

A Framework for Understanding White Racial Identity Development

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This article is the first in a series which suggests some ways of understanding White racial/ethnic identity development. In this first article the author synthesizes a broad review of White racial/ethnic identity models and suggests two approaches to organizing that synthesis that serve different practical purposes. Subsequent articles offer further development of White racial/ethnic identity models.

The importance of focusing on Whites as racial/ethnic beings is often overlooked in the workplace. White values and mores are often the default by which we gauge important work-related ideas such as “success,” “performance,” “professionalism”, and a host of other concepts that impact our work lives and beyond. Though our nation has taken steps to make overt racism illegal, White males still tend to be the highest paid identity group, holding a numerically disproportionate number of leadership roles at all levels of society. Since it is so often White males who make the decisions about diversity (and so much else!) it is important for us to acknowledge Whiteness and approach it with a body of theory and practice behind us.

This paper is based upon a review of White racial/ethnic identity development models. Its main focus is on two particularly well established models and the instruments used to measure them.

1. Janet Helms’ White Racial Identity Scale (WRIS). This model has received more attention than any other single model of White racial development. This is partly owing to the fact that Helms and Carter (1993) developed the White Racial Identity Attitude Scale (WRIAS) to measure development as it is described by the Helms model. The Helms model and instrument have been the subject of more numerous studies regarding their validity of any other model.
2. Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson (1994) model of White Racial Identity Development. As opposed to the Helms model, which measures White identity development in relation to Blacks¹ only, the Rowe et al model is based on Whites’ identity development in relation to all other racial and ethnic groups. Their model also makes fewer inferences regarding the nature and direction of development along their scale, but it remains in many ways similar to the Helms and other models of White identity development. The Oklahoma Racial Attitudes Scale (ORAS) (Choney and Behrens, 1996) was developed to measure peoples’ developmental positions within the Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson model.

Both of these models have been extensively reviewed and will not be reviewed individually here.

¹ The word “Blacks,” rather than another term such as “African American,” is used here based upon the fact that Dr. Helms uses it to describe herself and her people. The author is aware of the multiple ways in which people make meaning around language and has decided to honor the theoretician under discussion (Dr. Helms) by using the word that she herself uses. It is meant to be respectful and it is understood (with apologies) that it may not be some peoples’ preferred choice of words.

Viewing Traits Along the Developmental Journey

One way to understand and measure human development is to delineate *traits* (in this case we discuss *attitudes*, *cognitions*, and *behavior*) that people exhibit. Looking at their traits helps us to possibly better understand where they are developmentally, or, in what “position” they are. A “position” is like “where a person stands” in terms of his or her development.

Studies by Pope-Davis, Vandiver, and Stone (1999) and LaFleur, Rowe, and Leach (2002) compare the two above models in a way that may allow practitioners to benefit from both of them. They conducted statistical analyses of both the WRIAS and the ORAS and compared them. Three factors surfaced that were measured by both instruments in combination. They are:

1. *Degree of Racial Comfort*: ranging from comfortable to uncomfortable with other races.
2. *Attitudes toward Racial Equality*: ranging from supportive of racial equality to against it.
3. *Attitudes toward Racial Curiosity*: ranging from curious to apathetic about race.

After a detailed review of the two models in question and the different traits they describe for each status or stage of development, the author devised the following trait list. Each trait is listed below under its correlated factor and delineating how it reflects the person’s *Relationship to Whiteness* and *Relationship to Non-Whiteness*, and the *Behaviors/Cognitions* associated with each trait.

The following table summarizes the list below:

Factor	Degree of Racial Comfort	Attitudes toward Racial Equality	Attitudes of Racial Curiosity
Traits	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Anti-Diversity 2. Diversity Detente 3. Pro-Diversity 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Low Equality 2. Equality Detente 3. High Equality 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Naïve 2. Informed

Factor: Degree of Racial Comfort

Trait: Anti-Diversity

Relationship to Whiteness

Consciously acknowledges, is aware of Whiteness.

Takes an ethnocentric perspective.

Relationship to Non-Whiteness

Believes racial stereotypes.

Behaviors/Cognitions

May express views actively: overtly hostile.

May express views passively: avoiding contact with other groups.
May not give voice to these feelings until he/she feels personally threatened.
Guilt or anxiety sublimated - transformed into feelings of fear and anger.

Trait: Diversity Détente

Relationship to Whiteness

Actively questions White superiority/Non-White inferiority.
Still holds a White perspective.
Holds some degree of uncertainty and discomfort about racial identity.
Has let go of racist identity but has yet to develop a non-racist identity.
Sees White responsibility for racism.
May be looked upon with suspicion by Whites who see him/her as violating racial norms.

Relationship to Non-Whiteness

Sees that society treats Non-Whites differently than whites.
Has feelings of being caught between the White world and the Non-White one.
Can sometimes overlook seriously socially deviant behaviors in Non-Whites.
Tends toward more paternalistic encounters with Non-Whites.
May be looked upon with suspicion by Non-Whites, who see him/her as having and advancing White mores.

Behaviors/Cognitions

Primarily centered on intellectualization -- emotions about race tend to be submerged.
Tends to look to Non-Whites to explain racism/offer solutions rather than seeing Whites as the racists.
Prone to unwittingly behaving according to White supremacist assumptions.
Experiences anger and/or guilt as motivating factors in dealings with race.
Seeks out new information regarding racial issues to lower anxiety, not out of commitment to anti-racism or personal development.
Dissonance exists between previously held ethnocentric beliefs and new information.
View of self as moral is contradicted by realization that he/she is benefiting racism.
May feel marginal were issues of race are concerned.
May try to change his/her beliefs but may only have racist society as model.

Trait: Pro-diversity

Relationship to Whiteness

Is comfortable with own Whiteness.
Is able to apply definitions of race and Whiteness to self image and behaviors.

Relationship to Non-Whiteness

Comfortable with Non-Whites.
Values a pluralistic society.
Seeks opportunities to learn from other groups.
Loses need to see group memberships as positive or negative, idealized or denigrated.

Behaviors/Cognitions

Well balanced and realistic view of race, the effects of racism, and the actions which can be taken to be effective regarding racism.
Has a sense of internalization about his/her approach to race.
Is motivated by a moral consciousness.
Does not approach identity issues out of anger or guilt.
Has the ability to identify and abandon racism.
Can exhibit behaviors that are active: e.g. organizes events to protest racism.
Can exhibit behaviors that are passive: e.g. contributes to organizations that fight racism.
Continuously open to new ideas about race and culture.
Great enough personal rewards such as enhanced self-esteem can motivate to seek out positive non-racist aspects of Whiteness.
Emotions that were suppressed resurface/ may have cognitive and emotional restructuring.

This is an ongoing process, not an achieved state!

Factor: Attitudes toward Racial Equality

Trait: Low Equality

Relationship to Whiteness

Consciously acknowledges Whiteness.
Takes an ethnocentric worldview.

Relationship to Non-Whiteness

Believes racial/ethnic stereotypes.
Negative aspects/experiences of Non-White groups are seen as confirmation of those groups' inferiority, not as stemming from any historical or current social injustice.

Behaviors/Cognitions

May take a passive approach, avoiding Non-Whites and racially focused situations.
May be more overtly racist, engaging in discrimination or violence against Non-Whites.

Trait: Equality Détente

Relationship to Whiteness

May believe that Normalness *is* Whiteness and Whiteness *is* Normalness with no awareness of holding this belief.

Relationship to Non-Whiteness

Opposed to clearly discriminatory practices, but, also opposed to many societal actions which offer extra assistance to Non-Whites.

Behaviors/Cognitions

Deeper, systemic, and more subtle types of racism are overlooked.

Trait: High Equality

Relationship to Whiteness

Tends to believe Whites benefit from/are responsible for discrimination.
Sees White responsibility for racism.

Relationship to Non-Whiteness

Aware of racism's profound impact on U.S. American Culture.
Can identify and combat oppression of multiple identity groups.

Behaviors/Cognitions

Holds a perspective that diminishes the role of personal responsibility/heightens the role of groups or society.

May exhibit active behaviors: e.g. getting more involved in Non-White groups and fighting racism, work to convince other Whites that Non-Whites are not inferior.

May exhibit passive behaviors: e.g. intellectually identifying with Non-Whites or having a great deal of awareness of racial issues.

Factor: Attitudes of Racial Curiosity

Trait: Naïve Curiosity

Relationship to Whiteness

Believes Whiteness is "Normalness" -- No awareness of holding this belief.
Has positive self esteem but lacks nuance.
Does not see the complexity of his/her identity.
Measures self by White standards.

Relationship to Non-Whiteness

Introduction to Non-Whiteness.
Uninformed curiosity or trepidation.
Takes an ethnocentric view of Non-Whites.
Prefers Non-Whites who "act White."
Has limited interaction with Non-Whites.
Assumes stereotypes about Non-Whites are true.
Can have a positive opinion of "the idea of Non-Whiteness."
May experience anxiety when actually dealing with Non-Whites.

Behaviors/Cognitions

"Doesn't see race"
Ignores, minimizes, or denies racial differences or issues.
Remains the beneficiary of a racist system.
Espoused beliefs about Whiteness may not be not his or her own -- received from socialization or someone else without questioning.
Most Whites have the option to avoid the majority of interracial encounters.

Trait: Informed Curiosity

Relationship to Whiteness

Actively seeks to understand own White racial identity.

Relationship to Non-Whiteness

Continuously open to new ideas about race and culture.
Seeks opportunities to learn from other groups.

Behaviors/Cognitions

Sense of internalization about approach to race.
 Ability to identify and abandon racism.
 Can identify and combat oppression of multiple identity groups.

Using this above data, practitioners can relatively easily devise measurements of White racial/ethnic identity development that are statistically sound.

Viewing “Positions” Along the Developmental Journey

A position is a cluster of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that a person tends to engage in as a reflection of his or her underlying assumptions about Whiteness and racial/ethnic identity. This next table uses the same information as above in a different way to understand a number overarching identity positions that Whites can take in regards to their development. Using this format, practitioners may be able to see patterns in people with whom they work and have broader understanding of how they may be able to work with them in ways that are supportive of their development.

<i>Positions</i>	Non-Racial/Ethnic Identified	Racist/Ethnocentrist	Mixed-Awareness	Antiracist/Antiethnocentrist	Racial/Ethnic Identified
<i>Traits</i>	Naïve Curiosity	Low Equality Anti-Diversity	Diversity Détente Equality Détente	High Equality	High Equality Pro-diversity Informed Curiosity

It is important to note here that in the final position, Racial/Ethnic Identified, the High Equality traits remain but are informed by the traits of Pro-diversity and Informed Curiosity. The “High Equality” of the Antiracist/Antiethnocentrist position in this model is one that may be seen as motivated more by guilt than by a sense of connection to the self and others.

The names used in this model are in no way meant to denigrate the growing White Antiracist Movement in the U.S. in which the author has found much support, wisdom, and compassion.

Tools for Practitioners

Scott and Robinson (2001) suggest ways that practitioners can help clients in different stages of identity development. The list below is an adaptation of their suggestions to fit these above positions.

Position 1: Non-Racial/Ethnic Identified:

- a) Practitioners must be aware of their own feelings towards people in this status. These people often hold views that practitioners (and others) find objectionable.
- b) Practitioners must provide a supportive environment for people in this status to explore their issues, even though the practitioner may not share their beliefs.

Position 2: Racist/Ethnocentrist:

- a) Practitioners must be able to hold their ground without losing their tempers if they decide to work with racists/ethnocentrists or with groups that contain them.
- b) Practitioners must be able to weigh the benefit they may offer as a possible “positive experience with diversity” (which is important to helping people develop) versus the real possibility of the futility of working with racists/ethnocentrists.
- c) Practitioners must know their limits and be able to decide when they must absent themselves from such people.

Position 3: Mixed-Awareness:

- a) Practitioners working with people in this position are encouraged to assist them in dealing with the confusion and anger associated with the realization that inequities exist.
- b) Practitioners must be able to help people in this position deal with the feelings of guilt that may surface while at the same time helping them to take responsibility for racism in their own lives.

Position 4: Antiracist/Antiethnocentrist:

- a) Practitioners working with people in this position are called upon to support them in their efforts to seek out new knowledge and begin to build their new identities.
- b) Practitioners working with people in this position can help people in this position to learn to explore their own identities as part of the development process.

Position 5: Racial/Ethnic Identified:

- a) Practitioners working with people in this position can help them to build the relationships that their new worldview allows.
- b) People in this position can also be helped to see how their own White identity can be used constructively to heal themselves and others.

The field of White identity development has benefited from the work of a large number of practitioners. The next article in this series uses much of that work to suggest another view of development that moves away from Eurocentric notions of psychology and the individuality.

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