

# White Racial Identity Development

## Chapter Learning Objectives

On completion of this chapter, the reader will be able to:

1. Recognize factors that are influential in the development of a White racial identity.
2. Examine the significance of “the invisible Whiteness of being.”
3. Discuss White privilege, including the ways in which a White person benefits from it and the ways in which a White person is disadvantaged by it.
4. Explain the developmental stages described in the various White racial identity development models.
5. Describe how a social worker’s stage of White racial identity development affects the social work helping relationship, and how it affects assessment and intervention with culturally diverse clients.

Content in this chapter supports the following Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) Core Competencies (Council on Social Work Education, 2015):

Competency 2. Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice

Competency 6. Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

Competency 7. Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

## OVERVIEW

This chapter focuses on White identity development, White privilege, and how the Euro-American worldview affects their perceptions of race-related issues. Understanding the White identity development model is an important component of culturally competent care for White social workers. The thesis of this chapter is that White social workers and other mental health professionals (1) must realize that they are victims of their cultural conditioning; (2) have inherited the racial biases, prejudices, and stereotypes of their forebears; (3) must take responsibility for their role in the oppression of minority groups; and (4) must move toward actively redefining their Whiteness in a nondefensive and nonracist manner. Discussion of the interplay between varying levels of White awareness and working with culturally diverse clients is a major part of this chapter.

### “WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE WHITE?”

Some readers may already feel uncomfortable with or baffled by the title of this chapter. “What does this have to do with social work? Is there really such a thing as White racial identity development? Even if there is, why is it covered in a separate chapter rather than integrated with the previous one? What do you mean by ‘White?’”

The truth is that, like ethnocentric monoculturalism, Whiteness also represents an entrenched determinant of worldview. Because it is an invisible veil that is outside of conscious awareness, it can be detrimental to women, LGBTQ individuals, people of color, and other marginalized groups in our society (Sue & Sue, 2013). Whiteness defines a reality that advantages White Euro-American males while disadvantaging others. Although most White Americans believe in equality and justice, the inability to recognize or deconstruct Whiteness allows society to continue with unjust actions toward and arrangements for minority groups. If social justice is one of the values of social work, then social workers must make the invisible visible. Let us look at the following dialogues taken from Sue and Sue (2003, pp. 235–238):

#### **Forty-Two-Year-Old White Businessman**

**Q:** What does it mean to be White?

**A:** Frankly, I don’t know what you’re talking about!

**Q:** Aren't you White?

**A:** Yes, but I come from Italian heritage. I'm Italian, not White.

**Q:** Well then, what does it mean to be Italian?

**A:** Pasta, good food, love of wine [*obviously agitated*]. This is getting ridiculous!

**OBSERVATIONS:** Denial and/or conflicted about being White. Claims Italian heritage, but unable to indicate more than superficial understanding of ethnic meaning. Expresses annoyance at the question.

### **Twenty-Six-Year-Old White Female College Student**

**Q:** What does it mean to be White?

**A:** Is this a trick question? [*pause*] I've never thought about it. Well, I know that lots of Black people see us as being prejudiced and all that stuff. I wish people would just forget about race differences and see one another as human beings. People are people and we should all be proud to be Americans.

**OBSERVATIONS:** Seldom thinks about being White. Defensive about prejudicial associations with Whiteness. Desires to eliminate or dilute race differences.

### **Sixty-Five-Year-Old White Male Construction Worker (Retired)**

**Q:** What does it mean to be White?

**A:** That's a stupid question [*sounds irritated*]!

**Q:** Why?

**A:** Look, what are you . . . Oriental? You people are always blaming us for stereotyping, and here you are doing the same to us.

**Q:** When you say "us," to whom are you referring?

**A:** I'm referring to Americans who aren't colored. We are all different from one another. I'm Irish but there are Germans, Italians, and those Jews. I get angry at the colored people for always blaming us. When my grandparents came over to this country, they worked 24 hours a day to provide a good living for their kids. My wife and I raised five kids, and I worked every day of my life to provide for them. No one gave me nothing! I get angry at the Black people for always whining. They just have to get off their butts and work rather than going on welfare. At least you people [reference to Asian Americans] work hard. The Black ones could learn from your people.

**OBSERVATIONS:** Believes question stereotypes Whites and expresses resentment with being categorized. Views White people as ethnic group. Expresses belief that anyone can be successful if they work hard. Believes African Americans are lazy and that Asian Americans are successful. Strong anger directed toward minority groups.

### **Thirty-Four-Year-Old White Female Stockbroker**

**Q:** What does it mean to be White?

**A:** I don't know [*laughing*]. I've never thought about it.

**Q:** Are you White?

**A:** Yes, I suppose so [*seems very amused*].

**Q:** Why haven't you thought about it?

**A:** Because it's not important to me.

**Q:** Why not?

**A:** It doesn't enter into my mind because it doesn't affect my life. Besides, we are all unique. Color isn't important.

**OBSERVATIONS:** Never thought about being White because it's unimportant. People are individuals, and color isn't important.

These are not atypical responses given by White Euro-Americans when presented with this question. When people of color are asked the same question, their answers tend to be more specific:

### **Twenty-Nine-Year-Old Latina Administrative Assistant**

**Q:** What does it mean to be White?

**A:** I'm not White; I'm Latina!

**Q:** Are you upset with me?

**A:** No. . . . It's just that I'm light, so people always think I'm White. It's only when I speak that they realize I'm Hispanic.

**Q:** Well, what does it mean to be White?

**A:** Do you really want to know? . . . Okay, it means you're always right. It means you never have to explain yourself or apologize. . . . You know that movie [*Love Story*, which features the line, "Love is never having to say you're sorry"]? Well, being White is never having to say you're sorry. It means they think they're better than us.

**OBSERVATIONS:** Strong reaction to being mistaken for being White. Claims that being White makes people feel superior and is reflected in their disinclination to admit being wrong.

### **Thirty-Nine-Year-Old Black Male Salesman**

**Q:** What does it mean to be White?

**A:** Is this a school exercise or something? Never expected someone to ask me that question in the middle of the city. Do you want the politically correct answer or what I really think?

**Q:** Can you tell me what you really think?

**A:** You won't quit, will you [*laughing*]? If you're White, you're right. If you're Black, step back.

**Q:** What does that mean?

**A:** White folks are always thinking they know all the answers. A Black man's word is worth less than a White man's. When White customers come into our dealership and see me standing next to the cars, I become invisible to them. Actually, they may see me as a well-dressed janitor [*laughs*], or actively avoid me. They will search out a White salesman. Or when I explain something to a customer, they always check out the information with my White colleagues. They don't trust me. When I mention this to our manager, who is White, he tells me I'm oversensitive and being paranoid. That's what being White means. It means having the authority or power to tell me what's really happening even though I know it's not. Being White means you can fool yourself into thinking that you're not prejudiced, when you are. That's what it means to be White.

**OBSERVATIONS:** Being White means you view minorities as less competent and capable. You have the power to define reality. You can deceive yourself into believing you're not prejudiced.

### **Twenty-One-Year-Old Chinese American Male College Student (Majoring in Ethnic Studies)**

**Q:** What does it mean to be White?

**A:** My cultural heritage class was just discussing that question this week.

**Q:** What was your conclusion?

**A:** Well, it has to do with White privilege. I read an article by a professor at Wellesley. It made a lot of sense to me. Being White in this society

automatically guarantees you better treatment and unearned benefits and privileges than minorities. Having white skin means you have the freedom to choose the neighborhood you live in. You won't be discriminated against. When you enter a store, security guards won't assume you will steal something. You can flag down a cab without the thought they won't pick you up because you're a minority. You can study in school and be assured your group will be portrayed positively. You don't have to deal with race or think about it.

**Q:** Are White folks aware of their White privilege?

**A:** Hell no! They're oblivious to it.

**OBSERVATIONS:** Being White means having unearned privileges in our society. It means you are oblivious to the advantages of being White.

### **THE INVISIBLE WHITENESS OF BEING**

The responses given by White Euro-Americans and persons of color are radically different from one another. Yet the answers given by both groups are quite common and representative of the range of responses given in diversity or multicultural classes and workshops. White respondents would rather not think about their Whiteness, are uncomfortable with or react negatively to being labeled "White," deny its importance in affecting their lives, and seem to believe that they are unjustifiably accused of being bigoted simply because they are White.

Strangely enough, Whiteness is most visible to people of color when it is denied, when it evokes puzzlement or negative reactions, and/or is equated with normalcy. Few people of color react negatively when asked what it means to be Black, Asian American, Latino/Hispanic, or a member of their race. Most could readily inform the questioner about what it means to be a person of color. There seldom is a day, for example, in which we are not reminded of being racially and culturally different from those around us. Yet Whites often find the question about Whiteness quite disconcerting and perplexing.

It appears that the denial and mystification of Whiteness by White Euro-Americans are related to two underlying factors. First, most of us seldom think about the air that surrounds us and about how it provides an essential, life-giving ingredient, oxygen. We take it for granted because it appears plentiful; only when we are deprived of it does it suddenly become frighteningly apparent how important it is. Whiteness is transparent precisely because of its everyday occurrence—its institutionalized, normative features in our culture—and because Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, average, and ideal. To people of

color, however, Whiteness is not invisible because it may not fit their normative qualities (values, lifestyles, experiential reality, etc.). Persons of color find White culture quite visible because even though it is nurturing to White Euro-Americans, it may invalidate the lifestyles of members of multicultural populations.

Second, Euro-Americans often deny that they are White, seem angered by being labeled as such, and become very defensive. “I’m not White, I’m Irish.” “You’re stereotyping, because we’re all different.” “There isn’t anything like a White race.” In many respects, these statements have validity. Nonetheless, many White Americans would be hard pressed to describe their Irish, Italian, German, or Norwegian heritage in any but the most superficial manner. One of the reasons is related to the processes of assimilation and acculturation. There are many ethnic groups, but being White allows for assimilation.

Although persons of color are told to assimilate, this psychological process is meant for Whites only. Assimilation and acculturation are processes that assume a receptive society. Racial/ethnic minorities are told in no uncertain terms that they are allowed only limited access to the fruits of our society. Thus, whether Whiteness defines a race is largely irrelevant. What is more relevant is that Whiteness is associated with unearned privilege—advantages conferred on White Americans but not on persons of color. It is our contention that much of the denial associated with being White is related to the denial of White privilege, an issue we explore in a moment. The same can be said of male privilege. It is easy for men to acknowledge that women are disadvantaged in this society, but they may deny that men are advantaged by virtue of their gender (McIntosh, 1989).

## UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF WHITENESS

An analysis of the earlier responses captured in the beginning of this chapter from both Whites and persons of color leads to the inevitable conclusion that part of the problem of race relations (and by inference social work practice) lies in the different worldviews of both groups—in the case of this example, Whites and people of color. Which group, however, has the more accurate assessment related to this topic? The answer seems to be contained in the following series of questions: If you want to understand oppression, should you ask the oppressor or the oppressed? If you want to learn about sexism, do you ask men or women? If you want to understand homophobia, do you ask straights or gays? If you want to learn about racism, do you ask Whites or persons of color? It appears that the most accurate assessment of bias comes not from those who enjoy the privilege of

power, but from those who are most disempowered (D'Andrea & Daniels, 2001; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000; Neville, Worthington, & Spanierman, 2001). Taking this position, we make the following assumptions about the dynamics of Whiteness:

First, it is clear that most White people perceive themselves as unbiased individuals who do not harbor racist thoughts and feelings; they see themselves as working toward social justice and possess a conscious desire to better the life circumstances of those less fortunate than they. Although these are admirable qualities, this self-image serves as a major barrier to recognizing and taking responsibility for admitting and dealing with one's own prejudices and biases. To admit to being racist, sexist, or homophobic requires people to recognize that the self-image they hold so dear is based on false notions of the self.

Second, being a White person in this society means chronic exposure to ethnocentric monoculturalism as manifested in White supremacy (Sue et al., 1998). It is difficult, if not impossible, for anyone to avoid inheriting the racial biases, prejudices, misinformation, deficit portrayals, and stereotypes of their forebears. To believe that they somehow have not inherited such aspects of White supremacy is to be naive or to engage in self-deception. This is hard for some to hear. Such a statement is not intended to assail the integrity of White people but to suggest that they also have been victimized. It is clear that no one was born wanting to be racist, sexist, or homophobic.

Misinformation is not acquired by free choice, but is imposed on White people through a painful process of cultural conditioning. In general, lacking awareness of their biases and preconceived notions, White social workers may function in a therapeutically ineffective manner.

Third, if White social workers are ever to become culturally competent providers, they must free themselves from the cultural conditioning of their past and move toward the development of a nonracist White identity. Unfortunately, many White Euro-Americans rarely consider what it means to be White in our society. Such a question is vexing to them because they seldom think of race as belonging to them—nor do they think of the privileges that come their way by virtue of their white skin. Katz (1985) pointed out a major barrier blocking the progress of White Euro-Americans investigating their own cultural identity and worldview:

*Because White culture is the dominant cultural norm in the United States, it acts as an invisible veil that limits many people from seeing it as a cultural system. . . . Often, it is easier for many Whites to*



*identify and acknowledge the different cultures of minorities than accept their own racial identity. . . . The difficulty of accepting such a view is that White culture is omnipresent. It is so interwoven in the fabric of everyday living that Whites cannot step outside and see their beliefs, values, and behaviors as creating a distinct cultural group. (pp. 616–617)*

Ridley (1995) asserted that this invisible veil can be unintentionally manifested in clinical interactions, with harmful consequences for minority clients:

*Unintentional behavior is perhaps the most insidious form of racism. Unintentional racists are unaware of the harmful consequences of their behavior. They may be well-intentioned, and on the surface, their behavior may appear to be responsible. Because individuals, groups, or institutions that engage in unintentional racism do not wish to do harm, it is difficult to get them to see themselves as racists. They are more likely to deny their racism. (p. 38)*

The conclusion drawn from this understanding is that White social workers and other helping professionals may be unintentional racists. First, they may be unaware of their biases, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviors. Second, they often perceive themselves as moral, good, and decent human beings and find it difficult to see themselves as racist. Third, they often do not have a sense of what their Whiteness means to them. And finally, their therapeutic approaches to multicultural populations are likely to be more (unintentionally) harmful than helpful. These conclusions are often difficult for White helping professionals to accept because of the defensiveness and feelings of blame they are likely to engender. Nonetheless, it is important for White clinicians and students not to be turned off by the message and lessons of this chapter. White Americans must continue a multicultural journey to explore the question, “What does it mean to be White?”

## MODELS OF WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Models of White racial identity development came primarily through the work of counseling psychologists, which is nevertheless highly relevant to social workers (Carter, 1995; Corvin & Wiggins, 1989; Helms, 1984, 1990; Ponterotto, 1988; Sue et al., 1998). These specialists pointed out that although learning about racial/cultural identity development for minority groups proves beneficial in our work

as service providers, more attention should be devoted to the White helping professional's racial identity. Because the majority of social workers and trainees are White, middle-class individuals, it would appear that White identity development and its implications for multicultural social work practice are important aspects to consider, both in the actual practice of clinical work and in professional training (Welkley, 2005). For example, a NASW study of licensed social workers (*Assuring the Sufficiency of a Front Line Work Force*, 2006) indicated that people of color are only 13 percent of all licensed social workers. In other words, 87-plus percent of licensed social workers are White).

Researchers have found that one's level of White racial identity awareness is predictive of one's level of racism (Carter, 1990; Pope-Davis & Ottavi, 1994). In these studies, the less aware subjects were of their White identity, the more likely they were to exhibit increased levels of racism. Further, women were less likely to be racist. It was suggested that the finding was correlated with women's greater experiences with discrimination and prejudice. Evidence also exists that cultural competence is correlated with White racial identity attitudes (Neville et al., 2001; Ottavi, Pope-Davis, & Dings, 1994). Other research has suggested that a relationship exists between a White helper's racial identity and his or her readiness for training in multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills (Carney & Kahn, 1984; Helms, 1990; Ponterotto, 1988; Sabnani, Ponterotto, & Borodovsky, 1991; Sue & Sue, 1990). Because developing cultural sensitivity is a long-term developmental task, the work of many researchers has gradually converged on a conceptualization of the stages (or phases or statuses) of racial/ethnic identity development for White Euro-Americans (Bennett, 1986; Smith, 1991). A number of the proposed models describe the salience of identity for the establishment of a relationship between the White clinician and the culturally different client, and some have now linked stages of identity with stages for appropriate clinical training (Bennett, 1986; Carney & Kahn, 1984; Sabnani et al., 1991).

### **The Hardiman White Racial Identity Development Model**

One of the earliest integrative attempts at formulating a White racial identity development model was that of Rita Hardiman (1982). Intrigued by the reality that certain White individuals exhibit a much more nonracist identity than do other White Americans, Hardiman studied the autobiographies of individuals who had attained a high level of racial consciousness. This led her to identify five White developmental stages: (1) naïveté, (2) acceptance, (3) resistance, (4) redefinition, and (5) internalization.

1. The *naïveté stage* (lack of social consciousness) is characteristic of early childhood, when a person is born into this world innocent, open, and unaware of racism and the importance of race. Curiosity and spontaneity in relating to race and racial differences tend to be the norm. A young White child who has almost no personal contact with African Americans, for example, may see an African American man in a supermarket and loudly comment on the darkness of his skin. Other than the embarrassment and apprehension of adults around the child, there is little discomfort associated with this behavior for the youngster. In general, awareness and understanding of race, racial differences, bias, and prejudice are either absent or minimal. Such an orientation becomes less characteristic of the child as the socialization process progresses, however. The negative reactions of parents, relatives, friends, and peers toward issues of race begin to convey mixed signals to the child. This orientation is reinforced by the educational system and mass media, which instill racial biases in the child and propel him or her into the acceptance stage.
2. The *acceptance stage* is marked by a conscious belief in the democratic ideal: that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed in a free society and that those who fail must bear the responsibility for their failure. White Euro-Americans become the social reference group, and the socialization process consistently instills in the child messages of White superiority and minority inferiority. The underemployment, unemployment, and undereducation of marginalized groups in our society are seen as evidence that members of non-White groups are lesser than Whites. Because everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed, the lack of success of minority groups is seen as evidence of some negative personal or group characteristic (low intelligence, inadequate motivation, or biological or cultural deficits). Victim blaming is strong as the existence of oppression, discrimination, and racism is denied. According to Hardiman, (1982) although the naïveté stage is brief in duration, the acceptance stage can last a lifetime.
3. Over time, the individual begins to challenge assumptions of White superiority and the denial of racism and discrimination. Moving from the acceptance stage to the *resistance stage* can prove to be a painful, conflicting, and uncomfortable transition. The White person's denial system begins to crumble because of a monumental event or a series of events that didn't just challenge but actually shattered the individual's denial system. The White person may,

for example, make friends with a minority coworker and discover that the images he or she has of “these people” are false. Or the White individual may have witnessed clear incidences of discrimination toward persons of color and may now begin to question assumptions in regard to racial inferiority. In any case, the racial realities of life in the United States can no longer be denied. The change from one stage to another may take considerable time, but once it is complete, the person becomes conscious of being White, is aware that he or she harbors racist attitudes, and begins to see the pervasiveness of oppression in our society. Feelings of anger, pain, hurt, rage, and frustration are present. In many cases, the White person may develop a negative reaction toward his or her own group or culture. At the same time, although the White person may romanticize people of color, he or she cannot interact confidently with them for fear of making racist mistakes. According to Hardiman (1982), the discomfort in realizing that one is White and that one’s group has engaged in oppression of racial/ethnic minorities may propel the person into the next stage.

4. Asking the painful question of who one is in relation to one’s racial heritage, honestly confronting one’s biases and prejudices, and accepting responsibility for one’s Whiteness are the culminating marks of the *redefinition stage*. New ways of defining one’s social group and one’s membership in that group become important. Such intense soul searching is most evident in Winter’s (1977) personal journey:

*In this sense we Whites are the victims of racism. Our victimization is different from that of Blacks, but it is real. We have been programmed into the oppressor roles we play, without our informed consent in the process. Our unawareness is part of the programming: None of us could tolerate the oppressor position, if we lived with a day-to-day emotional awareness of the pain inflicted on other humans through the instrument of our behavior. . . . We Whites benefit in concrete ways, year in and year out, from the present racial arrangements. All my life in White neighborhoods, White schools, White jobs and dealing with White police (to name only a few), I have experienced advantages that are systematically not available to Black people. It does not make sense for me to blame myself for the advantages that have come my way by virtue of my Whiteness. But absolving myself from guilt does not imply forgetting about racial injustice or taking it lightly (as my guilt pushes me to do). (p. 24)*

There is a realization that Whiteness has been defined in opposition to the experiences of people of color—namely, by standards of White supremacy. Winter (1977), by being able to step out of this racist paradigm and redefining what her Whiteness meant to her, was able to add meaning to developing a nonracist identity. At the redefinition stage, the extremes of good versus bad and positive versus negative attached to “Whites” and “people of color” begin to give way to more realistic assessments. The person no longer denies being White, honestly confronts his or her racism, understands the concept of White privilege, and feels increased comfort in relating to persons of color.

5. The *internalization stage* is the result of forming a new social and personal identity. With the greater comfort in understanding oneself and the development of a nonracist White identity comes a commitment to social action as well. The individual accepts responsibility for effecting personal and social change without always relying on persons of color to lead the way. The racism-free identity, however, must be nurtured, validated, and supported to be sustained in a hostile environment. Such an individual is constantly bombarded with attempts to be resocialized into the oppressive society.

### **The Helms White Racial Identity Model**

Working independently of Hardiman, Janet Helms (1984, 1990, 1994, 1995) created perhaps the most elaborate and sophisticated White racial identity model yet proposed. Helms is arguably the most influential White identity development theorist. Not only has her model led to the development of an assessment instrument to measure White racial identity, but also it has been scrutinized empirically (Carter, 1990; Helms & Carter, 1990), and has generated much research and debate in the psychological literature. Like Hardiman (1982), Helms assumes that racism is an intimate and central part of being a White American. To her, developing a healthy White identity requires movement through two phases: (1) abandonment of racism and (2) defining a nonracist White identity. Six specific ego statuses are distributed equally between the two: contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independence, immersion/emersion, and autonomy. Originally, Helms (1990) used the term *stages* to refer to the six statuses, but because of certain conceptual ambiguities and the controversy that ensued, she has abandoned its usage.

1. *Contact status*. People in this status are oblivious to and unaware of racism, believe that everyone has an equal chance of success, lack an understanding

of prejudice and discrimination, have minimal experiences with persons of color, and may profess to be color-blind. Such statements as “People are people,” “I don’t notice a person’s race at all,” and “You don’t act Black” are examples of what a person in this status might say. Although there is an attempt to minimize the importance or influence of race, there is a definite dichotomy between people of color and Whites on both a conscious and an unconscious level in regard to stereotypes and the superior-inferior dimensions of the races. Because of obliviousness and compartmentalization, it is possible for two diametrically opposed belief systems to coexist: First, uncritical acceptance of White supremacist notions relegates minorities to the inferior category with all the racial stereotypes. Second, there is a belief that racial and cultural differences are unimportant, which allows Whites to avoid perceiving themselves as dominant group members or as having biases and prejudices.

2. *Disintegration status.* Although in the previous status the individual does not recognize the polarities between democratic principles of equality, on the one hand, and the unequal treatment of minority groups, on the other, such obliviousness may eventually break down. The White person becomes conflicted over irresolvable racial moral dilemmas that are frequently perceived as involving polar opposites: for example, believing one is nonracist, yet not wanting one’s son or daughter to marry a minority group member; believing that “all men are created equal,” even though society treats many people of color as second-class citizens; and not acknowledging that oppression exists, and then witnessing it in the media (e.g., the 2014 deaths of Michael Brown of Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner of Staten Island, both unarmed Black men who were killed by the police). Conflicts between loyalty to one’s group and “humanistic ideals” may manifest themselves in various ways. The person becomes increasingly conscious of his or her Whiteness and may experience dissonance and conflict, resulting in feelings of guilt, depression, helplessness, or anxiety. Such statements as “My grandfather is really prejudiced, but I try not to be” and “I’m personally not against interracial marriages, but I worry about the children” are representative of personal struggles occurring in the White person. Although a healthy resolution might be to confront the myth of meritocracy realistically, the breakdown of the denial system is painful and anxiety provoking. Attempts at resolution, according to Helms (1994), may involve (1) avoiding contact with persons of color, (2) not thinking about race, and (3) seeking reassurance from others that racism is not the fault of Whites.

3. *Reintegration status.* This status can best be characterized as a regression in which the pendulum swings back to the most basic beliefs of White superiority and minority inferiority. In an attempt to resolve the dissonance created from the previous process, the person retreats to the dominant ideology associated with race and his or her own socioracial group identity. This ego status results in idealizing the White Euro-American group and the positives of White culture and society; there is a consequent invalidation and intolerance of other minority groups. In general, a firmer and more conscious belief in White racial superiority is present. Racial/ethnic minorities are blamed for their own problems.
4. *Pseudoindependence status.* This status represents the start of the second phase of Helms's model, which involves defining a nonracist White identity. As in the Hardiman model, a person is likely to be propelled into this phase because of a painful or insightful encounter or event that jars the person from the reintegration status. The awareness of visible racial/ethnic minorities, the unfairness of their treatment, and discomfort with the racist White identity may lead a person to identify with the plight of persons of color. There is an attempt to understand racial, cultural, and sexual orientation differences and a purposeful and conscious decision to interact with minority group members. The well-intentioned White person in this status may suffer from several problematic dynamics, however. First, although intending to be socially conscious and helpful to minority groups, the White individual may unknowingly perpetuate racism by helping minorities adjust to the prevailing White standards. Second, his or her choice of minority individuals as associates is based on how similar they are to him or her, and the primary mechanism used to understand racial issues is intellectual and conceptual. As a result, the person's understanding has not reached the experiential and affective domains. In other words, understanding Euro-American White privilege; sociopolitical aspects of race; and issues of bias, prejudice, and discrimination tends to be more of an intellectual exercise.
5. *Immersion/emersion status.* If the person is reinforced to continue a personal exploration of himself or herself as a racial being, questions become focused on what it means to be White. According to Helms (1994), the White individual searches for an understanding of the personal meaning of racism and the ways in which he or she benefits from White privilege. The person is increasingly willing to confront his or her own biases, to redefine Whiteness,



and to become more activist in directly combating racism and oppression. This status is different from the previous one in two major ways. First, it is marked by a shift in focus from trying to change people of color to changing the self and other Whites. Second, there is increasing experiential and affective understanding that was lacking in the previous status. This latter process is extremely important. Indeed, Helms believes that a successful resolution of this stage requires an emotional catharsis or release that forces the person to relive or reexperience previous emotions that were denied or distorted. Achieving this affective and experiential upheaval leads to euphoria or even a feeling of rebirth and is a necessary condition for developing a new nonracist White identity.

6. *Autonomy status.* Increasing awareness of one's own Whiteness, reduced feelings of guilt, acceptance of one's role in perpetuating racism, and renewed determination to abandon White entitlement lead to the autonomy status. The person is knowledgeable about racial, ethnic, and cultural differences; values the diversity; and is no longer fearful of, intimidated by, or uncomfortable with the experiential reality of race. Development of a nonracist White identity becomes increasingly strong. Indeed, the person feels comfortable with his or her nonracist White identity, does not personalize attacks on White supremacy, and can explore the issues of racism and personal responsibility without defensiveness. A person in this status "walks the talk" and actively values and seeks out interracial experiences.

Helms's model is by far the most widely cited, researched, and applied of all the White racial identity formulations. Part of its attractiveness and value is the derivation of "defenses," "protective strategies," or what Helms (1995) formally labeled *information-processing strategies* (IPSs), which White people use to avoid or assuage anxiety and discomfort around the issue of race. Each status has a dominant IPS associated with it: contact = obliviousness or denial, disintegration = suppression and ambivalence, reintegration = selective perception and negative out-group distortion, pseudoindependence = reshaping reality and selective perception, immersion/emersion = hypervigilance and reshaping, and autonomy = flexibility and complexity. Table 7.1 lists examples of IPS statements likely to be made by White people in each of the six ego statuses. Understanding these strategic reactions is important for White social workers in their efforts to understand, the barriers that must be overcome to move to another status, and for potentially developing effective training or clinical strategies.



**TABLE 7.1 White Racial Identity Ego Statuses and Information-Processing Strategies**

1. *Contact status*: satisfaction with racial status quo, obliviousness to racism and one's participation in it. If racial factors influence life decisions, they do so in a simplistic fashion. Information-processing strategy (IPS): Obliviousness.

Example: "I'm a White woman. When my grandfather came to this country, he was discriminated against, too. But he didn't blame Black people for his misfortunes. He educated himself and got a job: That's what Blacks ought to do. If White callers [to a radio station] spent as much time complaining about racial discrimination as your Black callers do, we'd never have accomplished what we have. You all should just ignore it" (quoted from a workshop participant).

2. *Disintegration status*: disorientation and anxiety provoked by irresolvable racial moral dilemmas that force one to choose between own-group loyalty and humanism. May be stymied by life situations that arouse racial dilemmas. IPS: Suppression and ambivalence.

Example: "I myself tried to set a nonracist example [for other Whites] by speaking up when someone said something blatantly prejudiced—how to do this without alienating people so that they would no longer take me seriously was always tricky—and by my friendships with Mexicans and Blacks who were actually the people with whom I felt most comfortable" (Blauener, 1993, p. 8).

3. *Reintegration status*: idealization of one's socioracial group, denigration and intolerance for other groups. Racial factors may strongly influence life decisions. IPS: Selective perception and negative out-group distortion.

Example: "So what if my great-grandfather owned slaves. He didn't mistreat them and besides, I wasn't even here then. I never owned slaves. So, I don't know why Blacks expect me to feel guilty for something that happened before I was born. Nowadays, reverse racism hurts Whites more than slavery hurts Blacks. At least they got three square [meals] a day. But my brother can't even get a job with the police department because they have to hire less-qualified Blacks. That [expletive] happens to Whites all the time" (quoted from a workshop participant).

4. *Pseudoindependence status*: intellectualized commitment to one's own socioracial group and deceptive tolerance of other groups. May make life decisions to "help other racial groups." IPS: Reshaping reality and selective perception.

Example: "Was I the only person left in American who believed that the sexual mingling of the races was a good thing, that it would erase cultural barriers and leave us all a lovely shade of tan? . . . Racial blending is inevitable. At the very least, it may be the only solution to our dilemmas of race" (Allen, 1994, p. C4).

5. *Immersion/emersion status*: search for an understanding of the personal meaning of racism and the ways by which one benefits and a redefinition of Whiteness. Life choices may incorporate racial activism. IPS: Hypervigilance and reshaping.

Example: "It's true that I personally did not participate in the horror of slavery, and I don't even know whether my ancestors owned slaves. But I know that because I am White, I continue to benefit from a racist system that stems from the slavery era. I believe that if White people are ever going to understand our role in perpetuating racism, then we must begin to ask ourselves some hard questions and be willing to consider our role in maintaining a hurtful system. Then, we must try to do something to change it" (quoted from a workshop participant).

6. *Autonomy status*: informed positive socioracial group commitment, use of internal standards for self-definition, capacity to relinquish the privileges of racism. May avoid life options that require participation in racial oppression. IPS: Flexibility and complexity.

Example: "I live in an integrated [Black-White] neighborhood and I read Black literature and popular magazines. So I understand that the media presents a very stereotypic view of Black culture. I believe that if more of us White people made more than a superficial effort to obtain accurate information about racial groups other than our own, then we could help make this country a better place for all peoples" (quoted from a workshop participant).

Source: Helms, 1995, p. 185.

## THE PROCESS OF WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: A DESCRIPTIVE MODEL

Sue and Sue (1990) and Sue et al. (1998) have proposed a five-stage process that integrates the Hardiman and Helms models. The model makes several assumptions: First, racism is an integral part of U.S. life, and it permeates all aspects of our culture and institutions (ethnocentric monoculturalism). Second, Whites are socialized into the society and therefore inherit all the biases; stereotypes; and racist attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the larger society. Third, how Whites perceive themselves as racial beings follows an identifiable sequence that can occur in a linear or nonlinear fashion. Fourth, the status of White racial identity development in any multicultural encounter affects the process and outcome of interracial relationships. And finally, the most desirable outcome is one in which the White person not only accepts his or her Whiteness but also defines it in a nondefensive and nonracist manner.

### **Conformity Stage**

The White person's attitudes and beliefs in this stage are very ethnocentric. There is minimal awareness of the self as a racial being and a strong belief in the universality of values and norms governing behavior. The White person possesses limited accurate knowledge of other ethnic groups, and he or she is likely to rely on social stereotypes as the main source of information. As seen earlier, Hardiman (1982) described this stage as an acceptance of White superiority and minority inferiority. Consciously or unconsciously, the White person believes that White culture is the most highly developed and that all others are primitive or inferior. The conformity stage is marked by contradictory and often compartmentalized attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. A person may believe simultaneously that he or she is not racist, but that minority inferiority justifies discriminatory and inferior treatment; he or she may believe that minority persons are different and deviant, but that "people are people" and differences are unimportant (Helms, 1984). As with their minority counterparts in the Conformity stage in the R/CID model (Chapter 6), the primary mechanism operating here is one of denial and compartmentalization. For example, many Whites deny that they belong to a race that allows them to avoid personal responsibility for perpetuating a racist system. Like fish that do not recognize the water surrounding them, Whites either have difficulty seeing or are unable to see the invisible veil of cultural assumptions, biases, and prejudices that guide their perceptions and actions. They tend to believe that

White Euro-American culture is superior and that other cultures are primitive, inferior, less developed, or lower on the scale of evolution. It is important to note that many Whites in this stage of development are unaware of these beliefs and operate as if they are universally shared by others. They also believe that differences are unimportant and that “people are people,” “we are all the same under the skin,” “we should treat everyone the same,” “problems wouldn’t exist if minorities would only assimilate,” and “discrimination and prejudice are something that others do.” The helping professional with this perspective professes color blindness and views theories of counseling and therapy as universally applicable, not questioning their relevance to other culturally different groups. Such an orientation was aptly captured by McIntosh (1989) in describing her own White racial awakening:

*My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. . . . Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow “them” to be more like “us.” (p. 8)*

Wrenn’s (1985) notion of the “culturally encapsulated counselor” fulfills characteristics of the conformity stage. The primary mechanism used in encapsulation is denial—denial that people are different, denial that discrimination exists, and denial of one’s own prejudices. Instead, the locus of the problem is seen as residing in the minority individual or group: minorities would not encounter problems if they would only assimilate and acculturate (enter the melting pot), value education, or work harder.

### **Dissonance Stage**

Movement into the dissonance stage occurs when the White person is forced to deal with the inconsistencies that have been compartmentalized or encounters information or experiences at odds with denial. In most cases, the person is forced to acknowledge Whiteness at some level; to examine his or her own cultural values; and to see the conflict between upholding humanistic, nonracist values and his or her contradictory behavior. For example, a person who consciously believes that “all men are created equal” and that he or she treats everyone the same may

suddenly experience reservations about having African Americans move next door or having his or her son or daughter involved in an interracial relationship. These more personal experiences bring the individual face-to-face with his or her own prejudices and biases. In this situation, thoughts that “I am not prejudiced”; “I treat everyone the same regardless of race, creed, or color”; and “I do not discriminate” collide with the truth. Further, some major event (the death of Michael Brown and Eric Garner etc., events that spawned the nationwide *Black Lives Matter* movement) may force the person to realize that racism is alive and well in the United States.

The increasing realization that one is biased and that Euro-American society does play a part in oppressing minority groups is an unpleasant one. Dissonance may result in feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and depression. A person may use rationalizations to exonerate himself or herself for his or her own inactivity in combating perceived injustice or personal feelings of prejudice: for example, “I’m only one person—what can I do?” or “Everyone is prejudiced, even minorities.” This type of conflict is best exemplified in the following passage from Winter (1977):

*When someone pushes racism into my awareness, I feel guilty (that I could be doing so much more); angry (I don't like to feel like I'm wrong); defensive (I already have two Black friends. . . . I worry more about racism than most whites do—isn't that enough?); turned off (I have other priorities in my life with guilt about that thought); helpless (the problem is so big—what can I do?). I hate to feel this way. That is why I minimize race issues and let them fade from my awareness whenever possible. (p. 24)*

As such conflicts ensue, the White person may retreat into the protective confines of White culture (encapsulation of the previous stage) or move progressively toward insight and revelation (resistance and immersion stage).

Whether a person regresses is related to the strength of positive forces pushing the individual forward (e.g., support for challenging racism) and negative forces pushing the person backward (e.g., fear of some loss). For example, challenging the prevailing beliefs of the times may mean risking ostracism from White relatives, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. Regardless of the person’s choice (to regress or not), there are many uncomfortable feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and depression related to the recognition of inconsistencies in his or her belief system. Guilt and shame are probably related to the White

person's recognition of his or her own role in perpetuating racism in the past. Guilt may also result from the person's being afraid to speak out on the issues or take responsibility for his or her part in a current situation. For example, the person may witness an act of racism, hear a racist comment, or be given preferential treatment over a minority person but decide not to say anything for fear of violating racist White norms. Many White people rationalize their behaviors by believing that they are powerless to make changes. In addition, there is a tendency to retreat into White culture. If, however, others (which may include some family and friends) are more accepting, forward movement is more likely.

### **Resistance and Immersion Stage**

The White person who progresses to this stage begins to question and challenge his or her own racism. For the first time, the person begins to realize what racism is all about, and his or her eyes are suddenly open. He or she now sees racism everywhere (advertising, television, educational materials, interpersonal interactions, etc.). This stage of development is marked by a major questioning of one's own racism and that of others in society. In addition, increasing awareness of how racism operates and its pervasiveness in U.S. culture and institutions is the major hallmark of this stage. It is as if the person has awakened to the realities of oppression; sees how educational materials, the mass media, advertising, and other elements portray and perpetuate stereotypes; and recognizes how being White grants certain advantages denied to various minority groups.

There is likely to be considerable anger at family and friends, institutions, and society at large, which are seen as having sold the White individual a false bill of goods (democratic ideals) that were never practiced. Guilt is also felt for having been a part of the oppressive system. Strangely enough, the person is likely to undergo a form of racial self-hatred at this stage. Negative feelings about being White are present, and the accompanying feelings of guilt, shame, and anger toward himself or herself and other Whites may develop. The "White liberal syndrome" may develop and be manifested in two complementary styles: assuming the paternalistic protector role or overidentifying with another minority group (Helms, 1984; Ponterotto, 1988). With the former, the White person may devote his or her energies to an almost paternalistic attempt to protect minorities from abuse. With the latter, the person may actually want

to identify with a particular minority group (Asian American, African American, etc.) to escape his or her own Whiteness. The White person will soon discover, however, that these styles are not appreciated by minority groups and will experience rejection. Again, the person may resolve this dilemma by moving back into the protective confines of White culture (conformity stage), again experiencing conflict (dissonance stage), or moving directly to the introspection stage.

### **Introspection Stage**

This stage is most likely to be a compromise after the White person has swung from an extreme of unconditional acceptance of his or her White identity to a rejection of Whiteness. It is a state of relative quiescence, introspection, and reformulation of what it means to be White. The person realizes and no longer denies that he or she has participated in oppression and benefited from White privilege, and/or that racism is an integral part of U.S. society. At the same time, he or she has become less motivated by guilt and defensiveness, accepts his or her own Whiteness, and seeks to define his or her own identity and that of his or her social group. This acceptance, however, does not mean a less active role in combating oppression. The introspective process may involve addressing the questions, “What does it mean to be White?” “Who am I in relation to my Whiteness?” and “Who am I as a racial/cultural being?”

The feelings or affective elements may be existential in nature and involve a sense of disconnectedness, isolation, confusion, and loss. In other words, the person knows that he or she will never fully understand the minority experience but feels disconnected from the Euro-American group as well. In some ways, the introspection stage is similar to the dissonance stage in terms of dynamics, in that both represent a transition from one perspective to another. The process used to answer the preceding questions and to deal with the ensuing feelings may involve a searching, observing, and questioning attitude. Answering these questions involves dialoguing with and observing members of one’s own social group as well as actively creating and experiencing interactions with various minority group members. Characteristics of this stage can be found in Kiselica’s (1998) personal journey:

*I was deeply troubled as I witnessed on a daily basis the detrimental effects of institutional racism and oppression on ethnic-minority groups in this country. The latter encounters forced me to recognize*

*my privileged position in our society because of my status as a so-called Anglo. It was upsetting to know that I, a member of White society, benefited from the hardships of others that were caused by a racist system. I was also disturbed by the painful realization that I was, in some ways, a racist. I had to come to grips with the fact that I had told and laughed at racist jokes and, through such behavior, had supported White racist attitudes. If I really wanted to become an effective, multicultural psychologist, extended and profound self-reckoning was in order. At times, I wanted to flee from this unpleasant process by merely participating superficially with the remaining tasks. . . while avoiding any substantive self-examination. (pp. 10–11)*

### **Integrative Awareness Stage**

Reaching this level of development is most characterized by the White person's (1) understanding himself or herself as a racial/cultural being, (2) being aware of sociopolitical influences in regard to racism, (3) appreciating racial/cultural diversity, and (4) becoming more committed to eradicating oppression. A nonracist White Euro-American identity emerges and becomes internalized. The person values multiculturalism, is comfortable around members of culturally different groups, and feels a strong sense of connectedness with members of many groups. Most important, perhaps, is the inner sense of security and strength that develops, allowing the individual to function in a society that is only marginally accepting of integratively aware White persons. As Winter (1977) explained,

*To end racism, Whites have to pay attention to it and continue to pay attention. Since avoidance is such a basic dynamic of racism, paying attention will not happen naturally. We Whites must learn how to hold racism realities in our attention. We must learn to take responsibility for this process ourselves, without waiting for Blacks' actions to remind us that the problem exists, and without depending on Black people to reassure us and forgive us for our racist sins. In my experience, the process is painful but it is a relief to shed the fears, stereotypes, immobilizing guilt we didn't want in the first place. (p. 25)*



## IMPLICATIONS FOR MULTICULTURAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Ultimately, the effectiveness of White social workers is related to their overcoming sociocultural conditioning and making their Whiteness visible. We offer the following guidelines and suggestions for White social workers undertaking this challenging process:

1. Work on accepting your own Whiteness, but define it in a nondefensive and nonracist manner. How you perceive yourself as a racial being seems to be correlated strongly with how you perceive and respond to racial stimuli.
2. Spend time with healthy and strong people from another culture or racial group. As social workers, we work with only the narrow segment of society receiving our services. Thus, the knowledge we have about minority groups is usually developed from working with troubled individuals.
3. Know that becoming culturally aware and competent comes through lived experiences and reality. Identify a cultural guide, someone from a culture different from your own who is willing to help you understand his or her group.
4. Attend cultural events, meetings, and activities led by minority communities. This allows you to hear from church leaders, attend community celebrations, and participate in open forums so that you may sense the strengths of a community, observe leadership in action, personalize your understanding, and develop new social relationships.
5. When around persons of color, pay attention to feelings, thoughts, and assumptions that you have when race-related situations present themselves. Where are your feelings of uneasiness, differentness, or outright fear coming from? Do not make excuses for these thoughts or feelings, dismiss them, or avoid attaching meaning to them. Only if you are willing to confront them directly can you unlearn the misinformation and nested emotional fears.
6. Dealing with racism means a personal commitment to action. It means interrupting other White Americans when they make racist remarks and jokes or engage in racist actions, even if it is embarrassing or frightening. It means noticing the possible opportunities for direct action against bias and discrimination in your everyday life.



## SUMMARY

This chapter began with the question, “What does it mean to be White?” This question is significant for White social workers, who may be unaware that they may be victims of their own cultural tradition, and that their behaviors may reflect the inherited racial biases, prejudices, and stereotypes of their forebears. With this question in mind we examined the dynamics of Whiteness through two theoretical models of White racial identity development: the Hardiman White racial identity development model and the Helms White racial identity model. We then presented a descriptive model of White racial identity development based on these two models. Our developmental model has the following stages: conformity, dissonance, resistance and immersion, introspection, and integrative awareness. The interplay between the various stages of White identity development has significant implications for a White social worker engaged in providing services for culturally diverse clients.

In this chapter we have stressed the need for White Euro-American social workers to understand the assumptions inherent in White racial identity development models. Readers are asked to consider seriously the validity of these assumptions and engage one another in a dialogue about them. As stated earlier in this chapter the effectiveness of White social workers is related to their overcoming sociocultural conditioning and making their Whiteness visible.

Undergirding this chapter is an acceptance that racism is a basic and integral part of U.S. life and permeates all aspects of our culture and institutions. White social workers have been socialized into U.S. society and therefore have inherited the biases, stereotypes, and racist attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the society. As one White mental health professional stated openly in a race dialogue symposium conducted by one of the authors of this text, “Racism is like living for long periods in a smog-filled city. You become so acclimated to the pollution that you do not realize the extent of the pollution until you leave the city and breathe fresh air.” In other words, all White helping professionals—whether knowingly or unknowingly—harbor racist attitudes and engage in unintentional racism. By employing the White racial identity development model as a heuristic in the same manner as the integrative racial/cultural identity development model discussed in Chapter 6, one can better understand how the level of White racial identity development in an interracial encounter (working with minority clients) can affect the process and outcome of the interracial relationship (in social work practice).

## REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do the information-processing strategies (IPs) described in Helms (1995) model have relevance to you? Are there others strategies that come to mind?
2. As a White social worker what are some of the implicit and explicit barriers for achieving the integrative awareness stage? For example, what would make it difficult for you to interrupt a stranger or even a family member when a racist or sexist joke is being made?
3. Have you ever been in a situation where you were the only White person in an activity or event full of African Americans or Latinos/Hispanics? What thoughts did you have? How did you feel? Were you uncomfortable or fearful?
4. What would you need in the way of support or personal moral courage to move toward developing a nonracist White identity?

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