

# **RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

## **GOALS FOR THIS SESSION**

In this session we are going to focus on issues of racial identity development for white people.

## **SETTING THE CONTEXT**

At the beginning of this session we want to introduce the idea of racial identity development as it pertains to people of color and white people.

Then Bill Gardiner and Melissa Carvill-Ziemer will share reflections on their personal stages of racial identity development.

## **RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN PEOPLE OF COLOR**

We will start by discussing racial identity development in people of color. Beverly Daniel Tatum, in her book Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting together in the Cafeteria? ” and Other Conversations about Race (Basic Books, 1997) writes

“Learning to spot ‘that stuff’ – whether it is racist, or sexist, or classist – is an important skill for children to develop. It is as important for my Black male children to recognize sexism and other forms of oppression as it is for them to spot racism. We are better able to resist the negative impact of oppressive messages when we see them coming than when they are invisible to us. While some may think it is a burden to children to encourage this critical consciousness, I consider it a gift. Educator Janie Ward calls this child raising process, ‘Raising resisters.’ And there are infinite opportunities to do so.”(p.47)

William Cross, in his book Shades of Black: Diversity in African American Identity (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991) describes these stages of identity development for people of color:

### PRE-ENCOUNTER

Children are soaking up society’s messages about race. Unless parents or teachers intentionally critique these messages, children in general will not critically evaluate them.

### ENCOUNTER

Usually in early adolescence, an event or series of events begins to make clear the impact of race on one’s personal life. The individual begins to grapple with what it means to be a member of a group targeted by racism.

### IMMERSION/EMERSION

Surrounding oneself with symbols of one’s racial identity. Learning about one’s history and culture. Associating with one’s racial group.

## INTERNALIZATION

One emerges from Immersion/Emersion with a sense of security about one's racial identity.

## INTERNALIZATION COMMITMENT

This sense of security translates into activism about the concerns of one's racial group.

## **RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN WHITE PEOPLE**

"The task for Whites is to develop a positive White identity based in reality, not on assumed superiority. In order to do that each person must become aware of his or her Whiteness, accept it as personally and socially significant, and learn to feel good about it, not in the sense of a Klan member's "White pride," but in the context of a commitment to a just society." (Dr. Janet Helms as quoted in Beverly Tatum, Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting together in the Cafeteria? p. 94.)

In her book Black and White Identity Development: Theory, Research and Practice (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1990) Janet Helms proposes the following theory of identity development for white people.

## CONTACT OR PRE-ENCOUNTER

Whites internalize the messages of the dominant society. Whites learn that being white is "normal" and being white makes one superior to people in other racial groups.

## DISINTEGRATION (ENCOUNTER)

Events and/or relationships begin to make white children, adolescents, or adults aware of the reality of racism. Racism becomes visible. This often brings discomfort.

## REINTEGRATION

The pressure to conform to the norms of the society is strong. Acting against racism may have costs. There is a tendency to slip backwards, often blaming the victims of racism or their life circumstances. Whites will also attempt to distance themselves from the white collective saying "But I am an individual." or "I don't do those things!" They may choose to identify with some other marginalized group.

## PSEUDO-INDEPENDENCE

Beginning to understand institutional and cultural racism, but not yet sure about what to do about it or how to be an effective ally to people of color in the struggle for racial justice.

## IMMERSION/EMERSION

Surrounding oneself with positive white anti-racist people and symbols; learning about white antiracist history and identity.

## AUTONOMY

Separating from the values of white supremacy. Being willing to engage in anti-racism efforts in solidarity with people of color and other white anti-racist allies.

## COMPARING THE STAGES OF RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT FOR WHITE PEOPLE AND PEOPLE OF COLOR

### WHITE PEOPLE

PRE-ENCOUNTER

ENCOUNTER

REINTEGRATION

PSEUDO INDEPENDENCE

IMMERSION/EMERSION

AUTONOMY

### PEOPLE OF COLOR

PRE-ENCOUNTER

ENCOUNTER

IMMERSION/EMERSION

INTERNALIZATION

INTERNALIZED COMMITMENT

## ISSUES OF RACIAL IDENTITY USING THE PERSPECTIVES OF BEVERLY TATUM

Beverly Tatum is the author of the book Why are all the Black Kids Sitting together in the Cafeteria? (1997) These notes are a summary of an article Dr. Tatum wrote for The Harvard Educational Review entitled, "Talking about Race, Learning about Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom" (1992) as well as some reflections from her book previously cited. This additional material is provided for participants who would like more detailed information about the stages of racial identity development.

## IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT FOR YOUTH OF COLOR

Tatum makes use of William Cross's categories of development for youth of color.

### 1. PRE-ENCOUNTER

Youth of color internalize negative stereotypes that the dominant white culture has of them. Youth of color absorb many of the beliefs and values of the dominant white culture. Youth of color may seek to assimilate and be accepted by whites and actively or passively distance themselves from other people of color.

### 2. ENCOUNTER

An event or series of events forces the individual to acknowledge the impact of racism in their lives. A person of color recognizes they can't be truly white.

### 3. IMMERSION/EMERSION

In this stage the person learns about their people, and the history of their people. They surround themselves with visible symbols of their own racial identity group. They actively avoid symbols of

whiteness. They unlearn internalized stereotypes. The support of peers from the same racial group is very important. Anger and resentment about racism and a desire to denigrate white people are also part of this process (p. 11 of article).

In her book Tatum describes the need for youth of color to develop an oppositional identity (pgs. 59 and 60). This helps protect youth of color from further offenses. They develop their own music, dress, and speech so as to not “act white.” They develop a supportive community for one another. Tatum discusses how youth of color may be snubbed by other youth of color for hanging around white youth or living in the suburbs (p.67).

#### 4. INTERNALIZATION

Tatum writes that the emergence from immersion marks the beginning of internalization. Secure in one’s own sense of racial identity, there is less need to assert the “blacker than thou” attitude often characteristic of the immersion stage. While still managing his/her connection with black peers, the internalized individual is willing to establish meaningful relationships with whites who acknowledge and are respectful of his/her emerging self definition. The individual is also ready to build coalitions with member of other oppressed groups (p.12).

#### 5. COMMITMENT

A personal sense of blackness is translated into a plan of action or a general sense of commitment to the concerns of blacks as a group, which is sustained over time.

### **IMAGE OF THE SPIRAL**

Tatum emphasizes this process is more like a spiral than a straight line. A person may revisit an earlier stage as the result of a new encounter. However, the later experience of the earlier stage may be different from the original experience the person had of it.

### **IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT FOR WHITE PEOPLE**

In chapter six of her book Beverley Tatum uses Janet Helms description of the six stages of white identity formation.

#### 1. CONTACT (PRE-CONTACT)

The person is not aware of herself as a racial being and only minimally aware of race and racial issues as they shape his or her life. Whites see them selves as the norm. Whites have curiosity about or fear of people of color based on stereotypes from family, friends, and media. Whites have highly internalized stereotypes. Whites think of racism as prejudice. They do not see the systemic nature of racism. They lack awareness of cultural and institutional racism and of white privilege.

At this stage whites may adopt a “colorblind” perspective enabling them to interact with other people presumably without regard to color. Even in the absence of direct contact with people of other racial groups, whites come to develop a sense of themselves in relation to racialized “others.”

## 2. DISINTEGRATION (ENCOUNTER)

Whites begin to see that race is a problem. They realize how much their life and the lives of people of color are affected by racism. Whites come to realize that race does matter, that racism does exist, and that they are white. The experience shatters the person's ego structure – he or she feels they are falling apart—hence the term disintegration. There is a loss of innocence. Whites have discomfort and awareness of their prejudices. Whites experience guilt, shame, and sometimes anger. There is recognition that whites are part of “the system”.

In this process whites can go one of two ways: whites can go into denial, convincing themselves that racism doesn't exist and it's the fault of the victims (a process which often leads to withdrawal). If they begin to speak out, the white community will put on pressure to conform, leading to collusion. There is a fear of being rejected by other white people. Alternatively, white people can “turn the discomfort into action.” Those of us who are white need to learn to feel comfortable with the discomfort we experience here if we are to move forward and make a change.

## 3. REINTEGRATION

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.

As whites we can go back into amnesia. Then we will blame the victim. Tatum writes, “If there is a problem with racism, then people of color must have done something to cause it. And if you would just change your behavior, the problem would go away.” (p. 101 Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting together in the Cafeteria?)

Whites may experience fear and anger toward people of color because they are causing discomfort. Whites want to be seen as individuals rather than as members of a white group. Whites ask the question: Don't we deserve our position? There is a reinforcement of the belief in white superiority.

Helms suggests that it is relatively easy for whites to become stuck at the reintegration stage of development, particularly if avoidance of people of color is possible. There is lots of support in white society for doing this.

## 4. PSEUDO INDEPENDENCE

Whites want to escape whiteness by actively affiliating with people of color. Whites are uncomfortable with their whiteness but are unable to be truly anything else. Whites may pretend to be people of color or be overly eager to associate with people of color in an attempt to escape their whiteness. Whites turn to people of color looking for solutions. But people of color do not have the answers for our internalized whiteness. We have to figure these out as white people.

Trying to associate with people of color can become another way of not dealing with our whiteness. Tatum writes “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 people of color that are suspicious of his or her motives. Students of color moving from the Encounter or Immersion phase of their own racial identity may be particularly unreceptive to the white person's attempt to connect with them” (p. 16 in

article). Strong feelings at this stage can include guilt and shame. This is sometimes known as the guilty white liberal phenomenon.

### 5. IMMERSION/EMERSION

Whites search for a new and more comfortable way of being white. Whites seek to replace racially related myths and stereotypes with accurate information. Whites no longer look to people of color for solutions of the issues of whiteness. Whites look to other whites to deal with whiteness and the fact that racism is a white problem.

White people seek help in unlearning racism and finding ways to fight for justice. Whites seek new role models. We begin to identify important examples of resistance and identify white resisters of racism. Whites form identity based support groups or caucuses.

### 6. AUTONOMY

White people successfully implement the issues they began working on in the Immersion/Emersion phase. Whites take steps to develop a positive and constructive racial identity. They incorporate a newly defined white anti-racist identity. Whites join with people of color to dismantle white power and privilege in institutions. Whites form alliances with people of color and strive to be good accountable allies with them.

## **BILL GARDINER'S PERSONAL RACIAL IDENTITY JOURNEY**

### PRE ENCOUNTER – PRE CONTACT

Right up through my days in college I was in pre-encounter or pre-contact.

I was only minimally aware of race as an issue.

As I recounted in last week's session, I internalized the messages about white superiority from my family, the media, the schools, and my church.

I was learning prejudices and internalizing white supremacy. I was made into a racist. In fact I am still dealing with the power of this socialization. I still think of myself as a recovering racist.

While in Divinity School from 1964-1967, I became more aware of the struggle for civil rights that was happening around the country.

### MY EXPERIENCE OF ENCOUNTER

In 1967 I went to Washington, DC to serve as Assistant Minister at All Souls Church. One of my primary reasons for going there was to serve the African American people living in the community. But I was entering the situation with a paternalistic attitude.

I was totally unprepared to work in the community. In fact, all of the socialization into whiteness that I experienced when I was growing up was a huge barrier in my being able to work effectively with the people. Nothing that I had learned in my previous 25 years was of much use in working for change

I think of my five years spent in Washington as one long encounter –a super nova encounter. And the big encounter was punctuated by daily encounters as I made contact with people of color from different walks of life. I met with folks in the community suffering from family and personal crises. I spent time with people of color who were members of the congregation. I worked with African American leaders in the community. I became engaged with leaders of the Unitarian Universalist Association Black Caucus. These were all different opportunities for meeting and “encounter.”

I learned the realities of life in the community and the devastating impact of racism on the African American people living there. All the stores were owned by whites. All of the police were white. Most of the social workers were white. This was truly a community with little power.

During the two years I experienced a profound personal crisis. Janet Helms describes this as a state of disintegration, confusion, and anxiety. That is exactly the way that I felt. I began to see the depth of my own personal prejudice and my own internalization of white superiority.

I actually went through a spiritual crisis that played itself out for several years. A spiritual crisis comes when there is a conflict between your core values and how you are actually living your life. I wanted to be in right relationship. I wanted to be working for justice. But I couldn't be in right relationship because my prejudices and my internalized white superiority were getting in the way.

## REINTEGRATION

Helms describes the possibility of going back into the white community, and trying to forget what has happened. She describes this move as going back into denial and amnesia.

That did not happen for me. In part it was because I served the church for five years so I was immersed in the situation. Of course I could have left, but I never felt compelled to do so.

During this time the Empowerment Movement happened in our denomination. There was a black caucus called Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC). And, there was a white support group called FULLBAC (Full Support for the Black UU Caucus). I was a member of FULLBACK, because it seemed like the right thing to do.

We in FULLBAC were supposed to be good allies for the members of BUUC. We were also asked to deal with white institutional racism and work with white people on these issues. We nodded politely and agreed with the challenge put forth by our brothers and sisters in BUUC. But we were totally unprepared to take on that challenge. We did not have a clear understanding of the core issues of white supremacy, white privilege, or white identity. And, we had no strategies for organizing other white people.

But we did have meetings of our local FULLBAC group and we did discuss with one another what was happening in the denomination and in our congregations regarding issues of black empowerment at the time. That was a help. And we did find ways of supporting one another.

## PSEUDO INDEPENDENCE

Helms talks about whites wanting to escape their whiteness by affiliating with people of color or trying to act like people of color. I remember doing some of that but not in a major way. I found that doesn't work

because I was still very white. Besides I was too caught in my internalization of white superiority to be very effective acting like a person of color.

What I did do was turn to people of color looking for answers. Margaret Edwards was serving as Religious Education Director of the church at that time. She was a person I could go to. She was particularly helpful in helping me to work through my prejudices against people of color. But she could not help me with my internalized whiteness.

A couple of years after I arrived, David Eaton became the Senior Minister at the church. David was the first African American called to be a minister in a major pulpit in the Unitarian Universalist Association. David was a critical mentor for many people in my generation. He certainly was for me.

### IMMERSION/EMERSION

But I did not reach the immersion-emersion stage while I was in Washington. I did not find a comfortable way of being white.

I did not have a useful way of understanding whiteness or a white community that could actually support me in doing in depth racial identity work.

In 1972 I went to Nashville to serve at the First Unitarian Universalist Church. I went to work on racial justice issues. The city was going through desegregation at the time and I was specifically called by the search committee to do that work.

In 1980 I went to the Unitarian Society in Germantown in Mt. Airy, Philadelphia – a fully integrated community - and while I was there I also worked on a variety of racial justice issues.

But I did not work on issues of white supremacy, racism in white controlled institutions, or white privilege. I did not deal with my own internalized white superiority.

NOTE: We need to do both – work on racial justice issues and work on the issues of white supremacy. It is not a matter of either/or but one of both/and.

In 1990 I went to work on the staff of the Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston. At that time the denomination was just beginning to reengage with issue of racism after twenty years of silence following the Empowerment Controversy.

The UUA was looking for an organization that could bring an analysis of racism and an organizing strategy for making change. This is when the UUA began a relationship with Crossroads Ministry. Crossroads has since changed its name to Crossroads Anti-racism Organizing.

During the Crossroads two and a half day training, there was discussion of the issue of white privilege, the internalization of whiteness, and how white supremacy operates at a personal, institutional, and cultural level. I was brought back to the issues about internalized white superiority that had been raised for me over twenty years earlier during the Empowerment Controversy.



As I participated in these training I went through another major encounter. But now there was a container and an analysis for me to really deal with my internalized white superiority. Here there were people of color and others whites holding me accountable for doing this deeper work.

Again I experienced disintegration, confusion, and anxiety as I tried to sort through the many levels of my socialization into whiteness. For me this period in the early 1990s was as emotionally difficult and as challenging as days when I was serving as a minister in Washington in the late sixties.

During this time, I began to identify how I was made into a racist and how I internalized white supremacy. As part of this process I began to identify some of the important parts of my personal racial identity journey. I shared some of the stories that are part of that journey in the last on line session. I described how I was socialized into racism by my family, schools, media, and my religious community. This is the time in my life when I got in touch with the meaning of these early experiences.

Two things pushed me to go deeper to confront my internalized superiority. One was an analysis of racism and white supremacy which Crossroads provided. Here was an understanding of white supremacy, white privilege, racism as a misuse of white power, and the internalizing power of race.

The other was work done in white caucus. Here was a community that would both challenge me and support me. Here I could explore with other white people the difficulties and challenges of being white in America. Here I could reflect on how my internalized superiority prevented me from being an effective ally. Working together members of the white caucus could envision new possibilities for developing a positive white identity.

### AUTONOMY

I am still on the journey. Every day I have opportunities to learn how to be accountable. I strive to be a good ally. That means learning to listen and follow.

I also try to provide leadership in working with my white sisters and brothers as we try to use our white privilege in a positive way. Here I am more outspoken and direct.

You can see these are different, but complimentary leadership styles.

Have I reached autonomy? I think only history and the anti-racist community can make that kind of judgment.

## **MELISSA CARVILL-ZIEMER'S PERSONAL RACIAL IDENTITY JOURNEY**

### PRE ENCOUNTER – PRE CONTACT

Though the first five years of my life was lived in a multicultural, urban context, no one in my life except the people on Sesame Street acknowledged race. Without overstating its significance, I do want to acknowledge the impact of Sesame Street in my formative years. I watched the show daily and was undoubtedly influenced by its pro multi-cultural diversity message. Having said that, I would classify the first eight years of my life as pre encounter, though not pre contact.

### MY EXPERIENCE OF ENCOUNTER

When I think about my first conscious encounter of racism, I think about the third grade experience I described in an earlier session. Though I didn't have the language or the skill to voice my discomfort or object to the Crisco and cocoa concoction, I was uncomfortable. I found the experience confusing and unsettling enough to be memorable.

Throughout my childhood I can identify other mini-encounters. Along with the racism expressed by my mother's husband, I encountered racism on the playgrounds and in the classroom that made me aware that people of color were treated poorly in comparison to white people. Though I was uncomfortable with this understanding I didn't have the slightest idea how to challenge that reality.

### REINTEGRATION

During reintegration people find a way to conform to the norms of society. Though some do so by blaming the victims of racism, I reintegrated instead by distancing myself from those white people I perceived to be racist. I coped with my understanding of racism by seeing myself as different from the white people who were perpetrating racism.

### PSEUDO INDEPENDENCE:

My first formal introductions to race and racism came when I was in college. I took a women's studies class my first year of school and a history of jazz class my second year. In each class I began to learn just a little bit about the societal impact of racism on people of color. With these learning experiences I was going through another encounter.

I described my experience with the National Coalition Building Institute at Smith College as another encounter experience. That encounter was significant enough to motivate me to want to make change and to learn a different way to be in the world. However, I still did not have the resources or support to find another way.

I took advantage of classes and coursework to deepen my understanding of the history and experience of people of color in our country. As a women's studies major I was encouraged to explore and analyze sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism and other oppressions.

And then I had the opportunity to spend a summer as an intern at a social service agency serving the African American community on the West Side of Chicago. This experience was a major encounter. Every day as I took public transportation from Hyde Park across the city to the West Side, I noticed the color of humanity changing around me. I noticed that there were more people of color in the poorer parts of the

city. I noticed that more people of color were on the buses and trains with me while more white people were driving the cars outside my window.

In my work with the agency's clients, I was overwhelmed by the impact of racism on their lives. I saw the ways in which racism limited educational opportunities, professional opportunities, housing choices, transportation options and access to quality health care. I saw how racism was manifest environmentally and in the criminal justice system. I saw everything I had been studying written on the bodies of people I was coming to know and care for and I was overwhelmed.

I continued to study when I returned for my last year of school, but then a crisis in my own personal life motivated me to retreat. I spent three years after my graduation focusing on my own mental and spiritual health. Though I was still committed to all I had learned, I felt I was not equipped to deal with anything but my own well being. As a white person, I had this privilege.

### IMMERSION/EMERSION

When I emerged from my three year retreat, I devoted myself to finding a job working against domestic and sexual violence. I was blessed to be hired by the New England Learning Center for Women in Transition (NELCWIT) in Greenfield, MA. As an intentionally anti-racist, multi-cultural organization, NELCWIT required all employees to participate in a two and half day training led by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. The People's Institute does work very similar to Crossroads which Bill has mentioned in his reflections. My training with the People's Institute deepened not only my understanding and analysis of racism, but also provided me with tools and a direction for further work.

Along with my white co-workers I participated in a weekly white caucus in which we challenged and supported each other in our work against racism. And in our day to work each of us was encouraged to look at not only our interactions but also our policies and practices with an anti-racist lens. My time working at NELCWIT was some of the best anti-racist training I have ever had.

Concurrently I became involved in a community based anti-racism group and in the anti-racism group forming at my Unitarian Universalist congregation. My immersion continued when I went to theological school as I served on my schools anti-racism organizing team and during my ministerial internship as I worked with that congregation's anti-racism transformation team.

In the congregation I currently serve I have found ways to incorporate anti-racist activism and this work on transforming our whiteness. I have also found my affiliation with Allies for Racial Equity to be both supportive and challenging for me as I continue to learn and explore how to be an effective, accountable ally and how to work for meaningful change.

### AUTONOMY

This is the work of tomorrow. By doing our work today we are making it possible for the next generation to begin to imagine a new way.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Where are you now on your journey of white identity development?

Reflect on as many of the different stages of white identity development as you can.

What do you need to do to take the next step on your journey?

Apply the theory of racial identity development to your congregation or community. What is the racial identity of the congregation? What have been the congregation's encounters, disintegrations, and re-integrations? (Thanks to Rev. Josh Pawelek for this insight.)