

● COMMENT

**Misrepresentation and Interpretation:  
Critical Evaluation of White Racial  
Identity Development Models**

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Recently, Thompson (1994) offered a spirited, yet scholarly, reaction to our (Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994) statement of concerns about White racial identity development (WRID) models. We were gratified to see her comment published in *TCP* because we believe that critical discussion of the attributes and implications of WRID models is needed if theory in this area is to be advanced. Psychological theory is, after all, reasoned speculation about human behavior, and we believe that WRID theory as it is evolving has several potential shortcomings that need to be critically examined before they become part of our accepted body of knowledge.

In reacting to our earlier critique of WRID models, Thompson (1994) suggested that we misrepresented Helms's WRID theory, and she focused her reaction to our article on a defense of the Helms model. We would like to reemphasize that our original comments were directed toward WRID models in general and that we used Helms's theory as a specific example only because it is widely referred to in the current counseling literature. Although we were not predisposed to single out this particular WRID theory, in responding to Thompson's charge of misrepresentation we find it necessary to comment further on the Helms model. We do not think that we have misrepresented Helms's ideas about WRID, although it is clear that we share a different perception of their implications and merit.

At issue are the three concerns about WRID models that we (Rowe et al., 1994) discussed: (a) "that the conceptualization of White racial identity development as a process parallel to minority identity development is not merited" (p. 131), (b) that WRID models "mainly describe how Whites develop different levels of sensitivity to and appreciation of other racial/ethnic groups . . . but little about a White identity" (p. 131), and (c) that a

“major problem has to do with the conceptualization of WRID models as developmental stage models” (p. 132).

In regard to the first, Thompson (1994) refers to “Helms’s (1990) descriptions of the WRID and the Black racial identity development (BRID) theories” (p. 645) and concludes that they “are quite different qualitatively” but that “[s]ome similarities do exist” (p. 646). Although Thompson is correct, we simply stated that Helms’s 1984 model resembled the oppression-adaptive minority identity models whose common features we had listed on page 130, and we then listed her stages to illustrate the resemblance. We still stand by this comparison.

Second, our point was that WRID models are short on “attitudes toward their racial-group membership” (Carter & Helms, 1990, p. 105) and long on attitudes toward non-Whites. Regardless of Helms’s (1990) admonition that a White person “must accept his or her own Whiteness” (p. 49), which was quoted by Thompson (1994) in rebutting us, the fact remains that in the descriptions of the White identity stages (now statuses) that follow, little attention was devoted to White attributes, other than attitudes toward non-Whites.

Although the descriptions of the Contact and Disintegration stages focus almost exclusively on attitudes toward Blacks, in the Reintegration stage a person consciously acknowledges a White identity—namely, “that one is superior to people of color” (Helms, 1990, p. 60). In the Pseudo-Independent stage, a positive White identity is redefined by acknowledging the responsibility of Whites for racism and by forming an “intellectual acceptance and curiosity about Blacks” (p. 61). In the Immersion/Emersion stage, one seeks information to replace myths and stereotypes and “the goal of changing White people becomes salient” (p. 62). In the final stage, people apply “the new definition of Whiteness evolved in the earlier stages” by refraining from racist behavior and being “continually open to new information and new ways of thinking about racial and cultural variables” (p. 66).

To us, this says little about development of reference-group membership and a lot about attitudes toward non-Whites. Perhaps this should not be unexpected because it has been argued that White culture, and consequently “Whiteness,” in America is often seen as lacking its own definition yet functioning as a norm that is used simply “as a point of reference for the measuring of others” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 197). We believe that with only the most rudimentary conception of “Whiteness” available to us at the present time, it seems ill advised to pursue formulations of WRID in a manner similar to racial/ethnic identity models.

Last, are WRID models best conceptualized as developmental stage models? Thompson (1994) listed five criteria (from Green, 1989) with which

we have no problem. Our reservation concerning viewing White racial identity as a developmental process, however, is related to satisfying two of the criteria: cumulativeness, that one thing builds on another; and directionality, that changes are in a predictable direction. In our article, we questioned the usefulness of a developmental perspective when many exceptions to the usual order of progression through WRID stages, including forward, backward, and fixation, are anticipated.

However, these issues may be moot in light of Helms's (in press) recent elaboration of WRID. According to this formulation, racial identity statuses (formerly called stages) are assumed to develop sequentially. Earlier or more primitive statuses, however, are said to leave an influence on subsequent statuses so that any available status may govern a person's reaction to a situation, depending on factors that determine its dominance. In terms of explanatory constructs, this seems to meet the concerns related to a developmental conceptualization cited above. The question remains whether the hypothesized entities and mechanisms can be validated using the methods of scientific psychology (Rowe, Behrens, & Leach, in press).

Some readers may not agree with our concern about these issues and may be satisfied with the current conceptualization of WRID models, the amount of attention they give to White identity per se, and their use of a developmental frame of reference. However, the reason we raised these issues was to encourage the critical evaluation of WRID models. Many questions, including some very fundamental ones, need to be addressed.

Precisely what is meant by White racial identity? How is White racial identity development related to or grounded in theories of human development? How is White racial identity different from racial/ethnic identity? Is there any benefit in using a higher level abstraction such as racial identity, rather than racial attitudes, when the cost is to remove the construct further from the data and to lengthen the inferential chain? In our opinion, this area of inquiry has been marked by a surprising degree of uncritical acceptance of both the speculative models that have been proposed (see Rowe et al., 1994) and the instruments that have been developed to assess dimensions of the models (Rowe et al., in press).

As a means of challenging current WRID theories, we presented several concerns and described an alternative explanation of White racial attitudes and behaviors that is not developmentally based and that we believe is at least as defensible as the WRID models that have been presented until now. In addition, the Oklahoma Racial Attitudes Scale-Preliminary Form (ORAS-P; Choney & Behrens, in press) has been developed to assess the attitudes proposed by this alternative paradigm. We encourage others to join in exploring the area of White racial consciousness. For further information

regarding the ORAS-P or related matters, please contact John Behrens, Division of Psychology in Education, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-0611 or Mark Leach, Department of Psychology, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-5025.

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