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Carole L. Lund
Alaska Pacific University

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White Racial Identity Development Model for Adult Educators

Carole L. Lund, Ed.D.
Alaska Pacific University, USA

Abstract: The white racial identity development model has implications for educators wishing to address racism. There are six pathways an adult educator might explore to understand where they are in the white racial identity development process—status quo to ally.

Inadequacy in addressing racism paralyzes many from taking any action. The white racial identity development process leads one to progress from the status quo to become an advocate or ally. Frow and Morris (2000) addressed the identity of scholars: “Questions of identity and community are framed not only by issues of race, class, and gender but by a deeply political concern with place, cultural memory, and the variable terms of these scholars’ access to an ‘international’ space of debate” (p. 319). The international debate would not be possible without reflection on one’s experience within our diverse, racial community. The identification of our background and how that background influences our daily perceptions and actions feeds our racial identity.

The discussion of white racial identity development is particularly important when discussing racism; it takes into account the complexity of who we are. Messages by those around us whether they are teachers, mentors, or colleagues shape our identity; they are the messages by which society represents us or does not represent us. White professors and students rarely mention being white; they have no need to even think about where they are in their identity development process. Identity development models, in general, provide an avenue for whites to explore where they are developmentally in their interactions with peoples of color. White racial identity development provides a summary of the process of moving from racist to advocate or ally for white adult educators. It outlines the intersection of racism and white privilege. As adult educators a deeper understanding of our developmental response to peoples of color; how we are socialized to interact with peoples of color; and how we can seek to change our identity as it relates to peoples of color are pivotal in practice and professional associations.

Pope-Davis and Ottavi (1992) examined the influence of the white racial identity attitudes on racism among faculty members. They selected a sample of 250 white college faculty members from a large Midwestern university; 61% (158) of the returned questionnaires were used for the study. Participants ranged from 29 to 70 years old; 29% were full professors, 36% were associate professors, and 35% were assistant professors. All participants had either doctorates or professional degrees. This study did find “faculty members’ racial identity attitudes to be predictive of racism” (p. 393). The researchers indicated there is a need for faculty to openly discuss their own racial identity and the impact it may have on their racial attitudes. Only when educators have reached cultural or ethnic identity clarification can they provide appropriate and needed leadership for students around such issues as racism. (p. 393)

White Racial Identity Models

Identity development models have been around since the 1970s; many were designed specifically for peoples of color. One of the early models of Black identity development was
Cross’ (1995) Nigrescence theory originally written in 1971 and revised in 1991. The revised stages of the model included: Stage 1) Pre-Encounter; Stage 2) Encounter; Stage 3) Immersion-Emersion; Stage 4) Internalization; and Stage 5) Internalization-Commitment. Cross’ (1995) Nigrescence theory was foundational to five white racial identity models investigated in this paper: Hardiman (1982), Myers, et al. (1991), Helms (1995), Sue (2003), and Howard (2004). During the same period, both Helms (1995) and Hardiman (1982) independently applied the stages to models designed for white racial identity development, but there were also similarities in the Myers, et al. (1991) and Sue (2003) models. The orientations or stages in Howard’s model are not similar to any of the others; however, there are similarities in the descriptions of the orientations.

**Hardiman’s White Identity Development Model**

In 1982, Hardiman developed the generic stages of social identity development from examining the prevailing sex-role identity and racial identity constructs. For sex-role identity she researched Block (1973), Pleck (1975), and Rebecca, Hefner, and Oleshansky (1976); sex-role identity had been researched more than racial identity. For racial identity development models, she reviewed Thomas (1971), Cross (1973), Jackson (1976), Hayes-Bautista (1974), and Kim (1981). These racial identity development models discussed the identity development of racially oppressed groups, but did not discuss the development of racially dominant groups. From these constructs, Hardiman (1982) developed the following White Identity Development Model: no social consciousness; acceptance; resistance; redefinition; and internalization.

**Sue’s White Racial Identity Development**

Sue (2003) began his work in the early 1970s with research on personality categories. Hardiman (1982) mentioned the work of Sue and Sue’s (1973) analysis of Chinese-American personality categories as one of two research projects focused directly on Asian Americans’ identity development. She described Sue and Sue’s identity types as static with Chinese-Americans falling into “one of three personality types: traditionalist, marginal man and Asian American, as a means of coping with minority status in America” (p. 109).

Sue (2003) described a new awareness and interest in “Whiteness,” including conferences and gatherings designed specifically to explore what it means to be white. As a number of writings on white privilege have indicated, it is not a new revelation that there is a need for white Americans to understand their racism. Sue outlined the following phases in his developmental model: naïveté; conformity; dissonance; resistance and immersion; introspection; integrative awareness; commitment and antiracist action.

**Myer’s, et al. Optimal Theory Applied to Identity Development (OTAID)**

A primary aspect of optimal theory and other worldviews is that the spiritual and material aspects of reality are not separate. “Within optimal theory, the unity of humanity is acknowledged culturally and historically as spreading from Africa; thus, the presence of spiritual-material unity is a pan cultural phenomenon” (Myers et al., 1991, p. 58). As one moves deeper into the more expansive levels of identity development, there is a switch in perception. Our purpose in living is to increase the knowledge of ourselves; eventually, our identity development becomes a primary attribute of being. In knowing who and what we are, “individuals can integrate all apparent aspects of being into a holistic sense of self” (p. 58). Self-knowledge is the exploration of oneself and not necessarily learning new information.

Although this model was developed primarily for peoples of color, the stages are relevant for comparison. The sequence of the phases is predictable; however, the amount of time one spends in each of the phases varies depending upon external pressures. This model is not
described as linear but as a spiral with the beginning of the process similar to the end. The following outlines the six phases of optimal theory applied to identity development (OTAID): absence of conscious awareness, individuation, dissonance, immersion, internalization, integration, and transformation.

**Helms’ White Racial Identity Ego Statuses**

Helms (1995) originally examined the stages for the identity development process but changed them to statuses; stages were viewed as static instead of fluid. She looked at how the identity developmental process differed between racial groups primarily due to the differences in power. She believed that the “issue for whites is abandonment of entitlement, whereas the general development issue for people of color is surmounting internalized racism” (p. 184). The task of white Americans is to relinquish factoring out racism on others. She divided her white racial identity process into two status areas; the first three statuses are the contact status, disintegration status, and reintegration status. These three statuses involve recognizing and relinquishing white racism. The final three statuses are pseudoindependence status, immersion/emersion status, and autonomy status. The last three statuses require work to reframe one’s identity into a nonracist identity.

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<td>Transformation</td>
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<td><strong>Transformationist White Identity</strong></td>
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**Howard’s Authentic Multicultural White Identity**

Howard (2004) developed the only identity model dealing directly with educators. He personalized his own developmental journey along with other educators. He felt that “as white educators, we are collectively bound and unavoidably complicit in the arrangements of dominance that have systematically favored our racial group over others” (p. 50). His concern was how this dominance played out in the classroom. Howard elaborated on the ways of being a white educator: fundamentalist white orientation; integrationist white orientation; transformationist white identity.

The summary Howard (2004) provided for his identity process provided the foundation for his model and rationale for exploring identity development:

White educators have a choice to grow beyond our ignorance, denial and guilt. There is a journey, which I envision as a river that carries us through many confusing currents and treacherous rapids, but which eventually can lead to a place of authentic multicultural
white identity. . . . We did not choose whether to be white, but we can affect how we are white. This is both our challenge and our hope. (p. 52)

**White Racial Identity Development for Adult Educators**

The previously described white racial identity models: Hardiman (1982), Myers, et al. (1991), Helms (1995), Sue (2003), and Howard (2004) influenced the racial identity development model for educators. There are six pathways an adult educator might explore to become an ally. The process is not linear, but a fluid one where an educator might go through all of the pathways, only some of them, or repeat some any number of times. The white racial identity development model has implications for educators wishing to address racism. “Early studies, for example, have found that the level of white racial identity awareness was predictive of racism: the less aware you are of your white identity, the more likely you are to exhibit increased levels of racism” (Sue, 2003, p. 170). The six pathways an educator might be in or go through include:

**Status Quo**

The status quo pathway is a belief that being white is right and that whites are superior to others. Normally role models and family influence the values and identity and may reinforce stereotypes. The educator might not be exposed to other perspectives and be oblivious to racism and one’s participation in it. The world is seen through a single lens with isolation from other perspectives.

**Questioning Beliefs**

The educator might question the beliefs held by his or her own social group and reject thoughts, feelings, and behaviors expected by role models and family. Unresolvable racial moral dilemmas force one to choose between one’s own group loyalty and humanism; there can be anxiety experienced during situations involving racial dilemmas. There may be awareness of whiteness along with feelings of anger, sadness, guilt, helplessness, and confusion. One may also rationalize one’s behavior regarding racial situations. Critical reflection may occur during this pathway, as experiences are re-examined and a new consciousness is developed; there is recognition of one’s racial identity and the ownership one has in the racial group.

**Commitment to Racial Group**

During this pathway, one might develop a commitment to one’s own racial group and rediscover one’s heritage. An educator might acknowledge and tolerate differences; racism becomes noticeable. This acknowledgement of racism might follow with a paternalistic and condescending attitude toward peoples of color followed by a desire to help other groups. At this time an educator selects what one accepts and rejects what one believes through a critical review of one’s social identity.

It is during these first three pathways that white professors perpetuate racism. The next three pathways are indicative of coming to terms with racism and accepting the fact that white educators can and do perpetuate racism.

**Acknowledge Participation in Oppression**

The acknowledgement of one’s participation in oppression forces one to redefine what it means to be white. It is important that one realizes and acknowledges that racism is a part of society. The inclusion of other social groups allows one to develop an understanding of those in
one’s racial group in the previous stages of development. It is difficult to confront and do something about being a racist if a person is in denial.

*Deeper Understanding of Self*

A deeper understanding of oneself and inner peace changes the way one views the world; it allows one the capacity to relinquish the privileges garnered by racism. The true nature of oppression is reflected in one’s worldview. Feeling connected and comfortable around culturally diverse groups, students and colleagues, allows one the ability to engage in discussions of race. The nonracist white identity begins. One feels responsible for effecting personal and social change without relying on persons of color to lead the way. There is a shift from trying to change peoples of color to changing oneself and other whites. You believe it is possible to become an ally.

*Seeks Alliances with Persons of Color*

Actively seeking alliances with persons of color and other nonracist white professors characterize this final pathway. Educators need moral fortitude and courage to take action against individual, institutional, and cultural racism. One becomes an ally, advocate, and nonracist.

A deeper understanding of our developmental response to peoples of color; how we are socialized to interact with peoples of color; and how we can seek to change our identity as it relates to peoples of color are pivotal. It is a way to understand our feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment or inadequacy about racism and about our responses to it. . . . Because racism makes a mockery of our ideals of democracy, justice and equality, it leads us to be cynical and pessimistic about human integrity and about our future. (Kivel, 1996, p. 37)

Enforcements are in place to maintain the status quo regarding racism. If we ignore or challenge the messages, roles, and assumptions in place, there may be consequences for our colleagues or us. “People who conform (consciously or unconsciously) minimally receive the benefit of being left alone for not making waves, such as acceptance in their designated roles, being considered normal or ‘a team player,’ or being allowed to stay in their places” (Harro, 2000, p. 19). It is time consuming and difficult to seek an understanding of or create a new identity. Tatum (2000) was eloquent in explaining why it is important: “Our ongoing examination of who we are in our full humanity, embracing all of our identities, creates the possibility of building alliances that may ultimately free us all” (p. 14).

**References**


An anthology on racism, antisemitism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and classism (pp. 15-21). New York: Rutledge.


