

Expanding White Racial Identity Theory: A Qualitative Investigation of Whites Engaged in Antiracist Action

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This article presents outcomes of a qualitative exploration of White racial identity. Ten participants whose characteristics were reflective of Helms's (1990) autonomy status defined their racial identities and related lifestyle choices. Findings are conceptualized within the framework of Helms's (1990, 1995) theory of White racial identity development. Suggestions are intended to enhance White racial identity theory and provide empirical support for characteristics of Whites who are engaged in antiracist activities.

Keywords: White racial identity development, Whiteness, multicultural counseling, racial identity, antiracism

Whiteness and White racial identity (WRI) theory have emerged as constructs of interest over the past 20 years in academia (Croll, 2007). In the field of counseling, tenets of WRI theory are commonly drawn on to inform classroom instruction, clinical practice, and research, often with the goal of expanding White clinicians' racial self-awareness, which, in turn, is associated with effective cross-racial counseling practices (Chao, 2013; Spanierman & Poteat, 2005). Premised on Cross's (1971) earlier model of Black racial identity, Helms's (1990) theory of White racial identity development (WRID) is one of the more frequently applied models in education and research focused on understanding race across mental health and behavioral science professions (Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006).

Helms's (1990) WRID model proposes a general two-stage developmental process for Whites that entails movement from a lack of consciousness about racism and the salience of race to heightened consciousness and efforts to live as a nonracist. Drawing from Cross's (1991) stage theory of Nigrescence, Helms's (1990, 1995) theory possesses six statuses, each reflective of unique race-related attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The contact status, often thought of as an early developmental status, indicates Whites' adoption of dominant cultural norms regarding race; enactment of racist behaviors toward persons of color; and unawareness of race, the impact of privilege, and the effects of individual and institutional racism.

At the other end of the continuum, characteristics of the autonomy status were defined by Helms (1990, 1995) as (a) a sophisticated racial awareness of self and one's racial privilege, including an "informed positive socioracial-group commitment" (Helms, 1995, p. 185); (b) an establishment of cross-racial friendships, marked by flexible interactions and an appreciation of the complex identities of people of color; (c) the abandonment of personal racism and racial privileges, including avoidance of life options that entail participation in racial oppression or racially oppressive organizations; (d) an understanding of the effects of racism on people of color; and (e) an engagement in antiracist actions. Whites who engage in behaviors that intentionally, strategically, and consistently strive to dismantle racism are described as antiracists (Ayvazian, 2010). Antiracist individuals often serve as allies to people of color and strive to challenge White individuals' racist beliefs and actions (Trepagnier, 2010). White antiracists also understand that their racial privilege can lend additional power and influence to their antiracist actions (Ayvazian, 2010).

Scholars across disciplines have begun to examine experiences of Whites who exhibit characteristics of the autonomy status (O'Brien, 2001; Smith & Redington, 2010; Warren, 2010). Conceptual and empirical scholarship have, in part, aligned with autonomy-related characteristics as noted in Helms's (1990, 1995) theory, including Whites' awareness of structural racism and internalized White superiority, re-

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jection of a color-blind racial ideology, and engagement in antiracist actions (Ayvazian, 2010; Barry, 2008; McKinney & Feagin, 2003; O'Brien, 2003; Smith & Redington, 2010; Trepagnier, 2010). Researchers have also found that Whites will exhibit traits of more than one status simultaneously, albeit with traits from one status as more dominant, and with a corresponding information-processing strategy that governs their race-related interactions (Carter, Helms, & Juby, 2004).

Over the years, critiques have emerged regarding Helms's (1990, 1995) model. Scholars have noted limitations in the model's ability to concretely operationalize the experiences, lifestyles, and perceptions of Whites (Leach, Behrens, & LaFleur, 2002; Miller & Fellows, 2007). For instance, Rowe (2006) criticized the autonomy status as a simplistic description of Whiteness that was developed "in the absence of supporting evidence" (p. 242). Miller and Fellows (2007) suggested that the autonomy status provides limited descriptions of how Whites engage in antiracist activism. Scholars have argued that the theory tends to focus on how Whites develop perspectives toward other racial groups, rather than delineating Whites' definitions and experiences of Whiteness (Miller & Fellows, 2007; Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994), thus inadvertently perpetuating the notion of "other."

An additional challenge to Helms's (1990, 1995) theory is that Whites in the autonomy status are described as having a positive racial-group association. This is problematic for educators striving to support White students in understanding and developing their WRIs (Miller & Fellows, 2007) because of a dearth of White antiracist role models with well-defined and positive identities (Tatum, 1994). Some scholars have even cautioned that a positive Whiteness should be discouraged, because individuals with positive White identities may inadvertently accept and enact myths of racial supremacy and superiority (Croll, 2007; López, 2006). Roediger (1999) concurred, insisting that Whiteness in and of itself embodies unfair privilege and, consequently, a healthy White identity cannot exist. Conversely, Whites who eschew a positive racialized discourse may be left with a sense of shame related to Whiteness as being affiliated with the oppression of people of color (Rose, 1996). Rose (1996), a scholar of color, cautioned that, for Whites who are unable to experience a sense of racial pride, "our pride will always threaten you. It will always feel as though people of color are something because you are nothing" (p. 45).

Consequently, there is a great deal that is unknown regarding current WRID theory. First and foremost is the absence of empirical evidence supporting the many tenets of the autonomy status (Rowe, 2006), which limits understanding and insight into the essence of an antiracist White identity. For instance, Helms's (1995) model purports that antiracist Whites will possess a positive racial-group commitment, yet there is limited understanding of how, or even if, this develops over time. Furthermore, there is a lack of detail regarding what

this positive perception of self and one's Whiteness actually entails. Hence, there is a need for a more complex and nuanced understanding of how Whites in the autonomy status make meaning of their own Whiteness. Beyond the racial self-awareness elements of WRID, there is a need to concretely operationalize how antiracist Whites engage in the world, including lifestyle (job, living) choices and relationships with others. Such information would offer a more realistic model for those who are striving toward a more holistic and multidimensional antiracist White identity (Tatum, 1994).

The current study sought to address those many needs through a qualitative investigation with 10 Whites who self-identified as antiracist. Through in-depth, individual interviews, we sought to explore the perceptions and experiences of lived Whiteness for Whites committed to antiracist activism in both their personal and professional lives. Meanings gleaned from those interviews were explored to identify answers to the overarching research question of the study, namely, what are the actual, lived tenets of an antiracist White identity?

Method

We applied a phenomenological approach (Morrissette, 1999) in the current study in an effort to gain deeper insight into those many missing pieces. A phenomenological approach strives to explore and elucidate the essence of a phenomenon. The goal is not to test a hypothesis, but rather to ask questions that "allow the data to speak for themselves" (p. 3) by eliciting the real and lived experiences of the participant. The meaning assigned to individual experiences can emerge and generate a concrete and detailed analysis of a phenomenon (Osborne, 1990). The overarching research question of this study was "What are the actual, lived tenets of an antiracist White identity?" The specific interview protocol (see Appendix A) derived from this question sought to elucidate three main areas identified as missing in the current literature: (a) meanings assigned to personal White identities, (b) racial development processes over time, and (c) how participants' lived experiences (e.g., behaviors, relationships, and life decisions such as career or housing choices) are influenced by their antiracist White identities (Helms, 1995).

Participants

Participants were purposefully selected and were identified because of their visibility as antiracist activists and through snowball sampling (e.g., referred by others; Merriam, 1998). Selection criteria included persons whose characteristics reflected Helms's (1995) autonomy status according to a demonstrated knowledge (through interviews) of a complex understanding of race, racism, and racialized systems of privilege, as well as a recognition of their effects on both Whites and people of color. In addition, participants had to show

evidence of a commitment to, and a sustained engagement in, antiracist activities. Antiracism entails efforts to eradicate racism through actions such as teaching others about racism, interrupting episodes of racism (e.g., racist jokes), participating in public speaking, writing antiracist articles or books, taking legal action, or participating in rallies (Ayvazian, 2010; Kivel, 2002; Smith & Redington, 2010). Antiracist efforts were verified through identifying public evidence, such as books or articles written by or about participants, media outlets (e.g., television, news, or newspaper articles by or about them), or websites verifying jobs that entailed antiracist activism.

Although White racial self-identification was a homogeneous participant demographic, we sought to achieve maximum variation by selecting participants of varying gender and age. Hence, a total of 10 participants were selected (five men and five women) with the goal of achieving redundancy or saturation of data. Data saturation emerged at approximately six participants, with an additional four participants selected and analyzed to verify saturation (Merriam, 1998).

Participants' ages ranged between 25 and 69 years, with the majority ($n = 6$) being 50 years or older. They resided in three of the five U.S. regions: Five lived in the Northeast, three lived in the West, and two lived in the Midwest. Reported childhood socioeconomic status (SES) was predominantly middle income ($n = 8$), with the remaining two participants reporting their childhood SES as upper income. Most participants ($n = 9$) reported their current SES as middle income, whereas one participant reported his or her current SES as lower income. Half ($n = 5$) had earned bachelor's degrees; two had earned master's degrees; one had earned a doctoral degree; and two at the time of the interviews were studying for a master's or doctoral degree, respectively. Participants predominantly reported their current religion as Christian ($n = 6$), followed by Jewish ($n = 2$), atheist ($n = 1$), and agnostic ($n = 1$). Eight participants reported that their religious or spiritual values informed and inspired their antiracist activities, and that their values created a moral imperative to address oppression and honor the values of "unity," "justice," "inclusion," "compassion," "sacredness of life," and "worth and dignity of every person." Diversity trainings taken by participants ranged in number from one ($n = 1$) to an unspecified descriptor of "hundreds" ($n = 1$), with all reporting engagement in antiracism-related leadership roles as trainers or consultants. All of the participants reported U.S. citizenship status, and all of their parents were at least second-generation U.S. citizens.

Interview Protocol and Procedure

The first two authors developed a semistructured interview protocol (Seidman, 1998) that was informed by the literature on WRI. In this protocol (see Appendix A), participants were asked to explore (a) the meaning assigned to their White identities, (b) their racial developmental process, and (c) how

their lived experiences (e.g., behaviors, relationships, and life decisions such as career or housing choices) are influenced by their antiracist White identities. The open format of the interviews allowed for the exploration of topics that emerged as meaningful to participants (Seidman, 1998).

Participants were provided written informed consent forms, which were approved through a university institutional review board process. No incentive was offered. Interviews were audio recorded, via phone or in person, and entailed at least two meetings for the majority of the participants ($n = 8$). The interviews lasted between 1.5 to 3 hours ($M = 2$) and were transcribed verbatim by master's-level graduate assistants. Each transcript was verified for accuracy by one of the authors.

Researcher-as-Instrument Statement

A team of three coders (first, third, and fourth authors) and two peer auditors (second and fifth authors) analyzed the data. The team was composed of one White man, one Black woman, and three White women, ages 34 to 46 years. The researchers were counselor educators who worked in various geographic regions of the United States, including the Northeast ($n = 2$), the West ($n = 2$), and the Southeast ($n = 1$). Two peer auditors were used in an effort to reduce bias, thus enhancing the trustworthiness of the meaning derived from the data (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Morrow, 2005). They were selected because of their WRI-related instructional and research experiences, as well as their respective White and Black racial identities, with an understanding that persons of different racial identities may have varying perceptions of race-related data because of their distinct socialization process in a racially stratified society (Helms, 1995).

In phenomenological approaches, researchers seek to bracket (i.e., identify and suspend) preconceived notions, biases, assumptions, and beliefs regarding the phenomena being examined to allow participants' voices to emerge more authentically (Creswell, 1998). The researchers' beliefs and assumptions regarding White identities and related life choices included beliefs that Whites in a racially hierarchical society harbor learned racism, and assumptions that the study participants would experience race-related struggles regarding lifestyle choices. The White researchers acknowledged that their personal racism could potentially restrict their perspectives when analyzing and interpreting the data, thus calling for increased vigilance in the form of ongoing reflexive conversation and journaling across the span of the investigation (Morrow, 2005).

Analysis

The researchers in this study, who were all experienced with the phenomenological approach, initially met to review the analysis process. Analysis in phenomenological research entails efforts at identifying meaningful and multidimensional

participant experiences that serve to illuminate the “essential structures of the phenomenon in question” (Morrissette, 1999, p. 4). The researchers began with multiple readings of the typed transcripts to gain a familiarity with the data. As they read, they highlighted meaningful words, statements, and sections, which were paraphrased and named. Paraphrased excerpts were reviewed and discussed by the researchers until consensus about their meaning was achieved. Excerpts with similar meanings were then combined to form first-order themes. First-order themes were reviewed by the researchers until consensus was achieved and then placed beneath broader, overarching clusters (called *second-order thematic clusters*).

For example, one study participant’s description of her struggles related to lifestyle decisions (career, school, and housing choices) was highlighted in the transcript as meaningful by the researchers. That meaning was paraphrased as *difficult to make lifestyle choices that honor antiracist commitment and does not reify Whiteness status quo*, which was then assigned the first-order thematic name of *struggles to make lifestyle decisions that honor antiracist beliefs*. In reviewing the first-order themes that emerged across that participant’s transcript, the researchers noted various experiences of struggles, some related to lifestyles, others to relationships. Hence, those first-order themes related to struggles were placed beneath a broader second-order thematic cluster, which was assigned the name of *struggles to live as an antiracist White*. Following the individual analysis of each transcript in this way, the researchers met and reviewed their findings line by line, dialoguing until reaching consensus on first- and second-order themes.

Following the identification of these first- and second-order themes for each participant, the research team engaged in a synthesis of protocol (called a *within-person analysis*; Morrissette, 1999). In this process, team members reflected on and summarized each participant’s thematic experiences to create a summative picture. Team members then reflected on the themes among the participants to compare and contrast experiences. The researchers engaged in regular and sustained dialogue regarding their findings in light of the current literature, returning to the participants’ transcripts or to the scholarly literature to gather additional data or information, until coming to a final consensus on the first- and second-order themes. Through this inductive and reiterative process, themes emerged from the data, rather than being imposed on them, and multiple and conflicting perspectives were considered (Merriam, 1998). In this way, a more “global picture” (Morrissette, 1999, p. 5) of the participants’ experiences emerged.

Efforts at Establishing Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was sought through efforts at securing the dependability and credibility of the findings (Morrow, 2005). Dependability was achieved through the use of a detailed audit trail (e.g., a detailed written account of the study’s steps; Merriam, 1998), maintained by the first author, as well as the

writing of ongoing notes in a reflexive journal (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In addition, throughout the study, the researchers consulted with two auditors, who separately reviewed the transcripts and the coders’ results to assess for bias, clarify or verify certain codes, or suggest additional themes. Indeed, although the auditors verified that the themes aligned with their own findings, the auditor of color uniquely identified participant language and actions that reflected unconscious White supremacist perspectives. The identification of this language and these actions did not alter the findings reported in the study, because her findings aligned with the participants’ own admissions of possessing unconscious racial bias.

Efforts at achieving confirmability were made through triangulation, which entailed the use of multiple researchers, and attempts to manage subjectivity with the use of an audit trail, member checks, and peer auditors (Morrow, 2005). Credibility was sought through prolonged engagement with the participants through lengthy and multiple interviews. In addition, the researchers engaged in member checking, whereby participants were asked in person ($n = 2$) or via phone ($n = 2$) or e-mail ($n = 6$) to verify the accuracy of the within-person summary of their transcripts, which highlighted major thematic findings for each participant, as well as to clarify any questions the researchers had regarding the interviews (Morrissette, 1999). Questions were largely related to clarifications of ambiguous language. For example, one participant was asked to clarify specific antiracist values he referred to multiple times. Half ($n = 5$) of the participants provided feedback or clarifications. Their responses were uniformly positive and indicated that each analysis accurately represented their experiences and perspectives. No additional themes emerged from the member-check responses.

Findings

Findings in the overall data included nine broader second-order themes, under which fell 35 first-order themes. We selected six first-order themes (defined and illustrated in Appendix B) for presentation in this article because of their representation of this study’s research inquiry (e.g., meanings assigned to personal White identities, racial development processes, and lifestyle choices informed by antiracist identities). The themes are as follows: (a) Whiteness as oppressive, (b) reconstructing White identity, (c) antiracism as essential to a positive self-concept, (d) WRID as ongoing and nonlinear, (e) struggles to make lifestyle decisions that honor antiracist beliefs, and (f) struggles with relationships. In the following paragraphs, we review those themes, providing participant statements to illustrate their meaning. Pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality.

Whiteness as Oppressive

As a central part of this study, participants were asked to define their White identities. Initial responses indicated a per-



ception of Whiteness as oppressive because of its association with racially hierarchical systems. For instance, Liz defined her Whiteness as “the advantages I’ve been given because of the way that people see me and the work that my ancestors have gotten because of their white skin.” Similarly, Meg defined her Whiteness as “part of a monolithic obstruction,” and Rob refused to racially self-define, explaining, “I have a problem basically with the word *White* . . . because [it was] constructed to promote things that I don’t believe in, so I have a problem with, you know, White identity per se.”

Whiteness was seen as a phenomenon that infiltrated participants’ learned perspectives and behaviors. For example, Sam explained that “I was conditioned to operate from a colonized state of mind.” Terms used by many to describe this Whiteness included “oppressor,” “White supremacist,” and “internalized racial superiority.” In turn, a focus on identity work was difficult to embrace, because many feared that such efforts served to divert attention from antiracist action while reifying the oppressive elements of Whiteness. Dan’s comments illustrated this perspective:

I take [racial identity reflection] seriously, and I do a lot of personal work in writing about it. But it wasn’t that we [activists] were focused on the identity part of it so much. . . . It was about what is your role in these struggles [of racism]? . . . What should you be doing? . . . It’s very easy for people to get stuck in an individualistic place around this concept of an identity . . . [and then] the attention is back on White people.

Reconstructing White Identity

Despite the negative traits ascribed to White identity, or perhaps because of them, participants noted efforts to reconstruct a personal racial identity through assuming a separate, more positive definition of Whiteness. Jim stated, “I . . . have the assigned identity of Whiteness that totally privileges me. But I can choose a political and cultural identity. . . . Everyone has the opportunity for choosing an identity.”

Self-constructed White identities included multiple, intersectional identities and their related cultural tenets. A representative statement by Dan was that “White identity is . . . complex. . . . People have multiple identities, and we don’t shift around between them. We don’t move in and out of them. We always are all of them. So . . . White Christianness is different than White Jewishness.” Identities varied across participants in their intersectionalities. For instance, Jim described his Whiteness as composed of an intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and class. Jen emphasized that “my Whiteness is completely enmeshed with the fact that I’m a woman.” According to Dan, his Whiteness was informed by his class, gender, and racial privileges, along with his Jewish traditions and contemporary and historical experiences of religious persecution.

Deb described her Whiteness as a “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant” identity, which, for her, included SES, race, re-

ligion, her British origins, and their related cultural tenets. Several participants defined their Whiteness according to the norms, values, and practices inherited from their immigrant ancestors. Across the interviews, nearly all of the participants acknowledged that their White identities and corresponding behaviors were informed by dominant U.S. norms. Those norms were described as Western or Eurocentric, and they included being individualistic, competitive, and future oriented, with an internal locus of control and a strict adherence to time. Participants viewed others’ Whiteness as equally complex and distinct, informed by each individual’s unique traits and context. As Meg explained, “My version of Whiteness isn’t the same, you know, as [that of] the woman in Appalachia who [struggles] to get enough food on the table.”

Antiracism as Essential to a Positive Self-Concept

When considering the positive aspects of their racial identities, participants described engaging in antiracist action as an antidote to the negative (e.g., oppressive) aspects of Whiteness. This perspective was aptly illustrated by Pam, who explained that her antiracist identity “gives me a positive way of being White in the world.” Some deemed their antiracist efforts a role, rather than an identity. Dan stated, “It’s a practice; it’s not an identity. It’s not something you are; it’s something you do. And you do it in different ways and at different times.” Some participants assumed antiracism as an identity that was separate from their Whiteness. Rob explained his antiracist identity as “trying to *not* connect with Whiteness per se, to try to be aware of what being categorized that way has done to [my] sense of privilege, and how it affects other people.”

However, most participants deemed antiracism as being affiliated with their White identities. For example, Jim stated that, “politically, I choose to be a racial justice activist, educator . . . to be part of a solution, a sort of positive change. So that’s . . . how I choose to be White.” Similarly, Deb noted that her racist and antiracist White identities were contingent on each other, because they “codefine one another. . . . The ability to do better [fight racism] is of equal sort of power to the horror of doing bad [by enacting White supremacy].” Both Sam and Deb described that complex, White self as “schizophrenic,” inferring that their racial identities were composed of distinct and conflicting parts: the racist and the antiracist.

Engaging in antiracist action was essential for participants, because this action allowed them to gain a sense of redemption as self-identified racially privileged and racist Whites. For example, Jen noted that

part of my identity . . . was robbed because it wasn’t actually me. . . . It was part of this oppression that affected me. It affected the way I was brought up and [it] affected how I had acted. And so now . . . I’m just trying to think how can I use myself and my own White identity to have the arrow go the other way and shape White culture.

Several participants described their antiracist identities as a newer and more positive version of Whiteness, or what participants variably called a “redeemed” or “new Whiteness.” In describing this cultivated antiracist identity, Jen remarked, “Now [my White identity] feels much more in my control, much more customized to actually me. . . . I’ve gotten to work on it, I’ve shaped it. . . . I feel ownership of my own White identity at this point.”

In describing tenets of antiracist identities and behaviors, participants largely noted that the values of social justice, love, compassion, unity, fairness, and equity fueled ongoing efforts to address and eradicate White supremacy across systems, in other individuals, and in oneself. A representative definition of antiracist activism was given by Rob as an ongoing process in “becoming continuously aware of what the aspects [are] of being White, and categorized as White, given the privileges that are undeserved . . . to reverse the structures that are in place.” Such practice, according to participants, required a constant assessment of, and openness to, “understanding how our system perpetuates racism and how to undo that.”

WRID as Ongoing and Nonlinear

Participants perceived their racial identity development as a lifelong process, with a positive trajectory. As noted by Deb, “what we are [as Whites] is the opportunity to change.” Many described development as a journey toward more effective antiracist actions or, as Rob noted, “growth in learning to be an [antiracist] ally.” Participants described the racial identity development process as beginning with an early awareness of their own and others’ racism. Through trainings or readings, they expanded their understanding of White supremacy as a systemic phenomenon. Then, many participants engaged in what they described as zealous, angry, or guilt-induced behaviors perceived by some as efforts at being a “White hero,” whereby they enacted White supremacy through striving to “save” people of color from racism. Over time, participants noted a shift that entailed eschewing zealotry and other paternalistic behaviors to embrace antiracist activism for the betterment of oneself and the community. Antiracist action was described as efforts at constant vigilance of the presence and effects of White supremacy, both in oneself and across varied systems.

Participants noted that the process of identity development is nonlinear. As Jim explained, “You make some progress. . . . Be ready for having to take one step back, then two more forward. It’s not a real linear and predictable path.” That process was described by many as a kind of repetitive or cyclical growth pattern, whereby an observed racist event or cross-racial interaction revealed to them their own racism or called to light their own failed efforts in addressing others’ racism. Participants would then process what several described positively as “new information,” often with support from a community of antiracist allies, to reduce personal rac-

ism or to improve antiracist tactics. Participants acknowledged such a process as ongoing, stressing that one never “arrived” to emerge fully and perfectly nonracist and successful at antiracist efforts. However, the cycle seemed to be one of positive growth. Pam, for example, described it as a “cycling through [to] go deeper and deeper.” Similarly, Ted stated that “I see myself learning throughout my entire life, changing throughout my entire life,” and Jen noted, “Having to know that I’m going to be racist forever sucks, but I don’t feel bad about it because . . . I’m being proactive and I’m learning.”

Struggles to Make Lifestyle Decisions That Honor Antiracist Beliefs

Participants described myriad challenges in efforts to align life choices with antiracist values, such as finding integrated and equitable working and living communities. Participants found that their values were often at odds with reality. For instance, Ted noted how difficult it seemed to find work that did not somehow sustain or promote racially hierarchical systems, noting that “to some extent, everything’s compromised.” Jim explained that “the norm across society is segregation, and, hence, efforts at integrating one’s work [do] really require continual work and commitment and courage, to go against the grain and come up with a different result.”

A formidable challenge noted by participants was finding an integrated living community that was consistent with their personal values and beliefs. Liz, unable to find a racially integrated neighborhood to live in, initially bought a home in an all-Black community. However, she quickly realized that such a move led to gentrification, with its resulting pushing out of long-term Black residents. As a result, she moved to an all-White community, noting, “It’s not something I’m resolved around, like, ‘Oh, now I live in a predominantly White community and am totally okay with that and that doesn’t impact my life at all.’” Conversely, participants with school-age children who did live in racially integrated neighborhoods struggled with underfunded school systems. For example, Ted stated,

We were constantly faced with school decisions about how important was a diverse educational experience for our kids compared to the perhaps better educational experience they might get in [better funded] suburban schools or private schools . . . with all the pressure and expectations from family and friends that you’re not doing right by your kids . . . you’re not exposing them to the opportunities they might have.

Struggles With Relationships

Participants’ efforts at same- and cross-racial relationships were plagued with challenges related to their antiracist beliefs and/or actions, leaving them, at times, frustrated because they felt isolated or disconnected from others. Concerning their same-race (White) peers, participants struggled to make and

maintain relationships with individuals whom they perceived as, at times, oblivious to their own racial privileges and racism. Jen aptly illustrated this sentiment, noting, “There are a lot of White people I don’t like. I mean, I don’t like their culture, that they’re unaware of race, that they’re in their privilege bubble.” Often, however, there were other Whites who seemed to eschew the participants. Backlash, or alienation from White peers, colleagues, and family members, was a common result of their antiracist efforts. In describing the general responses of Whites to his antiracist actions, Jim noted, “I’ve been in situations where people really wished I wasn’t in the room anymore or wished I wasn’t part of the group anymore because I brought [race issues] up.” Similarly, Deb explained, “I’m alienating a lot of people. . . . There’s a cost with it; no doubt about it.”

Struggles in relationships with persons of color were described differently from those with Whites, such as dealing with the distrust and suspicion from persons of color, particularly regarding the authenticity of their own antiracist efforts. As Dan noted in regard to connecting with persons of color, “It takes time. Trust comes over time as you continue to show up.” Liz noted struggling with multiple internal questions in regard to reaching out to peers of color, wondering aloud, “Am I approaching this person of color just because they’re a person of color? . . . Or am I *not* approaching this person of color because I’m afraid of them or because I think that they don’t want me to approach them?”

Multiple participants noted conflict in cross-racial relationships that was related to their antiracist efforts. In such situations, peers of color questioned the validity or authenticity of participants’ antiracist efforts, calling their efforts out as reenactments of White power and privilege. Rob described a situation in which a Black colleague defined his attempts at antiracist advocacy as “a symbol of White privilege. [She was critiquing] that I felt empowered to speak out like that. I think there was probably truth in that. . . . She saw it as, you know, hurting her efforts.” Meg similarly noted regular questioning of the validity of her antiracist efforts from people of color:

People of color [were asking], “Who are you to lead this?” or “What do you know about this?” or “Stop trying to talk from my experience.” All those really valid critiques and questions, like “What do you think about being a White person making money doing antiracism work?”

Discussion

This article sought to extend theory and research regarding WRI through examining how Whiteness is defined and lived by those who evidence traits of Helms’s (1990, 1995) autonomy status. Participants’ experiences and perspectives seem to both extend and contradict what is currently understood about WRID. In the following paragraphs, we apply

Helms’s (1990, 1995) theory as a framework for discussing selected study outcomes.

Whiteness Defined

Helms’s (1990, 1995) theory of WRID has focused on how Whites perceive and interact with people of color, with little description about how Whites may define their own and others’ WRIs (Leach et al., 2002; Miller & Fellows, 2007). The findings from our study extend understanding of how Whites who demonstrate characteristics of the autonomy status develop and make meaning of their WRIs. Themes indicated perceptions of Whiteness as multidimensional, including oppressive, in its correspondence with White supremacy; antiracist, in relation to a self-selected definition; and complex, in its incorporation of multiple sociocultural identities.

Despite similarities across participants in this study, no two self-definitions of WRI were identical, suggesting that the definition of WRI is more widely variable than Helms’s (1990, 1995) theory hypothesizes. However, our findings do correspond with scholarly suggestions that WRI is malleable and influenced by context and intersecting identities (Bonnett, 2008; Duster, 2001; McDermott & Samson, 2005; Rose, 1996; C. E. Thompson, 2003; Toporek, 2011; Twine & Gallagher, 2008). Corroborating these assertions is an emerging body of literature indicating that Whites’ racial identities are influenced by intergroup differences, affiliations with other racial and ethnic groups, and social characteristics such as class and educational levels (Croll, 2007; McDermott & Samson, 2005; Miller & Fellows, 2007; Warren, 2010).

Development of a Positive and Nonracist White Identity

Two related tenets of Helms’s (1995) theory are that Whites in the autonomy status possess a nonracist White identity as well as an “informed positive socioracial-group commitment” (p. 185). Participants in our study perceived achievement of these tasks as difficult, if not impossible. Whiteness was viewed by the participants as inherently negative because of its roots in a racially hierarchical or what many called a “White supremacist” system, leading them to eschew a positive racial-group commitment. They believed that such a system continually reinscribed their own personal racism, according to their unearned privileges despite their antiracist efforts.

Such perspectives expand the understanding of Whites’ possible self and other definitions and perspectives of Whiteness, while also seeming to contradict some of what is inferred in Helms’s (1990, 1995) theory (e.g., a positive orientation to WRI). These findings align with other scholarly thought, such as Roediger’s (1999) assertion that Whiteness connotes unfair privilege and, thus, a positive White personhood cannot exist. Although they eschewed a fully positive racial-group identity or commitment, participants reported that the process of unveiling White supremacy in self and

society was an ever-expanding journey that provided a more realistic understanding of the world and ways to change it. This trajectory of WRID is consistent with the idea that “the general developmental issue for Whites is the abandonment of entitlement” (Helms, 1995, p. 184).

Living as a Nonracist White

Helms (1995) asserted that Whites can learn to “avoid life options that require participation in racial oppression” (p. 185). The participants in our study perceived avoidance of oppressive life options as an impossibility, because they viewed every system as premised on, or influenced by, an unequal racial hierarchy. Hence, complete self-removal from society and its structures as a whole seemed unlikely to them. They believed that a more realistic goal was to seek work and living spaces that were less oppressive, while continuing efforts at eradicating White supremacy in those systems.

Helms (1995) cited the importance of participation in integrated work and living spaces, with ongoing engagement in antiracist activities and positive cross-racial friendships as elements of autonomy status. Participants described struggles in their efforts to make those kinds of life choices, with many of the difficulties coming from the system itself. For instance, cross-racial relationships were reported as challenging because of the distrust of persons of color and the participants’ own personal racism. In addition, participants perceived that the system was set up in such a way that efforts at authentic cross-racial relationships and racial integration were likely to be difficult throughout their lives.

These findings enrich Helms’s (1990, 1995) theory by lending insight into the challenges faced by some anti-oppression activists. Our findings also counter aspects of the theory that assert that Whites, when acting primarily from the autonomy status, can assume a nonracist and integrated lifestyle. Other studies have found similar dilemmas and conflicts experienced by Whites (B. Thompson & White Women Challenging Racism, 1997; Todd & Abrams, 2011; Warren, 2010). Todd and Abrams (2011) referred to such race-related struggles as a “dialectical process” (p. 355), whereby Whites experience ongoing tensions, some that overlapped with those in this study, in relation to the many contradictions inherent in being White. Todd and Abrams asserted that such tensions emerge from “contradictions . . . as White people implicitly or explicitly struggle with the dilemmas of having social power” (p. 356).

Dilemmas and tensions in our study emerged through participants’ contradictory experiences of being committed to antiracism while simultaneously recognizing the impossibility of refraining from participation in a racist system. Such tensions were illustrated in the contradiction between participants’ attempts or stated desires to live in racially

integrated spaces, while ultimately deciding to live in White communities because of the negative impact of gentrification or other value conflicts. Todd and Abrams (2011) asserted that Whites can, at times, strive to alleviate such tensions by finding ways to live authentically in the world (aligning beliefs with reality), but that, at other times, they will simply need to learn to live with the continual struggle borne from uncomfortable tensions and ambiguities.

Implications for Counselor Education

Our findings indicate that the participants’ experiences and meanings of their WRIs are more problematic than what is predicted in Helms’s (1990, 1995) theory. Counselor educators seeking to support White students in racial identity development may want to present a more descriptive, albeit potentially disconcerting, picture of WRID. At the least, instructors may wish to refrain from expecting certain outcomes related to the racial identity development of White students, such as a positive racial-group identity, and to attend to what Miller and Fellows (2007) called “potential dilemmas of Whiteness” (p. 54) that can emerge for Whites as they explore race and racial identity topics in the university classroom.

Specific to the potential challenges experienced by Whites engaged in antiracism, counselor educators should provide time for dialogue that acknowledges and explores issues related to living an antiracist White identity in a racially hierarchical society. Potential challenges would ideally be recognized by all faculty members and infused across the curriculum. For instance, counselor skills and dilemmas related to antiracism will likely surface differently in a career course than in a group course. In addition, counselor training programs or the university itself would ideally offer forums or supportive groups for engagement in such dialogue. These dialogues could normalize and promote exploration of problem resolution in regard to dilemmas, contradictions, and tensions that emerge for individuals engaged in efforts to address racism.

A study of White college students by Todd and Abrams (2011) identified similar racial identity struggles that could be useful in understanding and supporting Whites engaged in antiracist action. Todd and Abrams defined this struggle as “the process of transforming apparent contradictions by engaging two opposing ends of a continuum” (p. 355). They recognized the value in normalizing the dialectical process, describing it as difficult, cyclical, and hopeful in that it is indicative of racial identity growth and efforts at White authenticity. They asserted that the achievement of White authenticity (an ultimate goal) required Whites to “hold the tensions of a privileged position while engaging in antiracist behaviors to effect sociostructural change” (p. 385). They further suggested the use of mindfulness as a means for processing and accepting, in a nonjudgmental manner, the

ambiguity and emotions that surfaced when trying to hold both elements of the dialectic. A similar approach was described as helpful by some of our participants in dealing with race-related struggles. Hence, the common themes found in the current study and Todd and Abrams's work suggest that counselor educators could support students by providing strategies for attending to the ongoing tension surrounding racial identity development.

In congruence with findings in our study, Miller and Fellows (2007) asserted that WRI may not develop in a sequential manner and that identity models may need reformulation and reconsideration to allow for greater variability in understanding WRID and its related dilemmas. In turn, the current findings will help educators to recognize that various WRID-related dilemmas may occur simultaneously for students, with a corresponding need for support as they work through those dilemmas. Educators can communicate to students that development will happen differently for different individuals at different times, ultimately implying that multiple solutions exist to one's racial identity growth (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998).

Finally, in regard to the call for presenting antiracist role models in an educational manner (Tatum, 1994), findings in our study suggest the need to present WRID and White role models in a way that reflects complex, positive and negative aspects of White identity. Presentation of role models will facilitate the consideration of the possibility that, regardless of antiracist effort, Whites are supporting the racist system simply by existing in it and benefiting from it, with the understanding that one cannot cease to exist within it. Hence, there is a continual risk of reifying racially hierarchical systems while simultaneously working to dismantle them, and antiracist Whites will remain Whites while simultaneously striving to redefine Whiteness. Not even antiracist role models seem to be exempt from such struggles. White role models are flawed because the system is flawed, but the trajectory is hopeful, positive even. Students can benefit from understanding and emulating our participants' awareness and understanding that commitment to antiracism work and positive identity development is challenging and that imperfection still permits growth.

■ Limitations and Future Directions

Participants in this study represented a small number of Whites who resided in a limited set of geographic locations and who were educationally homogeneous (e.g., all were college-educated professionals). Hence, additional research is warranted to determine whether larger and more varied populations of Whites who meet the criteria for Helms's (1995) autonomy status possess perspectives similar to those of the participants in this study. Future

research could also focus on solutions for Whites in managing race-related challenges, or what Todd and Abrams (2011) identified as dialectical tensions, in regard to WRI. Such studies could draw from a wider range of Whites who identify as antiracist, with efforts at determining differences and similarities of Whites with certain traits (e.g., age, class, religion, and gender). There is also a need to define a model of support, specific to White counseling students, to facilitate and sustain WRID, and to determine how such educational interventions affect learning and, ultimately, clinical outcomes.

Finally, we attempted to address a problematic topic, WRI, in a racially hierarchical society. This may be problematic in that a focus on Whiteness may ultimately serve to reify White supremacy (Tuck, 2009). In addition, certain dilemmas experienced by the study participants, such as the inability to refrain from reifying Whiteness because of one's participation in a racially hierarchical system, and the potential harm in basing one's career progress on a focus on Whiteness, were also present for the White members of the research team. In addition, we recognized that limitations existed in selecting language (e.g., antiracism) for this article, because any and all language options seemed imperfect because of the risk of reifying a racial hierarchy. Efforts at establishing trustworthiness, such as the use of two peer auditors, were made to protect against enacting harmful researcher bias. However, similar to the participants in this study, we recognized total absence of bias as an impossibility in an imperfect system.

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APPENDIX A

Phenomenological, Open-Ended Interview Protocol

1. Can you discuss how you started antiracism work?
 - a. What got you started in this work?
 - b. How has it changed over time?
2. When did you first become aware of being White?
 - a. Who or what influenced that awareness?
 - b. What feelings did you initially have with this new racial awareness?
 - c. How did you manage any negative feelings, if you had any, in relation to your Whiteness awareness, and with what were they associated?
3. How do you currently define your Whiteness?
 - a. What feelings are now associated with your White identity?
 - b. How did your racial identity develop over time, and who or what influenced that awareness?
 - c. Has your growth been linear or nonlinear?
4. How does your White identity inform any life decisions?
5. How does your White identity inform any aspect of your relationships?
6. How have those around you reacted to your antiracist efforts?
7. How do you envision your growth, in the future, as a White person?
8. What else should we know about you and your process in becoming White?

APPENDIX B

First-Order Thematic Findings and Descriptions With Representative Quotes

Theme	Thematic Description	Representative Quote
Whiteness as oppressive	Societally imposed Whiteness as inherently oppressive, as part of a societal structure of White supremacy	“Being White meant I was an oppressor. . . . I didn’t get to control my identity.” “My understanding of Whiteness . . . is the belief of its relation to White supremacy.”
Reconstructing White identity	Efforts to reconstruct a personal racial identity	“I . . . have the assigned identity of Whiteness that totally privileges me. But I can choose a political and cultural identity. . . . Everyone has the opportunity for choosing an identity.” “The new White identity is one of re-creating.”
Antiracism as essential to a positive self-concept	Antiracism commitment as redeeming the oppressive elements of personal Whiteness	“[Antiracism] gives me a positive way of being White in the world.” “I chose an identity of being a White racial justice activist.”
White racial identity development as ongoing and nonlinear	Racial development as a lifelong and nonlinear process	“It’s not like you ever get it.” “You make some progress. . . . Be ready for having to take one step back, then two more forward. It’s not a real linear and predictable path.”
Struggles to make lifestyle decisions that honor antiracist beliefs	Difficulty in making lifestyle decisions (work, living, schooling) that honor antiracism beliefs	“We were constantly faced with school decisions about how important was a diverse educational experience for our kids compared to the perhaps better educational experience they might get in [better funded] suburban schools or private schools.”
Struggles with relationships	Difficulty in making and sustaining relationships with Whites and people of color	“I haven’t really figured out how to handle the backlash [from Whites].” “People don’t understand a lot of times it takes really creative work in developing friendships across racial lines. And I think that goes for all of us—White, Black, and Latino.”