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Exploring White Racial Identity Development within Christian Colleges

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Abstract

Racial identity development is a growth process in which many college students engage as they regularly interact with peers and instructors from diverse backgrounds. As compositional diversity, as well as diversity of thought, lags at Christian colleges, the purpose of this qualitative, narrative study was to understand how White students who have undergone significant progress in their racial identity development, describe their process while attending predominantly White, evangelical, Christian colleges. Three participants from three Christian colleges/universities were interviewed, a total of nine, White student participants. One college was located in the Pacific Northwest and two colleges were located in Southern California. The participant's narratives revealed that there were factors that facilitated their growth process and factors that impeded their growth process regarding racial identity development. Each factor had external and internal dimensions. Four major categories were identified as the factors that facilitated and impeded racial identity development were combined with the external and internal dimensions. The content and figures in this article were developed from the researcher's doctoral dissertation (Kinoshita, 2018).

Introduction

The college years are a time when momentous racial identity development can occur in the life of a student. Much of this development is a result of interracial engagement, both spontaneous and planned, that takes place in the heterogeneous environment of a college. However, being that the majority of Christian colleges are lacking diversity in composition and thought, this process may be hindered for students. For White students in particular, Cha and Jun (2019) commented, “the cost is great to white students who are not encountering opportunities to develop a healthy consciousness of race during college. Specifically, white students should encounter opportunities to examine their own racial identity and their whiteness” (p. 66). This lack of diversity on all levels (faculty, staff, fellow students) limits White students from the interracial dialogue which is crucial for racial identity formation.

In seeking to address this gap, the central research question that drove this study was: How do White students who have undergone substantial identity development at a predominately White, evangelical Christian college describe their own process of racial identity formation?

Identity Formation in Christian Perspective

Biblical principles regarding human dignity are mentioned throughout scripture and are thus applicable to all aspects of human identity. Genesis 1:26 describes the climax of the creation order where God declared, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness,” and the culmination in Genesis 1:31 where everything God created was described as, “very good.” The fact that all humanity was created in the image of God is crucial when exploring one’s identity. Hays (2003) wrote:

So the creation of humans in the image of God has far-reaching implications for how we view each other and how we treat each other. All people of all races are created in God’s image and therefore deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. (p. 51)

Another concept that frames our perspective on God’s intention for humanity is *shalom*, “universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight — a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, all under arch of God’s love” (Plantinga, 2002, p. 15). *Shalom* and humanity’s relationship with God was broken when sin entered the world. Williams (2010) wrote:

As a result of sin, every relationship needs to be restored to the original state in which God intended before sin entered the creation. All races – not just blacks and whites – scattered throughout the entire world need to be reconciled first to God and second to one another because of the universal impact of sin. (p. 3)

Racism, then, is a direct result of the fall that continues to influence the world today. The concept of race, and consequently racism, is “a denial that all people have been created in the image of God” (Hays, 2003, p. 50).

One of the damaging ways that race manifests itself is through the establishing of hierarchies amongst people groups, with some “positioned as dominant or advantaged in relation to other groups that are subordinated or disadvantaged” (Bell, 2016, p. 9). These hierarchies can easily become accepted as “the natural order of things,” particularly when “both advantaged and targeted group members internalize their roles and accept their positions in the hierarchical relationship” (Hardiman, Jackson and Griffin, 2013, p. 31). As Tizon (2018) noted, “race became (and remains) a social construct that placed European and Euro-American at the top of the heap” (p. 41).

This racism obviously damages targeted groups, but it harms the advantaged group as well. Hardiman et al. found that “members of oppressor groups are socialized to internalize their dominant status so that it is not seen as privileged, but is experienced as the natural order of things, as rights, rather than as a consequence of systems that provide them with advantages not readily available to other groups” (2013, p. 32). As White people in U.S. society are the dominant racial group, a process of re-socialization is necessary to move from an internalized dominant paradigm to one that sees all humanity as image bearers of God and thus embraces a lifestyle of building a just society that reflects shalom.

White Racial Identity Development

Wijeyesinghe and Jackson (2012) described models of racial identity development as “tools for understanding how individuals achieve an awareness of their sense of self in relation to race within a larger social, cultural and historical context” (p. 1). In describing the ways in which the developmental process differs for White people and people of color, Helms (1995) wrote, “The general developmental issue for Whites is abandonment of entitlement, whereas the general developmental issue

for people of color is surmounting internalized racism in its various manifestations” (p. 184).

Several models have been developed over the years that address racial identity development for White people in U.S. society: Hardiman (1982, 1994), Helms (1990), Ponterotto (1988), Rowe, Bennett & Atkinson (1994), and Sue & Sue (2008). According to Sue and Sue (2008), the model by Helms “is by far the most widely cited, researched, and applied of all the White racial identity formulations” (p. 273). Because of the notoriety of the model by Helms, it is used as a theoretical framework by which this study is measured, and as such it is worthwhile to highlight the content from Helms’ model here.

Helms’s model (1990) consists of six statuses: *contact*, *disintegration*, *reintegration*, *pseudo-independence*, *immersion/emersion*, and *autonomy*. This model is structured in two main sections: Phase 1, Abandonment of racism (contact, disintegration, and reintegration), and Phase 2, Defining a positive, or non-racist White identity (pseudo-independence, immersion/emersion, and autonomy) (Helms, 1990, p. 56). Helms (1995) defined statuses as “the dynamic cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes that govern a person’s interpretation of racial information in her or his interpersonal environments” (p. 184).

Contact is the first status, in which a White person in U.S. society sees themselves as the norm for society and exhibits a “colorblind” ideology. As a result, a White person “does not consciously think of herself/himself as White” (Helms, 2000, p. 37). In this status, if interaction with people of color occurs, the likelihood of seeing and hearing about racism in U.S. society increases, which can progress into disintegration. In *disintegration*, dissonance and confusion are common, as White people are confronted with the reality that racism is a present reality, as opposed to merely a past reality. Guilt and shame begin to surface and the desire to relieve the cognitive and affective dissonance can lead to the reintegration status. In *reintegration*, the emotions of guilt and shame become overwhelming and thus White people will seek to resolve the internal dissonance that they are facing. According to Helms (2000), “the primary self-protective strategy during this stage is displacement or scapegoating; that is, resolving one’s inner turmoil by blaming people of color for one’s condition rather than Whites” (p. 31).

As their thinking on racism continues to evolve, responsibility on the part of White people begins to surface in *pseudo-independence*. This movement from reintegration to pseudo-independence signifies the

transition from Phase 1 (abandonment of racism) to Phase 2 (defining a positive or non-racist White identity) of this White identity development model. As Helms (1990) summarized this status, “the person begins to acknowledge the responsibility of Whites for racism and to see how he or she is no longer comfortable with a racist identity and begins to search for ways to redefine her or his White identity” (p. 61). As a White person moves into the *immersion/emersion* status, the emphasis centers on more self-discovery, as well as learning about how White people can be responsible in a racially unjust society. Helms (1990) wrote, “The person in this stage is searching for the answer to the questions: ‘Who am I racially?’ and ‘Who do I want to be?’ and ‘Who are you really?’” (p. 62). Finally, in *autonomy*, the White person views themselves, as well as people of color, from an internalized positive White identity that is non-racist. A person in autonomy values diversity and seeks opportunities to continuously learn and engage in ways that influence the world around them in solidarity with people of color to build a racially just society.

Even though autonomy is the last status in the model, Helms asserted, “it is best to think of it as an ongoing process. It is a process wherein the person is continually open to new information and new ways of thinking about racial and cultural variables” (p. 66). In describing advanced stages of racial identity development, Helms (1990) used the term *positive White identity*, which is essentially the “abandoning of racism and the development of a non-racist White identity” (p. 49).

It is worth noting that critics of Helms’s model emphasize that it is based on White people’s response to people of color as opposed to their own culture, as well as questioning the linear nature of the model (Rowe, et al., 1994). Howard (2006), while affirming Helms’s model, noted that it is an “approximation of actual experience” (p. 98). Howard wrote of the model, “the chronology of growth implied by her model can be helpful as a guide and as an educative tool but may not be accurate or appropriate for everyone” (p. 98). Readers should proceed with the understanding that White racial identity development, as with all racial identity development, is not a static theory. Rather it is a complex and dynamic process.

Methodology

The method for this study was narrative research, or inquiry. Stories can be an effective means to obtain data as it arises from research participants recounting their upbringing, stimulates personal and collective

processing, and highlights the paradigm shifts that may be occurring within them. Riessman (2008) addressed the relation between narratives and identity: “What the narrative accomplishes can become a point of entry for the narrative analyst. Most obviously, individuals and groups construct identity through story telling” (p. 8). Narrative inquiry thus connects well with identity development as research participants share their thought processes in response to their reflections on who they are as created in God’s image.

The data for this study was collected at three Christian colleges on the West Coast—two in Southern California and one in the Pacific Northwest. Three traditional-aged college students from each institution were interviewed, for a total of nine student participants. Of the nine participants interviewed, five were seniors, one was a junior, and three were sophomores. Six participants were female and three were male. Data was collected via one-on-one interviews of 60–90 minutes each. The researcher transcribed the interviews prior to uploading and using NVivo 11 data analysis software. Through the process of open coding (Creswell, 2013, p. 86), the researcher organized data into big picture concepts. As patterns of thoughts, feelings and growth process emerged, short words and phrases were utilized to categorize them. Shared experiences were identified as the researcher analyzed the data for common threads and repeated themes. Follow up interviews were conducted with several participants for further probing questions and clarification.

Due to the complex nature of racial identity development, a purposeful sampling was pursued (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); specifically, White students who have made significant progress in their racial identity development and could provide meaningful data from in-depth interviews. For this study to be meaningful, the targets of the study needed to be White students whose current racial identity process (both self-identified and as identified by directors of diversity programs on the various campuses) reflected holding a non-racist, positive White identity in the Helm’s model stages of pseudo-independence, immersion/emersion, and autonomy stages (Helms, 1990).

The strategies for trustworthiness were clarifying researcher bias, utilizing thick description, and negative case analysis. As the researcher has engaged in matters of race and inclusion for many years, a conscious effort was made to prioritize narratives—allowing them to speak for themselves—with care for accuracy to address potential researcher bias. The researcher developed a thick description by describing the context

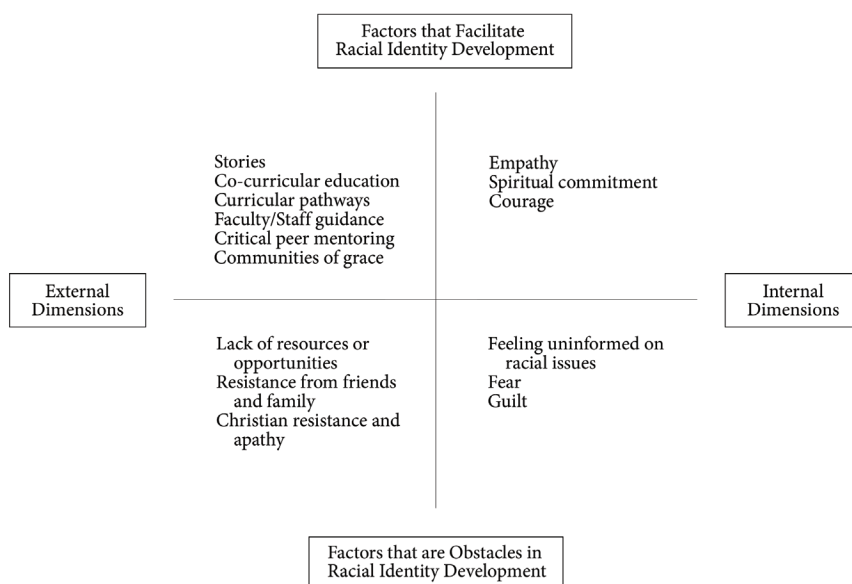
and setting for each narrative, as well as the context of the Christian colleges. Regarding negative case analysis, where any data ran contrary to general findings or racial identity models, the researcher was careful to include this in the data collected.

Results

The data that arose from the narratives are arranged in Figure 1 by two sets of factors: first those that facilitated or were obstacles to development, and within both of these factors, there were external and internal dimensions to the participant's growth process. External factors are the various ways that the participants were influenced by programs, events or interactions that stimulated their development. Internal factors are the individual cognitive and affective processes engaged introspectively.

Figure 1

Process of transformation.



External Factors That Facilitated Racial Identity Development

The external factors consisted of a variety of curricular and co-curricular gatherings where the participants were exposed to information or interactions that stimulated their thinking about race and racial identity. These included stories describing marginalization from students of color, co-curricular education opportunities, classes addressing diversity as it

related to the academic discipline, faculty/staff guidance, peer interaction, and finding safe or brave spaces to converse in community.

Stories

The stories the participants referred to were from peers who were students of color feeling marginalized within the campus climate. All nine participants were involved in student leadership and were required to attend training in which diversity was addressed. Participants were emotionally moved by the accounts of pain and oppression, which stimulated their reflection on issues of inclusivity in the institution and diversity in society.

Co-curricular and Curricular Education, Faculty/Staff Guidance

Curriculum and classes were from a broad range of disciplines where topics of diversity were addressed, specifically racial matters in the United States as it related to the particular discipline. The course content, readings, assignments and thoughtful reflection that resulted all contributed to the developmental process. Participants also mentioned guidance from faculty and co-curricular educators, who modeled a commitment to racial justice. In addition to the classroom, interaction after classes or over meals allowed for dialogue to occur on a variety of complex issues regarding race and identity.

Peer Mentoring

Each participant spoke of a student peer, or peers, that played a significant role in their racial identity development. The participants described their peer mentors as both White and students of color. White student peer mentors exemplified values of social justice and modeled Phase 2 non-racist statuses (Helms, 1990). Peer mentors who were students of color provided perspectives through sharing personal stories of feeling marginalized, as well as openly discussing their culture.

Several themes arose through the narratives of the participants that were relevant to the role of peer mentoring in the participant's racial identity development. First, trust and rapport within relationships created enough safety to be open and honest with one another. Second, stories that peers shared provided insights and perspectives into the racial identity development process that students of color experience. Third, peers who were students of color validated and encouraged perseverance for the White participants' racial identity development, particularly during the more challenging and painful parts of the process.

Communities of Grace

Finally, participants referenced the spaces where they engaged in difficult conversations on race, which one participant described as “communities of grace.” Several participants described how being in community with a diversity of people and hearing their perspectives enhanced their growth and helped them gain insights into their own racial identity. The participants often spoke of their insecurities, how conversing on matters of race in a group with diverse experiences and identities was a new experience for them. The significance of these communities of grace was that the participants felt welcomed despite their fears and felt affirmed to engage in dialogue.

Internal Factors That Facilitated Racial Identity Development

Participants experienced many thought processes and emotions as they responded to and engaged with topics of diversity and social justice. The three themes regarding these internal factors arose from the interviews: empathy, spiritual commitment, and courage.

Empathy

The vast majority of participants self-identified as highly empathetic and were deeply moved by the stories of their peers of color being marginalized and invalidated on campus. As a result, they were motivated to reflect and explore topics of diversity, systemic oppression, and justice. Empathy was also mentioned as a factor that helped them persevere through their discomfort during discussions. “Just listening to my friends and the struggles they’ve been through, that’s what gets me through and keeps me motivated,” one participant said.

Spiritual Commitment

When addressing why they continued to pursue their racial identity development despite its challenges, all participants affirmed that diversity and racial justice were values central to their faith. As they were exposed to concepts of racism in U.S. society, they were eager to address the question, “What does the Bible say about this injustice?” As a consequence of the various opportunities referenced prior, participants were exposed to biblical theology addressing the inclusive nature of the kingdom of God, which was new information to most of them. Another prominent theme mentioned often that connected their faith to conversations on race and diversity was the inclusivity exemplified by Jesus while on earth.

Courage to Persevere

As noted earlier, the participants described emotional discomfort throughout their growth process, more specifically, feeling uninformed, fearful about engaging in conversations, and experiencing high levels of guilt. Having come to the dual realization that racism exists as a reality on their campuses and spaces were created to dialogue about it, many struggled to enter these spaces wondering if they would be welcomed. Despite these emotions, one participant mentioned how she was “determined to try” engaging with the conversation because “choosing to remain ignorant seemed like the wrong choice...[like] choosing a lower standard to live by.” Her display of courage was further exemplified as she continued to elaborate:

By choosing to engage, I am choosing to grow. It is hard and difficult, but I recognize that growth does not happen in your comfort zone. So, by pushing out of my comfort zone, not only will it improve my ability to have conversations, but will improve my life in general. As I continue to expand my understanding of the world around me, I’ll be able to better interact, and influence more people.

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Despite their hesitancy, the participants ultimately chose to engage as they confronted their fears and insecurities.

External Factors That Were Obstacles to Racial Identity Development

During their time in college, participants also encountered external factors that impeded, or were obstacles to their racial identity development. The main external factors that made racial identity difficult were the lack of resources in the institution, pushback from friends and family, and resistance and apathy from their Christian community.

Lack of Resources or Opportunities

According to participants, though opportunities to converse were present on campus, they were limited. These conversations were “discovered” as a result of student leadership training, friends who initiated conversations, or sessions that arose following racial incidents on campus. Participants acknowledged that it was difficult to find faculty who were fluent in discussing diversity and that opportunities to converse in classes were sparse.

Resistance from Family

Most of the participants described their families as central to their socialization process growing up. As their awareness of diversity and racial identity grew, relationships with family members became more strained.

On trips home, participants often encountered resistance when expressing new perspectives, and this was heartbreaking to them. One participant spoke of sharing what she was experiencing:

Having parents who don't have awareness of their White racial identity is really hard. I go home for Thanksgiving and they would ask what am I learning in my classes. When I respond that I'm learning about racial justice, they disengage and move on to another topic. Sometimes my dad will make an offensive joke and then say, "Whoops, can't say that with Miss Racial Justice over here."

As participants progressed in racial identity and understanding of racism in U.S. society, their growing understanding of White privilege and systemic racism conflicted with their family's individualistic and colorblind ideology.

Another factor mentioned was how they would be accused of "going liberal" and how this was the wrong direction for evangelicals. One participant commented:

A huge barrier to my growth has been my own family. My parents love people, but being they are politically conservative, they choose not to engage in racial reconciliation. I think there are people who adhere closer to their political party as opposed to what God is saying in the Bible.

Being that many of the participants were close with their families, the resistance they encountered was especially painful as engaging in their racial identity development became a value they were very passionate about.

Resistance from Friends

A common reference from participants was how their White friends at college would push back or disengage from any conversation on diversity and Whiteness. Several participants recognized this reticence as a cultural norm. One student commented, "I think the friends I have been surrounded with have a barrier, just not being able to talk about it. It's easy just to go along with the norm." One student spoke of the attitude that she often encounters as "barriers" and yearned for a more empathetic response:

I think that is what I am looking for in lots of ways, for them to see what I am going through and to say, "I hadn't thought about that, tell me more about who you are and what you are feeling."

I think in those situations where I feel frustrated and feel those barriers, it's because I don't feel the empathy that I am wanting. When conversations with friends did occur, participants spoke of having to manage the emotional climate as their friends either invalidated the importance of diversity or sought to debate (as opposed to dialogue). Participants spoke of having to proceed with caution as many of their friends lacked the concepts and vocabulary to engage on a meaningful level.

Resistance and Apathy from the Christian Community

Another form of impediment to growth was apathy and resistance to conversations on diversity or racial justice from the Christian college culture at large. Participants mentioned that engaging in discussions on race involved stressful energy which caused students to shut down. As one said,

. . . there is sort of a culture of apathy at [our college]. People don't like to be upset here, they [dislike] conflict. I think exploring your identity as a White person involves a lot of stress. And for White people, they don't often experience this stress in their life because their existence is normalized. So, I think that sort of complacency or apathy is definitely a barrier.

Much of the impetus for participant's desiring to engage in conversations on race was that as their racial identity development progressed, so did their understanding of biblical mandates for racial justice. The cultural norm at their Christian colleges, however, was to disengage or avoid such conversations.

Internal Factors That Were Obstacles to Racial Identity Development

The internal factors that impeded racial identity formation for the participants were their inner thoughts and emotive processes, which caused hesitancy, insecurity, fear, and a sense of bearing the onus for society's racial injustice. Three major themes arose: feeling uninformed, fear of engaging in conversations, and struggles with guilt.

Feeling Uninformed and Fearful in Engaging Conversations About Race

Two internal struggles, feeling ill-informed on racial matters and feeling fearful about engaging in conversations on race, were often expressed in the same context. As the majority of the participants grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods, they lacked meaningful interaction with people of color and were raised in colorblind ideology. As a result, the majority felt ill-equipped to engage in meaningful dialogue on issues

of race. Terms such as “scared,” “nervous,” and “not wanting to mess up” were used to describe how participants felt. As a result of feeling uninformed, the majority of participants were reluctant to join events or conversations on racial justice, as they could not determine if what they were thinking—and thus would say—was racist or not. However, some participants did attend gatherings despite their fears and were able to handle their emotional discomfort.

Feelings of Guilt in Conversations on Race

Feeling guilty during conversations on racial justice was a recurring theme. Most addressed how hearing stories of pain that White privilege had caused their friends who were students of color resulted in feelings of guilt; some wished to evade these conversations as a result. One student said that learning about White privilege gave her new insights but was also painful. Two others indicated that their guilt subsided as they embodied a more developed racial identity.

Discussion

Critical Peer Mentoring

Peer influence was a common item referenced by the participants in regard to the broadening of one’s understanding about systemic inequality. Critical mentoring is a term that describes the process where the mentor seeks to build an understanding of systemic inequality through conversations that take place in the mentoring process (Weiston-Serdan, 2017). Critical peer mentoring takes the concept of critical mentoring with application on a peer level, mentoring thus takes place amongst peers with focus on building critical awareness on matters of race and injustice (Kinoshita, 2018). In this study, critical peer mentoring was among the most significant external factors relating to peer influence that facilitated racial identity development.

Implications for Practice

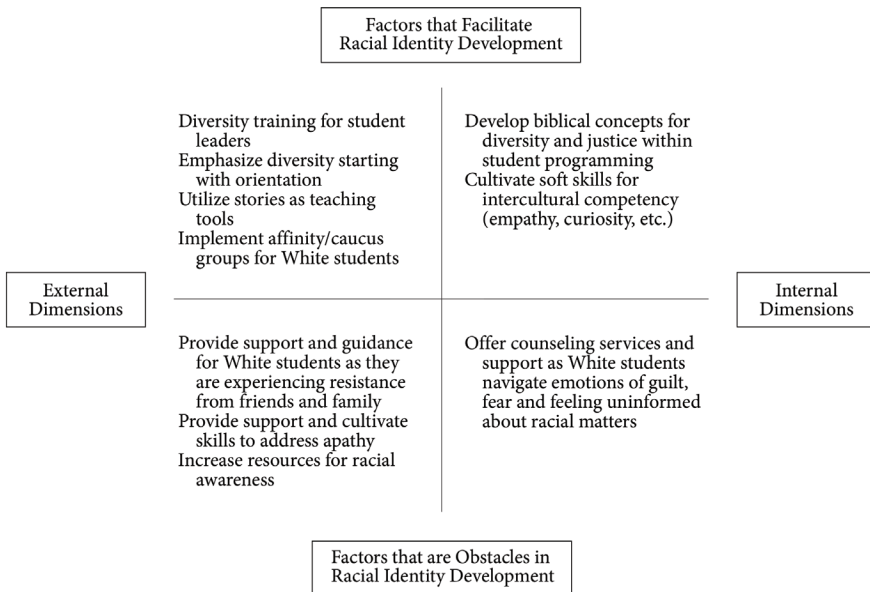
Those who engage with White students regarding their racial identity development should first reflect on their own racial identity development and prioritize their growth so as to effectively lead the process for others. Howard (2006) adds, “We cannot help our students overcome the negative repercussions of past and present racial dominance if we have not unraveled the remnants of dominance that still lingers in our minds, hearts, and habits” (p. 6). Whether educators are White or people of color, it is essential for those who are in positions to mentor and guide

in developmental capacities to personally know and do the work of racial identity development for themselves.

Student Affairs practitioners can utilize the points highlighted from this research as guiding principles for supporting White students in their racial identity development. Each quadrant from the Figure 1 diagram can serve as a basis for programmatic insights, as well as a guide for interactions, counseling or advising for students. While space does not allow for each section to be discussed, Figure 2 lists corresponding strategies to consider as implications for practice. Items offered here are not exhaustive but samplings to help stimulate further thought. Student Affairs professionals can conceive a balanced approach to facilitate growth in both the external and internal realms through programs that challenge students to develop awareness and deeper insights, as well as supporting students emotionally as they navigate the various forms of resistance they encounter from friends, family and the institutions they are a part of.

Figure 2

Suggested action items to enhance racial identity development.



Limitations

A limitation to this study was that the research participants were selected from three Christian colleges on the West Coast. Although research

participants came from a wide variety of locations across the country and abroad, their college experience reflected the culture and demographics of the West Coast (Pacific Northwest and Southern California). Interviews from the Midwest, the South, and the East Coast could provide perspectives where issues of race and White racial identity reflect a more diverse context.

Recommendations for Further Research

In the midst of conducting this research, a question often raised by the participants was “What does a positive White identity look like?” More research could be done to explore factors and trends that surface for White students in a Christian context who enter more advanced stages of development. Further research could be conducted on how this ongoing process unfolds and what challenges arise. Another item for research is to explore trends in thought and attitude within White society as U.S. demographics continue to shift. As the White population continues to decrease in numbers, will there be more or less willingness to be proactive in the empowering journey of racial identity? Lastly, as the majority of the participants self-identified as highly empathetic, it would be important to conduct further research exploring racial identity formation for those who do not identify as empathetic.

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Conclusion

Frequent interaction with diverse people is a crucial factor for racial identity development. As diversity lags at Christian colleges on all levels, this study sought to explore the question: How do White students who have experienced significant racial identity formation while attending predominantly White, evangelical Christian colleges describe their process? The data that arose from this study revealed there were factors that facilitated and were obstacles to the participant’s development. Within both of these factors there were external and internal dimensions. External factors were primarily encounters with diverse people through classes, co-curricular programs, and personal interactions. Internal factors were the participant’s processes, engaged introspectively, on cognitive and affective levels.

As the racial climate in the U.S. continuously grows polarized, engaging in racial identity development remains an important process for students during their college years. In describing their growth process, participants from this study referenced qualities such as increased critical thinking on matters of race, empathy for both oppressed and privileged

groups, and deeper relationships with students and colleagues from diverse backgrounds. Qualities as such would be of great benefit to our society today. Student affairs professionals can support the growth and development of White students by enhancing factors that facilitate racial identity, as well as being a supportive presence when students encounter resistance or obstacles to their racial identity development process.

In summary, White racial identity development is a growth process whereby a person engages in a series of paradigm shifts which results in a deconstruction of the racial hierarchy and reconstructs a new identity: a non-racist, or a positive, White identity. For the White Christian student and educator alike, this reconstruction process must include viewing oneself alongside the whole of humanity with no racial hierarchy; made whole in the image of God, flourishing and abundant in the connectedness of shalom.

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