

# Racial Identity Development

(from Talking about Race, Learning about Racism:

The Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom – Beverly Daniel Tatum)

## Five Stages (Persons of Color)

**Preencounter** The individual seeks to assimilate and be accepted by Whites, and actively or passively distances him/herself from other persons of own race. This de-emphasis on one's racial-group membership may allow the individual to think that race has not been or will not be a relevant factor in one's own achievement.

**Encounter** Movement into the Encounter phases is typically precipitated by an event or series of events that forces the individual to acknowledge the impact of racism in one's life. Faced with the reality that he or she cannot truly be White, the individual is forced to focus on his or her identity as a member of a group targeted by racism.

**Immersion/Emersion** This stage is characterized by the simultaneous desire to surround oneself with visible symbols of one's racial identity and an active avoidance of symbols of Whiteness. Individuals in this stage actively seek out opportunities to explore aspects of their own history and culture with the support of peers from their own racial background.

**Internalization** In this stage, secure in one's own sense of racial identity, there is less need to assert the "Blacker than thou" or similar attitudes often characteristic of the prior stage. Pro-one's race attitudes become more expansive, open and less defensive. The internalized individual is willing to establish meaningful relationships with Whites who acknowledge and are respectful of his or her self-definition. The individual is also ready to build coalitions with members of other oppressed groups.

**Internalization-Commitment** Those in this last stage have found ways to translate their personal sense of race into a plan of action or general sense of commitment to the concerns of their own race as a group. This is sustained over time. Their race becomes the point of departure for discovering the universe of ideas, cultures and experiences beyond their own race, in place of mistaking their race as the universe itself.

Often a person moves from one stage to the next, only to revisit an earlier stage as the result of new encounter experiences. Though the later experience of the stage may be different from the original experience.

## Six Stages (Whites)

**Contact** A lack of awareness of cultural and institutional racism, and of one's own White privilege. This stage often includes naïve curiosity about or fear of people of color, based on stereotypes learned from friends, family or the media. Those whose lives are structured so as to limit their interaction with people of color, as well as their awareness of racial issues, may remain at this stage indefinitely.

**Disintegration** Increased interaction with people of color or new information about racism may lead to a new understanding, which marks the beginning of this stage. In this stage, the bliss of ignorance or lack of awareness is replaced by the discomfort of guilt, shame and sometimes anger at the recognition of one's own advantage of being White and the acknowledgement of the role of Whites in maintaining a racist system. Attempts to reduce discomfort may include denial or attempts to change significant others' attitudes toward people of color. Societal pressure to accept the status quo may lead the individual from Disintegration to Reintegration

**Reintegration** At this point the desire to be accepted by one's own racial group, in which the overt or covert belief in White superiority is so prevalent, may lead to a reshaping of the person's belief system to be more congruent with an acceptance of racism. The guilt and anxiety may be redirected in the form of fear and anger directed toward people of color who are now blamed as the source of discomfort. It is easy for Whites to become stuck at this stage of development, particularly if avoidance of people of color is possible.

**Pseudo-Independent** Information-seeking about people of color often marks the onset of this stage. The individual is abandoning beliefs in White superiority, but may still behave in ways that unintentionally perpetuate the system. Looking to those targeted by racism to help him or her understand, the White person often tries to disavow his or her own Whiteness through active affiliation with persons of color. The individual experiences a sense of alienation from other Whites who have not yet begun to examine their own racism, yet may also experience rejection from persons of color who are suspicious of his or her motives. Persons of color moving from the Encounter to Immersion phase of their own racial identity development may be particularly unreceptive to a White person's attempts to connect with them.

**Immersion/Emersion** Uncomfortable with his or her own Whiteness, yet unable to be truly anything else, the individual may begin searching for a new, more comfortable way to be White in this stage. Learning about Whites who have been antiracist allies to people of color is an important part of this process. Whites find it helpful to know that others have experienced similar feelings and have found ways to resist the racism in their environments, and they are provided with important models for change.

**Autonomy** The internalization of a newly defined sense of self as White is the primary task of this stage. The positive feelings associated with this redefinition energize the person's efforts to confront racism and oppression in daily life. Alliances with people of color can be more easily forged in this stage because the person's antiracist behaviors and attitudes will be more consistently expressed.