

Racial/Cultural Identity Development: Integrating Various Models into One

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Last semester in Sherry Watt's Student Development course, we studied many identity development models pertinent to college students. These identity models (e.g., Cass, 1979; Cross, 1971; and Phinney, 1990) consider the environment in which an individual has developed. Rooted in the theories underlying these models is the idea that some systemic or environmental factor has caused an individual to feel "different."

U.S. society is an oppressive culture where those who are "different" are discriminated against and oppressed (Sue & Sue, 1999). Thus, the U.S. system impedes the healthy development of the self in individuals who are not of the dominant culture (i.e., White, middle-class, Christian). People internalize the messages they have been fed about what is "right" and "normal." These messages negatively impact cognitions and behaviors.

When interacting with individuals who are not of the dominant culture, their worldviews are likely to be linked to the historical and current experiences of bigotry and oppression in the U.S. (Sue & Sue, 1999). Moreover, individuals of the dominant culture have been impacted by the messages in the environment and will hold biased views. For an individual of the dominant culture to say that they have somehow escaped their discriminatory upbringing and that they "are not perpetrators of racism or that the racial climate is improving is to deny social reality" (Sue & Sue, 1999, p. 7).

Developmental Models are helpful. They assist in organizing developmental processes and behaviors exhibited by individuals. Models help explain stages or statuses that people progress through. There are some points to keep in mind: 1) do not over generalize to all individuals within a particular group; 2) it can be a helpful to keep models in mind for potential

help in diagnosing based on where an individual falls; 3) models are helpful because they take into account the sociopolitical influences on individuals.

Models pertaining to racial identity are the most known. One widely cited model is Helms' White Racial Identity Model (1984, 1995). This model consists of two Phases (Abandonment of Racism and Defining Non-racist White Identity) with six specific racial identity statuses equally distributed between the two phases: 1) Contact Status, 2) Disintegration Status, 3) Reintegration Status, 4) Pseudo-independence Status, 5) Immersion/Emersion Status, and 6) Autonomy Status.

In addition to racial identity, models exist for other types of personal development. For instance, Vivian Cass (1979) developed a model to explain the development of non-heterosexual individuals. Cass' model is based on two broad assumptions: 1) that identity is acquired through a developmental process, and 2) that locus for stability of, and change, in behavior lies in the interaction process that occurs between individuals and their environment. The model consists of the following stages: 1) Identity Confusion (Who am I?); 2) Identity Comparison (I am different); 3) Identity Tolerance (I am probably gay); 4) Identity Acceptance (I am gay); 5) Identity Pride (Gay is good; heterosexuals are bad!); and 6) Identity Synthesis (My gayness is part of me).

Many of the developmental models have a similar structure. The first stage usually consists of an individual being completely unaware of a particular part of him or herself or they hold negative views about that identity aspect. The models typically end with an integrated sense of self awareness. Due to the similarities in the models, Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1989) developed the Racial/Cultural Identity Development Model (R/CID).

R/CID consists of five stages: 1) Conformity, 2) Dissonance, 3) Resistance and Immersion, 4) Introspection, and 5) Integrative Awareness. An individual in each of these stages is characterized as having four corresponding beliefs and attitudes. These four consist of a attitude about the self (based on the salient identity characteristic), other individuals with the same characteristic, individuals from the dominant culture, and individuals of other marginalized groups.

In Stage 1 – Conformity, the individual completely embraces the dominant culture’s beliefs and customs. At the same time, characteristics of her or his own culture are rejected and viewed with contempt. This stage has the most “profound negative impact upon (ethnic) minority groups” (Sue & Sue, 1999, p. 96) as individuals experience low self-esteem for not being a part of the majority group.

Stage 2 – Dissonance is characterized by conflicting messages and observations that are inconsistent with the view of one’s own culture and the dominant culture. This inconsistency leads the individual to question the beliefs from the Conformity Stage. Typically the movement into this stage is gradual; however, traumatic events (e.g., the incarceration or assassination of a major leader) can propel an individual into Stage 2.

When an individual enters Stage 3 – Resistance and Immersion, he or she will completely embrace his or her culture’s values and beliefs and reject those of the dominant culture. In this stage, Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1989) highlight three major affective qualities displayed by individuals as they resist the oppression their group has faced by the dominant group: guilt, shame, and doubt. The values and customs that were once shameful become “symbols of pride and honor” (Sue & Sue, 1999, p. 103).

In Stage 4 – Introspection, individuals realize the extreme nature of the feelings associated in Stage 3 and how those feelings interfere with the development of self-identity (Sue & Sue, 1999). In addition, cognitive dissonance occurs in that negative views of the dominant group from Stage 3 are challenged by experience. In this stage, the individual attempts to understand herself or himself better, tries to become more objective about the cultures' views and attitudes and strives to integrate the values of the minority and dominant group.

In the final stage, Integrative Awareness, persons develops an “inner sense of security and now can appreciate unique aspects of their culture as wells as those in U.S. culture” (Sue & Sue, 1999, p. 106). Rather than seeing conflict between one's culture and that of the dominant group, individuals realize that there are acceptable and unacceptable factors from both. A strong desire to end all forms of oppression exists in the individual.

As with any model, one should bear in mind the limitations of that model. R/CID's limitations include 1) it is not a global personality theory with specific identifiable stages that serve as fixed categories; 2) it is inadequate for using with immigrants; 3) there is a value judgement given in that higher levels are seen as more “healthy” than lower ones; 4) it is necessary to explore how interpersonal, institutional, societal, and cultural factors may either facilitate or impede cultural identity development; 5) it is important to continue refining these models; and 6) the combination of the therapist's cultural identity development and the client's cultural identity development should be considered.

Developmental models are meant to help understand the processes that individuals go through in life. R/CID combines the commonalities of several models for different groups (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities and non-heterosexual individuals) into one. Knowledge of this model can help individuals in college settings to understand the students they work with.

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