

# WHITE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN A MULTICULTURAL AGE

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*In an era of increased multicultural awareness and competence, student affairs administrators and other helping professionals are tasked with developing programs and centers that promote inclusiveness and the understanding of self and others. For White professionals in student affairs administration, an understanding of personal development is essential to working effectively with students and colleagues from other cultural groups. This narrative demonstrates a model of self-exploration and application of a racial identity development model in an effort to enhance student affairs professionals' multicultural competence.*

As my classmates' responses to the instructor's question flood the computer screen during an on-line course, up popped a "private" message from my instructor, "Maybe you have not reached the next developmental stage of the model yet?" That private message—red, bold, and vividly etched in my mind—was a thunderbolt to my very soul. Could it be possible? I read the message several times, then replied, "Wow, I think you are right. Maybe I haven't." My instructor responded, "Let's talk."

That private message was a turning point in my life. Even though I completed the readings for class, it was at that moment that I became aware of the fact that I was White, a member of a majority group and thus privileged within society; and as a result of my whiteness, that I was often perceived as an oppressor. The emotion was raw, drowning my heart like a torrential rain. The realization that I was a participant in people's suppression and oppression because of privilege crushed me. I wanted to crawl into a hole and die; not because of embarrassment, but because of shame. I viewed White society as very cruel and I did not want any part of it. It was at that moment that I decided to make a change, but a change for whom – for others, for me, or both? What was it that I wanted to change: my comfort, or the comfort of others? As an educator, how will such change affect my work? How can I make a difference? Will I make a difference?

In an era of increasing multicultural awareness and competence, student affairs administrators and other helping professionals

are tasked with developing programs and centers that promote inclusiveness and the understanding of self and others. For White professionals, an understanding of personal development is essential to working effectively with students and colleagues from other cultural groups. Using personal narrative as a method of inquiry, I will explore who I am and discuss my thoughts, motivations, and assumptions related to my White identity development and how it affects my work. Everyone has ideologies that can be difficult to acknowledge. I hope to instill a sense of willingness and urgency for individuals to embrace the opportunity to acknowledge their differences and embark upon their own journey by utilizing the tools developed by Helms (1984, 1990a).

Over the years, research has focused primarily on identity development of people of color, particularly on Black people. The most widely utilized theoretical model has been the Cross (1971) Model of Psychological Nigrescence. A shift in White identity typology from that of a purely psychological health focus to also including attitude development began in the eighties (Helms, 1990a) when Helms (1984) developed a model of White identity development (later revised in 1990). Ponterotto (1988, as cited in Tokar and Swanson, 1991) further suggested that it was "important to understand racial identity development levels of cross-cultural counselors, who are often White" (p. 296). While a substantial amount of research on White racial identity development has been done in the counseling field, there has been

minimal research related to the field of student affairs.

In an effort to examine the level of my own White identity development and to answer the questions that surfaced for me, I embarked on an in-depth study of Helms's White Racial Identity Development Model and an application of the model to myself.

### Helms White Identity Development Theory

The most widely cited and utilized model of White identity development is that proposed by Janet Helms. Helms' (1990a) model was initially identified as a linear stage-based model; however, she discovered through further research that an individual may experience one or many of the statuses at the same time. In other words, each status can be present but at differing levels or times.

Racial identity, according to Helms (1990a), refers to the perception an individual develops with regard to his or her identification and recognition with a particular racial heritage or group. The context in which an individual attributes his or her heritage will determine the ability to adjust positively to racial identity development. Helms further states that, "White racial identity theories attempt to explain the various ways in which Whites can identify (or not identify) with other Whites and/or evolve or avoid evolving a nonoppressive White identity" (p. 5). White identity development, then, touches upon individual value systems, ideologies, reference groups, affiliations, commitments, and personal awareness as it relates to feelings and perceptions of those of another race.

Because racism plays a role in White identity development, one must have a sense of what racism is as well as recognition that racism exists. Three types of racism were identified by Jones (as cited in Helms, 1990a). They are:

(a) individual, that is, personal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors designed to convince oneself of the superiority of Whites and the inferiority of non-White racial groups;

(b) institutional, meaning social policies, laws, and regulations whose purpose is to

maintain the economic and social advantages of Whites over non-Whites; and

(c) cultural, that is, social beliefs and customs that promote the assumption that the products of White culture (e.g., language, traditions, appearance) are superior to those of non-White cultures (p. 49).

Helms (1990a) indicates that in order for a positive and healthy White identity to develop, individuals need to overcome, at a minimum, one of these identified types of racism. This can be achieved by "accept[ing] [one's] own Whiteness, the cultural implications of being White, and defin[ing] a view of self as a racial being that does not depend on the perceived superiority of one racial group over another" (p. 49). To achieve such a White identity, one needs to understand the process of White identity development.

**The Model.** Helms's (1990a) White Identity Development model is composed of two phases and six statuses. The first phase is the abandonment of racism and includes the three statuses of contact, disintegration, and reintegration. The second phase is the defining of a positive White identity and includes the statuses of pseudo-independence, immersion/emersion, and autonomy. The model indicates that development takes place in statuses versus stages because as the individual works through racial identity development, statuses can occur simultaneously, only once, several times, not at all, or the individual may remain in a status for the duration of the individual's life.

**Contact.** The contact status is essentially color-blindness. In this status the individual "is oblivious to her or his own racial characteristics and attempts to pretend that others have none. Naiveté and 'accidental' insensitivity often characterize the person in this [status]" (Helms, 1990b, p. 10). At this status, White individuals "choose to be oblivious to race" (Helms, 1990a, p. 54). There is minimal awareness and the individual only interacts with people of color when it is necessary, such as at work or in minimally sought out social settings. There are two types of awareness related to the contact status – vicarious and

direct. Vicarious awareness refers to the ways in which individuals gain such awareness – through the media, family or friends. Direct awareness refers to how a White individual acts, or reacts, with or toward a person of color. Helms (1990a) further indicates that the duration of the contact status is determined by the types of interactions and experiences and the type of awareness related to such experiences. For example, if the experience is influenced more with vicarious awareness rather than direct awareness, it is likely that the individual will remain in the contact status for an extended period of time. The White individual moves to the disintegration status when her or his awareness of social interaction and social intolerance of racial peer pressure is recognized as inappropriate or unjust.

**Disintegration.** This status occurs when the White individual becomes consciously aware that she or he is White, which results in a flood of moral dilemmas and personal conflict. It is in this status that the White individual realizes that people of color and White individuals are not perceived as equal; that what one had been taught as a youngster is not true, and that how the White individual chooses to respond may cause incongruence with self and personality, not to mention the effect of the White individual's status in society.

In the disintegration status, the White individual experiences many feelings – guilt, anxiety, helplessness, even depression. In Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (as cited in Helms, 1990a), she or he identifies such feelings as dissonance and indicates that "when dissonance is present, a person will not only attempt to reduce it, but will also take steps to avoid situations and information that are likely to increase it" (p. 59). Hence, this indicates that an individual can reduce such dissonance by changing their behavior or the environment, and develop new beliefs as one works through the disintegration status.

**Reintegration.** As the White individual's conscious awareness is more clearly defined with regard to her or his White identity, reintegration occurs. At this status, the White

individual "accepts the belief in White racial superiority and Black inferiority and residual feelings of guilt and anxiety are transformed into fear and anger toward Black people" (Helms, 1990a, p. 60). In addition, the White individual begins to develop either a passive or active expression when interacting with people of color. Passive expression refers to the deliberate removal from or avoidance of the environment for which one may encounter people of color. Active expression would include the inferior treatment of people of color and, in some cases, includes violence toward a minority group in an effort to protect the White individual's privilege. In this status, the "person resolves her or his racial moral dilemmas by trying to re-establish a status quo in which Whites are superior and entitled to privilege and Blacks are inferior and entitled to disadvantage" (Helms, 1990b, p. 11). Helms (1990a) further indicates that the White individual could remain in this status throughout the duration of one's life, especially if the individual chooses a passive expression of superiority. For the individual to move from the reintegration status to another status, a personally jarring or traumatic event must occur that challenges the racial identity of the White individual.

**Pseudo-independent.** The pseudo-independent status is "characterized by an intellectualized awareness of one's own race as well as societal racial issues. However the [individual] still [believes] that 'race' and 'racism' are best understood and explained by 'intelligent non-White' people" (Helms, 1990b, p. 11). The White individual is flooded with the realization of Whiteness and the injustices that accompany this status more strongly than at any other time in the model. Here, they "actively question the proposition that Blacks are innately inferior to Whites;" and "begin to acknowledge the responsibility of Whites for racism and to see how he or she wittingly and unwittingly perpetuates racism" (Helms, 1990a, p. 61). This status marks the beginning of the positive White identity development. The White individual is drawn to personal rewards that are non-racist such as self-esteem.

**Immersion/emersion.** In the immersion/emersion status, the White individual comes face to face with the stereotypes, myths, and mores that are present in their identity. It is in this status that the White individual enters into a deep conversation with self and asks what it means to be White (Helms, 1990a). The White individual in this status finds her or him self riding an emotional roller coaster as feelings that may have been suppressed for some time surface and the individual works through the negative responses of their cognitive restructuring and begins to experience positive change. In the immersion/emersion status, the White individual experiencing positive change finds that there is a reservoir of energy from which to draw as the individual begins to "tackle racism and oppression in its various forms" (p. 62).

**Autonomy.** By the time the White individual reaches autonomy status, the individual has already begun to demonstrate their new anti-racist White identity. No longer does the individual seek to oppress, denigrate, or threaten individuals of other races, but rather, the individual seeks out opportunities to learn about the various cultural groups and begins to identify other areas of oppression, be it heterosexism, sexism, ageism, or other systems of marginalization. At this status, the individual finds her or him self at "racial self-actualization or transcendence" or "in an ongoing process" (Helms, 1990a, p. 66) of development. Thus begins the White individual's process of change, growth, and renewal in seeking a positive White racial identity.

### Method

The primary method of inquiry utilized for looking into my own White identity development was critical self-reflection of past and present life events as well as daily journaling for a two-month period and personal application of the Helms' (1990a) White Racial Identity Development Model. I utilized both the Helms' (1990a) White Racial Identity Attitude Scale (WRIAS) and the Workshop Activity on Self-Assessing White Racial Identity Scale worksheets to identify my initial

White racial identity status and the attitudes that I needed to address to develop a more positive White identity. Helms' WRIAS was developed to measure the attitudes of Black and White individuals as it relates to their relationship to each other. While racial identity is broader than just being Black or White, for the purposes of this paper I am using Helms' model to explore my own identity development. It is in the context of Helms' model for which I am speaking when referring to Black individuals.

Additionally, I developed worksheets that enabled me to note my personal thoughts and recollections of how or when I worked through each of the statuses. These worksheets allowed me to better analyze the journal entries, as they were categorized by statuses.



### Results

Tatum (1997) indicates that one's identity is influenced by family characteristics, individuality, history, and social and political influences. How individuals are perceived by members of society is often based upon race, and how individuals respond to society is based upon their current racial identity. In an effort to understand my own identity, I examined where I grew up, what ideologies formed during my development, who I was, and who I wanted to be.

I was raised in a blue-collar, Catholic, White, Irish, Danish, and Dutch, alcoholic, divorced, and (in my opinion) dysfunctional family. Many hot Saturday afternoons were spent sitting in the car in the parking lot of a bar with my two sisters and two brothers waiting for my father to come out. My father grew up in New York and joined the Navy when he was 18 years old in an effort to break away from his domineering father. While in California, he met my mother. After a two-year courtship, they married. Over the course of seven years they had five children, of which I am the oldest. I was born in 1960. I initially

experienced a family where dad worked and mom stayed home with the children. My mother went to work when I was 12, and soon after my parents divorced.

### The Garbage Men

My earliest experience with racism was related to degradation and segregation. When I was six years old my family moved from Salt Lake City to Las Vegas. As my family settled into our new house, I heard a loud rumbling noise in the distance. As the sound got closer, I noticed that it was a garbage truck. I watched as the truck neared my house and saw two men in orange jump suits behind the truck. As the truck would move forward, the men in the orange jump suits would come out from behind the truck, pick up a garbage can, dump the garbage into the truck, put the garbage can back, and then step onto the back of the truck. Soon the garbage truck reached my house and I watched with great excitement as the garbage went into the truck. When the man who picked up my garbage can put it back on the curb, he saw me and waived a brown-gloved hand, smiled, and got back on the truck. I stood there mesmerized by what I saw I ran into my house and said to my mother "Garbage men sure do get dirty – he had dirt all over his face." My mother threw her head back in laughter and replied, "No Colleen, he is a Black man. It is his job to pick up the garbage." All the years I lived in that house, the men that picked up our garbage were Black, thus, I assumed only persons of color were garbage collectors.

My mother used the garbage man as a ploy to get my little brothers to behave. If they were misbehaving, she would say to them, "If you don't stop crying I am going to give you to the garbage man." As a result, every time my brothers would hear the garbage truck coming, they would run into the house, shut the door, and stand at the window waiting for the garbage truck to pass our house – terrified that the garbage man was going to take them away. As a youngster it was comical to me, and I would wait at the window with them and spur on their fears.

Growing up in Las Vegas, segregation was prevalent in the community I do not recall any

children of color in my neighborhood. I was told that Black people lived in North Las Vegas, not in our neighborhood. North Las Vegas – a mere five or six miles away from where I lived – could have been across the state and I would not have known otherwise.

### 1970s Sitcoms

Many nights during my childhood were spent watching television shows that were situation comedies featuring African Americans and issues of race such as *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*, and *The Jeffersons*. As my father howled with laughter at something Archie Bunker said, I stared at the television screen trying to figure out what was funny. What I got from Archie Bunker was that it was not a good idea to trust Black people or anyone different from us, because they would steal from you, rape your daughter or wife, and ruin the neighborhood. One day I asked my father why he liked to watch the show. He told me it was because Archie Bunker was just like his father Okay - so now I had an idea of what my grandfather was like, but I still did not understand why my father was laughing.

The first Black man I ever saw on television was the character of "George Jefferson" on *All in the Family*. During that episode, Archie went on a rampage about a Black family living next door to him and how now the neighborhood was going to go downhill. However, the theme song for *The Jeffersons* spoke volumes to me as a youngster. The lyrics indicated that this Black family was moving up in class status, that they could afford to live in a White neighborhood on the eastside, that they finally got a break in life, and were getting "a piece of the pie." I understood the class status and the moving to the eastside, but I did not understand the "piece of the pie" metaphor. I asked my father what it meant, and he told me that White people did not always want to share success with Black people. He said that White people try to stop Black people from getting ahead by keeping things from them, and that by getting "a piece of the pie," the *Jeffersons* finally broke through racial barriers and attained a higher socio-economic status.

*Sanford and Son*, which was set in a junk yard, reinforced for me the notion that all garbage men were Black. As a youngster, it provided me with a glimpse of what I thought being Black was like. Since many of the jokes in the show were about Black people, it impressed upon me as a youngster that it was okay to joke about race and that Black people did not mind.

### **Junior High School**

While growing up in Las Vegas, I cannot remember any of my classmates in elementary school being people of color. My first face-to-face interaction with children from under-represented groups was when I entered seventh grade and junior high school. When I was in the sixth grade, the school districts instituted a Sixth Grade Center that would introduce and integrate Black and White sixth grade students with each other before they entered junior high school. The year before I entered junior high school, there were two riots at the junior high that generated horrible rumors of White female students being dragged by the hair down the halls by Black girls, and raped and beaten by Black boys. As a result of these rumors, I developed a fear of junior high school and of Black people. When it came time to enter junior high school, I told my mother that I was going to make sure that I made friends with some Black girls so that if there were any problems they would protect me – and I did. My mother never told me that thinking that way was bigoted or anti-racial.

Mother and daughter talks were rare when I was growing up, but there was always an underlying message: it was not acceptable to kiss, date, or marry a Black man. If we did, my mother would disown us. The only reason given was that White people just do not marry Black people.

### **Graduate School**

I only recently became aware of the fact that because I am White, I am privileged within society. This realization took place in my Introduction to Identity Development graduate course during the Fall 2006 semester, and is the event I discussed at the beginning of this paper. As we reviewed the identity

development models of Cross' s Model of Psychological Nigrescence, Helms' Model of White Identity, and Phinney's Model of Ethnic Identity, the instructor asked if we could remember in our lives where we were and what the circumstances were when we moved from one level of identity to the next. I stated that I believed that all people are individuals, and that I never considered color to be a deterrent as an adult. Other students were identifying specific events in their lives that clearly indicated transitions.

I was somewhat frustrated and felt a little out of place. I indicated that I was having a hard time coming up with any specific incident or issue that would identify my transition. To my surprise, my instructor informed me that maybe it was because I am just now starting the journey. While I have always known I was White, I did not know what it meant to be White and have innate power as part of a majority group. The realization that I am a participant in people's oppression merely because of privilege devastated me. As a result, I sought opportunities to learn about my Whiteness.

### **Family**

As I was examining the development of my racial identity, I attempted to have conversations with family members regarding racial issues, segregation, superiority, and oppression. To my displeasure, they were not very receptive. Every attempt led to a disagreement between what I was sharing with them and what they perceived to be true. For example, we could agree that God created man in his image. However, no matter how often I had the conversation with my family regarding skin color and melanin, I could not get them to understand, nor have I been able to change their belief that Black people came into existence as a result of a curse on Cain when he killed Abel.

Many of my family members have expressed their displeasure in my pointing out that a racial joke or comment about a person of color, gay, lesbian, or Jewish person was inappropriate. They question my education and ask me what kind of "cult" I am getting into. About three years ago, my in-laws were considering purchasing a new home. They

found a very nice home, but were “concerned” about the neighborhood. They visited the neighborhood at different times of the day and sat in the car for several hours at a time in order to determine what kind of people lived nearby. They were sitting in their car around at 6:00 p.m. when a Hispanic family pulled into the driveway next door to the house they wanted to purchase. At about the same time, they noticed a Black man exiting his vehicle on the corner. That was all it took for them to make up their minds: they did not purchase the house. I challenged the basis of their decision, but my comments were not well received and there was no further discussion about it.

#### **Dr. Janet Helms**

While researching White identity development, I found the website of Dr Janet Helms, the originator of the White Identity Development Model I had been studying and using to examine my own racial autobiography I was very excited and immediately clicked on the link. As I watched the website load up, a photograph of a Black woman appeared and was identified as Dr Janet Helms. I was taken aback and surprised to learn that Dr . Helms was Black. As I sat at my computer taking this in, I became angry . How could a Black individual think about telling a White individual about their racial development process? After the shock wore off, I asked myself why it surprised me. Initially, I was angry, guarded and suspicious of her motives. It never occurred to me that a person of color might have some insight into what a White individual would or could experience. As I continued to contemplate the matter, I realized that I had just been met with an awareness of my inaccurate racial beliefs.

#### **Discussion**

The application of the Helms’ s White Identity Development model to my own White identity development further revealed that I was in the abandonment of racism phase for most of my life. It was not until that eventful afternoon when my instructor helped me to realize that I had just made a transition – I was 47 at the time I began my journey of

developing a positive White identity. When I learned that Dr . Janet Helms was a Black woman, however, I briefly reverted back to the reintegration status and struggled with the realization that I actually believed Whites were superior. I was overwhelmed by guilt and shame.

Many facets of society mold our identity development and how our identity is constructed differs from one individual to another. As one develops, what is experienced as an adolescent will “ripple throughout the lifespan” (Tatum, 1997, p. 20). The misconceptions of self can play out through one’s life, dictating how one’s life will be and how others are treated, thereby, stressing the need to understand one’s own identity, biases, racial issues, and stereotypical mores.

Upon analysis, it is evident that vicarious awareness (*All in the Family, Sanford and Son, The Jeffersons*) shaped my ideology of Black people and fueled my fears, along with the explanations I received from my parents. Vague responses from adults were interpreted by a six year old, further contributing to my misconceptions of race as an adult. My direct awareness of how I treated and felt about people of color , particularly Blacks, demonstrated negative interactions and therefore reinforced the ideology of contact status.

The most revealing awareness that surfaced for me is that I have developed two identities: a personal and a professional identity Helms (1990a) indicates that some individuals may find themselves experiencing the “ability to successfully ‘split’ her or his personality” (p. 58). I find it much easier to work through my White identity development on a professional level than on a personal level. In the professional setting, multicultural awareness and competence are embraced and my colleagues are willing and eager to discuss these matters. My personal White identity development has been harder to work through because my family is not as accepting of my developing new identity. I believe, however, that as I continue to develop my professional White identity, it will enhance my personal White identity and eventually the two will become one.

The application of the Helms' s White Identity Development Model helped me to find the answers to my initial questions. Why am I on this quest for change? Is it for personal satisfaction, for me to feel better because I am White? Am I trying to do all I can for change to make myself feel better? Why has it become so important to me to work with people of color and discuss issues of bias and indifference? What is my motivation? Will I make a difference?

Initially, it was to make myself feel better about being White and to explain the dissonance I experienced when I recognized that I was often perceived as an oppressor , and to somehow remove my regrets for all that White society imposed upon people of color. I started out on a quest to heal the pain I was experiencing and realized that the pain will never go away and that my journey will never end. I recognize that I need to continue to seek out every opportunity to conduct research, and attend conferences, programs and training about race, diversity , multiculturalism, and affirmative action. My journey, so far, has helped me to accept my own "isms" and to acknowledge that I have them. It has enhanced the realization that no minority individual or group deserves to be subjected to unjust behaviors and that I am a small part of the overall solution to end oppression, suppression, and degradation.

### Conclusion

To become effective allies, student affairs administrators and other helping professionals must recognize that one must seek awareness and understanding regarding cultures and issues related to multicultural competence. Professionals need to take active steps toward individual identity development and understanding and become educated individuals for change. Yamato (1996) indicates that we must "work on racism for [our] own sake, not [the student's] sake" (as cited in Wall and Evans, 2000, p. 357). Only by knowing who we are as individuals can we effectively facilitate positive change.

This experience has made me a more culturally aware individual. As a result, I have developed more meaningful positive

relationships with my colleagues and students. I am also more aware of multicultural issues and will strive to develop programs that are more culturally inclusive and responsive. Most importantly, I am aware of my own limitations and what I need to work on as I continue my journey and strive to affect change.

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