<u>White Racial Identity Development Model</u> (Helms, 1990, 1993)

Following are the characteristics and stages of Helms' (1990, 1993) White Racial Identity Development Model. Read through this model and write your own observations of where and how your experiences are, or are not, represented by it.

> The development of White identity in the United States is closely intertwined with the development and progress of racism in this country. The greater the extent that racism exists and is denied, the less possible it is to develop a positive White identity. J. M. Jones (1972, 1981) has identified three types of racism: (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, societal 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 (Helms, 1990, 1993).
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> Because each of these three types of racism is so much a part of the cultural milieu, each can become a part of the White person's racial identity or consciousness ipso facto. In order to develop a healthy White identity, defined in part as a nonracist identity, virtually every White person in the United States must overcome one or more of these aspects of racism. Additionally, he or she must accept his or her own Whiteness, the cultural implications of being White, and define a view of Self as a racial being that does not depend on the perceived superiority of one racial group over another. (Helms, 1990, 1993, p. 49)

<u>Phase 1: Abandonment of Racism</u>

Contact Status: The "happy racist" — one encounters the idea or the actuality of Black people and other people of color

- Enters status, with either naïve curiosity, and/or timidity and trepidation
- Characterized by obliviousness to racial/cultural issues.
- Person approaches world with a color-neutral or culture-less perspective and general naiveté about how race and racism impact oneself as well as other people. Person rarely thinks of self in racial terms.
- Uses White criteria automatically without awareness that other criteria are possible.

Behaviors: Limited interracial social or occupational interaction with Blacks and other people of color, unless interaction is initiated by persons of color who "seem" White.

Affects: Positive self-esteem; positive feelings about the "idea" of Blacks and people of color and about fair treatment of people of color.

Transition: Depends on nature of contact, vicarious or direct. Eventually one must acknowledge that there are differences in how Blacks and people of color versus Whites in the United States are treated, regardless of economic status. When enough of these "socialization" experiences enter the White person's identity system, then he or she can enter the Disintegration status.

Disintegration Status

Conscious, but conflict, acknowledgment of one's Whiteness.

Recognition of moral dilemmas associated with being White.

On one hand, does not want to assume responsibility for discrimination by acknowledging one's Whiteness and the benefits that result therefrom; on the other hand, one cannot identify entirely with Blacks, Black culture, people of culture, and cultures of other races.

Incongruence leads to discomfort—discomfort is reduced by
(a) avoiding further contact with Blacks and people of color
(b) attempting to convince significant others in one's environment that Blacks are not so inferior
(c) seeking information from Blacks or Whites—either racism is not the White person's fault or racism does not really exist

Affect: Guilt, depression, helplessness, anxiety

Transition: The desire to be accepted by one's own racial group and the prevalence in the White group of the covert and overt belief in White superiority and Black inferiority and the inferiority of people of color virtually dictates that the content of the person's belief system will also change in a similar direction. As this reshaping of the person's cognitions or beliefs occurs, he or she enters the Reintegration status.

Reintegration status
Person consciously acknowledges a White identity.

- Accepts belief in White superiority and Black inferiority and the inferiority of other people of color.
- Comes to believe that institutional and cultural racism are White person's due because of earning such privileges and preferences.
- Race-related negative conditions assumed to result from Black people's and other people of color's inferior social, moral, and intellectual qualities, and, thus, it is not unusual to find persons in this status selectively attending to and/or reinterpreting information to conform to societal stereotypes of Black people and people of other racial groups.

Affect: Residual feelings of guilt and anxiety transformed into fear and anger toward Blacks and other people of color.

- Anger covertly or overtly expressed.
- Feelings may not be overtly expressed but lie just below surface of one's awareness.
- Only takes an event(s) characterized by the White person as personally threatening for these feelings to be unleashed.

Behavior: Either active or passive
Passive expression: Deliberate removal of self—honest discussion of racial matters most likely to occur among same race peers who share or are believed to share similar view of the world.

Active expression: May include treating Blacks and other people of color as inferior and may involve acts of violence or exclusion designed to protect White privilege.

In this society, it is fairly easy to remain or to fixate at this status, particularly if one is relative passive in one's expression of it.

Transition: A personally jarring event is probably necessary for the person to begin to abandon this essentially racist identity. Event can be either direct or vicarious; it can be caused by painful or insightful encounters with Black persons (or other persons of color) or White persons. Changes in the environmental racial climate (Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Vietnam War) may also trigger transition from this status. Once the person begins to question her or his previous definition of Whiteness

and the justifiability of racism in any of its forms, then one has begun movement into the Pseudo-Independent status.

Phase 2: Defining a Nonracist White Identity

Pseudo-Independent Status: The White "liberal"

Person begins actively to question the proposition that Blacks and other people of color are innately inferior to Whites.

- Begins to acknowledge responsibility of Whites for racism and to see how he or she wittingly and unwittingly perpetuates racism.
- Is no longer comfortable with a racist identity and begins to search for ways to redefine one's White identity.
- Usually the redefining process takes the form of intellectual acceptance and curiosity about Blacks and other people of color.
- Internalization of Whiteness and capacity to recognize personal responsibility to ameliorate the consequences of racism.
- Person has an intellectual understanding of Black culture and the unfair benefits of growing up White in the United States.

Affect: One attempts to submerge tumultuous feelings about Whiteness aroused in previous statuses. To the extent that feelings are allowed, they are apt to be feelings of commiseration with Blacks and other people of color and perhaps disquietude concerning racial issues in White peer groups.

Behavior: Although person is abandoning belief in White superiority/Black and people of color inferiority, behavior may still unwittingly perpetuate this belief system.

- Though person may seek greater interaction with Blacks (and with others of color), much involves helping Blacks and other people of color to change themselves so that they function more like Whites on White criteria for success and acceptability rather than recognizing that such criteria might be inappropriate and/or too narrowly defined.
- Cultural or racial differences likely to be interpreted by using White life experiences as the standard.
- Still looks to Black people and people of color, rather than White people, to explain racism.
- Although person no longer has a negative White identity or consciousness, neither does one have a positive one. Also note the paucity of White models of positive Whiteness.
- Many Whites treat person in Pseudo-independent status as though he or she has violated White racial norms.
- Many Blacks and other people of color are suspicious of motives of person who devotes so much attention to helping Blacks and people of color rather than changing Whites.
- One may not be entirely comfortable with one's White identity, but overidentification with Blacks and other people of color is also not very comfortable.
- Person may feel marginal where race and racial issues are concerned.

Transition: If personal rewards (self-esteem, etc.) are great enough to encourage continued strengthening of a positive White identity, then the person may begin the quest for those positive aspects of Whiteness that are unrelated to racism. The person's quest for a better definition of Whiteness signals the person's entry into the Immersion/Emersion status.

Immersion/Emersion Status

Redefining a positive White identity requires that the person replace White and Black and other people of color myths and stereotypes with accurate information on what it means and has meant to be White in the United States as well as in the world in general. Person searches for answers to questions such as "Who am I racially?", "Who do I want to be?", "Who are you really?"

- The White person often immerses oneself in biographies or autobiographies of Whites who have similar identity journeys. May participate in White consciousness-raising groups whose purpose is to help one discover one's individual self-interest in abandoning racism and acknowledging a White racial identity. Changing Black people and other people of color is no longer the focus of her or his activities, but rather the goal of changing White people becomes salient.
- Emotional as well as cognitive restructuring can happen during this status. Successful resolution apparently requires emotional catharsis in which person reexperiences previous emotions that were denied or distorted. Once negative feelings are expressed, person may feel a euphoria akin to a religious rebirth. These positive feelings not only help to buttress the newly developing White identity, but provide fuel by which the person can truly begin to tackle racism and oppression in its various forms.

Autonomy Status

Internalizing, nurturing, and applying the new definition of Whiteness evolved in the earlier statuses are major goals. Person no longer feels a need to oppress, idealize, or denigrate people on the basis of group membership characteristics such as race because race no longer symbolizes a threat. Since one no longer reacts out of rigid world views, it is possible for him or her to abandon cultural and institutional racism as well as person racism.

- Bicultural or racial transcendent view. Has internalized a positive, nonracist White identity, values cultural similarities and differences, feels a kinship with people regardless of race, and seeks to acknowledge and abolish racial oppression.
- Autonomous person actively seeks out opportunities to learn from other cultural groups. Actively becoming aware of how other forms of oppression are related to racism and acting to eliminate them as well.
- According to Terry (1977), one holds a pluralistic view of the world; recognizes that racism is a White problem and attempts to eliminate it.

Status represents highest level of White racial identity and might be thought of as racial self-actualization or transcendence; it is best to think of it as an ongoing process. It is a process where one is continually open to new information and ways of thinking about racial and cultural variables.

Helms, J.E. (1990/1993). Toward a model of White racial identity development. In J.E. Helms (Ed.), *Black and White racial identity*, pp. 49-66. New York: Greenwood/Praeger.