

White Identity Development: Mapping the Journey  
Gary Howard (1999) "We Can't Teach What We Don't Know"

"When Whiteness is discussed in educational settings, the emphasis is almost exclusively on revealing it as an ideology of privilege mediated largely through the dynamics of racism. While such interventions are crucial in developing an anti-racist pedagogy, they do not go far enough. Henry Giroux, "Rewriting the Discourse of Racial Identity."

\*Howard states that "his friends and colleagues from other racial groups often tease him about acting White."

\*That happens when he becomes overly concern w/ details and time constraints.

\*Howard talks about going from "identity versus identity confusion."

\*In his early "20s he challenged many of the assumptions and values he had acquired in his childhood."

\*He encountered many "struggles which were a part of his life-cycle transition into adulthood."

\*Eric Erikson's theory of "identity development greatly influenced his work w/ White teachers in multicultural education over the past 20 yrs."

\*Development of a positive White racial identity, like the movement toward mature adulthood, is a continually unfolding journey of discover & growth."

\*Howard talks about the inadequacy he experienced in his early adulthood.

\*Howard states "that many White educators are similarly subjected to insecurities and personal dislocations when confronted w/ issues of race."

\*Howard "states that if we are to be effective navigators for ourselves and others on the river of diversity, it is important that we become self-reflective regarding our White identity."

\*It...is liberating to realize that we can continue to grow and deepen in our understanding of what it means to be White educators in a multicultural society."

\*Howard discussed theories of racial identity development.

\*\*Theories of White Racial Identity development are well-established in social literature (Carter, 1995; Cross, 1971; Helms, 1990; Tatum, 1992).

\*Helms (1990) "defines racial identity as "...a sense of group or collective identity as one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage w/ a particular group."

\*Theories of racial identity development are primarily concerned w/ social, psychological, and political implications of our perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors regarding racial categories."

\*Carter (1995) states that "Whites are not accustomed to seeing themselves as racial beings.

\*J. H. Katz and Ivey (1977) observe, “White people do not see themselves as being White” (p. 486)

\*Helms (1990) suggested that “Whites can overcome this history of ignorance and superiority by attending to several key developmental issues:

“The White person’s developmental tasks w/ regard to development of a healthy White identity...require the abandonment of individual racism as well as the recognition of and active opposition to institutional & cultural racism...”

\*Howard also discussed the stages of Black racial identity development.

\*These stages are pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment.

\*Marshall states that “racial identity development falls in the domain of developmental psychology.”

\*Most “theories of racial identity are grounded in developmental psychology principles such as stagewise progression.

\*Thus, a set of stages is used to explain how development within a particular psychological domain progresses between various tiers of complexity.

\*Scholars have described stages or ego statuses through which...individuals in the U.S. progress as they develop a racial identity.

\*A healthy racial identity is associated with a fully functioning state of human existence (Cross, 1989; Helms, 1989; Parham, 1989).

\*According to these authors, various factors impact whether individuals progress to this state.

\*Helms (1993), a leading racial identity scholar, states that the theory of racial identity “concerns the psychological implications of racial-group membership: that is belief systems that evolve in reaction to perceived differential racial group membership” (p. 4).

\*The “earliest studies of racial identity development examined the phenomenon among African Americans.”

\*There is a body of scholarship known as nigrescence” (Marshall, 2002, p. 47).

\*Nigrescence “explores African American-American racial identity development and the series of psychological states” (p. 47).

\*African Americans “progress through a series of psychological states” (p. 47).

\*African Americans progress from a state of black racial denigration to one of the black racial admiration (p. 47).

\*African Americans w/ healthy racial identity are able to examine both the positive and negative aspects of both black and white cultures.

\*A “positive black racial identity is grounded in valuation and appreciation of black culture” (p. 47).

\*A “positive black racial identity reflects a realistic understanding of white culture and its impact on both Blacks and Whites” (p. 47).

\*At the pre-encounter stage, African Americans tend to distance themselves from their own racial identity.

\*There is an attempt to deny the importance of race, to contend that an individual can be judged on his or her own merits, irrespective of race.

\*A Black person at this stage has “absorbed many of the beliefs that ‘White is right’ and Black is wrong” (Tatum, 1992, p. 331).

\*The process is similar for people from other marginalized groups.

\*An American Indian colleague... describes her pre-encounter stage as “wearing the mask of Whiteness.”

\*Encounter stage “is often stimulated by experiences or events that lift the mask of Whiteness and point out the significance of racial categories” (Howard, 1999).

\*An African American person may be subjected to personal vilification or racist comments in spite of his or her best efforts to conform to dominant-culture norms and expectations.

\*At the encounter stage, there is a realization that race alone ... can lead to negative treatment.

\*Immersion/emersion—characterized by anger toward Whites and avoidance of anything that rings of Whiteness.

\*In this stage, “everything of value in life must be Black or related to Blackness” (Parham (1998, p. 190).

\*This “stage is also characterized by a tendency to denigrate White people” (p. 190).

\*In the Immersion/emersion stage, the individual is committed to Blackness and invests much energy in exploring the roots of his or her Black culture, over and against that of Whites.

\*Internalization begins when the “pro-black attitude becomes more expansive, open, and less defensive” (Cross, 1971, p. 24).

\*Internalization is characterized by a greater willingness to interact w/ members of other groups, including Whites.

\*The fifth stage, internalization-commitment, is evidenced by the individual’s willingness to proactively engage in work that supports and strengthens the Black community.

\*Individuals in this final stage are firmly and securely rooted in their own Black identity but also able to participate effectively in a broader multicultural context.

#### Stages of White Racial Identity Development

\*Most of the early work exploring White racial identity formation was related to the issue of racism.

\*Later works attempted to define a positive, as well as non-racist, sense of White cultural identity.

\*These works acknowledge that White identity must be defined not only in terms of racism but also in relation to an authentic sense of personal culture.

\*Consistent w/ their perspective, any comprehensive theory of White racial identity must explore the following three developmental tasks:

1. Acknowledging the reality of White racism in its individual, institutional, and cultural manifestations.

Abandoning racism and engaging in active resistance to its many forms.

Developing a positive, non-racist, and authentic connection to White racial and cultural identity.

\*Helm's work is based on extensive empirical investigation of each of the three criteria.

\*Helms (1990, 1992, 1994) and Helms and Piper (1994) describe six stages in the development of White racial identity.

\*The six stages are divided into two phases as follows:

#### Phase I: Abandonment of a Racist Identity

Contact

Disintegration

Reintegration

#### Phase II: Establishment of a Nonracist White Identity

Pseudo-Independence

Immersion-Emersion

Autonomy

\*Contact may occur through meeting a friend or co-worker of a different race, or it may occur vicariously, through the media or other channels.

\*Howard states that never having met a person who is not White, he was at the pre-contact stage.

\*Caucasians at the contact are uncomfortable and unsophisticated in their initial relationships with people of color.

\*Howard states that we are "timid and naively curious."

\*Howard states that this was how he reacted.

\*Howard states at the contact stage, Caucasians often ... exhibit stereotypical racist attitudes and behaviors."

- In "the contact stage espouses the theory of colorblindness.

\*At the contact stage, Caucasians make comments that appear to be racist to people of color."

\*The comment that is frequently made is “I don’t recognize what race a person is” (Helms, 1990, p. 57).

\*In the contact stage “White people do not see themselves as being White.”

“White people are unaware that other racial groups see us in particular ways because of our Whiteness” (Howard, 1999, p. 89).

\*McKenna states, “I understood that one of the unearned privileges I enjoyed as a White man in our society included rarely, if ever, being forced to be aware of my race.”

\*Whites in the “contact stage are ignorant of White privilege and unaware of the benefits that come to us because of institutional and cultural racism” (Howard, 1999, p. 89)

\*There is a ...tendency, following initial contact w/ people of color, to feel pressure from White peers to discontinue such relationship.

“When friendship with a person of color is formed, we tend to see this person as exception to our negative stereotypes about other members of that group” (Howard).

\*There is a tendency to make this statement to a friend, “you’re not like the others” or “You’re a credit to your race” (Howard).

\*Disintegration—At this stage “we acknowledge our Whiteness and begin to question what we have been socialized to believe about race” (Howard)

\*At the “disintegration stage we experience considerable dissonance regarding our Whiteness” (Howard)

\*We “feel anxiety, guilt, or shame regarding the discrepancies between our expressed values and the realities of racial discrimination” (Howard).

\*An example given was “anger of Black youth toward Whites in the 1960s was directed at a White female community worker attempting to help ease the tensions in their riot-torn neighborhood” (Howard).

Reintegration—For some Whites, ...the dissonance and the dilemmas of the disintegration state are resolved through regression to previously held prejudices and the reassertion of racist beliefs.

\*This is called the reintegration stage, wherein individuals consciously embrace the notion of White superiority.

\*The “emotions can be expressed by avoiding people of color and relating only to like-minded Whites” (Howard).

\*The “emotions can be more actively asserted in the form of hostility or violence through Militias, Ku Klux Klan, and other White supremacist groups” (Howard).

Reintegration (“retrenchment”) occurs as Whites retreat the dissonance of disintegration and consciously choose racism and White superiority as their means of dealing with diversity” (Howard).

\*Howard states that much of the conservative political response in the popular press “White male backlash” can be attributed to the dynamics of the reintegration stage” (Howard).

## Phase 2—Definition of a Non-racist White Identity

Pseudo-Independence—Here a White person “begins to question his/her previous definition of Whiteness and the justifiability of racism in any of its forms” (Helms, 1990, p. 61).

\*Howard states that pseudo-independence stage begins when we acknowledge White responsibility for racism and confront the fact that White people have intentionally or unintentionally benefited from it.”

\*Howard states that “our attempts to abandon racism in this stage are usually characterized by a desire to “help” people from other groups rather than to systematically change the dynamics of dominance.”

\*The “missionary zeal of the pseudo-independence stage often grows from a conviction that Whites really do have the answers for other people.”

\*Howard states that he was operating at this stage when he went to work in the New Haven ghetto to help Black kids.

Immersion/Emersion—Transition into the immersion/emersion stage is marked by a movement away from paternalistic efforts to help other groups and toward an internalized desire to change oneself and one’s fellow Whites in a positive way.

Howard states that for him, this stage marked the end of his “missionary period” in the Black community and the beginning of a genuine search for a new kind of White identity.

“Immersion/emersion is a process of exploration and self-discovery” (Howard).

\*The central question becomes, “How can I be proud of my race without being a racist?” (Carter, 1995, pp. 107-108).

\*Helms (1990) recognizes two important issues of this stage: “Who am I racially?” and “Who do I want to be?” (p. 62).

\*Much of “the work at this stage is being done at the emotional level, sorting out and working through issues that were repressed, denied, or avoided in the earlier stages” (Howard).

\*Autonomy—Here a new positive definition of Whiteness has been emotionally and intellectually internalized...

\*In “this stage, according to Helm’s model, race is no longer a threat to White people.

\*We have “acknowledged the reality of personal, cultural, and institutional racism, and are engaged in activities to resist the many manifestations of oppression” (Helms and Howard).

\*Tatum (1992) writes “that alliance w/ people of color can be more easily forged at this stage of development than previously because the person’s anti-racist behaviors and attitudes will be more consistently expressed” (p. 339).

\*At the autonomy stage, Howard states that “we begin to draw correlations and connections between racism and other forms of inequality and dominance, including sexism, heterosexism, classism, and ageism.

\*In Helms model, “autonomy does not represent an end point in the cycle of growth” (Howard).

\*It is “not necessarily a transcendence of race, but rather a state of being continually open to new information and growth” (Howard)

\*In the “autonomy stage we acquire a new and positive connection to our Whiteness and a deep commitment to resist oppression” (Howard).