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From White Feminism to Intersectional Advocacy: The Development of a White Antiracist Identity

Abby Elizabeth Feenstra

Feminism has historically uplifted the voices of White women at the expense of Women of Color. Therefore, White feminist women must consider other forms of identity development in order to become an advocate for People of Color. This article will explore the identity development of a White, feminist, woman. Using both research on White female students' identity development as well as elements of scholarly personal narrative (SPN), this paper will examine the author's racial identity development as it intertwines with their feminist background. Through the intersection of racial, gender, and feminist identities, the author argues that an antiracist identity emerges, which is necessary to build allyship and solidarity with communities from marginalized identities, specifically Women of Color.

The feminist movement has centered on the experiences of White women and dismissed the experiences of Women of Color (Frankenburg, 1993; Thompson, 2001). Similarly, my own feminist identity development centered on the history and experiences of White women, and I failed to acknowledge the presence of racism or engage in antiracist work until the beginning my current graduate program. In order to recognize racial oppression, I had to develop a deeper understanding of my White identity. The development of my White identity both follows and diverges from existing White identity development models. Using both a critical examination of the existing White identity development models, as well as my own experience navigating my identity development processes, I offer a narrative of White-feminist-antiracist identity development that can inform future work with White-identifying feminist women.

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Overview of White Racial Identity Development Models

Helms (1984) developed a model designed to measure White racial identity development as White people move from a racial identity based on individual, institutional, and cultural racism, to one that does not depend on the perceived superiority of one race over another. The model was originally defined as having two overarching phases: the abandonment of racism and developing a positive White identity. In addition, Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson (1994) proposed a model based on the construction of White racial consciousness, defined as “the characteristic attitudes held by a person regarding the significance of being White in relation to those who do not share White group membership” (p. 3). Rowe and colleagues classified attitudes of White racial consciousness into two categories: unachieved and achieved.

Both Helms’ (1984) model and Rowe and colleagues’ (1994) model are stage-based. Although the theorists use different language to describe their models (Carter, Helms, & Juby, 2004; Helms, 1995; LaFleur, Rowe, & Leach, 2002), the essence of the models remains as a series of steps that White people can progress through. However, due to the pervasive nature of White supremacy in American society (Jung, Vargas, & Bonilla-Silva, 2011), it is easy for White individuals, even those who progressed through White identity development stages, to re-enter a complacent state regarding their racial privilege.

Linder (2015) argued that due to the societal structure of White supremacy, White identity development models such as Helms’ (1984) and Rowe and colleagues’ (1994) models, which put forth a “final” stage of White development, were incomplete. Linder (2015) argued that a positive White identity cannot only be developed, it must also be maintained. Through interviews with undergraduate students who identified as White, feminist, women, Linder developed an alternative model for positive White identity development.

I will use the framework of these three models to frame my White identity development through the use of scholarly personal narrative. Although the models presented by Helms (1984), Rowe and colleagues (1994), and Linder (2015) share similar foundations, each model can be applied in different ways. I will weave the models into a narrative of my own identity development as a White feminist learning to recognize my White privilege and work towards dismantling White supremacy.

Becoming Aware of Race

Both Helms (1984) and Rowe and colleagues (1994) characterized stages in which White individuals are unaware of the presence of race and racial oppression. Helms’

(1984) initial phase is described as the *contact* phase, in which one is oblivious to one's own racial identity. Rowe and colleagues (1994) classified this stage as having *dependent* attitudes, or "dependence on others to determine one's opinions," (p. 137). Throughout my life, I existed in all three of these phases with a lack of awareness around race.

Reflecting on my experiences, I can name various instances of racism role-modeled for me by my White parents. Between the ages of six and fifteen, my family lived in San Francisco. I lived in a county that was more diverse racially and ethnically than any other place I have called home (United States Census Bureau, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). I was friends with many People of Color at school. I have distinct memories of my mother making statements about People of Color that she would not make about White people. Usually, she would either make fun of a person's name because it was "different," or discourage me from having play dates with People of Color because they were "weird." At the time, I never thought of those experience in terms of race. I was navigating Helms' (1984) contact stage, where I was oblivious to my White privilege. My ideas about race and racism came from and were shaped by my racist family and as a result, I also demonstrated Rowe and colleagues' (1994) dependent attitudes.

I do not think I became conscious of race until my family moved to Reno, Nevada when I was 14. I remember when I stood in the cafeteria on my first day of school and tried to figure out where to sit. At my old high school, students ate wherever they could find a seat with their friends. However, at my new school there was an unspoken rule that became immediately clear: Latinx students ate in the cafeteria, White students ate in the hallways, and students of other races integrated into one of those two locations. It was not until I stood in that cafeteria that I realized for the first time not only that race existed, but that people of different races moved through the world differently.

Becoming Aware of Privilege

Becoming aware of race is not the same thing as becoming aware of racial privilege. Awareness of racial privilege is a long process that includes a variety of stages. Helms (1984) defined the first step as *disintegration*, in which one recognizes and acknowledges one's identity as White. This stage closely aligns with Rowe and colleagues' (1994) dissonant attitudes, in which a person seeks to resolve any sort of dissonance "generated by the conflict of previously held attitudes and recent experiential incidents" (p. 137). Linder's (2015) model includes the *introduction to racism through experiences with sexism*, a stage where an awareness of Whiteness also takes place. Linder's model, with its specific focus on White feminist women's White identity development, found that these women needed a motivating factor to propel them into critically examining their White identity and White privilege.

Linder found that White feminist women are often first exposed to racism through the lens of sexism and intersectionality theory. I experienced aspects of Helms' (1984) disintegration, Rowe and colleagues' dissonant attitudes, and Linder's (2015) introduction to racism through experiences with sexism while studying at my undergraduate institution.

The first of these experiences was in a women's studies course titled "Social Movements in Gender, Race, and Identity." The class discussion turned towards White guilt, with many Students of Color in the class expressing their frustrations with demonstrations of White guilt. A Latinx student voiced his annoyance towards White guilt. I interjected with, "But how are we supposed to feel? My people have treated your people like shit for centuries!" This instance was a clear example of Helms' (1984) disintegration stage and Rowe and colleagues' (1994) dissonant attitudes in which I experienced confusion and shame about my White identity. Additionally, it was the first time I exemplified a behavior representative of the Linder (2015) model, namely the stage of introduction to racism through experiences with sexism. I took that specific course because my experiences with sexism led me to the development of a feminist identity, which subsequently inspired me to seek a women's studies major. This course allowed me to examine racism through the lens of sexism.

During a training session for my on-campus job, I was able to recognize the ways in which racial privilege also emerged for White people. The student staff played a game called "Four Corners" in which our supervisors read a statement and we had to position ourselves in one of the room's four corners, each of which had a sign that read one of the following: "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Disagree," or "Strongly Disagree." During the exercise, my supervisor made a statement concerning the ongoing presence of racism in American society. The majority of the group moved into the "Disagree" corner. I moved to the "Agree" corner with one or two other students. The only two Black men in the group were positioned in the "Strongly Agree" corner. I did not participate in the subsequent discussion; I simply observed as the two Black students' voices were drowned out by the majority in the "Disagree" corner.

I remember feeling disoriented throughout this experience. I always identified as someone with strong opinions, and throughout the game I usually moved into either the "Strongly Agree" or the "Strongly Disagree" corner. I wondered why I did not feel strongly about the statement on racism in American society, especially since the group discussion surrounding the topic proved to be so divisive. As the discussion progressed, I agreed with most of the statements made by those who chose "Disagree" for the question on racism on an intellectual level; emotionally, however, I felt a visceral negative reaction towards their dismissal of the Black students' experience. This occurrence was a more heightened expression of Helms'

(1984) disintegration stage and Rowe and colleagues' (1994) dissonant attitudes.

The third experience where I understood racial privilege was at a protest on my undergraduate campus following the death of Eric Gardner. I talked about the protest with a White coworker of mine who was in her first year of college and whom I knew looked up to me as a mentor figure. She asked me to go to the protest with her “just to watch,” and I agreed. A group of students filled the university library steps and chanted phrases such as “no justice, no peace” and “Black lives matter!” We stood and observed for the first five to ten minutes of the demonstration. Soon, she became too excited to continue to stand on the sidelines and pulled me onto the steps with her. I remember feeling terrified that my other (White) friends would see me participating, but I also remember how standing in solidarity with Students of Color and their allies felt like something of which to be proud. Although I participated in a concrete action against racism, I believe it was representative of the earlier stages of Helms' (1984) model and Rowe and colleagues' (1994) model because my feelings and attitudes were primarily rooted in confusion regarding my opinions.

Resistance to White Identity Exploration

All three of the models discussed have a stage related to *resistance*, the tendency for White people to reject or dismiss the presence of racism due to discomfort with the subject or fear. Helms (1984) defines this tendency as the *reintegration* stage, in which one idealizes White people while denigrating People of Color. Rowe and colleagues (1994) classified this specific phase of White identity development as dominative attitudes. A White person demonstrating *dominative* attitudes expresses worldviews that justify oppression of People of Color. Linder's (2015) model defined the resistance stage as *resistance and anger/ defensiveness*.

My memories of resisting discussions of White privilege are not as clear as my first experiences of being exposed to race and racism. However, I can remember the first time I was able to look back on my resistance from a place of reflection. My graduate cohort was in the Burlington Peace and Justice Center (PJC) for class. The woman in charge of the PJC talked about race and racism, and she referenced “White fragility,” or the panic White people experience when race is mentioned. She told us White people can have physical symptoms including shortness of breath and chest tightening. I remember watching the students react: the Students of Color laughed while most of the White students joined along, but they were also noticeably uncomfortable. I remember reflecting on the six months prior to that incident when sometimes I left classroom discussions about race and did not remember what I said or if I had said anything at all. It was as if my mind immediately erased any memories related to the experience. I had intense guilt and shame surrounding my White identity that I desperately wanted to move past,

but I was so afraid of engaging in conversations about race that my mind blocked out such experiences and my development was continuously stalled. I had visceral reactions to conversations about race and, to protect me, my mind erased those memories. I was just as fragile as the people everyone mocked.

This defense mechanism was a clear expression of Helms' (1984) reintegration stage, Rowe and colleagues' (1994) dominative attitudes, and Linder's (2015) resistance and anger/defensiveness stage. From the feedback I received from professors and classmates, I understand that I was disengaged during conversations around race and racial privilege in my first semester of graduate school. I listened to class discussions but did not participate. This passive behavior was also demonstrated by the White, feminist women Linder studied. Linder argued that such behavior was demonstrative of White feminist women being "caught" in the cycle of guilt and shame. In my case, it was an expression of resistance, an earlier stage in the model. I do not think I became aware of racism and the depth of my White privilege until the end of my first semester of graduate school.

Initial Development of Antiracist Identity

All three of the discussed racial identity development models have a stage or phase that describes a turning point for White individuals--a moment of development in which they come to realize that racism is reality and they have a responsibility to work against it. Helms (1984) classified this turning point as defining a positive White identity, including the pseudo-independence, the immersion/emersion, and the autonomy stages. Pseudo-independence involves developing an intellectualized acceptance of one's own race and the races of others, but still failing to recognize ways racism negatively affects not only People of Color, but also White people. In contrast, one enters immersion/emersion when moving to a more honest appraisal of racism and the significance of Whiteness. Autonomy is accomplished when one internalizes a multicultural identity with non-racist Whiteness as its core.

Rowe and colleagues (1994) described this turning point as having achieved reactive and integrative attitudes. A White person demonstrating reactive views recognizes racial injustice and reacts in the following ways: "overidentification with a minority [sic] group, romanticizing aspects of the minority [sic] culture, adopting paternalistic attitudes, and attempting to provide assistance based on a Euro-centric perspective" (Rowe et al., 1994, p. 140). This phase is similar to Helms' (1984) immersion, where a White person prioritizes relationships with People of Color and may forsake aspects of their White identity due to a profound sense of shame and guilt. A White person demonstrating integrative attitudes, which Rowe and colleagues (1994) define as the most anti-racist White attitudes, "neither idealizes nor oppresses minority [sic] groups and does not respond out of anger or guilt about being White" (p. 141). Linder's (2015) model included a stage called

acceptance of the reality of racism, similar to Helms' (1984) pseudo-independence stage and Rowe and colleagues' (1994) integrative attitudes. At this point in Linder's (2015) model, stages cease and a cyclical model of development is used.

Linder's (2015) model argues that once White feminist women progress through the initial three stages, they are able to engage in antiracist action and typically have a strong desire to do so. However, the model acknowledges that simply because a White feminist woman reaches a point where she accepts the reality of racism, other factors that may prevent her from engaging in antiracist action are not nullified. These factors include guilt and shame, fear of appearing racist, and distance from Whiteness. Linder acknowledges that guilt and shame are also components present in earlier White identity development models, but argues that such guilt and shame directly contributes to a fear of appearing racist, which is typically the largest cause of inaction. Many of the participants in Linder's study also retreated into inaction through distancing themselves from their White identity, naming a desire to always be the "cool White person" (p. 544). Linder's "final" stage is engaging in action; however, the author argues that there is no final stage of White identity development.

I believe that I reached the turning point described in all three models during my first semester of graduate school. Helms (1992) found that when a White individual first becomes aware of their racial privilege, it is akin to a religious awakening. I can pinpoint the exact moment of my awakening: the 2015 University of Vermont Examining White Privilege Retreat. The Examining White Privilege Retreat is intended to provide an experience for self-identified White students to learn more about their racial privilege and ways White people can engage in antiracist work to dismantle racism in American society (University of Vermont ALANA Student Center, 2015).

At the retreat, I participated in a conversation about a "conveyor belt" of racism in American society. This metaphor was explained as follows: to be a White person in America is to stand on a conveyor belt that is inexorably moving towards racist behavior. To stand in place on the conveyor belt is to be propelled towards racism; it is only when one consciously walks against the conveyor belt that one avoids perpetuating oppression. Intellectually, I was able to understand this concept, but it was when someone in the room compared it to a conveyor belt moving men towards rape culture that it resonated emotionally. To me (a woman), the rape culture conveyor belt is so obviously existent and problematic. I remember thinking that if the racism conveyor belt was anything similar, I have a moral obligation to walk against it as a White person. It was an awakening for me. It was at this point that I moved into the second phase of Helms' (1984) model, Rowe and colleagues' (1994) achieved attitudes, and Linder's (2015) acceptance of the reality of racism.

Although I believe I have moved beyond my resistance to discussing racism, I am not sure which stages or attitudes I currently operate within. I view racism through an academic lens, meaning I am exhibiting signs of Helms' (1984) pseudo-independence. I rely on People of Color for approval of my antiracist behavior, consistent with Helms' Immersion and Rowe and colleagues' (1994) reactive attitudes. Although I am able to engage in antiracist action, I often become entangled in feelings of guilt and shame surrounding my White identity, consistent with Linder's (2015) model. I hope to one day be able to reflect on this point in my development and have a clearer sense of where I am and where I still have to go.

Application and Conclusion

Everyone holds both privileged and marginalized identities (McIntosh, 1988). Developing of awareness around a privileged identity can be particularly complex when an individual also holds a salient marginalized identity (Dill, McLaughlin, & Nieves, 2007). Through my White identity development, I observed the ways in which my identity as a woman and the development of my feminist identity were both a hindrance and an aid in the process of understanding my own White privilege. I believe my experiences with sexism negatively affected my ability to analyze my White privilege in my graduate classes for a number of reasons. I often felt as though discussions about my racial privilege allowed others to dismiss my marginalized gender identity. I also feared making racist statements to a Person of Color, which I believe stemmed in part from knowing how terrible it felt when I heard men make sexist statements. However, I believe my gender identity and experiences with sexism also gave me a sense of compassion that enables me to work through my fear in order to properly engage in action, as the Linder (2015) cycle posits. My development of a White feminist identity development, informed by the three models set forth by Helms (1984), Rowe and colleagues (1994), and Linder (2015), can help inform future research on White student development, particularly for female-identifying White college students who have already developed a strong feminist identity.

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