

# White Racial Identity Development

**Ali Michael**

I remember sitting in an African American literature course, hearing the words “White supremacy” and “White savior complex” and feeling the color drain from my face. “Are they talking about me?” I wondered. I didn’t really know what these words meant, and I had never really thought about the fact that I was White. I grew up thinking I should be colorblind, that I shouldn’t talk about race, that racism was a thing of the past. Personally, I had thought of myself as “normal” or as a woman, but not really as “White.” I knew a little about racism, and I thought of it as something that affected Black people—not something that impacted me.

Later in college, I studied abroad in South Africa, I lived with a Black South African family, and, as I learned about the gruesome details of apartheid, I became highly critical of White people—especially White South Africans. The critique permeated my own sense of self and I started to become uncomfortable with my own Whiteness. I started dressing more ethnically African, I shaved my head, I started to learn Xhosa. I was doing my best to somehow shed my own Whiteness and be something else, something less harmful to the world.

A few years later, living in New York City, my hair had started growing back in, and I stopped trying to be someone I wasn’t. But I still felt tremendous guilt for all the ways that my family and I had benefited from laws and policies that gave us access to jobs, education, medical care, and political agency—at the expense of people of

color. I felt like this guilt was somehow my penance for the wrongs of the past—and that my guilt could heal the world. Clearly, I hadn't thought this through to its logical conclusion. Essentially, I thought the goal of racial justice was to create a world full of White people who feel bad about being White. It never occurred to me how pointless that would be.

Then one day, I read a book by a Black psychologist named Janet Helms, PhD, called, *A Race Is a Nice Thing to Have: A Guide to Being a White Person or Understanding the White Person in Your Life*. As I read this book, I began to recognize these different moments in my identity development as phases—phases that many White people go through as they learn about racism. And the most liberating part of this notion of phases was that I still had not gone through all of them. Helms suggested the radical notion that guilt is not actually the ultimate goal for White people who strive for racial justice. In fact, the end goal of racial justice is the kind of “beloved community” proposed by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1957), and further conceptualized by scholar bell hooks (1995), who wrote:

Like all *beloved communities* we affirm our differences. It is this generous spirit of affirmation that gives us the courage to challenge one another, to work through misunderstandings, especially those that have to do with race and racism. In a *beloved community* solidarity and trust are grounded in profound commitment to a shared vision. Those of us who are always anti-racist long for a world in which everyone can form a *beloved community* where borders can be crossed and cultural hybridity celebrated. Anyone can begin to make such a community by truly seeking to live in an anti-racist world (hooks, p. 272).

This was an epiphany for me. If love was really the goal, if beloved community through an end to unjust and oppressive structures was really the goal, how was my guilt going to help us get there? My guilt didn't make me more loving or more effective. It rendered me silent, unsure how to act, tentative in relationships across racial difference, sensitive to critical feedback, fearful of making a mistake, and paranoid that everyone might think I'm racist. Not to mention the fact that it made me relatively unpleasant to be around and uniformly unsupportive of other White people who had questions, doubts, or insecurities about race.

White racial identity development theory changed the whole game for me. I stopped trying to feel guilty and make others feel guilty. I started to look at how I could be proactive. Over time, I was able to return again and again to this framework to see where I was in my process and how I needed to grow in order to truly be an instrument for racial justice, and not just a guilty White person *or* a know-it-all White person *or* an activist White person who thinks my way of doing this

is the best way, better even than the people of color who I'm supposedly allying myself with (all phases I know well, because I've been through them). The phases have been a guide for me in setting my developmental trajectory and seeing if I'm meeting it. They have also helped me cope, when I'm discouraged or sad—or even guilty or ashamed of my thoughts or actions—to remind myself that I'm simply in a phase and to push myself to keep moving through it, rather than get stuck there.

I currently work with classroom teachers almost every day. In my experience, White teachers fall into certain patterns with Black boys—and with Black colleagues—that are connected to their racial identity development. In the following paragraphs, I will describe the six original phases first outlined by Helms, as well as the ways that these phases typically manifest in the classrooms of White teachers. While Helms's phases were originally written in the context of relationships with people of color in general, I will use Black boys and their families as the reference point here because that is the group we are addressing in this book.

The phases most commonly cited<sup>1</sup> are as follows:

*Contact:* This is the first time a person has *contact* with the notion of racism, after years—sometimes a lifetime—of believing the world is fair and that racism doesn't really impact people's lives. In this phase, one's definition of racism is limited to individual acts of meanness, one believes that all people have equal opportunities regardless of race, and one has only superficial relationships with people of color, if any.

In schools, I often meet White teachers in the *Contact* phase who believe that it's better not to see color, who see racial difference as a bad thing, rather than a part of who they and their students are. They might whisper the word *Black* or preempt a description of a Black person with qualifiers (i.e., He's this really amazing, well-spoken, total teddy bear of a Black man), as if they are afraid that the descriptor *Black* on its own is an insult. Teachers in contact phase might quickly shut down conversations about race, whether those conversations are among students who want to talk about current events or among colleagues who are trying to diversify the faculty. These conversations make them uncomfortable, and they are generally unable to make the important differentiation between conversations about race that perpetuate racism, on the one hand, and those that confront or otherwise seek to dismantle racism on the other.

*Disintegration:* *Disintegration* is a phase in which part of the foundation of what a person knows literally begins to disintegrate because the reality of racism is so

---

<sup>1</sup> First by Helms, and then more popularly by Beverly Daniel Tatum in *Why Are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*

different from the foundation of what they were taught (i.e., if a person was taught that the world is fair and that everyone had equal opportunity, the realization of historical racial discriminatory practices that may have benefitted their family for being White could be disorienting and could appear to discount the hard work that person's family contributed to their own success). After having contact with the reality of racism, people begin to question the foundation of their beliefs about the world and feel torn between different realities, different racial ideologies. Friends and colleagues might have a much greater awareness of racism than they do, whereas family and friends they are intimately connected to might not understand any of it. There's a lot of guilt and sadness in this phase as people become more and more aware of racism and racial privilege but still feel confused and conflicted about it.

When I meet teachers who have a lot of questions, who seem particularly emotionally torn up by discussions of racism, or who play the devil's advocate a lot, I often figure that they might be in the disintegration phase and that they probably need (1) to keep learning more and (2) to get support in answering questions posed to them by family and friends. Their need to play the devil's advocate is often coming from an inability to bridge their two worlds and a desire to find the language to explain things to others at home.

*Reintegration:* This phase is regressive. It comes about because it can be so hard when their foundation is rocked or disintegrates that people simply start to try to *reintegrate* their understandings of the world as it was before they started to see the stark realities of racism. In this phase, people try to avoid the feelings of guilt and shame by turning them outward and transforming them into hostility and anger. People in this phase blame people of color for racialized problems, suggesting that it's individual inferiority that causes disproportionate poverty in Black communities, not centuries of laws and policies that prevented Black people from having access to education, employment, and the housing market. People in this phase believe that to be White is to be wrong when it comes to conversations about race, and they often fear people of color while ridiculing White people who try to be racially conscious.

I recognize this phase in White teachers when they hesitate to call a Black parent, because they are scared of conflict. They may struggle to see parents of color—and colleagues of color—as equal partners in the education of students of color. They may not greet Black families or colleagues because the interaction raises anxiety in them as they start to realize that they too are raced, that they are being seen as a White person, and that they have this history of racism between themselves and people of color that they may not have previously acknowledged. A person in this phase might refuse to participate in professional development about racial

or cultural competency, out of a belief that by virtue of being White, everything they say will necessarily be wrong. They will resist attempts to diversify faculty or increase outreach efforts to families of color.

People in this phase (and my own self in this phase) can get in the way of anti-racism efforts in schools (each of us can get in our own way in this phase). Often, people need support to get through this phase. They need to know that they can keep trying and that they have support to keep trying—that nobody is trying to trap them into looking racist, that their own personal struggles with oppression that are connected to their class background, sexuality, or gender, matter too. It can be hard for others to give support to people in this phase because the actions of people in the reintegration phase can be so alienating.

*Pseudo-independence:* In this phase, people start to understand racism but still have an internalized sense of superiority that comes from an internalization of a system of racism that suggests White people—and White ways of doing things—are better than people of color. Although they see racism, they may also believe that if Black people worked harder, or if Black people were more like White people (talked more like White people, dressed more like White people, ran the PTO meetings more like White people), maybe racism wouldn't affect them so much. They may not realize that having to be more like White people in and of itself is a demand for assimilation that is based on a value system that prizes White cultural styles over any other racial or ethnic cultural styles. In this phase, people still tend to *think* about racism much more than they *feel* about it.

People in this phase might see themselves as allies, but others may not see them this way. They want to help Black students and families, but they see themselves as saviors rather than supporters. They still judge Black teachers, Black administrators, and Black families harshly, assuming that they themselves know more about how to help a Black boy grow into a Black man than the Black people in that boy's life. Their presumed competence is often based on their knowledge and prioritization of Whiteness and White ways of being—not knowledge about the assets and struggles of Black people. Teachers who focus on their Black students exclusively, trying to befriend and support them, without also trying to change oppressive structures or other White people, might be in this phase.

*Immersion:* The immersion phase is about immersing oneself in understanding the reality of what it means to be White in a society in which resources and opportunities have historically been—and still often are—distributed unequally along racial lines. It's about working to understand how to be an antiracist White person who takes responsibility for racism and uses racial privilege to work against racism. This phase might involve feelings of guilt and anger, which may be directed toward other White people. It also may involve efforts to join communities of color and

disown one's Whiteness. It involves reading and engaging with ideas about race and Whiteness to try to determine what kind of White person one wants to be.

Teachers engaged in extracurricular reading groups might be in this phase. At this point in their development, White people tend to be so outraged about racism that they are sometimes ineffective at communicating with other White people in a way that would help them understand the source of their outrage. They may assert that because they work in a predominantly Black space, or live in a predominantly Black space, that they somehow have less of a connection to Whiteness or are “less White” than other White people.

*Autonomy:* I have dubbed this “the beloved community” phase. In this phase, White people develop a new, positive antiracist identity in which they are conscious of their racial privilege and use it to take action. White people are then able to work in multiracial coalitions as healthy contributing members, not taking over or unconsciously using privilege to shape the agenda. They seek and accept feedback from people of color, while also thinking for themselves. They value racial diversity beyond the optics, understanding how language, parenting styles, and cultural styles get racialized, and then marginalized, within a society that repeatedly asserts the superiority of White ways of doing things. In this phase, White people are able to move beyond guilt because they understand the ways that racism is both systemic and historically rooted.

In this phase, White teachers will work to change oppressive structures, finding ways to hire more Black teachers, finding ways to connect Black boys and families with resources and opportunity. Rather than trying to change Black boys, they might change systems of evaluation so that Black cultural styles are not denigrated or downgraded. In this phase, White teachers fight all forms of oppression—not just racism—but homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and Islamophobia, too. Teachers in this phase understand how to use their Whiteness strategically—in ways that are not always visible to outsiders. It is likely that Howard Stevenson's drama teacher was in one of these positive phases of identity development when she made the choice to produce *A Raisin in the Sun*, as Howard shared in his vignette earlier in this section. White people in this phase are able to “lean in” to other White people, supporting people in the early phases of identity development to move through those phases. They understand that they themselves are White, and they feel no shame about it—they may even be open to friendly teasing about it. But they know how to use their Whiteness to work against systems that hurt Black boys without having to be recognized as a hero or savior.

These phases do not usually occur for individuals in the same linear way that the theory broadly describes. Like the phases of grief, there's no right way to go through the phases, and everyone goes through them in their own order and on a different

timeline. People often continue to cycle through the phases each time they have contact with a form of racism they didn't previously know or understand, just as people go through the phases of grief each time they experience a loss. It would be ridiculous to say, "I don't need to grieve again because I already went through the stages of grief four years ago." Similarly, people go through these phases again and again as they learn more about racism. But in my experience, I have been able to go through the phases more quickly with new experience. Rather than spending three years feeling guilty for something, I might spend a weekend, or even just a few minutes, before snapping out of it and moving toward understanding and action. Having knowledge of these phases does not necessarily make progression through the phases any easier, but it does take some of the panic out of the process. Rather than wondering, "Why do I feel this way?" I am able to say, "I feel defeated because I'm in the reintegration phase in which White people feel like they can never be right. I'll move through this. I just have to keep learning, keep asking questions, keep listening, get support, and keep connecting."

## ■ ■ Engaging the Mind ★ Taking Action ★ Inspiring Excellence

### Identities at Play

1. Think back to a conflict or an uncomfortable moment that you had recently with a Black boy in your class, a Black colleague, or a Black parent.
2. Consider what phase of identity development you were in before that moment of conflict or awkwardness.
3. Consider what phase of identity development you were in after that moment.
4. Consider what phase the student, parent, or colleague might have been in at that time (see Chapter 18 from Bentley-Edwards et al.).
5. Write an action plan for how you might approach this person again next time you see them, knowing more about the phase of identity development you might have been in during your interaction, and knowing what phase of identity development they might have been in at that time.

*For many White people, the "r"-word can be terrifying. Many teachers have experienced it, and many of those who haven't fear it. For many, the word is the end of a conversation. And often the blame for the shutdown of the conversation gets placed on the accuser, the one who wields the "r"-word. But, having read what we've read*

at this point in the book about the common patterns White women exhibit (from Julie Landsman) and the unconscious bias that is so ever-present in most of our unconscious thoughts (Diane Finnerty), it seems very possible that, despite their best intentions, many teachers still act in ways that evoke the “r”-word in the minds of Black students and parents. And Dr. Elizabeth Denevi asks, in this compelling piece, what if that’s the beginning of the conversation—rather than the end? The key to this inquiry is really about the teacher—not the bearer of the word. It’s an inflammatory word, yes. But sometimes it’s the best a parent or a student can do, given the feelings they’re feeling. And as teachers, we have the choice to let it open us up to something we didn’t see before or to close us down.