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Caryn J. Block and Robert T. Carter

*The Counseling Psychologist* 1996; 24; 326

DOI: 10.1177/0011000096242012

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## White Racial Identity Attitude Theories: A Rose by Any Other Name Is Still a Rose

Caryn J. Block

Robert T. Carter

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

*The purpose of this article is to examine the White racial consciousness model (Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994), which has been proposed as a superior conceptualization for understanding White racial attitudes than existing frameworks, specifically Helms's (1990) theory of White racial identity attitudes. Rowe et al. (1994) have argued for the superiority of the White racial consciousness model because it can "describe the phenomena more accurately, predict relationships better, and provide a more stable base for assessment" (p. 133) than Helms's White racial identity attitude theory. This article raises questions as to the validity of these claims. The White racial consciousness model is examined in terms of its similarities and differences to Helms's White racial identity attitude theory, focusing on the two theories in relation to their definition of core constructs, theoretical basis, and the existing empirical evidence.*

We are encouraged by the amount of research and discussion surrounding Helms's (1984, 1990) White racial identity theory. In fact, White racial identity is seen as important enough to stimulate not only empirical research but also proposed alternative theoretical statements. We are encouraged by this as well, for as a topic gains importance it is likely that different perspectives will emerge. A critical issue that is the focus of this article is whether the White racial consciousness (WRC) model proposed by Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson (1994) is a superior alternative conceptualization to White racial identity attitude theory (WRIAT; Helms, 1990). Rowe et al. (1994) claimed that their model is a superior conceptualization for understanding White racial attitudes in that it can "describe the phenomena more accurately, predict relationships better, and provide a more stable base for assessment" than Helms's White racial identity theory (p. 133). In this article, we raise questions as to the validity of these claims. To question whether there

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Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to the first author at the Department of Social, Organizational and Counseling Psychology, Box 6, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027.

THE COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGIST, Vol. 24 No. 2, April 1996 326-334  
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**TABLE 1: Core Concepts: White Racial Identity Attitude Theory and White Racial Consciousness**

<i>White Racial Identity</i>	<i>White Racial Consciousness</i>
Two phases	Two statuses
Abandonment of racism	Unachieved status
Developing a positive White identity	Achieved status
Six attitude categories (statuses)	Seven attitude categories (types)
Contact	Avoidant
Disintegration	Dissonant
Reintegration	Dependent
Pseudo-independent	Dominative
Immersion/emersion	Conflictive
Autonomy	Reactive
	Integrative

is sufficient evidence to substantiate these claims, we will compare the two theories in terms of their definition of core constructs, theoretical basis, and the existing empirical evidence.

### DEFINITION OF CORE CONSTRUCTS

Although the domain of the WRC model is White "consciousness" and the domain of the WRIAT model is White "identity," in fact, both of these constructs refer to how an individual views the self as well as how the individual views other groups. Thus the domains being examined by both theories seem to be quite similar. Table 1 illustrates the core constructs in each model.

As noted by Rowe et al. (1994), "The types of White racial consciousness that we have described are quite similar to some of the stages of the WRID models" (p. 141). We concur. Both WRIAT and WRC have two broad categories, into which the types (WRC) or statuses (WRIAT) can be classified. The two statuses proposed by Rowe et al. (1994), "Unachieved" and "Achieved," are quite similar to the two phases of racial identity development, "Abandonment of Racism" and "Developing a Positive Nonracist White Identity," proposed by Helms (1990, 1992). According to Helms, the three racial identity statuses associated with abandoning racism are characterized by a lack of conscious exploration of the personal meaning and significance of being White. The latter three racial identity statuses are characterized by a much more active conscious process of development of a positive nonracist White identity (Helms, 1990, 1992). These seem very

similar to the Unachieved status, which is defined by Rowe et al. (1994) as involving those racial attitudes "for which either exploration, commitment or both are lacking" (p. 136), and Achieved status, which involves developing an "integrated personal outlook on racial issues" (p. 136).

Not only is the overall framework for categorizing White racial attitudes highly similar, but the specific "types" proposed by WRC are almost identical in meaning to the statuses defined in WRIAT. In fact, we fail to see the distinction between Contact—the first racial identity status in WRIAT, described as "a superficial and inconsistent awareness of being White" (Helms, 1990, p. 55)—and the Avoidant type, described by Rowe et al. (1994) as "lacks consideration of one's own White identity and avoids racial ethnic issues" (p. 136).

Disintegration, the second racial identity status defined by Helms (1990), is characterized by anxiety because of the initial realization that Whites and minorities are not treated equally in many situations. It is similar to the Dissonant type, which is described by Rowe et al. (1994) as an individual who is "likely to be confused because their previous racial attitudes are in conflict with recent experiential incidents" (p. 137).

Reintegration, the third racial identity status defined by Helms (1990), is characterized by the belief that White people are superior to people of color and therefore have accrued such privileges because of their superiority, and the inferiority of people of color is what is hindering their progress. This is highly similar to the Dominative type, which is defined by Rowe et al. (1994) as "White racial attitudes characterized by a strong ethnocentric perspective, which justifies the dominance of racial/ethnic minority peoples by the majority culture" (p. 137).

Pseudo-Independent, the fourth racial identity status, is defined by Helms (1990) as an individual who does not demonstrate overt racism but would still view Black culture as dysfunctional and therefore responsible for the creation and maintenance of institutional and cultural racism. It is similar to the Conflictive type, which is defined by Rowe et al. (1994) as "opposed to obvious, clearly discriminatory practices, yet is usually opposed to any program or procedure designed to reduce or eliminate discrimination" (p. 138).

Immersion/Emersion, the fifth racial identity status, is defined by Helms (1990) as an individual who is actively trying to understand the ways in which he or she contributes to, and benefits from, White privilege. It has some similarities to the Reactive type, which is defined by Rowe et al. (1994) as having attitudes that "White Americans benefit from and are responsible for the existence of discriminatory attitudes and practices" (p. 139). However, Rowe et al. (1994) go on to further define the Reactive type as having

attitudes that “ignore the implications of individual responsibility and tend to overlook the roles of personal behavior and individual choice as they contribute to the levels of achievement, poverty and social disorganization experienced by many racial/ethnic minority communities” (p. 140). These types of attitudes would not be descriptive of an individual in Immersion/Emersion. In sum, five of the types of WRC are similar to a particular status in WRIAT.

Because these two models are highly similar, it is even more critical to explore the ways in which these two models of White racial identity do differ. The Dependent type of White racial consciousness does not have a parallel in White racial identity theory, although it is most similar to Contact. This “type” of person, according to Rowe et al. (1994), is committed to some set of attitudes, but they are superficially held. Therefore, according to the authors, “Attitudes verbalized by persons here might be any of those described here” (p. 137). This seems to present some tricky issues for being able to assess these attitudes.

The Integrative type presented by Rowe et al. (1994) is different from Autonomy, the final status in WRIAT. The Integrative type is described as having attitudes that reflect a “pragmatic view of ethnic/minority issues” (p. 141). They define pragmatic as meaning that conduct will be tempered by the reality of what will make a difference. These attitudes reflect individuals who are not “held hostage by guilt” (p. 141). The degree to which they are involved with activities to promote social change ranges from passive to active.

Although there seem to be some similarities between the Integrative stage and Autonomy, the last status of WRIAT, the differences are worth examining. The Autonomy status of White racial identity theory is characterized by attitudes reflecting an active involvement in social change and a realization of the benefits one has been entitled to being White in this country. However, individuals who hold Autonomy attitudes would not be characterized as being held hostage by guilt. Instead, they would be characterized as individuals who would be actively committed to pursuing social change.

Although we encourage people to investigate these distinctions empirically, we find the content of this type of White racial consciousness somewhat disturbing. It seems to imply that an individual characterized by a healthy White identity could be seen as being passive and free of guilt with regard to racial/ethnic issues and simply be content with the status quo in this country, suggesting that he or she would be a supporter of a racist society. It is worth noting that the highest level of WRIAT, Autonomy, has been empirically related to adjustment variables such as self-actualization (Tokar & Swanson, 1991).

## THEORETICAL BASIS

When reading Rowe et al.'s (1994) White racial consciousness model, we were surprised that some of the basic notions criticized in WRIAT were used in their proposed alternative model. For example, although Rowe et al. (1994) criticized the developmental nature of Helms's White racial identity theory, they base their new model on a developmental stage theory. The basis of the White racial consciousness model is Phinney's (1989) developmental stage model of ethnic identity in adolescents. Rowe et al. (1994) implied that although their model is based on a stage model, it is not a "stage" model because they renamed the stages developed by Phinney (1989) and called them "types." This does not get around the issue Rowe et al. (1994) themselves raised about the inappropriateness of using a development stage theory as a basis to explain White identity. This suggests that the fundamental basis for the WRC model suffers from the same problems they criticize in WRIAT. It is of note that recent revisions of WRIAT have reframed the theory in terms of statuses and levels rather than stages, eliminating the notion of linear sequences in stages (Helms & Piper, 1994).

Rowe et al. (1994) incorrectly criticized Helms's WRIAT as being based on models of minority development (Thompson, 1994), and they correctly noted the differences between the identity development of nonoppressed groups and oppressed groups. Helms's theory of White identity is not based on minority identity development but instead on culture shock theory, which is decidedly distinct from minority identity development. In fact, Helms (1984) noted that "because Whites are the dominant race in this country, they can choose environments that permit them to remain fixated at a particular stage of racial consciousness" (p. 155). Because this option is not available to visible racial ethnic group members, she recognized that the racial identity process was distinctly different for Whites and visible racial ethnic group members.

We were, therefore, surprised that Rowe et al. (1994) based their WRC model on a model of ethnic identity development (Phinney, 1989). The process by which an adolescent develops an ethnic identity seems to us to be similar to minority identity development in that the type of ethnic identity that Phinney (1989) is referring to is in most cases an ethnic identity that is not the identity of the majority. Thus, when an individual who is Jewish develops an ethnic identity, it is in the context of differentiating one's own Jewish identity from the majority group. The process of ethnic identity development, which is the basis of WRC, seems to us to be much more similar to minority identity development than does culture shock theory, which is the basis of WRIAT.

To explain how individuals move between the types, Rowe et al. (1994) relied on dissonance theory. However, only a brief explanation of the role of dissonance theory in movement between types is provided. The authors state that movement between types of White racial consciousness occurs when individuals' experiences cause dissonance in their cognitive structure. That dissonance then is resolved by movement to another type of racial attitudes. The assumption here is that holding dissonant attitudes will lead to a change in attitudes. In fact, there is empirical evidence to the contrary. It has been demonstrated that many Whites do hold dissonant attitudes about Blacks for indefinite periods of time (Hass, Katz, Rizzo, Bailey, & Eisenstadt, 1991). According to the concept of racial ambivalence, Whites hold egalitarian and individualistic values that result in both very positive and very negative attitudes toward Blacks, simultaneously. Therefore, holding dissonant attitudes toward minorities does not necessitate attitude change. Dissonant attitudes can and do simultaneously exit for long periods of time.

Furthermore, as an explanation for movement between types, dissonance theory does not seem to be completely appropriate for the WRC framework. Dissonance theory is not a theory of attitudes but a theory of attitudinal and behavioral consistency (Festinger, 1957). Thus, according to dissonance theory, if people do hold dissonant attitudes, they may resolve the situation by changing their attitudes, by changing their behavior, or by changing the context or their environment. Because WRC is a theory that deals strictly with attitudes, not behaviors or feelings, WRC does not allow for the mechanisms of changing behaviors or changing contexts in response to dissonant attitudes. Thus WRC does not seem to encompass the necessary components to account for attitude change according to dissonance theory. In WRIAT, the mechanisms for movement between statuses are more consistent with dissonance theory in that WRIAT encompasses attitudes and behaviors. For example, as pointed out by Helms (1990), when individuals move from Disintegration to Reintegration, an individual can resolve dissonance via changing contexts, behaviors, or attitudes.

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

There is a great deal of empirical evidence that is supportive of WRIAT that is overlooked by Rowe et al. (1994) when they concluded that "independent empirical evaluation has not been supportive" (p. 133). White racial identity attitudes have been shown to be related to a number of constructs including cultural value-orientations (Carter & Helms, 1990), self-actualization and psychosocial development (Taub & McEwen 1992; Tokar & Swanson, 1991),

preferences for Black and White counselors (Helms & Carter, 1991), comfort with Black individuals (Claney & Parker, 1988), reactions toward interracial situations in the workplace (Block, Roberson & Neuger, 1995), hiring evaluations of Black and White applicants (Block & Carter, 1992), work values (Carter, Gushue, Weitzman, 1994), and racism (Carter, 1990; Pope-Davis & Ottavi, 1992; 1994). Each of these studies demonstrated empirical support for the propositions of White racial identity theory, and many of these studies were not conducted by researchers identified with the development of WRIAT. The basis for Rowe et al.'s (1994) conclusion is 2 studies which raise questions as to the validity and reliability of the White racial identity attitude scale (Tokar & Swanson, 1991; Bennett, Behrens & Rowe, 1993). It is of note that although Tokar and Swanson (1991) did raise questions as to the psychometric properties of the White racial identity attitude scale, they did find that higher levels of racial identity attitudes were related to self-actualization, thus supporting WRIAT.

Nevertheless, questions have been raised regarding the psychometric properties of the White Racial Identity Attitude Scale (WRIAS). Much has been written about this issue and the specifics of this debate are beyond the scope of this article; however, the interested reader is referred to Helms (in press); Carter (in press); and Swanson, Tokar, and Davis (1994) for a detailed treatment of this issue. Whereas some studies have found reliability estimates that are comparable to other psychological identity inventories (Helms & Carter, 1991; Swanson et al., 1994; Tokar & Swanson, 1991), other studies have found some subscale reliabilities to be somewhat low (Block et al., 1995; Ottavi, Pope-Davis, & Dings, 1994) and subscale intercorrelations to be high (Tokar & Swanson, 1991). In addition, some researchers have found via factor analysis of the items (Swanson et al., 1994) and via cluster analysis of the subscales (Carter, in press) that the two phases of racial identity seem to be easier to differentiate psychometrically than the five stages. Nevertheless, other researchers have found that the subscales do differentially predict various criteria (e.g., Block et al., 1995; Carter et al., 1994). In an effort to shed light on these conflicting results, Helms (in press) discusses the potential influence of sample characteristics on reliability estimates. Carter (in press) suggests that because of sample characteristics, the use of raw scores may be problematic and suggests using normed scores instead. Also, Helms (in press) suggests the use of alternative forms of psychometric analysis, such as multidimensional scaling. Although techniques for better assessing White racial identity attitudes are currently being developed (Carter, in press; Helms, in press), we do not believe that the existing empirical evidence provides appropriate grounds to dismiss WRIAT and the body of literature that supports it.



Rowe et al. (1994) stated that WRC is a better alternative because it can "describe the phenomena more accurately, predict relationships better, and provide a more stable base for assessment" (p. 133). It is surprising that no data are provided to support any of these claims. The reader is left to presume that this must be the case simply on the basis of their description of WRC. We do not agree with this conclusion after reviewing the theoretical development, definitions of core constructs, and the available empirical evidence of both the WRC model and Helms's WRIAT. In evaluating the usefulness of a theory, logic alone is insufficient. In his discussion of the role of theory in psychology, Marx (1976) stated that "logical tests are of limited utility with regard to primarily empirical propositions of natural science, including psychology" (p. 256).

Is there enough evidence to abandon research on White racial identity attitude theory in favor of the new theory of White racial consciousness? Is WRC different enough to warrant attention as a new model of White racial attitudes? The domain of both WRC and WRIAT is how an individual views the self and other racial groups. The content of the attitudes reflected in the given models is also highly similar, as is noted by the WRC authors. Like WRIAT, WRC has its roots in a developmental identity theory of racial attitudes. Although we have been critical of WRC as a replacement for WRIAT, we do not at all mean to imply that future research regarding White racial attitudes is not needed. In fact, it is needed. WRIAT is a theory that is evolving on the basis of empirical evidence.

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