



A Brief Overview of the Stages of Racial Identity Development

Guiding Assumptions

1. The development of a positive sense of racial/ethnic identity, not based on assumed superiority or inferiority, is an important task for everyone.
 2. Racial/ethnic identity formation is a developmental process which unfolds in rather predictable ways.
 3. For young people of color, the process often begins to unfold in adolescence.
 4. For whites living in predominantly white areas. The process may not begin until much later.
 5. Many white adults have given little consideration to the meaning of their own racial group membership.
 6. The fact that adolescents of color and white youth, as well as white educators, are on very different developmental timelines in terms of racial identity development is a potential source of misunderstanding and conflict.
 7. Those who feel affirmed in their own identity are more likely to be respectful of others' self-definition.
 8. Stages may not be simply developmental i.e. people may move back and forth in stages depending on life circumstances.
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White Racial Identity Development

Stage 1: Contact

Description:

- Characterized by a lack of awareness of cultural and institutional racism, and of one's own White privilege (for a good discussion of White privilege see McIntosh, 1989)
- Naïve curiosity about or fear of people of color. These are often based upon stereotypes learned from family, friends, or the media (e.g., You don't act like a Black person.)



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- If Whites' lives are structured in a way that limits their interaction with people of color, as well as their awareness of racial issues, they are likely to remain at this stage forever.
- Certain experiences may lead to an understanding that cultural or institutional racism do exist (beginning of Stage 2)

Stage 2: Disintegration

Description:

- Individuals begin to recognize that they live in a society that discriminates based on race
- Individuals become aware of the realities of prejudice, discrimination, and racism
- Conflict over new knowledge about race relations
- Marked by feelings of confusion, guilt, anger, and depression

Stage 3: Reintegration

Description:

- Results from societal pressure to accept the status quo. The desire to accept one's own racial group leads the individual to reshape their belief system to be more congruent with an acceptance of racism.
- Guilt and anxiety felt in Stage 2 may be redirected toward people of color who are now blamed as the source of discomfort
- Relatively easy for Whites to become stuck at this stage, particularly if avoidance of people of color is possible.

Stage 4: Pseudo-Independent

Description:

- Often begins with a process of information seeking
- Individual is abandoning beliefs in White superiority, but may still behave in ways that unintentionally perpetuate the system.



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- Looks to those targeted by racism to help him or her understand racism.
- May try to disavow his or her own Whiteness through active affiliation with people of color. May experience alienation from other Whites who have not begun this process, and, may also experience rejection from people of color who are suspicious of his or her motives.

Stage 5: Immersion-Emersion

Description:

- Uncomfortable with his or her own Whiteness, yet unable to be anything else, individual may begin searching for a new, more comfortable way to be White.
- Seeks to replace racially related myths and stereotypes with accurate information about what it means and has meant to be white in the U.S.
- Learning about Whites who have been antiracist allies to people of color is a very important part of this process. Reading biographies and autobiographies of these people provides students with important models for change. Can also provide these students with a sense of hope that they can have white allies.

Stage 6: Autonomy

Description:

- Internalization of a newly defined sense of oneself as White is the central task of this stage.
- Positive feelings associated with this redefinition energizes the person's efforts to confront racism and oppression in his or her daily life.
- Alliances with people of color are more easily formed because of greater consistency in expression of antiracist attitudes and behaviors.

People of Color Racial Identity Development

Stage 1: Conformity



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Description:

- Preference for the values and norms of the dominant culture
- Strong desire to assimilate into the dominant culture
- Negative self-deprecating attitudes toward themselves and their racial group
- Attitudes toward the dominant group are positive
- Denial

Stage 2: Dissonance

Description:

- Individual begins to question pro-White attitude and behaviors
- Individuals alternate between self- and group-appreciation and deprecating attitudes and behaviors
- Confusion

Stage 3: Resistance and Immersion

Description:

- Individuals embrace their own racial/ethnic group completely
- Blind endorsement of one's group and all the values/attitudes attributed to the group
- Individuals accept racism and oppression as a reality
- Rejection of the values and norms associated with the dominant group
- Empathic understanding and an overpowering ethnocentric bias

Stage 4: Introspection

Description:

- Individuals develop a security in their racial identity that allows questioning of rigid Resistance attitudes
- Re-direct anger/negativity toward "White system" to exploration of individual and group identity issues
- Conflict between allegiance to one's own ethnic group and issues of personal autonomy
- Individuals acknowledge there is variation amongst all groups of people



Stage 5: Synergetic Articulation and Awareness

Description:

- Characterized by a sense of self-fulfillment with regard to racial identity, confident and secure
- Desire to eliminate all forms of oppression
- High level of positive regard toward self and toward one's group
- Respect and appreciation for other racial/cultural groups
- Openness to constructive elements of dominant culture(s)

Based on the work of Dr. Janet Helms, Institute for the Study and Promotion of Race and Culture (ISPRC) at Boston College