

Racial Identity Formation for People of Color

*In his landmark book *Shades of Black* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), William Cross describes several predictable stages in the development of Black identity, stages we believe to be similar to the stages of the development of identity for most Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans living in a white-dominated society. There is no particular age range attached to each stage and no expectation that all individuals will move through all stages, though the process typically spans the period from preadolescence to middle adulthood. Building racial identity is an ongoing process that continues over each person's lifespan. Some may stay at a particular stage without change, depending on temperament and life experiences.*

I'm a person of color, but who cares?

(Pre-encounter)

I may have no education about my cultural history, but I am sensitive to discrimination. I believe that white is best, so I experience "spotlight anxiety," or discomfort about being too different from white as the norm. My emphasis is on learning to fit into white culture.

Then along comes racism, right between my eyes.

(Encounter)

An unexpected event occurs that catches me off-guard and forces me to acknowledge racism. It may be a personal event or something that happens in the larger community, such as the conflict in Watts between Koreans and Blacks, or the passage of laws to limit or deny services to my group. The encounter phase has two steps: experiencing an event, and then being "turned around" by it. I begin to think about what it means to be a member of a group assaulted by racism. I feel like a yo-yo swinging between high and low self-esteem. Very personal questions come up which bring on guilt, anger and anxiety. I'm so emotional that it gives me energy to get on to the next stage.

Riding the identity roller coaster

(Immersion/Emerging)

Now, I kick out my old white-is-right view and decide to change. I don't really know how, only that change is needed. There is nothing subtle about this stage. I surround myself with symbols of my culture and seek out opportunities to learn from same-race peers. White people are boring. I don't have any interest in them. I yearn to learn about me and about where I've come from. My focus is on self-discovery. Confrontation,

Racial Identity Formation for White People

In our race-conscious society, where white people receive benefits just for being white, many live out their lives without thinking about their own racial or ethnic identity at all. When a white identity develops, seven stages have been outlined.

Being white doesn't count.

(Preconscious)

How many times in your life have you been asked to answer the question, Who am I? In response, white people who spend their lives in predominantly white environments commonly come up with a list something like this: mother, wife, partner, sister, worker, friend, liberal, middle class, Presbyterian, animal-lover, runner, dreamer, reader, and so on. Being white doesn't count. I tend not to note the qualities that make me part of the majority. In the preconscious stage of white identity development, I see being white as the norm. I notice race only when people are *not* white.

Uh-oh. You mean we're the bad guys?

(Contact)

This stage brings an awareness of white privilege—the invisible advantages held by white people—including me—in life, because our society was designed with our needs in mind. This awareness begins when I have significant contact with a person of color and can't miss seeing how racism operates. I make a close friend or fall in love or watch Rodney King being beaten to a pulp on TV. I feel uncomfortable, guilty, shamed and angry.

I am responsible for educating.

(Disintegration)

At this stage, the blinders have been removed. I begin to see racism everywhere. I get it! I feel outraged and committed to helping other white people get it. I join the Race Police, finding most other white people guilty. "They" are the enemy, I think to myself. My most important daily task, it seems, is to object to racist jokes, exclusions, injustices and institutional policies, objections I usually express in a shrill manner entirely lacking in charm. People I have known all my life tend to run when they see me coming. They wish I would stop it already. The peer pressure mounts, asking me to collude, to shut up and not to notice racism. But it's too late and I can never go back.

for People of Color, cont'd.

bluntness, and an either/or point of view are all I have time for. I just don't understand other people of color who don't live Black or Latino or Asian or Native "enough." Sometimes I think, "Whites are devils," and I want to drop out of the process of getting along with them. Sometimes I get excited about the complex subtleties of racial identity. *The last possibility opens the door to stage four.*

Proud to be me/Inner peace/Fully grown. (Internalization)

Ah-ha! I feel fine, but it's hard to describe why, because it sounds phony—too good to be true. Finding inner peace as a person of color in a society that habitually undervalues my personhood is something huge, a transformation as powerful as the heat of the sun at midday. Dignity and deep relief arrive. A flood of energy to embrace my own heritage at the roots and the security to interact with others from different groups have come together during this stage, because the conflict over wishing to be what I am not or blaming myself for being the target has been resolved. Race has high significance in my life every day. I join new groups, change my style of dress, what I read, my opinions about the role of my group in history. The art and music I respond to, the causes that activate me, maybe even my name. Much that is important in my life changes. *According to Cross, by this stage the following five positive defensive functions have been developed: 1) awareness that racism exists; 2) anticipation of being targeted; 3) well-developed defenses to use when confronted with racism; 4) awareness that the problem is in the circumstances and does not result from the individual self; 5) spiritual orientation that prevents the need to demonize whites.*

Commitment.

In this final stage, I will become able to look beyond myself to develop an ongoing interest in the well-being of my racial community. Great examples of leaders as prominent as Dr. Martin Luther King or as unrecognized as my next-door neighbor model an ability to make a commitment beyond personal needs and maintain humility after success. I hope that I can follow.

for White People, cont'd.

I, too, am in the group. (Reintegration)

Once you notice the elephant in the living room, it's hard to ignore it. When the mist clears, I come to realize that it's not enough to point out what others are doing wrong. I understand that people of color do not perceive me as exempt from my group. I am white; therefore I am under suspicion. This is intense. Why don't they understand that I am not like the rest of "them"? I am beginning to hear that people of color consider my new truths to be old hat, mundane, even obvious. My belief in my own accomplishments is threatened. I start to get angered by the frustration, falling back on blaming the victims: people of color.

Now what do I do? (Pseudo Independence)

I can't get through the living room without bumping into the elephant, but I still don't know what to do about it. I understand white privilege and am shamed by it, but feel overwhelmed at the thought of being responsible for moving that elephant. How did I get to be so white? Why didn't I notice? How can I change all that I am? At this point, I may become a racial wannabe, trying to "pass" as a person of color by taking on some of what I perceive as their cultural characteristics. But that usually doesn't work, and I move cautiously toward a next step.

Finding white pride. (Immersion/Emerging)

The next step is to recognize the need to find positive racial identity for myself, reflecting a developing desire to embrace my own racial and cultural heritage as a source of pride rather than an unconscious element in my life. I seek new ways to think about whiteness, ways that offer options other than either unconscious privilege or the bad-guy role. I begin to seek out white people who have come to a positive understanding of what it is to be white and racially conscious. I seek out support from other white role-models, people who have fought injustice and actively worked against racism.

I am a work in progress. (Autonomy)

Finally, the elephant begins to respond to the sounds of my voice. I feel good about bringing up race within my own circle of influence, because I can begin to see some ways in which I am changing and my changes are affecting lives. Feeling heard releases energy and creates increased zest, a sense of empowerment, greater knowledge, an increased sense of self-worth, and a desire for more connections. I define ways in which I can actively work to interrupt racism while I also understand that there is much more to learn. My goals are to continue to learn more and to identify my personal areas of influence. I often apologize in advance just in case my words or actions may not be sufficiently sensitive to the experiences of people of color. But I genuinely hope to learn from my mistakes. As a result, people of color often view me as an ally.