

Towards a Reexamination of White Identity Models

European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness¹

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Abstract: White racial identity models can provide insight into how to facilitate learning about race, racism and privilege. We examine assumptions inherent in these models and explore elements that we think deserve additional attention.

A fundamental belief in students is more important than anything else. This fundamental belief is not a sentimental matter: it is a very demanding matter of realistically conceiving the student where he or she is, and at the same time never losing sight of where he or she can be.
—William Perry

As William Perry's work gave educators a model from which to understand a student's conceptual positionality in relation to learning (Knefelkamp, 2003), so too might racial identity models offer an opportunity for us to assess the positionality of students in learning about race. Perry's empirically-based account of college-age students documents their cognitive and intellectual development as they move through different epistemic standpoints in the way they define and approach knowledge. While Perry's model looks at cognitive development, he observes that social location, such as gender, race, culture and socioeconomic class, also influence our learning (Perry, 1999). Following Perry's insight about the importance of social location, we examine the positionality of white students and educators in discussions about race. We ask, "Can descriptive models of white identity give insight into why one white student responds with guilt and defensiveness while another white student turns immediately to the students of color in the room for guidance, while yet another seems to feel compelled to step forward with an angry analysis of institutionalized racism?"

Increasingly, adult educators are becoming aware of their responsibilities to develop in themselves and their students a greater capacity for cultural consciousness. Identity development models are useful maps for educators who want to act skillfully in service of this responsibility. The most widely cited models of white identity—Janet Helms (1984), Rita Hardiman (1994), Joseph Ponterotto (1988) and Ruth Frankenberg (1993)—have their origins either in therapeutic fields (Helms and Ponterotto) or in raising awareness of racism (Hardiman and Frankenberg). In this paper we intend to explore the utility of white identity models for educators. The scholars who developed these models opened important doors of inquiry, leading the way in examining the previously unexamined assumptions about the hegemony of white identity. In our work on whiteness we have gradually come to recognize limits and risks in using these models. Responding to Robert Kegan's exhortation to examine the form that must transform (Kegan, 2000), we examine the assumptions inherent in these models and explore elements that we think deserve further attention. Our purpose in exploring these issues is not so much to critique them as to provoke further inquiry and reflection.

Change the Language: Identity Development in Relationship to a Racist Society

We notice that the beginning stages of these models, both for white people and for people of color, describe how racial identity is shaped by the social context of racism, rather than by recognizing qualities of the identity group itself. For example, in her analysis of the core processes present in racial identity development, Maurianne Adams (2001) discusses "*parallel*

developmental tasks experienced across both dominant (agent) and subordinate (target) identity statuses” (p. 216). Adams explains her meaning by citing Helms,

... “the general developmental issue for Whites is abandonment of entitlement [internalized domination], whereas the general developmental issue for people of color is surmounting internalized racism [internalized subordination] in its various manifestations” (Helms, 1995:184, [Adams] brackets...). (Adams, 2001, p. 216)

For both groups, the general arc of development includes what Adams calls transformed consciousness and redefinition.

Close examination of identity development models reveals that they refer to—and at times conflate—two different kinds of development.

The first is suggested by Helms' and Adams' analysis—the developmental task is transforming consciousness about how *living in a racist society* shapes one's beliefs and attitudes. In the case of white identity development, early stages generally describe a white person who is not conscious of her/himself as a racialized being, race being reserved for description of the other. Models of white identity development are built around the assumption that white people in the US are conditioned to repress awareness of racial difference. These models describe stages of increasing awareness of the racialized other as well as increasing consciousness about the relationship between race and justice.

The second kind of development described in some models is growth of racial identity separate from racism and its effects. These descriptions appear to be more about cultural or ethnic identity than they are about racialized identity. It seems significant that this kind of identity development is largely absent from models of white identity, in contrast to the models describing other racial groups. Ironically, whiteness itself is essentially an invisible element in white identity development, even as it remains central.

What these models of white identity describe, then, is not so much identity as awareness of racism and the impact of the racist society. Outside of this context, the models quickly lose meaning and coherence. The distinction is not trivial. As a group committed to creating a multicultural society in which difference is celebrated and all traditions are honored, we feel it is crucial to lay the groundwork now for an affirmative white identity.

We suggest that the way these models are named obscures this distinction between understanding one's relationship to racism and affirming one's cultural or ethnic identity. In the case of white identity development, the ambiguous labeling may be not only misleading but also counterproductive. As Paolo Friere observes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, unauthentic words are “unable to transform reality.” “To speak a true word is to transform the world” (Friere, 1970, p. 75). We ask, “What would happen if we changed the way these models are named?” Perhaps they would be more aptly described as racist identity models, or white identity as shaped by racism.

The concepts of developmental stages and of development are also misnomers. One of the problematics in developmental models is an implicit teleology: the path can appear to be linear, singular, and the result of development can appear to be a climactic or to have a defined end. Even when this is not the author's intention (as Perry is known to have protested) the lure of seemingly predictive models can be hard to resist. In contrast to the four stage models so far referenced, the work of Wayne Rowe and colleagues (Rowe, Bennett & Atkinson, 1994; LaFleur, Rowe & Leach, 2002) offers a descriptive model of multiple positions. Similarly, Janet Helms (1995) now describes white identity positions as statuses, not stages.

The Centrality of Whiteness

We believe that attitudes and behaviors of whites towards other whites must be more carefully examined as aspects of white identity. While all leading scholars mention this aspect of white identity, we believe that it requires additional attention and perhaps more centrality in the discourse. Consciousness about white identity as it relates to the self and other white people is described almost exclusively in terms of increased awareness of privilege vis-à-vis the people of color and of systems of oppression. In part this reflects the function for which these tools were developed. However, we fear that this way of making the person of color a focus, rather than the white person reinforces rather than challenges the general hegemony in the culture that accepts whiteness and white ways of being as the norm.

The presumed centrality of whiteness is often reinforced by the way it is presented. For example, in *Multicultural Counseling Competencies* (Sue, *et al*, 1998), the chapter on the Euro-American Worldview opens with the statement that culturally competent counselors, “understand their own worldview, how they are the product of their cultural conditioning, and how it may be reflected in their counseling work with racial and ethnic minorities” (p. 47). The succeeding chapter in this textbook on understanding Racial/Ethnic Minority Worldviews begins by saying that the culturally competent counselor is “one who actively attempts to understand the worldview of his or her culturally different client without negative judgment” (p. 67). While both statements seem valid on their face, the authors seem unaware that they have implied that counselors are the ones with a white worldview to explore, and that the only role accorded to a person of color in the counseling encounter is that of client. The potential significance of a counselor—either white or of color—understanding a white client’s racial identity is invisible.

Differentiations within Whiteness

The continued centrality of whiteness is often coupled with a second assumption in these models—that whiteness is an undifferentiated, if not essentialized, status. Hardiman (2001) acknowledges this limit noting that her model and Helms’ “do not acknowledge the possibility that White identity development might entail different processes for individuals raised in all- or mostly-White environments, and Whites who were raised in [a multicultural context]” (pp. 116-117). While Rowe, *et al*, create a more complex model of possible white positions, they do not address the variation that white individuals may bring to their development.

We believe that there is an inherent tension in examining the commonality and diversity within whiteness. In one classroom, we can easily find students who have arrived on a college campus to have their first encounter with a person of color and another who grew up in the multicultural complexity of many contemporary urban neighborhoods. A one-size-fits-all white identity model is, on its face, problematic. On the other hand, we note that as white people we frequently distance ourselves from our whiteness by centering our identities in social locations that have been historically and statistically defined as oppressed based on non-racial variables such as gender, sexual orientation, class, or religion. We find ourselves thinking, “What is being said about white people doesn’t apply to me because I am ...” Any rethinking of these models needs to acknowledge both this tension and the varieties of white experience.

Centering the Individual

The centering of whiteness is also apparent in an implicit assumption in all these models: the focus on the development of the individual as distinct from the community. This

unquestioned examination of the individual as separate from the community is itself associated with white epistemology:

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000) compares the perspectives of René Descartes (1637) “I think, therefore I am” with an African saying not attributed to any one person—*Ubuntu*—which means, “I am because we are” (p. 257). The former privileges the central importance of the individual mind, self-reliance and autonomy, while the latter recognizes the individual’s interrelationship and dependence upon community, group effort and harmony. (Paxton, 2003, p. 81)

In this context the very notion of individual development models can be seen as “White” in its underlying assumptions. After all, these models are created by “rationally-driven, intellectual lone wolf” academicians who work in a context deeply entrenched in white epistemology with its concomitant assumptions about individualism (Peterson & Brookfield, 2007, p. 5).

When the teleological nature of most of the models is coupled with a notion that individual development can take place without regard to the development of the community, it is perhaps understandable that the individual may feel that he or she “has arrived.” Expanding white epistemology beyond individualism and establishing a more affirmative white identity for thriving in a multicultural world suggests the need for a different kind of communication among white people.

Communication Among White People

We think it is important that white identity development models broaden their perspective to include how white people interact with each other when they talk about race, racism, whiteness, supremacy and privilege. By examining our own development as well meaning white adult educators, we notice ways of being and behavior that impede dialogue and unconsciously perpetuate White Supremacist Consciousness.

Striving to think and act within the meaning perspective that Frankenberg calls race cognizance, we often find ourselves zealously sharing our knowledge and correcting other white people in order to show them what we believe is the proper way. That is, we proselytize, often with self-righteous fervor. Implicit in our proselytizing is felt superiority to others, who we perceive to be less aware than we are of their relationship with the racialized other (European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, in press 2008). In both proselytizing and disdaining we shut down dialogue while acting out our individualism and our sense of superiority, reflecting our white investment in hierarchy and competition. We have described this phenomenon elsewhere as a strong need to be seen as a “good white person” (European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005).

While Ponterotto, *et al*, specifically identify comparable behavior in the stage they name “Zealot-Defensive” (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 97), this phenomenon goes unnoted in all other models. From our own reflection, we are reluctant to see these behaviors as linked to any one stage or position, rather as persistent.

As a strategy for personal transformation, striving to become the “good white person” can be potent. However, belief that one IS a good white person or a better white person than others is a strategy for resisting change. We believe that it is important to better understand the behaviors of proselytizing and disdaining and their role in white identity development. Do they reflect a form of internalized self-hatred, homologous to “horizontal hostility” (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997, p. 22), a form of internalized oppression in which rage is directed at the racial self rather than the other? Do they represent a stage or stages of development? Are they behaviors

that may manifest at any point in development in which the self becomes fearful or resistant to further change?

Broadening the Discussion

In examining underlying assumptions in models of white identity development and identifying factors that these models have implicitly excluded, we hope—at a minimum—to open a larger conversation on this topic. Optimally, such a conversation can lead to further research and development of more inclusive and effective models. As educators, we feel it is crucial to be able to locate our and our students' positions regarding our identity as white, and to learn how to communicate better what we have learned without further alienating ourselves as white people from other white people—students, colleagues, and others in our lives. While learning to heal from living in a racist society, we feel it is critical that we also follow Perry's exhortation to “never [lose] sight of where he or she can be” (Knefelkamp, 2003). We need models both for healing our racist past and for preparing for the multicultural present and future.

Note

1. The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness fosters research and learning about the subject of White Supremacist Consciousness. The use of collective authorship under the name of the Collaborative reflects our understanding of the way in which knowledge is constructed. Members came together originally through their association with a cultural consciousness project at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco; members are: Carole Barlas, Elizabeth Kasl, Alec MacLeod, Doug Paxton, Penny Rosenwasser and Linda Sartor. Inquiries about the Collaborative's work can be addressed to: collaborative@eccw.org. Find further information at our website: <http://www.iconoclastic.net/eccw/>

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