the central question at hand: Why do white people have so much trouble correctly identifying a black person?

Several months of research and reflection on little else but this topic has led me to a few conclusions. These conclusions are my own and are not based upon, or necessarily supported by, empirical data.

By nature, people are generally homogenous. We tend to prefer those we are familiar with, those with whom we identify. White people tend to prefer other whites, as rich people tend to prefer the company of others with money. These
groups are not alone in that respect: black people generally feel most comfortable around other blacks and poor people around other poor people. There's a pre-established comfort level—a set of customs and mores already in place. The comfort level allows one to relax and live less deliberately.

Those of different races may have different customs and mores, different ideas of permissible speech, behavior, diet, and dress. The hair texture and styles of the various races is often different, as is facial and body structure. In light of these considerations, I believe the major
cause of the
cross-racial
impairment is the
lack of familiarity
with those of
other races. We
often work
together, and at
times eat
together, but
seldom do we live
in the same
neighborhoods or
attend the same
churches. These
latter activities
reflect, in my
mind, our lack of
comfort among
those of other
races. Sadly, it is a
self-fulfilling
cycle: comfort
keeps us apart,
and yet, living
amongst each
other would
establish a
comfort level. With
this paradox as
our communal
mindset,
familiarity is a
difficult thing to
achieve. How can
one be expected
to accurately
identify a member
of a group with
whom they are so
utterly unfamiliar?

One of my
colleagues has
attacked my
viewpoint as
simplistic. He
refuses to believe
that familiarity
with those of
other races might
alleviate the
inaccuracy of
cross-racial IDs.
As support for his
contention, he
cites various
authorities that
conclude,
"counterintuitively,
the ability to
perceive the
physical
characteristics of
a person from
another racial
group apparently
does not improve
significantly upon
increased contact
with other
members of that
race . . . ."

Ironically, I believe
these findings