An overview of Black racial identity theories: Limitations and considerations for future theoretical conceptualizations

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Abstract
This article provides an overview of the major Black racial identity-development theories to date, summarizing the general strengths and limitations of these models. In addition, the authors discuss salient issues that should be considered in future conceptualizations of Black racial identity development.

Key words: Black, African American, Identity, Racial identity, Racial identity theory, Black racial identity development

The first theories of Black racial identity emerged in the psychological literature over 25 years ago. Some of these initial theories (e.g., G. G. Jackson & Kirschner, 1973; Vontress, 1971) were developed primarily to address (a) racial issues that were thought to influence the psychotherapy process, and (b) the assumption that assimilation by Black individuals was necessary for healthy psychological adjustment (Helms, 1990). Other pioneer theories (e.g., Cross, 1971, 1978; B. Jackson, 1975; Thomas, 1971) were formulated in an attempt to define healthy Black identity development, asserting that Black people's overidentification with White culture is psychologically unhealthy (Helms, 1990). Although each of these perspectives served different needs and purposes, they both appeared to represent explorations of the Black identity-development process, and responses to centuries of racism that have been factors in most theories and institutions of psychological study (Carter, 1995; Guthrie, 1976).

Some Black racial identity theories have focused on the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes associated with being Black in American society. These theories (e.g., Cross, 1971, 1978, 1991, 1995; Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 1996; Helms, 1984; B. Jackson, 1975; Thomas, 1971) have been labeled models of Nigrescence or Black racial identity. In essence, such theories reflect the notion that healthy racial identity development is achieved when Blacks progress through a series of linear stages commencing with degrading thoughts and feelings about themselves and other Blacks (accompanied by idealized beliefs about Whites), and ending with internalized positive feelings about themselves, other Blacks, and other racial and ethnic groups. Since their original conceptualizations, some of these stage theories have been revised and updated to include more dynamic notions of the identity-development process for Blacks (e.g., Cross, 1991, 1995; Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 1996; Helms, 1990, 1994a, 1994b, 1995; Parham, 1989; White & Parham, 1990).

Other theoretical models (e.g., Baldwin [a.k.a. Kambon], 1980, 1981, 1984; Kambon, 1992; Myers, 1988, 1993) have been proposed as alternatives to the traditional stage models of conceptualizing Black racial identity. These theories were developed to explain Black identity and Black con-
sociusness processes for Black Americans. These models have tended to focus on the qualitative experiences of being Black by considering the individual differences and experiences among Blacks, in addition to the perceptions of Blacks regarding their history, culture, and current standing in American society.

Despite the significant contributions of Black identity theories, there are several shortcomings of existing conceptualizations. In this article, we briefly highlight the major Black racial identity theories that have been proposed to date and discuss some limitations of these models. We will also identify issues that theorists may wish to consider in conceptualizing future Black racial identity models.

Black Racial Identity Theories

Over the last quarter century, many theorists (e.g., Akbar, 1979; Baldwin, 1980, 1981; Cross, 1971, 1978, 1991, 1995; Cross & Flagen-Smith, 1996; Helms, 1984, 1986, 1990, 1994a, 1994b, 1995; B. Jackson, 1975; G. G. Jackson & Kirschner, 1973; Kambon, 1992; Myers, 1988, 1993) have delineated models to address the Black identity-development process. These conceptualizations are generally categorized into two main approaches. First, the mainstream approaches are characterized primarily by their focus on cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes that Blacks undergo in order to achieve a healthy racial identity. These approaches, often referred to as Nigrescence racial identity models, have received a great deal of attention in psychological writings. In contrast, the underground approaches are characterized by the assumption that, despite some of the oppressive experiences of Blacks, there are positive cultural influences that may help Blacks to shape a healthy self-concept without first having internalized a negative view of self. The term “underground,” as it relates to these conceptualizations of Black identity development, has been used to reflect the fact that these types of theories generally have received little attention from the broader psychological community in comparison to the mainstream approaches (Gaines & Reed, 1994, 1995; Sellers et al., 1997).

Because of the large number of Black racial identity theories developed over the years, it is not possible to discuss each model in detail due to space constraints. Hence, the primary mainstream and underground approaches that have been used to conceptualize healthy Black racial identity development in psychological literature will be summarized below.

Mainstream Approaches

Among the first stage theories of Black identity development was a model conceptualized by Thomas (1971). In his articulation of Black racial identity development, Thomas described a five-stage process whereby Blacks began to shed a poor self-worth and move toward embracing a positive Black self-definition. Stage one of his model, Withdrawal, is manifested when an individual moves away from depending on Whites for self-definition and toward the development of a new Black identity. The second stage, Testifying, is characterized by confronting the anxiety related to becoming a self-defined Black person. Information Processing, the third stage, refers to the process of acquiring knowledge about Black heritage and the Black experience. The fourth stage, Activity, is characterized by an individual’s involvement in a host of cultural activities in order to find communion within the Black experience. The final stage, Transcendence, is manifested when an individual becomes relatively free of personal conflicts regarding issues such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and age.

One of the most popular conceptualizations of Black identity development in the psychological literature was the “Nigrescence” model formulated by Cross (1971). Nigrescence refers to the developmental process of becoming Black (Cross, 1991, 1995). Cross (1971, 1978) proposed a four- or five-stage model wherein each stage was characterized by self-concept issues that had implications for a Black person’s feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Helms, 1990). The first stage of the model, Pre-Encounter, is characterized by (a) the belief that Blacks are basically inferior to Whites, and (b) the tendency to internalize Eurocentric values, definitions, and concepts. The next stage, Encounter, is marked by a shift from the anti-Black sentiments of the first stage toward a posture that is pro-Black. This shift is believed to be brought about as a result of some type of external event that challenges the Eurocentric perspective previously expressed by the individual. Immersion-Emersion, the third stage, reflects an all-consuming engagement in the Black experience, accompanied by the denigration of Whiteness and Eurocentricity; an individual in this stage is generally involved in activities or organizations that endeavor to improve the present conditions of Black people. The next stage, Internalization, characterizes an individual who has achieved a positive and personally relevant Black racial identity. The last stage of Cross’s (1971) model, Internalization/Commitment, reflects a behavioral style that seeks to challenge and eliminate systems of oppression for Blacks and other people. Subsequent racial identity theorists combined the Internalization and Internalization/Commitment phases of Cross’s original model to create a four-stage model of racial identity development (i.e., Pre-encounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization) (Helms, 1990). Parham and Helms (1981) operationalized Cross’s (1971) Nigrescence model by creating the Racial Identity Attitudes Scale (RIAS). This 50-item scale was developed to measure attitudes that Blacks may harbor about themselves, other Blacks, and Whites as they cycle through the four stages of identity development.

Helms (1984, 1986, 1990) modified Cross’s (1971) original Nigrescence model in several ways. First, she suggested that each stage be considered a distinct “world view” or cognitive template that people use to organize information (particularly racial) about themselves, other people, and...
institutions. Second, she asserted that it might be useful for people to think of each of the stages as bimodal (i.e., as having two potentially distinguishable forms of expression) (see Helms, 1990, for a detailed description). Cross (1991) also amended his original conceptualization to broaden each stage to include more diverse experiences. Helms (1994a, 1994b, 1995) further refined Cross's (1971, 1991) Nigrescence model, in part, by reconceptualizing the stages as "ego-statutes" in order to reflect a more fluid process of identity development; she contended that a more mature ego status is denoted by an internal measure of self-worth and racial identity. More recently, Cross and Phagen-Smith (1996) updated Cross's (1971, 1991) previous Nigrescence conceptualizations by (a) delineating the Black identity-development process across the life span, and (b) linking Nigrescence to Erikson's ego-identity development stages.

Several years after Cross's (1971) original Nigrescence model, Jackson (1975) proposed a four-stage conceptualization of Black racial identity development. The first stage of the model, passive-acceptance, is characterized by acceptance of and conformity to White cultural, social, and institutional standards and values. Active-resistance, the second stage, is manifested in the rejection of White standards and values, accompanied by feelings of anger toward White society. The third stage, redirection, reflects the development of values, standards, and traditions that are viewed as uniquely "Black"; this stage is also characterized by diminished anger toward Whites, social isolation from Whites, and pride in one's identity and culture. Internalization, the final stage, is marked by an acceptance of healthy aspects of American society, along with a commitment to resisting "toxic" elements of American culture (e.g., racism and oppression) (Sue & Sue, 1990).

**Underground Approaches**

As alternatives to the mainstream approaches to conceptualizing Black racial identity, the underground approaches were formulated to describe the Black personality in radically different terms. One such approach was proposed by Baldwin (1980, 1981, 1984; Kambon, 1992), who asserted that the Black personality consists of two primary components: the African self-extension orientation and African self-consciousness. The African self-extension—orientation component symbolizes the essential organizing principle of the Black personality system, and is an innate, unconscious psychological disposition that provides coherence, continuity, and spirituality to the basic behaviors and psychological functioning of Black people. The second component of the African personality system, African self-consciousness, represents the conscious expression of the African self-extension orientation (Baldwin, Brown, & Rackley, 1990).

Baldwin (1980, 1981, 1984) and indicated that African self-consciousness has an important function in defining normal psychological functioning of the Black personality. The four basic characteristics of African self-consciousness are as follows: (a) one recognizes one's African identity and cultural heritage, and sees value in obtaining self-knowledge; (b) one places African survival and proactive development as one's first priority; (c) one has respect for and actively perpetuates all things African; and (d) one recognizes the oppositional and detrimental nature of racial oppression to Black survival and actively resists it. Thus, when these basic characteristics are fully functioning in the Black personality, they produce self-affirming behaviors among people of African descent (Baldwin et al., 1990). According to Baldwin (1980, 1981, 1984), under natural conditions both the African self-extension orientation and the African self-consciousness operate as one unified or undifferentiated process. One of the primary contributions of the African self-consciousness model is that it provides some direction for reconnection with African origins, and underscores the need for Blacks to learn about their African heritage in order to undo the effects of deracination. Baldwin and Bell (1985) developed the African Self-Consciousness Scale to empirically measure African self-consciousness as delineated in Baldwin's (1980, 1981, 1984) theory.

Another underground approach to Black identity development was formulated by Myers (1988, 1993). The two primary underlying tenets of her theory are (a) self-knowledge is the basis of all knowledge, and (b) human and spiritual networks provide the means through which people of African descent achieve their goals. She also theorized that among traditional African people, spirit and matter are one in the same, and any attempts to separate the spiritual from the material result in failure of human life to achieve harmony and peace. Myers (1988, 1993) further postulated that an "optimal" (i.e., African-centered) belief system places a premium on peace and synchrony, whereas a "suboptimal" belief system values quantification and competition; a suboptimal belief system leads to the societal "isms" (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, etc.) that exist throughout Western society.

**Shortcomings of Mainstream and Underground Approaches**

Both the mainstream and underground approaches to conceptualizing Black racial identity development have a great deal to offer anyone who wishes to understand the impact of oppression on people of African descent. There are some limitations to these approaches that are worth acknowledging, however. First, mainstream approaches may be interpreted as depicting Black identity development as a linear process. Second, the mainstream approaches tend to generalize the stages of racial identity development to a broad range of Black individuals. Third, there is nothing explicitly imbedded in the mainstream approaches indicating that knowledge and awareness of other world views (e.g., Afrocentricity and African axiology) exist as alternatives to idealizing Whiteness. Another area of concern is that mainstream approaches may tend to conceptualize Black culture
as representing a situational way of reacting to oppression, as opposed to a coherent and enduring system of African and Black American cultural practices.

With regard to the underground approaches to conceptualizing Black identity development, a primary criticism of these theories is that they tend to lack a sufficient discussion about how racism may shape the perspectives and experiences of Black individuals. Consequently, some individuals believe that these approaches may contribute to the internalization of racism in Black Americans, and may limit their potential accordingly.

Sellers et al. (1997) asserted that the most comprehensive understanding of the Black identity-development process may come from applying both the mainstream and underground models to the process of Black racial identity development. They proposed a multidimensional model of Black racial identity that consists of four dimensions: racial salience (i.e., the extent to which an individual’s race is an important aspect of her/his self-concept in a particular situation or moment); the centrality of an individual’s identity (i.e., the extent to which a person tends to define him/herself regarding race); the regard with which an individual holds the group associated with the identity (i.e., the degree to which a person feels positively about Blacks); and the ideology associated with the identity (i.e., an individual’s attitudes, beliefs, and opinions about how Blacks should behave). Sellers et al. (1997) pointed out that any one of the four dimensions of their model may not be synonymous with racial identity. Rather, they noted that each dimension represents a different way in which racial identity may be manifested by an individual. Further, they encouraged researchers to identify the appropriate dimension of racial identity to be studied based on the stated goals of their research.

It is clear that both the mainstream and underground approaches to conceptualizing Black racial identity development have made significant contributions to the field of psychology over the past three decades. These theories have provided useful foundations for understanding the identity development experiences and processes of many Black Americans. There is a need for future theories of Black racial identity to address the limitations of existing models, however. In addition, it is essential that emergent Black identity theories incorporate a number of issues in the context of their conceptualizations. In the next section of this article, several of these issues will be presented. We hope that these suggestions may provide a starting point for some theorists in conceptualizing increasingly relevant frameworks for understanding the Black identity-development process.

Future Considerations

Black racial identity theories should be expanded to include discussions of the impact of other salient sociodemographic identities on racial identity development. For example, current Black identity theories do not address how one’s racial identity may intersect with additional aspects of one’s personal identity (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, etc.). In particular, because some sociodemographic identities may play significant roles in shaping an individual’s Black identity or vice versa, it is important that future racial identity theories attend to how these variables may interact with each other in defining the self.

Future Black identity theories may wish to explore within-race differences in identity development among Black Americans. Some current models of Black racial identity have tended to assume that all Black Americans perceive and experience racial issues similarly. In particular, many Black identity theories have not discussed the impact of the African Diaspora (i.e., the dispersion of African natives primarily into North and South America and the Caribbean during the centuries of slavery and the slave trade) on the identity-development processes of various subgroups of Black Americans. Although there may be many similarities among Black American cultural groups, it is crucial that intragroup differences are addressed in the context of future identity theories. This point is especially important because much of the previous research on Black racial identity development has focused on the identity-development processes of African Americans, and then generalized to other groups of Black Americans. Hence, there is a need for future research to address within-group variations of Black Americans.

Impending theories of Black identity development may also need to incorporate vital, contemporary information about the impact of societal forces and events on the development of racial identity. More specifically, because identity-development theories are imbedded in societal and temporal contexts, it is critical that future conceptualizations of Black identity development acknowledge their limitations beyond the social climates and time periods in which they were formulated. Ideally, Black identity models should be dynamic and responsive to time and societal contexts. In addition, it is important to note that because social phenomena may affect the nature in which Blacks experience racial issues, the Black identity-development process may be significantly influenced in a variety of ways over the course of the developmental life span.

Future models of Black identity development may also wish to provide comprehensive analyses of the ways that racism and responses to racism may be manifested in Black persons across generations. For example, some of the issues that future theorists may consider addressing in the context of their Black identity conceptualizations might be: Are the current characteristics and dynamics of racism (and internalized racism) different from manifestations in the recent past? If yes, how so? Are there differences in the ways that present-day African Americans deal with the realities of racism (and internalized racism) as compared to African American ancestors? If yes, how so?
Finally, it is vital that emergent models of Black racial identity elucidate how African Americans who feel "disconnected" from their African origins, history, language, and so on may wish to commence the process of reconnecting with their “roots.” Although some existing Black identity theories underscore the importance of establishing or maintaining a core African identity, there are few Black identity models to date that explicate specifically how this objective might be achieved.

REFERENCES


