

Racial Identity Development and Its Impact in the Classroom

Janet E. Helms
Professor of Education
Boston College

In higher education, the unresolved race-relations issues that prevail more broadly in society are acted out at various levels of interaction. Because there are few commonly accepted theoretical models for resolving these issues in society, there are also few models for structuring the educational environment as a climate facilitative of personal and interpersonal growth rather than of damaged personal self-esteem and destructive interpersonal relationships.

This article demonstrates how racial identity theory (Helms, 1984; 1990a; 1990b) may be used to analyze the racial dynamics that impinge on the educational climate, including the classroom. Additionally, this article suggests that racial identity interaction theory can provide a framework for designing interventions.

Racial identity theory concerns a person's self-conception of herself or himself as a racial being, as well as one's beliefs, attitudes, and values concerning oneself relative to racial groups other than one's own. In the Helms' model, white identity progresses through two phases; each phase consists of three stages. Each stage involves conceptions of the self as a racial being, as well as conceptions of oneself relative to other racial groups. Because whites have great privilege and sociopolitical power in society, they can more readily avoid working through issues of racial identity development. White students often enter the college environment unaware that race still exists as a volatile issue in society, or that they can "choose" what kind of white person they can be. The teacher has the task of expanding their awareness of identity options and raising growth-promoting questions.

The first stage of the first phase of white identity development is *Contact*. Contact is characterized by an innocence and ignorance about race and racial issues. The person is not consciously white and assumes that other people are "raceless" too. Contact people present a picture of either naïve curiosity or timidity about other races. Classroom interventions for students in this stage should involve providing accurate and honest information about various racial/ethnic groups, as well as "safe" exposure to various groups via guest lecturers/speakers, media, etc.

The second stage of identity is *Disintegration*. The person enters this stage when denial of race no longer works. The general theme of this stage is confusion. This is the person's first conscious acknowledgement that he or she is white, and that certain benefits accrue from belonging to the white membership group. Recognition of the benefits carries with it a recognition of the negative consequences of white group membership. Uncontested white group membership carries with it the recognition that one is to treat other racial groups immorally. The person often resolves the dilemmas by distorting reality. That is the person learns to blame the victim. For students at this stage, teachers should design interventions that help distinguish personal responsibility for racism from group responsibility. For example, the student who uses racial slurs is demonstrating personal racism. Thus, through role-plays, readings, and discussions, the student might be helped to analyze how different behaviors impact self, members of other groups, as well as other whites in her or his environment. Ideally, these strategies help the student to understand his or her own feelings and empathize with others. They should also

teach respect for diversity in one's cross-racial and intraracial interactions.

As the person's system of distortion becomes more complex, he or she enters the *Reintegration* stage. In this stage, the person is not only consciously white, but considers whites to be superior to all other racial groups. There is a tendency to negatively stereotype other groups and to exaggerate the differences between one's own group and others. Students at this stage appear to be rigid in their beliefs. They may also exhibit reclusiveness and out-group aggression and hostility in mixed race school environments. Such students have learned rules for explaining to themselves why they are better than members of other racial groups. Students may engage in behaviors such as wearing the Confederate flag, attempts to express a white identity – albeit dysfunctional attempts. Because whites belong to the politically dominant group, white people can stay in the reintegration stage for a long time. Reeducation should be the teacher's primary focus with students in this stage. Reeducation should aim at eliciting the stereotypes of all racial groups (including whites) within the classroom and providing contrary information. Via analyses of the histories of their own groups, students should be helped to discover the sources of prevailing stereotypes and the social consequences of maintaining them.

The first stage of the second phase of white identity development is *Pseudo-Independence*. In this stage, the person maintains a positive view of whiteness, but begins to scale it down to more realistic proportions. The person is no longer invested in maintaining the belief that white is superior, though he or she does not have a new belief system to replace the previous socialization. To replace the old belief system, white liberalist views develop in which it is assumed that people of color can be helped through activities such as affirmative action programs, special education, etc. The person recognizes the

political implications of race in this country, but still denies the responsibility of whites in maintaining racism. Students at this stage generally have a positive view of themselves as white people, and though this view is still tinged with superiority, it is not consciously so. Since thinking about racial issues is a crucial dimension of this stage, teachers can help strengthen this stage by encouraging and devising activities that stimulate the student's curiosity and critical thinking about racial issues. Relevant activities could be keeping a portfolio in which the student describes his or her reactions to volunteer/service learning work and panel presentations involving members of other races who explain how they survive in a racist world. A basic goal of activities derived for persons in this stage is to encourage them to think critically by exposing them to situations that contradict prevailing white stereotypes about people of color.

Immersion-Emersion, the second stage of the second phase, is characterized by an effort to understand the unsanitized version of white history in the United States. It involves an active exploration of racism, white culture, and assimilation and acculturation of white people. During this stage, the person assumes personal responsibility for racism and develops a realistic awareness of the assets and deficits of being white. Sensitization is the protective strategy as the person seeks out experiences with other whites that will help him or her understand the meaning of white. Students at this stage attempt to grapple with the moral dilemmas that were repressed during earlier stages. Teachers can facilitate the student's quest for answers by encouraging them to analyze race-related current events with an eye toward clarifying moral dilemmas and helping them think of creative ways to educate themselves and other whites about racism and racial issues. Students can also be encouraged to recognize the positive aspects of whiteness through events such as white ethnic

awareness days or events. The teacher's task is to become an ally in helping students examine who she/he is and helping the student recognize that white people do have a culture.

During the *Autonomy stage* (the third stage of the second phase), the person actively confronts racism. Moreover, he or she seeks within race and cross-race experiences that permit that person to develop a humanitarian attitude toward people regardless of race. Confrontation and inclusion are the primary self-protective strategies of this last stage. Autonomy is a stage in which the person engages in experiences to nurture his or her whiteness, as personally defined. The student at this stage becomes increasingly aware of the commonalities inherent in various forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, poverty, ageism, etc.) and tries to eliminate all forms of oppression from society. The student is quite cognitively flexible and open to new information and new ways of thinking about racial and cultural variables. The teacher's

job is easiest when the student is in this stage because the student can frequently think of her or his own self-enrichment experiences. Therefore, the teacher merely acts as a consultant who helps the student channel his or her energies into practicable goals and activities.

References

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