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DEVELOPMENT OF ANTI-RACIST WHITE IDENTITY IN CANADIAN EDUCATIONAL COUNSELLORS

INTRODUCTION

My own sense of White identity developed during a decade-long sojourn in Nunavut, living and working in remote communities that are over 90 percent Inuit (Wihak, 2004a). When I returned to southern Canada, I discovered not only that I had changed, but that much had changed within the culture I had left so long before. Professionally, one of the most significant changes was the increasing emphasis on racial/cultural issues in the field of educational psychology in response to the changing demographics of Canadian society.

Psychology, a discipline little influenced to date by postmodern thought or critical theory, has been critiqued for its neo-colonial character (Duran & Duran, 2000). Nevertheless, psychologists of colour in the United States have pioneered the introduction of racial/cultural issues to the field (Ponterotto, Jackson, & Nutini, 2001). Under their influence, educational psychology has become sensitized to the need for practitioners to become *multiculturally competent*.

In this chapter, I begin by defining multicultural competence and discussing its importance in school counselling. I then introduce the topic of White Racial Identity Development (WRID), which is closely associated with the development of multicultural competence. After discussing existing theoretical WRID models, I use as an illustration examples drawn from a study (Wihak, 2004b) of White Canadian counsellors who had experienced extended and intense contact with the Inuit of Nunavut. The combination of theory and evidence is intended to assist educators to understand WRID as a developmental process requiring negotiation of an identity crisis. Such understanding will prepare them to support their students through the emotionally charged exploration needed to achieve a strong, anti-racist White identity.

MULTICULTURAL COUNSELLING COMPETENCE FOR SCHOOL COUNSELLORS

Students of colour now represent a significant presence in contemporary Canadian schools (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). In the face of changing demographics, educational professionals from the dominant White culture need to develop multicultural competence, which is required for working with children from culturally and racially

diverse backgrounds (Cole, 1998; Gopaul-McNicol, 1997; Gosine, 2002). While various conceptualizations of multicultural competence exist (Mollen, Ridley, & Hill, 2003), it is generally understood to encompass "the integration of attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, and skills essential for awareness of the impact of culture" on professional practice (Arthur & Collins, 2005, p. 48). In this definition, self-awareness and capacity to appreciate the worldview of self and others are essential for professionals in cross-cultural contexts. Multicultural competence models have been developed for both teachers (Taylor & Quintana, 2003) and counsellors (Arthur & Collins, 2005; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). The need for teachers to be aware of racial issues has been extensively discussed (Gosine, 2002; Kelly & Brandes, 2001; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003), but the equal importance of such awareness for school-based counsellors is less well recognized (Wallace, 2000).

In North America, the majority of educational counsellors are likely to be White (Arthur & Januszkowki, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). White counsellors typically report lower levels of multicultural competence than those who are themselves members of a visible minority (Vinson & Neimeyer, 2000; 2003). When educational counsellors lack multicultural competence, minority children and families may receive inadequate services (Constantine, 2001; Schwallie-Giddis, Anstrom, Sanchez, Sardi, & Granato, 2004). The impact on the school experiences of minority children and youth can potentially be profound.

Educational counsellors are typically responsible for conducting intellectual assessments that affect educational placement decisions, as well as for responding to students' academic issues, interpersonal problems, and mental health needs (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). Lack of multicultural competence may contribute to the overrepresentation of children from minorities in special education classes (Myles & Harold, 1988; Reschly, 2005). Educational counsellors have a significant role in the development of socio-emotional competence in school children (Coleman & Baskin, 2003; Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). Higher rates of school disciplinary actions and suspensions reported for minority youth (Nichols, 1999; Ruck & Wortley, 2002) may reflect lack of understanding of racial/cultural factors in these students' lives. Educational counsellors who define their identities as independent individuals might make errors such as advising separation and individuation from the family and inappropriate expression of emotions and assertiveness (Constantine, 2001) when working with children and families from cultures that tend to define identity in terms of relation to their families and communities, including Aboriginal, Chinese, and African-American (Sparrow, 2000).

Despite the mandating of multicultural competence by professional counselling organizations, Canadian counsellors working in school-settings are likely to lack this expertise. Arthur and Januszkowki (2001) surveyed a random sample of Canadian counsellors concerning their multicultural competence and found that most needed more effective education and training to work with racially and culturally diverse clients. In a survey of Canadian training-programs for counselling psychologists, responses from Directors of Internship Training indicated that

concern was warranted about the adequacy of diversity training in professional programs (Brooks et al., 2004).

Institutions that train educational counsellors have been making an effort to respond to the increased need for multicultural competence with courses and programs directed to that purpose (Arredondo & Arciniega 2001; Brooks et al., 2004). Although much thought and energy is being devoted to developing effective methods of training competent multicultural counsellors, these efforts are hampered by a lack of knowledge about the process of becoming multiculturally competent (Fuertes, Bartolomeo & Nichols, 2001). One promising research direction concerns the link between racial identity development and multicultural competency.

WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

An understanding of racial identity development and awareness of this facet of one's own identity is considered a key component of multicultural competence for educational counsellors (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). The concept of racial identity encompasses both feelings of belongingness to a cultural/racial group and the internal, psychological process in which the individual makes a decision about the role of race in his/her life (Fischer & Moradi, 2001). For minority youth, many face the question of racial identity early in the developmental process (St. Louis & Liem, 2005; Sneed, Schwartz, & Cross, 2006). White adolescents, however, may never consider this facet of identity because Whiteness is not something that distinguishes them as individuals (Kroger, 2007). Thus, both White students in educational counselling programs and White professionals currently practicing in schools may have an undeveloped White identity, which will impact their multicultural counselling competence.

In a review of research studies exploring the relationship between racial identity development and multicultural competence, McAllister and Irvine (2000) found that higher levels of racial identity development were consistently associated with higher levels of multicultural competence, non-racist behaviour, and knowledge about other cultures and races. Graduate students who have participated in multicultural counselling courses generally show higher levels of self-rated White racial identity development on completion than at the beginning (Neville et al., 1996; Parker, Moore, & Neimeyer, 1998).

A number of White racial identity development (WRID) models (Helms, 1990, 1995; Sue et al., 1998) have been proposed in the United States as extensions of Erikson's (1968) developmental model of identity (Sneed et al., 2006). The models are based on an understanding that race is a social construct derived from differing histories of oppression and domination, rather than a biological fact (Helms, 1995). Although the White identity models differ in detail, they generally propose a series of stages leading from unawareness of racial identity to achievement of a strongly anti-racist White identity (Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006).

Although Helms' (1990, 1995) WRID model is widely cited in the counselling and educational literature (McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Ponterotto et al., 2006), it

has been criticized for lack of empirical validity (Fischer & Moradi, 2001). Sue et al. (1998) have further critiqued Helms' (1990, 1995) model as being context-bound. For example, Helms' model speaks exclusively about Black-White relations, without reference to other visible minority groups (Phinney, 1996). Further, Sue et al. (1998) noted that Helms' model does not include unachieved identity statuses, which are needed to reflect the lack of exploration of and commitment to racial identity characteristic of many White people.

As an alternative to Helms' (1990, 1995) conceptualization, Sue et al. (1998) proposed a 5-stage WRID developmental model. In the *Conformity* stage of that model, a White person has little awareness of the importance of race and culture. A person in this stage is likely to espouse colour-blind attitudes that minimize racial/cultural differences. Remarks such as "people are people" or "I treat everyone the same" are considered typical of this phase. Any problems that a minority person encounters are attributed to individual problems, such as lack of effort, rather than to systemic forces in society. Racial identity in this stage would be considered unachieved.

In the *Dissonance* phase (Sue et al., 1998), a White person encounters information that challenges his or her beliefs about the lack of personal bias towards minority individuals and the absence of racism in contemporary society. Such information may come from personal interaction that raises conflicting feelings, such as work-related difficulty with a visible minority co-worker, or it may come from a public event, such as Oscar Peterson being the target of racial harassment or attacks on Islamic mosques. The conflict of this information with personal beliefs produces a negative emotional reaction (e.g., guilt, shame, or anger). In response to this identity crisis, the person may either retreat further into the denial of the conformity phase or move forward into an exploration of racial issues.

Sue et al. (1998) termed the third phase of their model *Resistance and Immersion.* At this time, a White person will likely experience both "anger at having been sold a false bill of goods by family, friends, and society, and guilt for having been a part of the oppressive system" (p. 58). To compensate, the White individual may become a strong, liberal spokesperson for minority groups and/or seek to associate only with minority individuals, rejecting their own racial affiliation. Nevertheless, a thread of paternalism continues to run through this stage.

In the fourth phase, the White individual becomes *Introspective* (Sue et al., 1998) about Whiteness. It becomes easier to acknowledge the inevitable association between being White and both participating in oppression and benefiting from unearned White privilege. Although the person remains active in the struggle against oppression, defensive feelings such as guilt and anger about being White subside. Through active exploration of racial issues and association with minority individuals, the person thoughtfully considers what it means to be White. The process culminates in the fifth phase termed *Integrative Awareness*. At this point, the individual has achieved a non-racist White identity characterized by both an appreciation of multiculturalism and a commitment to ending oppression, even at the risk of being marginalized by White society.

Although the Sue et al. (1998) model needs further empirical investigation, it nevertheless highlights an important aspect of White identity development: the key role of cross-racial contact in catalyzing the developmental process. In the theoretical literature on WRID, contact with minority people is considered a necessary, if not sufficient, factor in the developmental process (Ponterotto et al., 2006). Nevertheless, empirical reports concerning cross-racial experience and White identity development in educational counsellors continue to be rare.

Boyle, Nackerud, and Kilpatrick (1999) reported on an experiment in social worker training that involved short international exchange programs with social work schools in Mexico for two small groups of students. Their results were so encouraging that the exchanges have now been institutionalized. DeRicco and Sciarra (2005) described how a ten-week immersion experience in a Black neighbourhood in the northeastern U. S. revealed to a White liberal counselling student that, "racism had taken up residence within her without her bidding" (p. 13). These two studies both involved short-term sojourns. Inspired by the profound effect of my own longer sojourn with the Inuit (Wihak, 2004a) on my own White racial identity, I conducted research with other White counsellors who had lived and worked for at least two years in school-settings in Nunavut's Inuit communities and since returned to southern Canada (Wihak, 2004b).

WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: THE EXPERIENCES OF CANADIAN COUNSELLORS

Nunavut offers the sojourning counsellor an unusual physical and social environment, one that is very different from southern Canada. The territory, which came into political existence on April 1, 1999, comprises two million square kilometers above the tree line north and west of Hudson's Bay. The population is approximately 29,000, of which about 85 percent are Inuit. Although Inuit employment is increasing, a majority of Inuit families live in public housing and rely on social assistance payments for income. This socio-economic situation is the consequence of the Canadian government's intervention in the Arctic after the Second World War when the official policy was to settle the formerly nomadic Inuit into organized communities. Settlement in permanent communities disrupted traditional reliance on subsistence hunting and gathering while the requirement for Inuit children to attend school interfered with generational patterns of cultural transmission. Many Inuit suffering from tuberculosis were also removed for treatment in southern Canada, further disrupting generational relations. Rapid social, political and economic change has taken its toll on the mental health of Inuit. Nunavut faces high rates of substance abuse, family violence, and suicide (Korhonen, 2002).

The White counsellors participating in my research had varying degrees of training in multicultural counselling and experience with cross-racial contact prior to going to Nunavut. The length of their sojourns also varied considerably, as did the intensity of their involvement with Inuit during their time in Nunavut.

Because of this variability, their observations on their White identities provided an interesting cross-section of the WRID developmental process. To illustrate thoughts and feelings characteristic of different developmental phases, I have related extracts from the participants' narratives to the Sue et al. (1998) WRID model introduced above. [Note: Some participants chose pseudonyms while other preferred to use their own names. To respect their preferences while maintaining confidentiality, I have not indicated which is a pseudonym and which is a real name.]

Conformity: Based on retrospective interviews, these participants cannot be characterized as unaware of the importance of racial and cultural differences. In describing their personal and professional interactions with Inuit, all participants showed awareness of belonging to a different culture/ through using terms such as *qablunaaq*, Southerner, and White in contrast to Inuit. Nor was there any evidence that the participants attributed their Inuit clients' presenting problems to individual failures, as Sue et al. (1998) suggest is typical of the Conformity phase.

Paradoxically, however, several of the counsellors expressed opinions that Sue et al. (1998) describe as indicating the colour-blindness of Conformity. Bev, who had married an Inuk man and learned to speak Inuktitut fluently, observed, "People are people and people and people. They have the same feelings. They have same ideologies. They have the same psychological make-up, basically." Danya, who was herself a member of the Jewish minority, echoed Bev when she said, "In so many things, we're the same. We're all humans." Meeka, who had grown up in Indigenous communities, had a long term relationship with an Inuit man, and learned to speak the language, added support to this view when she said, "There's more similarities than differences in people."

Dissonance: Several of the participants recollected really becoming aware of their White identity when they first moved to Nunavut, although they all had previous cross-racial experience. Their memories of their emerging awareness of being White and associated feelings of guilt and anger are characteristic of the Dissonance stage (Sue et al., 1998).

Patricia described becoming aware of her racial/cultural identity when her family moved to a small community that was over 90 percent Inuit. She explained that, "It was really one of the first times that I was ever a minority." She remembered the uncomfortable feeling of "being examined and stared at." Similarly, Rebecca felt that her racial/cultural identity came into being in Nunavut. It was a different experience for her, being "told how many times a day that you're *qablunaaq* [Inuktutut word for non-Inuit]." Her Whiteness seemed to be the most significant thing about her. Rebecca expressed mixed emotions about being White, "feeling very guilty to feeling kind of defensive." She sometimes felt that what had happened to the Inuit was not her fault; "What's happened, happened and I didn't do it."

Patricia and Rebecca commented on the difficulty of making a difference with regard to social justice, another characteristic of the Dissonance phase (Sue et al.,

1998). Patricia felt "very powerless to make changes, because some of them were major social things and you're one person." Rebecca's comments echoed Patricia's opinion: "Social workers in those northern communities who are from the South have done some good work…. Have they fixed some of the systemic problems, the broader issues? I don't think they ever can."

Resistance and Immersion: Many of the participants' comments about their immersion experiences reflected Sue et al.'s (1998) description of the guilt associated with this phase. Michelle, for example, explained that, "I needed to somehow make a difference or right a wrong for myself. There's just the privilege of my life, just seeing that privilege, just being aware of the fact that I have a different experience because I'm White."

Commenting on how her cultural/racial identity had been affected when she joined the Inuit in their struggle against Canadian government interventions in their culture, Fluff said, "It's a difficult thing to identify as being of a race and culture that is oppressive to a lot of the world, and to recognize that… one's culture exercises power in negative ways over other people."

Bev and Meeka, both of whom had relationships with Inuit men, also demonstrated the tendency to over-identify with the oppressed group, another characteristic of this phase. Bev described herself as becoming "quasi-Inuk" when she married into the culture and learned the language. After returning to southern Canada, Meeka remembered going to a meeting and thinking, "Wow! There's a lot of White people here… a lot of pasty White skin and yellow hair and pale eyes." When she visited a nearby Aboriginal reserve, she thought, "This is the community I want to live in.". [Approved Transcript, lines 815-820]

Introspective: Debbie had extensive contact with Indigenous people prior to moving to Nunavut, living as a child on reserves where her father worked and working with Indigenous bands earlier in her career. When asked how her identity had been affected by her Nunavut sojourn, Debbie commented that racial/cultural identity has "always been fuzzy for me… It certainly solidified my humanness, my perspective. But there's lots of humanness outside of the Native culture. So I do understand your question; I just don't have the answer." Reflecting her prolonged cross-racial contact, Debbie's response seems to portray the disconnection from the White world that Sue et al. (1998) said is typical of this phase. This disconnection is also apparent in the observations of Bev, who recollected that while she was in Nunavut, her bicultural family was never fully accepted by the other Whites.

Integrative Awareness: Several participants made comments that suggested they had internalized a non-racist White identity. Reflecting on what she had learned in Nunavut, Michelle observed, "I've gotten a lot of my White guilt out of the way, and in doing so… I'm feeling… more connected to people of different cultures as opposed to… that patronizing… view." On her return to southern Canada, Michelle continued

to work and socialize with Aboriginal people, demonstrating the comfort with and commitment to minority groups that Sue et al. (1998) described in this phase.

Deborah's comments also illustrated a mixture of comfort with her own racial identity and commitment to working to end oppression. She described her own cultural identity in these terms: "I am undeniably the product of lower middle-class English people. I retain a lot of those values… and I'm very… comfortable in my cultural background." At the same time, Deborah learned a lot about working in solidarity with minorities from her experience in Nunavut, indicating that she had moved beyond a paternalistic, liberal approach. She explained:

> Women in [name of small Nunavut community] made it very clear to me that they don't need external spokespeople. Strategies? Yes. You can provide information, but women everywhere in the world advocate for themselves… They know what's wrong with their lives, and they take action on it when they're ready to.

Since leaving Nunavut, Deborah has worked with women's groups in Africa and Afghanistan.

Bev's perception of her identity changed after she returned to southern Canada. "Very definitely, I'm more *qablunaaq* now than I ever have been." She elaborated, "The kids blame me sometimes, 'Mom! You're too *qablunaaq*! Straighten up and be Inuk!' Look! You know, I'm White! This is me!" Bev has also continued her involvement with Aboriginal people in southern Canada.

TRANSFORMATIONAL EFFECT ON PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

The counsellors in this study developed their White racial identities in the Nunavut context. Their deepened understanding of their own Whiteness, however, has continued to influence their professional practice when working with clients from other racially diverse groups in southern Canada.

Fluff brought from Nunavut an awareness of how capable people are to be healthy and to grow. She commented about her work with Aboriginal people in southern Canada:

> I think that in many of our schools that teach us counseling and therapy, there's quite an emphasis on what we do to assist other people and how we do that. But perhaps we don't really pay enough attention to acknowledging that it is the person who is healing themselves.

Michelle described how her Nunavut experience had helped her work with Aboriginal clients in the South: "I feel more… friendliness; there's a way to be with Aboriginal people that is different in the therapeutic professions. It feels more like... it's about creating friendships and being part of the community."

With visible minority clients, Patricia now recognizes that for some people, it's uncomfortable for them to say, "No, I want to challenge you." She doesn't accept

that when they say "yes," they necessarily understand what she means. Patricia realized, "Sometimes I have to ask the same question in three or four different ways, and if I get a consistent answer, then I know that I've got the right information."

From her experience in Nunavut, Rebecca sees that most social work practice is based on a White European understanding and this may not be the best fit for everyone; "people aren't just all going to be the same, and you can't treat everybody the same way…. Just testing people out and asking them what they are comfortable with… that's just good practice."

DISCUSSION: WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND GENERATIVITY

The comments of the counsellors who sojourned in Nunavut fit well into the phases of WRID in the Sue et al. (1998) model, with one notable exception. That is the participants' persistence in "seeing people as people," supposedly a characteristic of Conformity, even though other remarks indicate considerable progression beyond colour-blindness and conformity to liberal ideals. What accounts for this paradox?

The participants in this study were mature counsellors concerned with the question of "How can I help?" This question is the focus of the developmental stage that Erikson (1982) termed *generativity*, which encompasses much of adult life. That is, the sojourning counsellors were involved with the question of effective caring (McAdams Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997), rather than identity. Through their commitment to being effective helpers, their identities also expanded (McAdams, Hart, & Maruna, 1998) to incorporate caring for people from a different race and culture. Their descriptions of similarities between people of all cultures and appreciation of their realities reflect not conformity to liberal ideas but rather development of a universal-diverse orientation that is essential for effective cross-cultural helping relationships in today's multicultural schools (Constantine, Arorash, Barakett, Blackmon, Donnelly, & Edles, 2001).

In the spiritual life, there is a proverb: "First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is." The process of WRID is similar. Initially, a White person raised in a liberal, White country such as Canada cannot see the differences in life experiences and opportunities that come from race. As a White person actually gets to know members of oppressed minorities, she also starts to see her own Whiteness and the privilege that accompanies it. As she accepts responsibility as a White person to work for social justice, she once again can express her sense of shared humanity with minorities, a sense essential for making the end of oppression their common cause. That is, she has become able to do what Parker (1997, p. 297) asked her White friends to do: "The first thing you do is forget that I am Black… Second, you must never forget that I am Black." This ability to be colour-blind and not colour-blind simultaneously is the hallmark of the achievement of a mature, anti-racist White identity.

To support development of a mature White identity, effective educational programs need to ensure that White students have the opportunity for extensive cross-

racial contact and, ideally, the opportunity for an extended immersion experience as a minority. Throughout this process, educators can use an understanding of the WRID model (Sue et al., 1998) to support students sensitively while they explore the conflicting emotions that characterize an identity crisis. Most importantly, educators need to recognize that White identity development is a process that may take months, if not years, to reach its mature expression in Integrative Awareness, and one that requires extended cross-racial contact to come to full fruition. Achieving Integrative Awareness is not, however, an end-point for White Racial Identity development. Although naïve colour-blindness and White guilt may disappear, the commitment to work collaboratively with minorities for social justice will continue to make learning about one's own Whiteness a lifelong task.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is your personal experience of developing a White Racial Identity?
2. How would achieving a mature White identity affect your professional practice?
3. How would you tell the difference between an individual who was expressing the colour-blindness of the Conformity stage and one who was expressing the colour-blindness/colour-vision of the Integrative Awareness stage?
4. How would educational activities to support White Racial Identity Development (WRID) differ for pre-service professionals in different phases of development?
5. Statistical projections indicate that in major Canadian cities (Toronto, Vancouver) White people will soon be in the minority. How might this affect the process of WRID?

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