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# White Counselor Trainees' Racial Identity and Working Alliance Perceptions

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*Racial identity has been theorized to significantly affect cross-racial counseling relationships (Helms, 1984, 1995). This study examined the direct impact of White racial identity of 124 counselor trainees on working alliance formation in a same-racial and cross-racial vicarious counseling analogue. Regardless of the race of the client, disintegration and reintegration attitudes negatively affected working alliance ratings, and pseudo-independent and autonomy attitudes positively affected working alliance ratings. Implications for counseling, supervision, training, and research are discussed.*

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In counseling, racial identity theory has been presented as a model for understanding the interpersonal dynamics that occur in cross-cultural counseling (Helms, 1984). *Racial identity* has been defined as the quality of an individual's identification with a specific racial group in which he or she perceives a "common racial heritage" (Helms, 1990). Theory on racial identity development suggests that identity resolutions directly affect the development of attitudes and interpersonal and social behaviors (Helms, 1995).

For purposes of clarity, Helms and Piper (1994) modified Helms's (1990) original White racial identity model so that stages were re-conceptualized as ego statuses. Although the White racial identity model remains developmental, the modification by Helms and Piper reflects the notion that individuals are thought to have attitudes, affects, and behaviors reflective of each of the racial identity statuses. With this notion stated, an individual's identity is still believed to be predominately anchored in one status. White racial identity development, according to Helms (1990, 1995), has been posited to consist of six ego statuses: (a) contact, general unawareness of race or racism; (b) disintegration, confusion, disorientation and conflict about race and racial injustice; (c) reintegration, belief in White superiority and inferiority of other racial groups; (d) pseudo-independent, intellectualization of positive White identity and people of color; (e) immersion-emersion, intent to define self as nonracist; and (f) autonomy, internalized nonracist identity.

White racial identity research has consisted primarily of correlational research examining psychological, social, behavioral, and cultural correlates (see Carter, 1995, for review). Carter (1988, 1995) conducted some preliminary

studies on psychotherapeutic processes and White racial identity development. Carter's research has shown that counselor intentions are more related to White racial identity attitudes than client reactions. Despite clinical assertions that White racial identity attitudes would affect therapeutic alliance formation (Helms, 1984; Ho, 1992; Sue & Sue, 1990), no research has emerged directly examining the impact of a client's or counselor's racial identity on the formation of a working alliance in same- or cross-racial counseling dyads.

Research (Block, Roberson, & Neuger, 1995; Taub & McEwen, 1992) suggests that disintegration and reintegration attitudes of White racial identity development inversely predict ratings of mature relationships skills and perceived willingness to form positive work relationships with African American students or coworkers. By contrast, high and positive ratings of mature relationship skills and willingness to form relationships with African American coworkers were found among individuals who had high pseudo-independent and autonomy attitudes. Based on this evidence, it was hypothesized that lower developmental levels of White racial identity (contact, disintegration, and reintegration) would inversely predict cross-racial working alliance ratings. Conversely, higher levels of White racial identity (pseudo-independent and autonomy) were hypothesized to positively predict working alliance ratings with the African American client.

There are three purposes for this study. First, to determine whether the racial identity of White counselor trainees in a vicarious counseling situation (Munley, 1974) would account for significantly more variance in the prediction of counselor working alliance ratings than observed counselor working alli-

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ance ratings. Second, to determine whether the racial identity of White counselor trainees in a vicarious counseling situation would account for significantly more variance in the prediction of counselor working alliance ratings than the perception of client race alone. And third, to determine if lower levels (contact, disintegration, reintegration) of White racial identity attitudes would inversely affect working alliance ratings, and if higher levels (pseudoindependent, autonomy) of White racial identity attitudes would positively influence working alliance ratings.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 124 White Euro-American graduate students, ages 22 to 57 ( $M = 33.41$ ), enrolled in graduate counseling classes at a midsized midwestern university. Participants were 91 female and 33 male students. Participation in this study was voluntary. Participants were at various levels of graduate training: (a) 83 were master's level, (b) 18 were post-master's level, (c) 20 were doctoral level, (d) 2 were students at large, and (e) 1 reported no educational status level. The sample comprised 23 participants who had no prior multicultural class, 74 had multicultural issues covered in other classes, 19 had one multicultural counseling class, and 8 had one or more classes in multicultural counseling issues.

### Variables

The three measures used in this study were a modified version of the Working Alliance Inventory, the observer form of the Working Alliance Inventory (Tichenor & Hill, 1989), and the White Racial Identity Attitude Scale (Helms & Carter, 1990). Participants additionally completed a demographic questionnaire.

*Working Alliance Inventory (WAI).* The WAI (Horvath & Greenberg, 1986) was developed to measure the working alliance that evolves between a client that is seeking change and a counselor offering to support this process as a change agent (Bordin, 1979, 1994). The WAI is a self-report measure consisting of 36 items on a 7-point fully anchored response scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*) (Horvath & Greenberg, 1986). There are three versions of the WAI that have been used in previous studies. Parallel self-report forms, the WAI-Client form and the WAI-Therapist (WAI-T) form, are administered to both client and counselor at the end of a counseling session. The WAI-Observer (WAI-O) form has also been developed as a rater's form (Tichenor & Hill, 1989).

This investigation used two forms of the WAI: the WAI-O, and the WAI-T. The WAI-O consists of 36 items and is completed by a rater after observing a client-counselor session. The second form used in this investigation is the therapist form of the WAI, which was specifically adapted for this investigation. Grammatically, the WAI-T form is written in the past tense and is intended for use after a counseling session to assess the counselor's perception of the formed

working alliance. For this investigation, the WAI-T form was written in the future tense to assess in advance of working with a client the counselor's perception of their ability to form a working alliance with a client. Three professional counselors (with 4, 5, and 11 years of counseling experience) examined the integrity of the modified WAI-T by evaluating its congruence with Bordin's (1979) conceptual model of the working alliance. They found that each of the 12 items were consistent with Bordin's three theoretical components of the therapeutic alliance: goals, tasks and emotional bond. This expert review suggests some preliminary evidence of content validity for the modified 12-item WAI-T.

Tracey and Kokotovic (1989) reported internal consistency reliabilities (coefficient  $\alpha$ ) of .87 to .93 for both WAI client and the counselor scales. Coefficient alphas were calculated in the present study for the WAI-O and the modified version of the 12-item WAI-T. Coefficient alphas for the WAI-O and WAI-T were .94 and .84, respectively, for our sample of 124 counselor trainees. This evidence suggests that the WAI-O and the modified therapist form of the WAI are internally consistent.

*White Racial Identity Attitude Scale (WRIAS).* Helms and Carter (1990) constructed the WRIAS to measure the five theoretical stages of White racial identity development originally postulated by Helms (1984) as follows: (a) contact, (b) disintegration, (c) reintegration, (d) pseudoindependent, and (e) autonomy. The WRIAS is a 5-point Likert-type self-report attitude measure consisting of 50 items. Helms and Carter developed five subscales; each subscale consists of 10 items. Subscale score ranges are from 10 to 50. Sample items from the WRIAS include "I wish I had a Black friend" (contact stage), "I limit myself to White activities" (disintegration stage), "I believe that White people look and express themselves better than Blacks" (reintegration stage), "I feel comfortable talking with Blacks" (pseudoindependent stage), and "I value the relationships that I have with my Black friends" (autonomy stage).

An initial investigation on the WRIAS indicated that internal consistency reliabilities were in the .90s for all subscales (Carter, 1984). Using meta-analysis across 22 studies, Behrens (1997) found the following average coefficient alphas: .50 (contact), .77 (disintegration), .78 (reintegration), .67 (pseudoindependent), and .61 (autonomy). However, the contact scale yields low and erratic internal consistency findings. In a few investigations, the contact scale yielded coefficient alphas of .18 to .33 (Alexander, 1993; Davidson, 1992; Sadowsky, Seaberry, Gorji, Lai, & Baliga, 1991).

Coefficient alphas were calculated for the five WRIAS scales for this study (see Table 1). Because of the low reliability for the contact subscale for this sample, it was not analyzed further. Deleting the contact subscale had no statistical effect on the other four WRIAS subscales.

Despite the relatively recent development of the WRIAS validity data is beginning to emerge. However, the validity evidence is somewhat controversial at this time. Tokar and

TABLE 1

**Means, Standard Deviations, and Coefficient Alphas for the Predictor and Criterion Variables by Treatment Condition (N = 124)**

| Variable                     | Total  |       | Coefficient $\alpha$ |
|------------------------------|--------|-------|----------------------|
|                              | M      | SD    |                      |
| Contact subscale             | 32.23  | 3.16  | .15                  |
| Disintegration subscale      | 21.61  | 6.21  | .81                  |
| Reintegration subscale       | 19.68  | 5.73  | .82                  |
| Pseudo-independence subscale | 38.00  | 4.94  | .73                  |
| Autonomy subscale            | 40.77  | 4.75  | .71                  |
| WAI-T                        | 118.85 | 26.66 | .94                  |
| WAI-O                        | 52.50  | 8.11  | .84                  |

Note. WAI-T = Working Alliance Inventory-Modified Therapist Form; WAI-O = Working Alliance Inventory-Observer Form.

Swanson (1991) suggested that the factor structure of the WRIAS does not confirm the five hypothetical constructs suggested by Helms (1984), and these findings were confirmed by Bennett, Behrens, and Rowe (1993) and Behrens (1997) in a confirmatory factor analysis. However, White racial identity attitudes and scales have been linked, in predicted ways, to cultural values (Carter & Helms, 1990), racism (Davis & Carter, 1988; Pope-Davis & Ottavi, 1994), and willingness to affiliate with African American coworkers (Block et al., 1995). Other research attempts have failed to demonstrate correlational findings to personality traits (Alexander, 1993; Bennett et al., 1993). Despite this controversial evidence, the WRIAS remains the most researched instrument measuring White racial identity attitudes from a developmental perspective. The newer Oklahoma Racial Attitudes Scale (ORAS; Choney & Behrens, 1996) was considered but not used, because it does not measure a developmental perspective as needed for this study.

**Demographic questionnaire.** Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire requesting personal/demographic data, and information on multicultural training and experiences.

### Stimulus Condition

A 12-minute audiotape of a career counseling vignette was developed for this study. The audiotape stimulus consisted of a brief counseling session in which a counselor attempted to assist a client in exploring a concern about career indecision. Racial issues were not explored in the tape. In addition, two parallel written intakes were constructed to provide background information on the client represented in the audiotape. One form of the intake presented an African American client, and the other form presented a White client. Three professional counselors reviewed both the audiotape and the two intakes for congruity between audio and written material presented on the pseudoclient, and their

review suggested that these materials were consistent. In addition, these professional counselors reviewed the materials to determine if the content was consistent with a counselor in training and found the materials met this criteria.

### Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two client-treatment conditions: an African American or White client condition. Based on the client treatment condition, the corresponding instructions and an intake were distributed. Participants were informed that they would hear a 12-minute section of an audiotape of the interview between a counselor and the client presented in the intake. After hearing the audiotape, participants were asked to make two ratings of the working alliance. In the first rating, participants were asked to place themselves in the role of the counselor and, based on their feelings and perceptions of the client, rate their ability to form a working alliance (using the 12-item WAI-T form). The second rating was of the observed working alliance formed between the client and the counselor on the audiotape. The two ratings were counterbalanced. Upon completing both ratings of the working alliance, the WRIAS (titled "Social Attitude Survey" as recommended by Helms & Carter, 1990), and the demographic questionnaire were then distributed. Participants were instructed to complete the WRIAS first and the attached demographic questionnaire second. Following the completion of the research materials, participants were debriefed through a discussion with the first author.

## RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for each of the scales used in this study are presented in Table 1, and Table 2 contains the intercorrelations for the predictor and criterion variables. Examination of the intercorrelation matrix indicated significant moderate correlation coefficients between WRIAS subscales and the WAI-T and no significant correlation coefficients between the WRIAS subscales and the WAI-O. Given that none of the predictor variables significantly correlated with the WAI-O, this scale was dropped from further analysis.

The results of the intercorrelations revealed that disintegration ( $r = -.48, p < .001$ ) and reintegration ( $r = -.35, p < .001$ ) attitudes were inversely related to working alliance formation. Pseudo-independent ( $r = .37, p < .001$ ) and autonomy ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ) attitudes were positively related to working alliance formation. Preliminary analyses found no significant effects for participant demographic variables, cross-cultural counseling classroom experience, cross-cultural counseling workshop experience, or number of clients of color seen in counseling practicum experiences.

To explore the extent to which the WRIAS subscales would account for the variance of the WAI-T scores and the variance accounted for by the race of the client, a series of four hierarchical regressions were conducted. Cohen and

TABLE 2

Intercorrelations Between the Predictor and Criterion Variables for the Total Sample ( $N = 124$ )

| Variable                            | 1 | 2     | 3    | 4      | 5      | 6      | 7      | 8    |
|-------------------------------------|---|-------|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------|
| 1. WAI-T                            | — | .37** | .02  | -.48** | -.35** | .37**  | .29**  | .01  |
| 2. WAI-O                            |   | —     | -.09 | -.16   | -.13   | .02    | -.06   | -.17 |
| 3. Contact <sup>a</sup>             |   |       | —    | -.14   | -.38** | .21    | .43**  | .01  |
| 4. Disintegration <sup>a</sup>      |   |       |      | —      | .84**  | -.64** | -.65** | .13  |
| 5. Reintegration <sup>a</sup>       |   |       |      |        | —      | -.63** | -.64** | .05  |
| 6. Pseudo-Independence <sup>a</sup> |   |       |      |        |        | —      | .73**  | .26* |
| 7. Autonomy <sup>a</sup>            |   |       |      |        |        |        | —      | .15  |
| 8. Client <sup>b</sup>              |   |       |      |        |        |        |        | —    |

Note. See Table 1 Note.

<sup>a</sup>Subscale of the White Racial Identity Attitude Scale. <sup>a</sup>African American or White treatment conditions.

\* $p = .01$ , two-tailed. \*\* $p = .001$ , two-tailed.

Cohen (1983) suggested the use of hierarchical regression analysis when there is a theoretical model to be tested. Wampold and Freund (1987) recommended that main effects be entered in the first steps in a hierarchical regression analysis, and the interaction effect(s) in the final step(s). Separate analyses were conducted for each of the four racial identity attitudes to develop a profile of how White racial identity attitudes affected working alliance ratings. This was done in accord with Helms and Carter's (1990) recommendation of developing a profile of how each of the racial identity attitudes mediated working alliance ratings. The variables were entered in the following order: (1) race of the client, (2) the specific WRIAS subscale, and (3) the interaction effect between the race of the client and the WRIAS subscale.

Wampold and Freund (1987) stated that in a hierarchical regression analysis the coefficient of interest is the change

in  $R^2$  from one step to that which is accounted for by  $R^2$  in the next step. The results of this study, presented in Table 3, indicated that the main effect for each of the White racial identity attitudes alone significantly predicted working alliance ratings. Race of the client did not account for significant variance in any of the regression models. Thus, it seems that White racial identity of counselor trainees was predictive of counselor working alliance ratings in a vicarious counseling situation, regardless of the race of the client.

## DISCUSSION

The results indicate that White racial identity attitudes significantly influenced counselor trainee ratings of the working alliance in same-racial and cross-racial counseling dyads. No relationship was found between trainee racial identity attitudes and their observer ratings of a client-counselor

TABLE 3

Hierarchical Regression Analysis of White Racial Identity Attitudes, Observed Race of the Client (African American, White), and Interaction Effects on Working Alliance Ratings ( $N = 124$ )

| Variable                     | $R$ | $R^2$ | Adjusted $R^2$ | Change in $R^2$ | $F$ for Change | Significance of $F$ |
|------------------------------|-----|-------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Disintegration               |     |       |                |                 |                |                     |
| Observed Race of the Client  | .00 | .00   | .00            | .00             | 0.00           | .98                 |
| Disintegration subscale      | .48 | .23   | .22            | .23             | 36.75          | .01                 |
| Interaction Effect           | .50 | .25   | .23            | .02             | 2.30           | .13                 |
| Reintegration                |     |       |                |                 |                |                     |
| Observed Race of the Client  | .00 | .00   | .00            | .00             | 0.00           | .98                 |
| Reintegration subscale       | .35 | .12   | .11            | .35             | 16.99          | .01                 |
| Interaction Effect           | .39 | .15   | .13            | .03             | 4.51           | .03                 |
| Pseudo-independence          |     |       |                |                 |                |                     |
| Observed Race of the Client  | .00 | .00   | .00            | .00             | 0.00           | .98                 |
| Pseudo-independence subscale | .38 | .14   | .13            | .14             | 20.28          | .01                 |
| Interaction Effect           | .39 | .16   | .13            | .01             | 1.76           | .18                 |
| Autonomy                     |     |       |                |                 |                |                     |
| Observed Race of the Client  | .00 | .00   | .00            | .00             | 0.00           | .98                 |
| Autonomy subscale            | .29 | .08   | .07            | .29             | 11.36          | .01                 |
| Interaction Effect           | .31 | .09   | .07            | .01             | 1.02           | .31                 |

lor alliance. Although preliminary, these findings allude to the idea that White racial identity may affect a counselor's ability to form a productive working alliance with a client.

Although the four levels of White racial identity attitudes yielded significant main effects, client race did not add significantly to the prediction of working alliance formation. No main effects for client race were found for any of the working alliance ratings. Taken together, these results suggest that White racial identity influences working alliance formation regardless of the race of the client.

This was a surprising finding given that past research (Block et al., 1995; Taub & McEwen, 1992) suggests that disintegration and reintegration attitudes of White racial identity development inversely predict ratings of perceived willingness to form positive work relationships with African American students or coworkers. By contrast, positive ratings of willingness to form relationships with African American coworkers were found among individuals who had high pseudo-independent and autonomy attitudes. Interpretation of this finding should be done with caution due to the research design and the nature of the sample. This being an analogue study, participants were limited to a vicarious experience of the client and only had a brief 12-minute exposure. The possibility exists that exposure to the client was not sufficient to produce an effect for race. In addition, this finding may be an artifact of the sample because only 24% of the sample had ever seen a client of color in a counseling session.

Although client race did not seem to influence ratings, different levels of White racial identity attitude did differentially affect working alliance ratings. Counselor trainee's disintegration and reintegration attitudes were found to have an adverse effect on perceived ability to form a working alliance. Conversely, counselor trainee's pseudo-independent and autonomy attitudes were found to have a positive effect on working alliance ratings. These results are consistent with earlier research that demonstrated mature relationship skills are inversely correlated with disintegration and reintegration attitudes and positively correlated with pseudo-independent and autonomy attitudes (Taub & McEwen, 1992). These preliminary findings suggest that counselors possessing predominately disintegration and reintegration attitudes may experience difficulty forming a working alliance. Conversely, counselors possessing pseudo-independent and autonomy attitudes may encounter significantly less difficulty in forming a productive working alliance. These findings should also be interpreted with caution given the actual counseling experience of the sample. Research on the working alliance has demonstrated that counselors with more counseling experience are better able to establish an alliance with clients than novice counselors (Mallinckrodt & Nelson, 1991). Reflective of this idea, in this sample, 33% of the counselor trainees had had only their first counseling practicum experience.

This study, like Carter's (1995), was the first study to empirically link White racial identity theory and working alliance theory. This connection is an important clinical and

research step toward understanding if and how White racial identity may affect cross-cultural counseling relationship development. Subsequent research in this area may produce or advance important knowledge of alliance development in multicultural counseling.

The generalizability of these findings are affected by some methodological limitations. As indicated previously, the findings from this study should be interpreted with caution because of the following: (a) the analogue nature of the design, (b) multicultural counseling experience of the sample, and (c) the counseling experience of the sample.

Another limitation to acknowledge is the use of the WRIAS as a measure. The WRIAS has been challenged psychometrically by several authors (i.e., Alexander, 1993; Behrens, 1997; Bennett et al., 1993; Swanson, Tokar, & Davis, 1994; Tokar & Swanson, 1991). Swanson et al. suggested that the factor structure of the WRIAS may best be represented by one unidimensional bipolar factor. They noted that the positively loaded items seem to equate with Helms's (1995) "abandonment of racism" phase, and the negatively loaded items seem to correspond to the "defining a nonracist White identity" phase of White racial identity development. Given this confusion about the construct validity of the WRIAS, the findings from this study should be cautiously interpreted. Future research on working alliance and racial identity should address the operational definition of White racial identity development.

Implications these findings may have for research in training and supervision are important to acknowledge. Theoretical writings on racial identity in training and supervision have suggested that this is an important area of development for counselor trainees (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1997). The findings from this study imply that training and supervision need to account for the impact of White racial identity in trainee's counseling with clients. Prior research on supervision by Hilton, Russell, and Salmi (1995) found no main effect for race of the supervisor in a supervisory dyad. It may be that using a psychological construct like White racial identity development would better account for the effect of race in supervision (Helms, 1990). Studies that examine racial identity development in counseling supervision would be valuable to understanding this process.

This study is important to counseling for three reasons: (a) This is the first time that the theories of working alliance and White racial identity development have been studied empirically, (b) it expands theory on working alliance formation and highlights the importance of the counselor's racial identity in the development of the counseling relationship, and (c) it suggests that White racial identity development may be important to acknowledge in the development and training of professional counselors. Based on the results of this study, future research could be expanded in the following ways. First, the level of counseling and multicultural experience representative of counselors should be expanded in future research samples. Second, the effect of other counselor variables (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status, multicultural counseling competency) and racial iden-

tities (e.g., African American, Asian American, Latino, Native American) on working alliance formation could be studied. Finally, this research should be replicated in an actual counseling setting.

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