Cultural Autobiography

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A) Description of Helms White Racial Identity Development Model

Janet Helms' identity development model assumes that racism is integral to being White in America (Sue, et al., 2019). The goal, in Helms' (2015) model, is to first abandon racism, and to work toward what Helms (2015) identifies as a *nonracist White identity* (Sue, et al., 2019). Helms' two phases each have three statuses: contact, disintegration, and reintegration (efforts to abandon racism phase); and pseudo-independence, immersion/emersion, and autonomy (development of a nonracist identity phase) (Sue, et al., 2019).

Contact Status

In this status, an individual would believe that racism does not exist, and would insist that everyone in our country has a fair shot, and might claim to be color-blind, when in fact they have little exposure to people of color (Sue, et al., 2019).

Disintegration Status

In the disintegration status, as an individual becomes more aware of instances in which members of the minority are not treated the same, conflict arises between their continued belief in non-racism and the evidence to the contrary (Sue, et al., 2019). A person in this status would still insist they are not racist, for example, but might still harbor prejudices or biases toward members of a minority group (Sue, et al., 2019).

Reintegration Status

In this final status in the first phase, an individual would alleviate the tension caused by the conflict between their insistence on non-racism and clear evidence of racism by reverting to their own White identity (Sue, et al., 2019). An individual in this status would hold the White racial group as superior and the minority group as inferior and may lay the blame the minority group for any inequalities that do exist (Sue, et al., 2019).

Pseudo-independence Status

This status is usually initiated when some event occurs that makes it impossible for the individual to remain in the reintegration status (Sue, et al., 2019). The person will become more aware of injustice but may perpetuate it by trying to bring the minority group into the dominant culture (rather than changing the dominant culture) or identify with the similarities of the minority group, rather than embracing differences as well (Sue, et al., 2019).

Immersion/emersion Status

This status departs from the previous ones because the individual stops focusing on how the minority group can change, and instead focuses on their own Whiteness and how they can change (Sue, et al., 2019). Through self-exploration and focusing on combating racism and oppression, the individual will begin to develop an understanding that they did not have in previous statuses (Sue, et al., 2019).

Autonomy Status

An individual in the autonomy status celebrates diversity, is informed, accepts their responsibility regarding racism, and can comfortably engage with the idea of race and racial identity (Sue, et al., 2019).

B) My Status in Helms' White Racial Identity Model

I would describe myself as being in the *immersion/emersion* status. On the simplest level, using Helms' description, I am focused on understanding my own identity and my own Whiteness, not on assimilating minority groups into the dominant culture (Sue, et al., 2019). I understand that I hold "unearned entitlements" that I can only hold to the detriment of others (McIntosh, 1989). I am seeking new awareness and understanding (Sue, et al., 2019) through research (I am conducting a research project on the incorporation of multicultural literature into early childhood education); advocacy (attending Black Lives Matter protests with my children); and engagement in current events, primarily through NPR and *The New York Times.* When I completed the Cultural Competence Self-Assessment

Checklist (AVMA), most of my responses in the Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills category fell in the

Fairly Often or Always columns, with most of the Sometimes/Occasionally responses being due to lack of

opportunity given my relatively isolated, homogenous neighborhood. In terms of the Implicit Bias tests,

the tests I've taken show no automatic preference, even in areas where I know I hold some biases

(gender/career for example, and Christianity). That being said – while my brain understands the way the

tests work, and can beat the system, I do see the idea behind the tests, and I am confronting those

biases I know I do hold.

C) My Progression Through the Statuses

 Contact Status: I believe I was in this status until my junior year of high school. My early

childhood and elementary school years were spent in a remote part of British Columbia with zero

people of color – and my parents taught me that we are all equal, but we really didn't talk about race or

racial inequality, though it felt more like a non-issue than a silencing, as there simply were no people of

color around us and I don't remember discussing current events or politics. There was one person who

was Black in my middle and high school, who was the adopted daughter of a White couple.

 Disintegration Status: I spent the summer of my junior year in North Carolina, and it was

coincidentally also this summer that my mother hosted a young Black girl, Ebony, through a program

called The Fresh Air Fund. I would say that the way I felt about my experience in racially mixed but

segregated North Carolina, coupled with meeting Ebony and hearing about her stay with my family, fits

Helms' description of the disintegration status. While I knew in my brain that we are all equal and

believed our country had moved past racism, I was living in an area where it was clear that for the most

part, White and Black people were very segregated, and that White people were, for the most part, far

better off then Black people. And while I didn't think I was racist I did see Ebony as alarmingly Different.

 Reintegration Status: I moved to Manhattan in 1998, and maybe during these years I was in the

reintegration status. Though I don't ever remember specifically blaming members of minority groups for

their problems or idealizing Whiteness, I didn't appreciate the diversity around me – I often saw it as

foreign and loud (types of music, style of dress).

Pseudo-independence Status: I moved to Williamsburg (BK) in 2001. It was in the smaller]

community of Williamsburg (though now it's massive) that I entered the pseudo-independence status. I

wouldn't say there was any specific event, but there was incredible diversity in this small, beautiful little

neighborhood (Manhattan had felt more segregated), and I was struck with the painful realization that

my very presence was a harbinger of gentrification, and that rents would begin to skyrocket, and the

people who made my neighborhood so beautifully diverse would be forced to find another home. And

when I moved to Ft. Greene in 2005, I remained in the pseudo-independence status. Like Helms notes of

this status, I was aware of inequity. White and Black, but relatively affluent, people shopped in

neighborhood bodegas staffed by Black or Indian or other people of color. Million-dollar townhouses

were geographically surrounded by low-income housing developments, where I didn't see a single White

person. My "discomfort with [my] racist White identity" did lead me to "identify with the plight of

persons of color" (Sue, et al., 2019, p. 262), but rather than sending my children to the almost all Black

zoned public school, I applied to another lottery-based public school because, while it was still diverse

(60% Black, 40% other), the families who were attending this school were largely like me, in their

politics, their relative affluence, and their education levels. This, Helms notes, is another feature of the

pseudo-independence status (Sue, et al., 2019).

Immersion/emersion status: We have a tree stump at the bottom of our driveway, and a few

years ago a friend suggested that he could carve the Lorax out of the stump, and the word "Unless"

below it. I loved the idea but learned some Dr. Seuss books were being recalled because of racist

imagery. I read several articles, all of which made sense but none of which really changed my

perception, until I found an article that cited a study revealing that only 2% of people in Dr. Seuss books

were people of color, and all of those were "depicted through racist caricatures" (Jenkins and Yarmosky,

2019). Even then, part of me thought – well, that's not great but it doesn't negate the book's value –

until I read further.

> Those caricatures have a potent effect, even at an early age. Research shows that even at the
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> age of 3, children begin to form racial biases, and by the age of 7, those biases become fixed. …
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> If kids open books and "the images they see [of themselves] are distorted, negative [or]
>
> laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society in which
>
> they are a part."

> (Jenkins and Yarmosky, 2019)

This marks the moment that I began to move from pseudo-independence to the immersion/emersion

status (Sue, et. al, 2019). It was then that I realized my culpability and my responsibility. I thought: what

have I done to ensure that my children, who learned to read with Dr. Seuss, are seeing windows into all

the cultures of our rich nation? Nothing. I was doing nothing to ensure that my children weren't

"oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority" and I

felt "no penalty for any such oblivion" (McIntosh, 2010). I realized that I needed to take a more active

role with my children – that even if I never said a word about race, they were developing their own

racial biases from the books I was reading to them. I began at this moment, as Helms describes, to focus

on changing myself and other Whites (Sue, et al., 2019). I thought about the policy of stop and frisk that

had been common when I was in the city. I knew it was racist, and my friends and I might rant about it in

conversations on playgrounds, but I never really thought about it. What would be like if my son, who's

15, came home from school saying that a police officer had thrown him against a wall and patted down

his body? I would bring down hell on the police station – and that is my White privilege – because if I

were Black, I would be powerless to do so. What would it be like if my daughter had a gun or a taser

pulled on her at a traffic stop, or worse? I've changed my reading lists to seek understanding, updated

my children's bookshelves to reflect the diversity of our country, and race and racial identity is now

something we all talk about, as we begin to accept our responsibility to examine our own biases, stay

active and aware, and not fall back into complacency.

D) and E) How will I move to the next (highest) stage of development?

In terms of the Cultural Competence Self-Assessment checklist, I need to be more curious – I

answered "sometimes/occasionally" here, because I don't often put myself in places where I can learn

about difference. Also as listed in the checklist, I want to further build my knowledge about other

cultures by reading, listening, and scouring available resources so that I can see through other cultural

lenses, not just my own (AVMA). I tend to be shy and awkward in uncomfortable situations, and I still

hold guilt around my White privilege, and so I need to be more adaptive, as per the checklist, to "build

connections with people from whom I differ." This will take some effort, as I do live and move in a

relatively homogenous, White circle. As per Helms' model, I need to continue to build awareness of my

White identity, seek knowledge about racial and cultural differences, and I need to "walk the talk and

actively value and seek out interracial experiences," as I noted above (Sue, et. al, 2019, p. 263). Although

the autonomy status is Helms' highest stage of identity development, I feel that the development of a

nonracist White identity will be a lifelong process, as I continue to practice not just openness, but active

resistance to oppression and my own and other White biases and assumptions.

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