

## [The Relationship of Racial Identity Attitudes to Autonomy and Mature Interpersonal Relationships in Black and White Undergraduate Women](#)

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### **Abstract:**

Correlations between racial identity attitudes and psychosocial development suggest two separate developmental processes for Black undergraduate women and two similar developmental processes for White undergraduate women.

### **Article:**

Both racial identity and gender differences are receiving increasing attention as important constructs in understanding developmental issues of college students. Sedlacek (1987) in his review of the literature on Black students on White campuses noted the importance of the developing literature on racial identity. McEwen, Roper, Bryant, and Langa (1990), Moore and Upcraft (1990), and Jones (1990) also cited the salience of racial identity to the development of college students.

Helms (1990e), in applying this construct both to Blacks and to Whites, defines racial identity as "...a sense of group or collective identity based on one's *perception* that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (p. 3). Helms (1984) proposed that individuals "regardless of race, go through a stagewise process of developing racial consciousness wherein the final stage is an acceptance of race as a positive aspect of themselves and others" (p. 154). Helms (1984) also suggested that, although the process might be similar for both Blacks and Whites, the content would be quite different.

A number of studies have investigated possible gender or race-related differences in psychosocial development as described by Chickering (1969). Few studies have focused exclusively on women, rather than comparing women and men, and few studies have looked at differences between White women and Black women. The relationship between psychosocial development and the development of racial identity has not been examined.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship of racial identity attitudes to the psychosocial development of White and Black traditional-age undergraduate women college students. The research questions specifically investigated in this study were: What is the relationship of the development of racial identity attitudes to the development of autonomy and interpersonal relationships as described by Chickering (1969) in traditional age Black and White undergraduate women? and Do racial identity attitudes differ by class standing (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior)?

### **RELATED LITERATURE**

#### *Racial identity Development*

Cross (1971, 1978, 1991) proposed a live-stage model of Black racial identity development, which encompasses attitudes about both Blacks and Whites. The first stage, Pre-encounter, involves thinking of the world as non-

Black: things Black are bad and things White are good. The second stage, Encounter, involves the questioning of identity, precipitated by a significant event (or encounter) with Whites or Blacks. In the Encounter stage the individual experiences both euphoria brought about by the discovery of Blackness and anxiety brought about by the loss of the previously held identity (Helms, 1984). In the third stage, Immersion/Emersion, everything that is good is Black. In the fourth stage, Internalization, individuals experience comfort and security with their racial identity and are, therefore, able to take a broader perspective. In the fifth stage, Internalization-Commitment, individuals have integrated and internalized their identity and demonstrate their commitment through social activism. Parham's (1989) proposed extension to Cross' model suggests that it may be cyclical in nature and continue throughout adulthood.

Helms (1990g) proposed a six-stage model of the development of White racial identity. The first three stages comprise Phase I—Abandonment of Racism. In the first stage, Contact, individuals are unaware of themselves as racial beings. During this stage, one "becomes aware of the societal pressures that accompany cross-racial interactions" (Helms, 1984, p. 156). If the individual chooses to interact with Blacks, this pressure and awareness precipitate the second stage, Disintegration, in which the person acknowledges his or her Whiteness. In this stage one may over-identify with Blacks, become protective toward certain Blacks, or retreat into separate White culture. If either of the first two options are selected, the failure of these attempts precipitates the third stage, Reintegration. In the Reintegration stage the individual becomes hostile toward Blacks and positively biased toward Whites. If during this stage the individual accepts his or her Whiteness and comes to understand the implications of being White in a racist society, he or she enters the Pseudo-independent stage.

The remaining three stages comprise Phase 2—Defining a Nonracist White Identity. In the fourth stage, Pseudo-independence, the individual becomes intellectually curious about racial differences and similarities. According to Helms (1990g), although the person is in the process of abandoning the belief in White superiority and Black inferiority, the individual still draws on White standards and helps Black persons to change to become more like White people. Movement into the Immersion/Emersion stage relates to one's attempt to redefine a positive White identity and understand that the goal of changing White people is more salient than changing Black people. The final stage of Autonomy is characterized by a security with one's racial identity and a valuing of cultural diversity. Helms (1990g) suggested that Autonomy is an ongoing process and might be thought of as racial self-actualization or transcendence.

The relationship of the stages of Black racial identity development to factors such as counselor preference, self-esteem, values, and social class have been investigated by several researchers. Racial identity attitudes were shown to explain significant percentages of the variance in regard to preference for counselor's race (Parham & Helms, 1981) and self-esteem (Parham & Helms, 1985a). In a third study, Carter and Helms (1987) found both sex differences and a relationship between values orientation and racial identity attitudes. In a closely related study, Carter and Helms (1988) found that racial identity attitudes could not be predicted from socioeconomic status.

The relationship of the stages of White racial identity development to factors such as the counseling process, cultural values, comfort with Black individuals, and racism also have been investigated by several researchers (Carter, 1990a; Carter, 1990b; Carter & Helms, 1990; Clancy & Parker, 1988). Carter (1990b) found gender differences in White racial identity attitudes: Carter (1990b) also found that White racial identity attitudes contributed significantly to the prediction of racism.

### *Sex and Race Differences in Psychosocial Development*

Recent research has suggested that Chickering's (1969) model of psychosocial development, although widely accepted and used, may not describe well the development of women (Greeley & Tinsley, 1988; Pollard, Benton, & Hinz, 1983; Stonewater, 1987; Straub, 1987; Straub & Rodgers, 1986; Taub & McEwen, 1991; Winston & Polkosnik, 1986) and of members of visible racial/ethnic groups (Itzkowitz & Petrie, 1986; Jordan-Cox, 1987; Taub & McEwen, 1991).

The developmental vectors of Developing Autonomy and Freeing Interpersonal Relationships (Chickering, 1969) have been of particular interest to researchers investigating gender differences. Although two studies (Sawa & Gressard, 1983; Stonewater, Daniels, & Heischmidt, 1986) using Chickering's (1969) framework found no significant differences between men and women in psychosocial development, six other published studies (Greeley & Tinsley, 1988; Pollard et al., 1983; Stonewater, 1987; Straub, 1987; Straub & Rodgers, 1986; Taub & McEwen, 1991) found significant gender differences.

Only three studies have been published that investigated the psychosocial development of Black students in the context of Chickering's theory (Itzkowitz & Petrie, 1986; Jordan-Cox, 1987; Taub & McEwen, 1991). Findings of these studies are consistent with much of the research on gender differences using predominantly White samples.

## **METHOD**

### *Sample*

Participants for this study were undergraduate women students enrolled at a large public, predominantly White, Mid-Atlantic university; their participation was solicited in two ways. First, a random sample of 320 Black and White undergraduate women living on campus (40 from each class level for both Black and White women) was obtained. Second, volunteer participants were solicited from four gender studies and one Afro-American studies class. The inclusion of the volunteer subjects was to counter the residential bias of the random sample.

### *Procedure*

Packets containing a cover letter, instruments, and a return envelope were mailed to the random sample of women living on campus. Reminder postcards were mailed one week and two-and-one-half weeks later. Packets also were distributed to undergraduate women volunteers in four gender studies classes and one Afro-American studies class; completed packets were collected at a subsequent class meeting.

Of the sample of 320,174 women returned packets for a 55.1% response rate of usable returns. From the five classes 63 women returned packets. Because the research questions in this study were concerned with Black and White traditional-age (17-24) undergraduate women, respondents not tilting those categories ( $n = 19$ ) were dropped from the analyses.

Analyses were performed on a total sample of 218 participants (ages 17-24) Of this group 50 (22.9%) were freshmen, 44 (20.2%) sophomores, 63 (28.9%) juniors, and 61 (28.0%) seniors. Eighty-three (38.1%) of the women were Black and 135 (61.9%) were White. The mean ages were 20.09 ( $SD = 1.31$ ) for White participants and 19.96 ( $SD = 1.30$ ) for Black participants.

### *Instrumentation*

#### *Racial identity Attitudes*

*Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale.* Racial identity attitudes of Black students were measured using the Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS-B; Parham & Helms, 1981). The RIAS-B measures Black racial identity according to the developmental model described by Cross (1971, 1978; Helms, 1990f). Three versions of the instrument, highly correlated with one another, have existed; this study employed the Long Form. The RIAS-Long Form consists of 50 items, which make up four scales corresponding to the four stages proposed by Cross: Pre-encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, and Internalization. Item responses were obtained using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Coefficient alpha reliabilities for the four scales are reported as Pre-encounter, .76; Encounter, .51; Immersion/Emersion, .69; and Internalization, .80 ( $n = 175$ ) (Helms, 1990f). Helms (1990f) recommended using the scores on all four scales to describe an individual's racial identity attitudes rather than assignment to a single stage based on highest score.

Several studies have supported the validity of the RIAS-B in terms of its relationship to other measures and theoretically predicted relationships (Helms, 1984; Helms, 1990g; Parham & Helms, 1981, 1985a).

*White Racial Identity Attitude Scale.* Racial identity attitudes of White students were measured using the White Racial Identity Attitude Scale (WRIAS; Helms & Carter, 1990). The WRIAS was developed to measure attitudes related to Helms (1984) original five-stage model of the development of White racial identity (Helms & Carter, 1990). The instrument consists of 50 items that comprise five scales of ten items each. These five scales represent five of the six stages proposed by Helms (1984): Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo-Independence, and Autonomy; the stage of Immersion/Emersion is not included in the WRIAS because it was added to the White racial identity development model more recently (Helms, 1990f). Item responses were obtained using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). As in the RIAS-B, Helms and Carter (1990) recommended using the scores on all five scales to form a profile to describe an individual's racial identity attitudes rather than assignment to a single stage based on highest score.

In three separate reliability studies, Helms and Carter (1990) cited reliabilities of .55 to .67 for Contact, .75 to .77 for Disintegration, .75 to .82 for Reintegration, .65 to .77 for Pseudo-Independence, and .67 to .74 for Autonomy.

Limited validity information is available for the WRIAS. Content, construct, and criterion validity are supported by findings in the hypothesized direction according to racial identity development theory (Helms & Carter, 1990).

#### *Psychosocial Development*

The Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SDTLI; Winston & Miller, 1987) was selected to measure the development of the tasks of autonomy and interpersonal relationships: autonomy was also measured by the Developing Autonomy (AUT) scale of the Student Developmental Task Inventory-2 (SDTI-2; Winston, Miller, & Prince, 1979). Because the SDTLI, a major revision of the SDTI-2, involved the elimination of the general Autonomy scale (Winston, 1990), and because previous studies had used the SDTI-2, it was recommended by Winston (personal communication, 1988) that autonomy be measured both by the Developing Autonomy (AUT) scale of the SDTI-2 and by the Academic Autonomy (AA) scale of the SDTLI.

*Developing Autonomy Scale, SDTI-2.* The Developing Autonomy task measures Chickering's (1969) constructs of emotional autonomy—disengagement from parents, freedom from "continual and pressing needs for reassurance, affection or approval" (Chickering, 1969, p. 58), instrumental autonomy—the abilities to "carry on activities and to cope with problems without seeking help, and . . . to be mobile in relation to one's own needs and desires" (Chickering, 1969, p. 58), and interdependence. Two-week test-retest reliability of the Developing Autonomy scale ( $N = 38$ ) is reported as .91; Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the AUT scale ( $N = 234$ ) was .78 (Winston et al., 1979).

*The Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SDTLI).* Autonomy also was measured using the Academic Autonomy scale of the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SDTLI); developing mature interpersonal relationships was measured using both the Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships Task and the Intimacy Scale of the SDTLI (Winston & Miller, 1987).

Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships (MIR) is made up of three subtasks, Peer Relationships (PR), Tolerance (TOL), and Emotional Autonomy (EA). Students with high scores on MIR "are free from the need for continuous reassurance and approval from others and have minimal dependence on parents for direction in decision making" (Winston & Miller, 1987, p. 9). Academic Autonomy (AA) measures "the capacity to deal well with ambiguity and to monitor and control [one's] behavior in ways that allow [one] to attain personal goals and fulfill responsibilities" (Winston & Miller, 1987, p. 10). Intimacy (INT) is an experimental scale and measures the degree to which a student has "established a relationship with another person based on high levels of mutual respect, honesty, and trust" (Winston & Miller, 1987, p. 10).

Test-retest reliability coefficients for AA, MIR, and INT ranged from .80 to .84 for a two-week interval ( $N = 27$ ) and from .78 to .84 for a four-week interval ( $N = 42$ ) (Winston & Miller, 1987). Internal consistency estimates for these scales were .76 for MIR ( $N = 1200$ ), .70 for AA ( $N = 1200$ ), and .70 for INT ( $N = 954$ ) (Winston & Miller, 1987). The tasks, subtasks, and scales of the SDTLI were correlated with instruments thought to be conceptually related to them (Winston, 1990).

## **RESULTS**

To investigate relationships between racial identity attitudes and the psychosocial developmental tasks of autonomy (AA and AUT) and mature interpersonal relationships (MIR and INT), Pearson correlation coefficients were computed.

### *Black Women and Racial Identity Attitudes*

The results of the correlation analyses for Black women students are presented in Table 1. Nine significant correlations (all of them negative) were found between the RIAS-B scales and the psychosocial developmental scales. High scores on the RIAS-B scales were significantly associated with low scores on the psychosocial developmental scales, and vice versa.

### *White Women and Racial Identity Attitudes*

The results of the correlation analyses for White women students are also presented in Table 1. Five significant correlations (two of them negative) were found between the psychosocial developmental scales and the WRIAS scales.

### *Differences in Racial Identity Attitudes by Class Level*

To investigate differences in racial identity attitudes by class level, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed for each racial identity attitude scale for Black and White students respectively. There were no significant differences, at the .05 level, by class for any racial identity attitude scale for either Black or White students.

## **DISCUSSION**

The nine significant correlations for Black women students, all negative, show that high Preencounter attitudes were significantly related to low scores on academic autonomy, autonomy, and mature interpersonal relationships and, vice versa, that low Preencounter attitudes were correlated with high scores on the psychosocial measures. Further, both high Encounter attitudes and high Immersion/Emersion attitudes were significantly correlated with low scores on academic autonomy, mature interpersonal relationships, and intimacy, while low Encounter attitudes and low Immersion/Emersion attitudes were related to high scores on those same measures. According to Winston and Miller (1987), higher scores on the psychosocial measures suggest that one is emotionally independent, is self-assured and self-confident, has low anxiety, and is accepting of cultural differences. The findings related to Preencounter attitudes are consistent with Parham and Helms' (1985a, 1985b) in results that Preencounter attitudes predicted poor self-esteem, feelings of inferiority, and anxiety. Results related to Encounter attitudes are dissimilar to findings of Parham and Helms (1985a, 1985b) in that Encounter attitudes were related to positive self-esteem, self-actualizing tendencies, and low anxiety. Immersion/Emersion attitudes, however, were again consistent with the findings of Parham and Helms (1985a, 1985b), in that Immersion/Emersion attitudes were related to poor self-esteem, high anxiety, low self-actualization, and high levels of anxiety and hostility.

**TABLE 1**  
**Correlations of Racial Identity Attitude Scales with**  
**Psychosocial Developmental Scales**

<b>Black Women Students (n = 83)</b>	<b>Pre-Enc.</b>	<b>Enc.</b>	<b>Imm./Em.</b>	<b>Intern.</b>	
Academic Autonomy (AA)	-.31**	-.18*	-.23*	-.04	
Autonomy (AUT)	-.28**	-.10	-.11	.11	
Mature Interpersonal Relationships (MIR)	-.46***	-.37***	-.26**	-.12	
Intimacy (INT)	-.15	-.30**	-.20*	-.10	
<b>White Women Students (n = 135)</b>	<b>Contact</b>	<b>Disint.</b>	<b>Reint.</b>	<b>Pseudo-Ind.</b>	<b>Aut.</b>
Academic Autonomy (AA)	.05	-.05	.05	.14	.10
Autonomy (AUT)	.05	-.13	-.10	.20**	.21**
Mature Interpersonal Relationships (MIR)	.01	-.44***	-.36***	.22**	.07
Intimacy (INT)	.09	.00	.02	.03	.09

\* $p < .05$   
 \*\* $p < .01$   
 \*\*\* $p < .001$

Five significant correlations were found between the WRIAS scales and the measures of autonomy and interpersonal relationships used in this study. Only two of the significant correlations were negative: MIR with Disintegration and with Reintegration. The negative correlations between these stages of racial identity attitudes and MIR may be due to the tolerance of cultural diversity component of MIR; according to Helms (1984), the Disintegration stage may involve a retreat into separate White culture and the Reintegration stage involves hostility toward Blacks and positive bias toward Whites. Also, Helms and Carter (1990) suggest that Disintegration attitudes may reflect discomfort with interpersonal interactions and that Reintegration attitudes reflect low desire to engage or interact with others, especially Blacks. Therefore, negative correlations between these stages and MIR are consistent with Helms (1990g) model of White racial identity. The significant positive correlations of Pseudo-independence attitudes with autonomy and mature interpersonal relationships and of Autonomy attitudes with psychosocial autonomy may reflect both the acceptance of cultural and individual differences and the separation from White society characteristic of these later stages of the development of White racial identity.

The relatively small number of correlations of WRIAS and SDTLI/SDTI-2 tasks compared to the number found for RIAS-B suggests that the psychosocial instruments are tapping different dimensions for Whites and Blacks. Racial identity development, however, may confound measurement of psychosocial development.

Based on the findings of this study, psychosocial development and the development of racial identity for Black women students appear to be occurring in opposition to one another. These observations suggest two separate and very different developmental processes for Black women college students—racial identity development and psychosocial development. Black women may experience developmental pulls in different directions by their psychosocial development of autonomy and interpersonal relationships on the one hand and their racial identity development on the other. This pull may reflect the duality of Black women's experience as minorities in White society.

According to Erikson (1968) and Chickening (1969), psychosocial development for college students is a result of the interaction of the individual with the environment. Thus, for Black women students, their psychosocial development is also defined in terms of their environment. However, because the environment of predominantly White universities is frequently counter-productive to the development of Black students (Fleming, 1981, 1984; Hughes, 1987), it appears that racial identity development and psychosocial development as defined by Chickening (1969) may not occur simultaneously for most Black women students at predominantly White colleges and universities. Fleming (1981, 1984) and Hughes (1987) suggested that psychosocial development of Black students on predominantly White campuses is delayed or postponed because of their preoccupation with intellectual survival. The findings of this study suggest that psychosocial development also may be delayed for

Black students as they develop their group or collective identity as Black persons in this society, (i.e., their racial identity).

A question raised by this study is whether White racial identity development is a parallel phenomenon to Black racial identity development. Cross (1971, 1978, 1991) described the development of Black racial identity as the self-actualization of a minority group under oppression. The content of the items on the WRIAS and the theoretical description of White racial identity development provided by Helms (1984) suggested a strong component of the development of cultural awareness or appreciation of cultural diversity within the model. This is more closely related to aspects of Chickering's (1969) description of the developmental vector of freeing interpersonal relationships than to the development of racial identity as described by Cross (1971, 1978, 1991). This may help to explain the pattern of correlations found in this study between WRIAS and MIR.

Several limitations to this study should be noted. Although development is by its nature a longitudinal phenomenon, this study is cross-sectional in nature. Instrumentation also presents other possible limitations. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that reactivity to the instrument may have affected both the nature of the responses and the response rate, especially among the Black women students.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Several implications are suggested by the results of this study. First, practitioners need to be knowledgeable about racial identity development theory, both for Black students and for White students. Racial identity development theory offers another important dimension of development during the college years. It also may help to illuminate differences within groups of college students.

Second, development of racial identity may or may not parallel students' psychosocial development. The findings of this study suggest that, for Black women students, at least, two different developmental processes may be occurring. For White women students, racial identity development seems to be more congruent with traditional theories of psychosocial development, such as that articulated by Chickering (1969).

Third, practitioners should be knowledgeable about the relationship of racial identity development to interpersonal dynamics among students and others within the campus community. Findings of this study suggest that certain racial identity statuses are associated with low development on interpersonal relationship tasks. Helms' (1990c) counseling interaction model and her extension of the counseling interaction model to other social dyads (Helms, 1990b) and to larger groups (Helms, 1990d) may be helpful in understanding such dynamics on the college campus.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The results of this study suggest several avenues for future research. First, replication of this exploratory research is called for. Similar as well as different measures of psychosocial development could be used. Second, the relationship of racial identity development to cognitive development should be explored. Helms (1984, 1990a, 1990g) stated that Black and White racial identity development models are cognitive developmental models and, thus, one would hypothesize that they would be positively correlated with other cognitive developmental measures. Third, extending this research to both men and women and examining findings for gender differences represent important next steps. Fourth, replicating this study with Black women students on predominantly Black campuses and comparing the findings with Black women on predominantly White campuses would be appropriate. Fifth, using racial identity attitudes as predictors of the development of autonomy and interpersonal relationships could also be investigated.

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