

Handout 2, Four Stages of White Identity Formation: A Model

This model can be a valuable tool to help people who identify as white to better understand their identity formation. A limitation of such a model is that human beings are all different, and each of us is constantly evolving and changing. Keep in mind that these stages are meant as guidelines; they are not stagnant, but fluid: A person can remain at one stage or move between stages during their lifetime. Take care neither to use this model to label or stereotype individuals nor to generalize about people who identify as white.

1. Pre-Awareness Stage. This stage is characterized by unawareness of the privileges of white skin. Like fish not knowing they live in water, white people in the U.S. can survive without noticing the advantages and privileges of whiteness. Believing stereotypes about ethnic minorities, and not seeing race/ethnicity or cultural differences are symptoms of this stage.

2. Awareness/Guilt Stage. This stage is initiated by a personal encounter (with a person of color, or with a story in the media) that brings awareness of racism. Feelings of guilt may surface as an individual connects themselves with historical oppression of ethnic minorities by white people, causing internal discomfort. In this stage, a white person may question their loyalty to whiteness, which can cause internal conflict as well as conflict with family and friends.

3. Rejection-Disengagement Stage. Some white people respond to the internal discomfort that surfaced in the previous stage by avoiding contact with ethnic minorities, in order to make themselves feel better. Internal discomfort causes some white people to engage with ethnic minorities out of guilt and/or a need to feel good about themselves. Internal discomfort may also manifest in a person's effort to distance themselves from whiteness, such as by rejecting privileges white skin brings.

4. Integration-Reengagement. In this stage, a healthy white identity is emerging. This stage is characterized by a willingness to be critical of white/dominant culture without a self-punishing guilt. People at this stage undertake resistance and transformation of white privilege and systemic racism in collaboration with other whites and ethnic minorities, with respect and accountability. There is awareness that moving back and forth between stages is normal.