

Personal Cultural Analysis and Identity Development

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine my personal racial, cultural identity development. I will accomplish this by answering four important research questions. These research questions are listed below:

1. *To what extent do you regularly interact with members of other diverse groups different from your own? Furthermore, consider if these interactions occur professionally, socially, and/or religiously.*
2. *How and when did you first come to understand that racism/discrimination/sexism existed and what did you learn from that experience? Also, place yourself along the continuum of the racial/cultural development model that currently best applies to you.*
3. *What were your parents and family's advice/suggestions about people from different religions, races, ethnicities, physical abilities, sexual orientation, etc.? How do you think this impacted your racial/cultural identity development at the time of these comments, and how do these comments/memories currently affect your racial/cultural identity development?*
4. *What, in your own words and with the benefit of theory and practice grounded in the literature, is the relationship between your current racial/cultural identity development and your ability to be an effective counselor (think particularly about your specific track)*

The first question examines my current level of interaction with individuals from groups different from my own. The second examines how the process of ethnic, cultural and discriminatory awareness developed in my life. It also seeks to identify the current state of my personal racial cultural identity development. The third examines the influence of advice offered by my parents upon my beliefs and attitudes about people from other religions, races, ethnicities, physical abilities and sexual orientation. The fourth and final question examines the relationship between my current racial cultural identity development and my ability to be an effective counselor. It is my intention to answer these questions from my own experience, while applying two current and relevant racial identity development theories, grounded in literature, to my own unique process of racial cultural identity development.

Results

1. Interaction with “others”

I would say that my current level of relational involvement with individuals with ethnicities different than my own is low but consistent. As a youth pastor in a predominantly white congregation, it has been a goal of mine to develop a network of relationships with individuals of different ethnicities and partnerships with organizations that work to serve minority communities. One such partnership is my volunteer service with Clubs in the City, which is based in downtown Raleigh, NC. Clubs in the City seeks to develop relationships with children, teens and their families in predominantly African American, low SES neighborhoods in order to provide opportunities for the development of life skills. I am privileged to teach an art class for their art club. My aim during every session is to teach one simple art technique, which then becomes an object lesson from which I facilitate a conversation about character and spiritual development. I teach this class every other Saturday during the school year, and I often invite students from my church to assist in that process.

Another example of my involvement with individuals from different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds is regular volunteer service at With Love From Jesus, a local food pantry, located in south Raleigh. Their mission is to provide basic needs to low SES individuals regardless of ethnic or cultural background. They receive the food and household good they offer strictly by donation from churches and charitable organizations. The patrons of With Love from Jesus are extremely diverse. Based solely on my personal observation, the predominant ethnicities represented are African American, Latino/a and Caucasian respectively. There are also many people of Asian descent. I serve at With Love From Jesus once every other month on average.

I am not content with my current level of relational involvement with members of different ethnicities. I am actively pursuing relationships with individuals and partnerships with

organizations that will place me in close contact with African American families as well as Latino/a families. With regard to personal relationships, I have two friendships in particular with African American men that are, and will continue to be very significant. The first is with Byron McMillan. He works for an organization called “Jobs 4 Life” in downtown Raleigh that is primarily interested in community development. They seek to prepare men and women for achieving their goal for gainful employment. Their target audiences are the unemployed and or underemployed minorities. He has become a great friend and is helping me navigate the cross cultural ministry challenges that are unique to Raleigh. The second is with P.J. Ogbedeagu. He is a young African American man, who recently has begun attending our predominantly white church. I met him because I was drawn to the comic book imagery on his T-shirt. We both have a passion for comic books and superheroes, so we became fast friends. As a youth pastor I am charged with modeling the character and behavior of a disciple of Jesus for the teenagers and families that I serve. Jesus’ passion for the “other” and for the marginalized, the oppressed and the impoverished is very clearly documented in the pages of the Gospels. If our congregation desires to engage and serve minority communities, they need learn how to pursue others in relationship who are ethnically different, than themselves. One of the very important ways people learn how to do something is by observation. Our friendship is very significant in the sense that it has begun what I hope becomes a very normal reality and expectation for our congregation.

With regard to pursuing partnerships with organizations, I am currently developing a relationship, which I hope blossoms into a fruitful partnership with the Boys and Girls Club Teen Center in Raleigh, NC. I have recently submitted my application and background check information to become a regular volunteer in their clubs. These clubs consist of predominantly African American and Latino/a children and adolescents and will afford me regular contact with families in both communities.

2. Awareness of “others”

My own personal awareness of racism and discrimination began very early in my life, although I probably would not have been able to articulate it. I grew up in the very impoverished, somewhat integrated neighborhood of Edgemoor Gardens in Wilmington, Delaware. We had white neighbors and we had African American neighbors. Everyone in our neighborhood would have been classified as having low socio-economic status (SES). I remember the unflattering words that were used to describe the African American families in our neighborhood. Those words made me particularly fearful of a family just down the street on the corner of our block. Many derogatory comments were directed at that family.

This may have affected the way I felt about the most memorable person from my early years in elementary. His name was Jamal. He was the only African American child in my grade. I remember feeling incredibly intimidated by him. All I knew was that I didn't like him, and that I was afraid of him. I tried so hard to put on a brave face whenever we had a conflict, which was often, and to appear stronger even though inwardly I was terrified. Recalling these vague memories, I am confident that my fear and dislike of Jamal was simply a way of protecting myself from what was different and from that which I did not understand.

My awareness grew as I entered middle and high school. One of my passions during these formative years was the game of basketball. My personal hero was Michael Jordan, and I wanted to “be like Mike” just like everyone else. As I began to participate in basketball camps and in school sponsored basketball teams, it became apparent to me that if I was going to prove myself as a basketball player, I was going to have to out play other African American teenagers. To my eyes they seemed faster, quicker, and more agile. This belief was fueled by constant references to the athletic superiority of African American men, and the athletic inferiority of white men. A great cultural example of such a reinforcement is the movie, “White Men Can't Jump,” starring Wesley Snipes and Woody Harrelson. In my mind African American basketball players

were the enemy, only because they represented “the competition.” This perception caused me to experience anxiety when playing against other teams with African Americans on their roster. My false thinking was that, “They are black, therefore they are good players.” I believe this flawed way of thinking about these young men was exacerbated by the reality that I was a member of an all white basketball team, at a predominantly white, private school. I fell prey again to the fear of “otherness,” from that which was different and unknown.

I experienced extraordinary and rapid development of my personal racial and discriminatory awareness when I graduated from high school. The most significant event in my life occurred at RFK stadium in Washington D.C. That venue played host to a movement in the 1990’s called “Promise Keepers.” My father and I were in attendance. The most memorable part of that gathering were the challenging messages from both black and white pastors addressing racial reconciliation within the church. This event changed my life spiritually, as I chose to follow Jesus for the rest of my life and to live as His disciple. It also began my journey in earnest toward racial reconciliation.

Following this life changing event, I began pursuing a very different career path. In 1998, I was accepted to Moody Bible Institute (MBI) in downtown Chicago, Illinois. I moved from the suburbs to the city, and I became immersed in one of the largest, most diverse and segregated cities in the world. It seemed that every nationality, ethnicity, orientation and culture had its own part of the city that was distinct from the “others.” I was eager to engage them all. As a student, we were required to perform “Practical Christian Ministries” (PCM) as part of our course work. These PCM’s, as they were called, were often multi-cultural. I was assigned to serve at the Agape Community Center in south Chicago. The staff was multi cultural, and the teenagers who frequented this ministry were all African American teenagers from the neighborhood. This was a great experience and my comfort level with and understanding of the African American community grew exponentially.

MBI is located at 820 N. LaSalle Blvd. in Chicago. Anyone who knows the recent history of the city understands that this location was directly adjacent to one of the most notorious projects in Chicago called Cabrini Green. This housing project, because of its close vicinity to the campus, was a place frequented by ambitious and idealistic future pastors, missionaries and other ministers. I was certainly among them. I recall a significant relationship I had with a young man named Maurice who lived in Cabrini Green. I met him through the big brother, big sister program facilitated by MBI. As his “big brother” I had many opportunities to visit his home. I had a firsthand look at what real poverty looks like. I remember being somewhat fearful about walking from campus to Maurice’s home, but as time went on, that fear subsided. I never felt threatened. I never was in any danger. I was however very conflicted about the circumstances that Maurice went home to every night, while I walked home to what by comparison was luxurious. The memories of that place and the beautiful, and often friendly faces that greeted me as I walked up those dank, putrid concrete stair cases I will not soon forget.

I have described a variety of “contact” experiences from my personal history in the previous paragraphs. My experiences resonate significantly with a theory put forth by Janet Helms, which is called the Helms White Racial Identity Development Model (Jackson, 2006, p. 394). In this model, Helm’s posits that ethnically white individuals move through six stages or statuses of racial identity development. Those stages are, *contact*, *disintegration*, *reintegration*, *pseudo-independence*, *immersion/emersion* and *autonomy*. These six stages can be divided into two meta processes. Those two meta processes are “(1) the abandonment of racism and (2) defining a non-racist white identity” (Leong, 2008, p. 1381). Indicative of the *contact* stage is an obliviousness toward racism and privilege that is interrupted when confronted with these realities (Jackson, 2006, p. 394). *Disintegration* is the stage in which a white individual becomes aware of their group’s role in maintaining racism resulting in guilt, shame and anger (Jackson, 2006, p. 394). *Reintegration* is the stage in which attempts at justification or avoidance are

made by adopting the view that, “People of color are inferior,” and directing their anger toward people of color (Jackson, 2006, p. 394). *Pseudo-Independence* is the state in which ethnically white individuals “begin to question their previously held racist views” (Jackson, 2006, p. 394). They can no longer believe or behave in a manner that suggests the superiority of the European American ethnicity. This stage can involve naive attempts by white individuals “to change people of color in order to eliminate racism” (Jackson, 2006, p. 394). *Immersion/Emersion* is the stage in which white individuals “grow to be comfortable with and to redefine their racial identity.” Individuals in this stage tend to explore their own ethnic history while focusing more on changing themselves in order to eliminate racism (Jackson, 2006, p. 395). In the final state of autonomy, the ethnically white “internalize a positive and secure racial identity,” after experiencing successful exploration (Jackson, 2006, p. 395).

Based on Helm’s model, it is clear to me retrospectively that in my early childhood I was safely within confines of Helm’s *contact* stage, despite being in a somewhat ethnically diverse neighborhood, and sharing a similar SES upbringing with other children in my neighborhood. Just before middle school, my family moved out of our low SES neighborhood into the suburbs because my father was promoted. It is at this point, I would argue from Helm’s theoretical perspective that I advanced into the *disintegration* and *reintegration* stages. I can recall feelings of shame and guilt related to a perceived change in status, and as I compared this newly perceived status to that of “others.” I also recall thoughts of justification, avoidance and assumption about the apparent “poor choices” African Americans had made which ultimately resulted in their current circumstances.

My racial identity development was quickened during my years in college. I began to question and to wrestle with the issue of racism and the palpable sense of division between white and black Americans. While in college, I had many opportunities to interact with the African American community. These encounters fanned into flame a vision for racial

reconciliation that was born while attending the Promise Keepers event I described above. Because of these interactions, I would argue that I entered into what Helm's would describe as the *pseudo-independent* and the *immersion/emersion* stages. Many of my first attempts to address the problem of racism in relationship with African Americans were indeed, clumsy and naive. My goal was simply and selfishly to convince them that white people weren't all bad. As I matured however, that naivete' disappeared and I came to the conclusion that all I could do was to think about and to behave exceptionally toward African Americans, a proposition that I remain deeply committed to today. It is at this point that I began to redefine my understanding of my own ethnicity and that of "others." My comfort and desire to be in settings that were predominantly African American increased exponentially as I matured. Currently in my personal, social and professional life I am pursuing opportunities to develop meaningful friendships with individuals who are ethnically different from myself, and lasting partnerships with organizations that serve communities that are ethnically different from my own. I am very happy to be in these settings, and I do not experience shame or guilt with regard to my own ethnicity as I once had. For these reasons I would say that I have been for some time, safely within the confines of Helm's stage of *autonomy*.

My experiences also correlate strongly with another theory of racial development put forth by Jean S. Phinney. His theory borrows from Erickson's ego identity development theory, "as operationalized by Marcia (1966, 1980)" (Phinney, 1990, p. 502), which posited four ego identity statuses. Those four statuses are *identity diffusion*, *identity foreclosure*, *identity moratorium* and *identity achievement*. The individual characterized by *identity diffusion* has explored their identity but has not made a commitment to an identity. The individual characterized by *identity foreclosure* has committed to an identity but has not explored their identity. The individual characterized by *identity moratorium* begins exploring their identity and is moving toward commitment to an identity. Finally, the individual characterized by *identity*

achievement has explored, and has made a final commitment to an identity (Phinney, 1990, p. 502).

Based upon Erickson's ego identity development theory, Phinney proposes a three stage, racial identity development theory which is known as *Phinney's Three Stage Ethnic Identity Development Model*. This model is one that was developed for adolescents from all ethnic groups (Jackson, 2006, p. 395). The first of his three stages is the *unexamined ethnic identity*. This stage is "characterized by a lack of exploration and search for ethnic identity." This certainly true and characteristic of me throughout my elementary years.

The second stage is the *ethnic identity search*. This stage begins with a search by an individual for what ethnicity means for them. It is typical for individuals in this stage to attend cultural events in an attempt to learn about the history of their particular ethnicity (Jackson, 2006, p. 395). I would argue that according to Phinney's theoretical perspective, I entered this stage as I left high school and began my college education. I did not attend cultural events peculiar to my own ethnicity, but I recall interactive experiences with individuals at gatherings peculiar to different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. One example I would reference was attending an urban black church service while serving the poor in Washington D.C. during a missions trip with my church. I remember one gentleman I met while serving in a soup kitchen. This African American gentleman became angry with me because he thought I was being patronizing for asking if he would like a glass of water. He was right. It wasn't what I said, it was how I said it, and probably a long history of negative experiences with people who looked like me. I will never forget that very instructive moment in my life.

The third and final stage in Phinney's model is the *achieved ethnic identity*. One reaches this stage after successful exploration, coupled with the resolution of any and all uncertainty, having attained clarity about what one's ethnicity means for them (Jackson, 2006, p. 395). I would argue that according to Phinney's theoretical perspective I arrived at this final

stage shortly after graduating from college. Upon graduation, I joined a non-profit organization called Delaware Youth for Christ, as a Campus Life Club Director. Part of my responsibilities in this position were volunteering at a local high school in order to develop a mutually beneficial partnership. The high school to which I was assigned had a very even distribution of African American and white students. The guidance staff with whom I worked daily was predominantly African American. I enjoyed a fruitful and meaningful relationship with each of them. This experience allowed me to interact on a daily basis with adolescents and adults from the African American community. I experienced no inner conflict about my own ethnicity while discussing potentially sensitive racial issues, and engaged the African American adolescents and staff members with ease and confidence. For these reasons, I am confident that according to Phinney's theoretical perspective, I had arrived at the *achieved ethnic identity* stage.

3. The Effect of Family Advice on my Racial Identity Development

With regard to the effect of advice offered by my parents regarding attitudes toward other ethnicities, cultures, religions and orientations, I can only say that my parents offered very little direct advice. My parents were and continue to be followers of Jesus. They affirmed the belief that all people, regardless of race, culture, orientation or creed are created in the image of God and therefore truly equal. I can't remember a time when this wasn't a core belief of my family. This belief, however sincere, did not motivate our family to intentionally engage members of different ethnicities once we moved out of Edgemoor Gardens, and into the suburbs. We didn't avoid people of color, or people with different beliefs than our own, but we certainly did not engage them in a meaningful or lasting way as a family. This reality led to a passive isolation from individuals who were ethnically different in particular. That could not be said of those who believed differently than our family, however. We had many friends with different religious backgrounds, all of whom were predominantly white.

Race and racism was not a regular topic of conversation around our dinner table. Due to the passive isolation from different ethnicities mentioned above. I also had never experienced overt acts of racism at this point in my life. I do remember covert racist comments and jokes that were shared in jest as we ate supper together and talked about the activities and interactions during that day. Had we been more intentional about engaging individuals in authentic relationship from different races, we might not have found those jokes so funny, or even worth repeating. All that being said, I believe that the passive isolation and subtle racist comments shared in jest produced a covert sense of superiority in my thoughts and attitudes toward other races, particularly African Americans. They contributed to negative stereotypes which I formed over time. These stereotypes were proven to be void of substance and veracity as my thoughts and attitudes matured, and as I gained relational experience with African Americans. They have since been replaced by a new and positive vision of what it means to be African American. I have received this new and positive vision by listening to and observing friends like Byron McMillan, who I mentioned earlier, who exemplify the best qualities of humanity and of what it means to be an African American.

4. The Relationship Between My RCID and Being an Effective Counselor

There is a strong relationship between my racial cultural identity development (RCID) and my ability to be an effective counselor. This strong relationship will be demonstrated in four specific ways. First, as a counselor who has *achieved ethnic identity* according to Phinney, and who has achieved *autonomy* according to Helms, I will be able to model security and confidence in my own ethnic identity, while helping others navigate their own process of RCID. Second, I will be able to identify characteristic overt and covert traits, thoughts and behaviors that serve as markers of one's growth along the continuum of RCID. Third, I will be able to correctly apply the appropriate RCID theory to any client at any stage of RCID. This should help the client gain insight and understanding into their own racial awareness and maturation process. Fourth and

finally, I will be able to empathize and reflect the feelings of client's accurately and sincerely, thus developing a lasting trust and a foundation for an effective counselor/client relationship.

References

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