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● COMMENT

Helms's White Racial Identity Development (WRID) Theory: Another Look

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In a recent issue of *The Counseling Psychologist*, Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson (1994) criticized White racial identity development (WRID) conceptualizations as "(a) being based on the oppression-adaptive models of minority identity development; (b) focusing primarily on attitudes toward racial/ethnic minority outgroups, not on White identity attitudes; and (c) depicting the process as developmental in nature" (p. 144). Because of its popularity in the empirical literature relative to other WRID conceptualizations, Helms's (1990) WRID theory was frequently cited in the article.

I found the criticisms leveled against Helms's (1990) WRID theory to be based on misrepresentations of this theory and, therefore, unsubstantiated. The purpose of this reaction is to correct the above-cited misrepresentations and to propose some guidelines for further research of this theory.

A CLARIFICATION OF HELMS'S WRID THEORY

Rowe et al. (1994) criticized WRID models as being similar to models that reflect the development that oppressed groups experience. A careful reading of Helms's (1990) descriptions of the WRID and the Black racial identity development (BRID) theories reveals that both the characteristics of White and Black racial identity development stages and also the process through which the two groups experience moving between stages are quite different qualitatively. These differences are much too extensive to describe here; however, one example of this dissimilarity resides in her descriptions of how Blacks and Whites develop a healthy racial identity. In the four-stage BRID theory, the primary challenge is for Black persons to come to terms with their Blackness against the backdrop of a racially oppressive milieu. In the six-stage WRID theory, the challenge is twofold: to abandon racism and eventually to construct a positive nonracist White identity (Helms, 1990).

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Some similarities do exist between the two theories. Helms's reason for creating the WRID theory was to complement the BRID theory and to allow for a parsimonious elaboration of her Black and White interactional model (Helms, 1984, 1990). Consequently, the stages of the WRID theory were devised, in part, to approximate similarities between Whites' attitudes toward Blacks and Blacks' attitudes toward Whites (e.g., Blacks in the Immersion-Emersion stage are anti-White/pro-Black and Whites in the Reintegration stage are anti-Black/pro-White). Still, the differential quality of the two theories is clearly evidenced in her writings and takes into serious account the differential impact of race, racism, and White privilege on the lives of Whites and Blacks.

The authors also stated that WRID conceptualizations emphasize Whites' interactions with and attitudes toward non-Whites rather than Whites' identity development as racial beings. However, Helms (1990) clearly stated that, in addition to developing a nonracist identity, the White person "*must* [italics added] accept his or her Whiteness, the cultural implications of being White, and define a view of Self as a racial being that does not depend on the perceived superiority of one racial group over another" (p. 49). These two features of her theory are closely intertwined. In many if not most cases, Whites become aware of their selves as White people after having been exposed, directly or indirectly, to non-Whites (and in the case of Helms's theory, Black people). In contrast, Blacks may first become aware of themselves as Black people as a result of learning about their African or African American ancestry.

DOES HELMS'S WRID THEORY QUALIFY AS A DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY?

Rowe et al. (1994) stated that they reject the notion that WRID is developmental in nature because these models fail to conform to certain developmental theory criteria. The following is a reexamination of Helms's WRID theory based on five characteristics that are typically used as criteria against which theories can be evaluated for their developmental adequacy (Green, 1989). These characteristics are (a) temporality, (b) cumulativeness, (c) directionality, (d) new mode of organization, and (e) increased capacity for self-control.

Temporality means that changes tend to occur over time, whereas *cumulativeness* means that "developmental changes result in the addition of some new feature(s) to the organism: first one thing, then another is required" (Green, 1989, p. 15). These two characteristics imply that the process of

change is typically slow and permanent. Rowe et al.'s (1994) dismissal of the WRID stages as being relatively stable is based partially on their evaluation that changes in racial identity are easily susceptible to changes in social or racial climate. They state, "social conditions at any given point in time might create what appears to be a developmental process, where large numbers of people move from one type to another, but different social conditions can create a reverse movement" (p. 142). Helms (1990) stated that movement between the racial identity stages is influenced by a confluence of factors, including environmental, maturational (i.e., cognitive), and conative forces. Catalysts that invoke movement from one stage to the next need to be powerful, but these prompts are not meaningful for the unready. Moreover, that social/racial movements—dramatic episodes in American history—can contribute to creating changes in Whites' racial identity stages illustrates in part the forcefulness needed to spark this type of progression. This forceful quality seems to be diametric to the notion that changes in racial identity are unstable.

It is also important to add that much of what could be perceived as relatively permanent changes in Whites' racial identity stages may instead be changes in behaviors. Using Rowe et al.'s (1994) example of the fluctuations that occur in Ku Klux Klan membership that parallel shifts in racial climate, it is likely that some Whites merely move to act on their existing racist (Reintegration) beliefs in response to what might have appeared to be evidence of some threat to their privileged status. Similarly, some Whites may feel pressured to be "politically correct" (a code term for appearing nonracist), whereas, in actuality, their beliefs toward oppressed groups do not reflect a genuine understanding of why a nonracist persona is desirable to their personal situation or to society as a whole. Researchers who attempt to "diagnose" the racial identity stages of Whites will need to consider these climatic issues.

Directionality suggests that developmental changes are progressive, relatively durable, and irreversible. The main point here is that changes are relatively irreversible and, therefore, cannot be undone. Consequently, to return to an earlier WRID stage is actually impossible. In my extensive reading of Helms's works, at no time does she imply that persons either move backwards or skip stages as Rowe et al. (1994) asserted (in fact, Helms [1990] described the progression as epigenetic). On the issue of the relatively stable linear process, Helms (1990) states:

To address the theoretical issue of whether racial identity does proceed according to a relatively stable linear process, longitudinal studies of racial identity development . . . are needed. Since such studies do not exist currently, resolution of this theoretical issue must probably await the birth of such studies. (p. 41)

As of this writing and to this author's knowledge, there are still no published longitudinal studies of WRID theory.

New mode of organization relates to the issue of directionality and implies the emergence of new phenomena and new properties not manifested in previous states. Rowe et al. (1994) argued that because Helms's (1990) WRID theory fails to conform to the concept of linearity its acceptability as a stagewise progression should be questioned. However, some argue that linearity need not be a necessary ingredient to developmental models. Green (1989) established that this continuity-discontinuity debate has occupied some attention in the annals of developmental psychology. Because this is an unresolved criterion, the failure of Helms's WRID theory to conform to the concept of linearity appears to be insufficient cause for dismissing it as a developmental theory.

Of note, adherents of *developmental structuralism* believe not only in a stage theoretical position but also in such ideas as discontinuity and emergent properties of structures (Overton, 1976). These adherents advocate that researchers look at the relatively stable patterns or structures of activities within organisms as well as the role of environmental structures. I believe that this position is significant in that it supports the need for serious, systematic study of racism and its impact on racial identity development theory (e.g., stage fixation). Undoubtedly, such inquiries would pose serious, although not necessarily insurmountable, challenges for future researchers. It is noteworthy that the kinds of challenges to be faced in conducting racial identity development research are particularly fitting for counseling psychology researchers whose lines of inquiry focus principally on the psychological functioning of individuals in the context of their environment.

Green's (1989) final characteristic, *increased capacity for self-control*, implies that as people develop they become more proactive and less reactive, thereby increasing their capacity for self-control. Green explains that "it implies some mechanism that anticipates the consequences of a particular activity, adjusts the activity to the expected outcome, initiates the activity, monitors the consequences of a particular activity, and continuously readjusts the activity to achieve planned consequences" (p. 18). The advanced stage of Helms's (1990) model connotes that not only is one liberated in one's way of thinking about racial issues but also that one has the capacity to perceive one's environment with greater accuracy and to rely less on distorted cues perpetuated by the media and other people (irrespective of race). This quality of attaining a level of increased capacity for self-control seems to support Helms's proposed progression of these stages. This progression can also be seen as one leading to good mental health if one were to view healthy

psychological functioning as the ability to function proactively in a "sick" society (Smith, 1985).

CONCLUSION

Rowe et al.'s (1994) characterization of Helms's (1990) WRID theory was erroneous; consequently, their evaluation of this theory was without sufficient grounds. Given the recency of the various WRID theories/models in the psychological literature, there is little question that more research is needed. For example, one important area of research is to explore how Whites' racism toward Blacks (and relatedly, how Whites progress toward a nonracist worldview) may be qualitatively dissimilar to Whites' racism toward other historically oppressed racial/ethnic groups to which they have been primarily exposed. Findings from such lines of inquiry would be valuable in determining if these existing WRID theories are indeed "limiting" as the authors proposed in their article.

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