It is an adaptation from a chapter in his 2014 book "Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All."

"The racial order was shaken up because the United States before was based on independent, able, self-providing white men, and then all of a sudden we have 800,000 disabled white men who decidedly need care and often are reliant on women, family members or ex-slaves," he said. "Nobody has thought much about how those categories have intersected. People at the time would have realized it's not so unproblematic to be white because now nobody is enslaved and [white](#) maleness doesn't equal independence and an ability to provide for yourself and your family. For a big chunk of people, it didn't."

Roediger said he hoped the book provided a way for the public to think critically about race relations, especially in how institutions interact with minorities.

"For me, it tries to take the temperature of where we are in this new phase in the critical study of whiteness, where [people](#) aren't making such big claims, such as if we understood whiteness, we'd understand everything," Roediger said. "Scholars are more saying whiteness is one thing that exists in social relations in the United States, but it always exists in combination with class and with law and gender and other

important factors."

Provided by University of Kansas

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