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# Racial Identity Development and Relational Theory: The Case of Black Women in White Communities

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## **About the Author**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the connection between racial identity development theory (which describes the process of developing a positively affirmed sense of racial identity) and relational theory. The points of intersection between these two theoretical perspectives are used to understand the experiences of young Black women growing up in predominantly White communities. In the summary of the discussion which followed the paper presentation, the implications of racial identity development theory for the development of mutuality between Black and White women are considered.*

The Stone Center Theory Group challenged themselves in the introduction to their book, *Women's Growth in Connection* (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, and Surrey, 1991) to take on the task of better understanding the specifics of women's experience based on class, race, age, ethnicity, and gender. This paper is presented in the spirit of adding more specific understanding by providing information about a particular group of women—Black, middle-class, college-educated women—and their racial identity development, framed in relational terms.

Though we each have multiple identities based on our membership in various social groups, as Vicki Spelman, author of *Inessential Woman* (1988), has pointed out, these identities cannot be separated like pop beads. For instance, we Black women cannot isolate our Blackness from our femaleness. We are always both simultaneously. Yet little research is being done on the combination. There are, of course, some exceptions, among them the work of Wellesley College professor Alice Brown-Collins (1991). Such exceptions notwithstanding, racial identity development theorists have done little to address gender. Relational theory has done little to address issues of race.

In this paper I want to talk about the connection between racial identity development theory (which essentially describes a process of moving from internalized racism to a position of empowerment based on a positively affirmed sense of racial identity) and relational theory. Specifically, it is an attempt to look at the points of intersection between the two theoretical perspectives in understanding the experiences of young Black women growing up in White communities. The examples I will use throughout the course of this discussion come from interviews I have done with young African-American

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women who grew up in predominantly White communities.

If, as Stone Center theorists suggest, connectedness is the goal of development, and those connections which are growth-enhancing are mutually empathic and mutually empowering, how do Black women in White communities develop these growth-enhancing connections as they move outside the boundaries of their families? With whom? What role does racism play in this process?

If we understand racism to be a pervasive system of advantage based on race (Wellman, 1977), which has personal, cultural, and institutional implications for our daily lives, then we must acknowledge its daily impact on interpersonal relationships. If mutual empathy requires the interest and motivation to know the other, then everyday racism often, if not always, represents the failure of mutual empathy. As Judith Jordan writes, "in order to empathize one must have a well-differentiated sense of self *in addition to an appreciation of and sensitivity to the differentness as well as the sameness of another person* (Jordan, Surrey, and Kaplan, 1991, p.29, italics mine). Yet when a person discriminates or intentionally or unintentionally acts on perceptions based on racial stereotypes, the appreciation of sameness is violated. On the other hand, when a White friend denies the impact of racism in the friend of color's life, the recognition of difference in experience is denied. As Wendy Rosen (1992) pointed out in her discussion of heterosexism, so too in the case of racism, our culture almost guarantees empathic failures, experiences of disconnection. Given this context, what are the implications for young Black women in predominantly White communities? How does their growth in connection take place?

### **A model of racial identity development**

Because many of you may not be familiar with racial identity development as conceptualized by Cross (1991), Helms (1990), and others, a brief overview may be helpful. Racial identity and racial identity development theory are defined by Helms (1990, p.3) 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 . . . racial identity development theory concerns the psychological

implications of racial-group membership, that is, belief systems that evolve in reaction to perceived differential group membership.

It is assumed that in a society where racial group membership is emphasized, the development of a racial identity will occur in some form in everyone. Given the dominant/subordinate relationship of Whites and people of color in this society, however, it is not surprising that this developmental process will unfold in different ways for the different racial groups. Because of our time limitations, my discussion will be limited to Cross's (1971, 1978, 1991) model of Black identity development. While the identity development of other people of color (Asian, Latino/a, Native American) is not included in this particular theoretical formulation, there is evidence to suggest that the process for these oppressed groups is similar to that described for African-Americans (Highlen, et al., 1988; Phinney, 1989).<sup>\*</sup> In each case it is assumed that a positive sense of oneself as a member of one's group (which is not based on any assumed superiority) is important for psychological health.

According to Cross's (1971, 1978, 1991) model of Black racial identity development, there are five stages in the process, identified as Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization/Commitment. In the first stage of Preencounter, the African-American has absorbed many of the beliefs and values of the dominant White culture, including the notion that "White is right" and "Black is wrong." Though the internalization of negative Black stereotypes may be outside her conscious awareness, the individual seeks to assimilate and be accepted by Whites and may actively or passively distance herself from other Blacks.

In order to maintain psychological comfort at this stage of development,

the person must maintain the fiction that race and racial indoctrination have nothing to do with how he or she lives life. It is probably the case that the Preencounter person is bombarded on a regular basis with information that he or she cannot

really be a  
<sup>\*</sup> While other similar models of racial identity development exist, Cross and Helms are referenced here because they are among the most frequently cited writers on Black racial identity development and White racial identity development, respectively. For a discussion of the commonalities between these and other identity development models, see Phinney (1989) and Helms (1990).