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Racial Identity Attitudes Among African-American Workers

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Abstract

In this paper, I compared racial identity attitudes of professional and non-professional African-American workers. Comparisons were made using means for each of the stages of the Racial Identity Attitude Scale. The Racial Identity Attitude Scale was developed by Janet Helms and was based on an identity model developed by Cross. Means for each stage are compared among men and women, professionals and non-professionals, salary, and educational levels. However, responses to the scale proved to be more interesting than the actual results. So, due to the overwhelming opposition to the use of this scale, I also discuss implications of the subjects responses to the RIAS.

Racial Identity Attitudes Among African-American Workers

An important issue for today's Industrial/Organizational psychologists is racism in the workplace. As more minorities enter the workplace, issues concerning race and ethnicity become increasingly important. African-Americans, who have long suffered the throes of discrimination, are the group which has received the greatest amount of attention in this area. Although there have been some half-hearted attempts at improving the inequality present in today's workplace, such as America's futile attempt to integrate affirmative action, little progress has been made. It seems that many have attempted to solve the problem by mending the symptoms, rather than the causes. Education and building of self-esteem are ways in which the cause may be addressed. Little has been done to improve the weaknesses that exist in this area. If children are taught to be proud of their own culture, as well as knowledgeable and respectful of other's cultures, they will be more likely to carry this into adulthood.

As a result of numerous factors, some of which may be negative reactions to and disrespect toward their race from members of other races, many African-Americans struggle with their own racial identity. Racial identity attitudes represent the extent to which persons hold positive, negative, or mixed attitudes toward their own racial or cultural group and their place in it. A predominant African-American psychologist, Dr. Janet Helms, has proposed that African-Americans progress through a series of stages in developing their racial identity. Helms derived these stages from an identity model developed by Cross (1971, 1978) who originally presented a four- or five-stage model of racial identity development in which each stage was characterized by self-concept issues concerning race as well as parallel attitudes about Blacks and Whites as reference groups. From this, Helms has suggested that there are five stages of racial identity. These stages range from Pre-encounter to Internalization (Helms & Piper, 1994).

The stages suggest that one begins in the Pre-encounter stage, in which a person thinks of the world as being non-Black. The person in this stage has a Eurocentric worldview. They degrade Blackness and assimilation/integration, which involves conformation to majority standards, is thought to be the only paradigm for race relations. This person prefers to be called a human being or American citizen. From this stage, one progresses to the Encounter stage. The person in this stage has some experience which shatters the person's current feeling about him/herself and his/her interpretation of the conditions of Blacks in America. There are two steps in this stage, the first being the actual encounter and the second is the reinterpretation of the world. The next stage is Immersion-Emmersion in which the person immerses in the world of Blackness and liberates from Whiteness. The Black person and the Black world are deified. Often times an intense interest in "Mother Africa" develops. Persons at this point in their development are said to have a "pseudo" Black identity because it is based on the hatred and negation of White people rather than on the affirmation of a pro-Black perspective which includes commitment to the destruction of racism, capitalism and Western dominance. Black rage and pride are characteristic of this stage. Finally, one reaches the Internalization stage. In this stage the person achieves a feeling of inner security and is more satisfied with themselves. The anger is not present in this stage. However, there is no commitment to a plan of action to fight racism.

According to Carter and Helms (1988), the racial identity model and studies which support it suggest that Blacks in different stages and/or who hold differing racial identity attitudes have responded differently to their sociocultural environment. Racial identity attitudes appear to represent a psychological orientation which reflects one's personal reaction to his or her psychosocial experiences. Issues regarding work and choosing a career are included in these psychosocial experiences. Therefore, one's racial identity attitude can affect their choice of career. Helms and Piper (1994) have explored this issue and conclude that some African-Americans will avoid positions of power and authority

because their attitude toward their race governs that African-Americans are not able to pursue such positions. They also argue that African-Americans who pursue higher-level positions do so because their racial consciousness is influenced by Pre-encounter or Internalization stages, and not because of the number of African-Americans who hold such positions (pg. 129). This study (Helms & Piper, 1994) focused on job satisfaction as related to racial identity.

Beyond job satisfaction, however, is choice of a career. If African-Americans are not comfortable with their racial identity, and feel that members of their race are unable to obtain higher positions, this will discourage them from pursuing such positions. As a result, only those African-Americans who believe they can succeed will attempt to obtain these positions. This would require a level of Internalization, in which they experience pride and security in their own race and identity. Additionally, those African-Americans in the Pre-encounter stage, who feel they are among the select few African-Americans who are accepted by the majority, will feel comfortable attaining these jobs. These individuals will have devalued their own race and associated with the majority. Therefore, they feel they can attain such positions because they are a part of the majority, and they are different from other African-Americans.

It is not uncommon to find literature that deals with the many aspects of racial issues in the workplace. There is literature which explores all sides of this issue. Some, like Cook and Helms (1988) have explored cultural influences on supervision. They have examined the effect supervisors of a different race have on their minority workers. Black supervisees report less supervisor empathy, respect, and congruence than White supervisees. Also, predominately White supervisors report that their minority workers are less able to accept constructive criticism and have more problems than the White supervisees. Obviously, there is a discrepancy in these supervisory relationships related to race difference in both the supervisor and the supervisee. So, if minority supervisees are uncomfortable with their White supervisors, they would be unlikely to aim for higher

positions. Likewise, the negative attitudes of White supervisors toward their minority workers would most likely prevent them from promoting these workers. African-Americans in supervisees positions such as these may be unable to reach the stage of Internalization when confronted with such discrepancies. They may remain in the middle stages, and make no attempt at attaining higher positions. As a result of the unfair practices of their White supervisors, African-American subordinates may find themselves in a vicious cycle which hinders the development of their racial identity which, in accordance with the theories of Helms and Piper (1994) mentioned earlier, prevent them from advancing.

Although there are many studies examining racial identity, and many studies regarding minorities in the workplace, there are very few which have specifically examined racial identity in the workplace. As more African-Americans obtain positions of power and authority, it is important to understand the impact of this shift. In my study I attempted to examine whether African-Americans in positions of power and authority tend to fall in either the Pre-encounter or Internalization stages, rather than the middle, volatile stages of Encounter and Immersion-Emmersion, which should define their non-professional counterparts. Helms and Piper (1994) believe that a persons' reactions to the work environment as either an individual or part of a collective rather than racial classification should be the focus of vocational psychologist's studies of race (pg. 126). Although this is an arguably valid point, one must have some means of classifying subjects, which in this study, will be on the basis of race. I believe this is necessary and important in this study because I am not directly measuring the reactions to the work environment. Instead, I measured racial identity and correlated it with African-American's workplace status. I researched African-American in positions of power and authority and African-Americans not in positions of power. I hypothesized that African-Americans in positions of power would be either in the stage of Internalization or Pre-encounter while the non-professionals would be in either the Encounter or Immersion-Emmersion stage.

Method

Participants

One hundred and twenty-five African-American adults were recruited through on-line African-American organizations. Organizations contacted included the Black Journalists Association, African-American Women on the Internet, and an African-American organization for women in Hawaii. Only fourteen of the 125 recruited returned completed surveys. Of the fourteen, twelve held either managerial or professional positions, and two were in clerical positions. Of the participants, eight were female and six were male. Subjects ranged in age from twenty-four to seventy-six. Directors of the organizations were sent an e-mail asking if they would be willing to distribute the surveys to their members. Surveys were mailed to these directors who then distributed them to their members. They were informed that this was a volunteer experiment, and they were not obligated to participate, it was their choice to do so. They were given an informed consent, which informed them of the content of the study and it's purpose. Volunteers were not compensated for their participation. They were treated in accordance with the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Instruments

Participants were asked to complete the Racial Identity Attitudes Scale (Helms & Piper, 1994). The scale consisted of thirty items to which subjects responded using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The Racial Identity Attitudes Scale contains items which require the subject to answer questions regarding racial attitudes (See Appendix A). For example, "I feel good about being Black, but do not limit myself to Black activities (Helms & Piper, 1994). Reliabilities for the scale are 0.69 for the Pre-encounter items, 0.50 for Encounter, 0.67 for Immersion, and 0.79 for Internalization items. Permission to use the Racial Identity Scale was obtained from Janet

Helms. Subjects also completed a data sheet. The data sheet required subjects to indicate age, sex, country of origin, educational level, type of occupation, and salary.

Procedures

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The survey was mailed to the participants. Subjects were asked to respond to items on the Racial Identity Scale and to complete the demographic sheet. They were given a self-addressed, stamped envelope to return the completed survey in.

Results

Since only fourteen of the 125 subjects recruited participated in this study, results could not be generalized to any population. Considering this restriction, means were calculated for each of the stages for each variable. Means calculated showed a slight difference among men and women for two stages (See Appendix B). Women scored a mean of 2.42 for the Encounter stage while the mean for men was 2.27 for this stage. Also, men scored a mean of 2.36 on the Immersion-Emmersion scale while the mean for women was 2.17 in this stage. There was little difference between men and women for the Pre-encounter and Internalization stages. The mean for women in the Pre-encounter stage was 1.69. For this same stage, the mean for men was 1.63. On the Internalization stage women had a mean score of 3.90 and the men had a mean score of 3.98. Means for scores by job type (Appendix C) indicated that clerical workers tend to have a lower mean score (1.57) than managerial and professional workers (2.38 and 2.37 respectively) in the Immersion-Emmersion stage. When separated by education (Appendix B), subjects with Ph.Ds/Ed.Ds scored higher than the other educational levels in the Pre-encounter stage but significantly lower in the Encounter stage. The mean score for subjects with Ph.Ds/Ed.Ds was 1.93 in the Pre-encounter stage and 2.00 in the Encounter stage. The mean scores for subjects with bachelor's degrees in these same stages were 1.47 and 2.50 respectively. Finally, salary was negatively correlated at -.433 with the Pre-encounter stage but positively correlated with Immersion-Emmersion at .529. Encounter and Internalization stages were not significantly correlated with salary (Appendix D).

Discussion

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The purpose of this study was to examine differences in racial identity attitudes among African-American workers. The most significant findings were the correlations between salary and Pre-encounter and Immersion-Emmersion stages. Also, differences in racial identity attitudes among different job types was observed. Had this project generated a larger response, several interesting conclusions could have been drawn in regards to the results. For instance, it is interesting to note that the Pre-encounter stage was negatively correlated with salary and the Immersion-Emmersion stage was positively correlated. This suggests that subjects with a higher salary score lower on the Pre-encounter stage while those with a lower salary score higher on this same stage. Perhaps those who earn more are less likely to degrade their Blackness. This may result from the confidence they gain by earning more in their area. Or, it may be that those who do not reject their race are able to advance because they are more comfortable with their identity and do not have the anger and resentment which sometimes hampers advancement.

On the other hand, salary was positively correlated with Immersion-Emmersion. This corresponds with the assumptions made based on Pre-encounter scores. In this stage, the subject immerses in the world of Blackness. So, those who are comfortable with their race are able to achieve in their field when achievement is based on salary.

When mean scores for education were compared, those with more education, such as those with a Ph.D/Ed.D, had a higher mean score for Pre-encounter and a lower mean score for Encounter when compared to those with less education, or those with bachelor's degrees. These results do not support the theory. However, since discrimination and various hindrances prevent most minorities from reaching the level of Ph.D./Ed.D, perhaps those who have higher degrees must learn to assimilate and cope with their predominantly. White peers by rejecting their Blackness. So, those with bachelor's degrees have more peers who are African-American and therefore do not need to assimilate. Similarly,

clerical workers had a lower mean score than managerial and professional workers on the Immersion-Emmersion stage. So, these results contradict the results for education. It would appear that African-American's who are in positions of power and authority, like managerial and profession positions, are more immersed in the world of Blackness and liberate from Whiteness. As in the results for salary, perhaps the self-confidence and comfort-level they gain at such positions allows them to be comfortable with their own race. Or, as stated earlier, the comfort they experience with their race may allow them to transcend stereotypes and discrimination and advance further than those who are not comfortable with their race.

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Although these results are interesting, these differences can not be generalized to any population due to the confine of the small number of participants. However, it can be noted that the majority of the subjects fell in the Internalization stage. Of course, one may argue that the method used to recruit subjects may have caused this result. Since subjects were recruited through African-American organizations, perhaps they are the population that would be most comfortable with their race. When examining other studies that used this same scale, though, it appears that this is a recurring phenomenon. It appears that subjects do not tend to fit in the various categories as Janet Helms had proposed.

It is evident that, although there were only a few subjects to base these results on, there appears to be some complications with placing subjects in categories according to their level of racial identity. Instead, it may be that a persons reactions may depend on the situation they are currently in. For instance, a person who is the only African-American in their workplace may need to interact with fellow employees in a way which would suggest they are in the Pre-encounter stage. However, this same person may interact with African-American friends or family members in a way which would suggest that they are in the Immersion-Emmersion stage.

Therefore, although the scale used in this project has been widely used in psychological studies, subjects recruited in this study seemed to dispute it's relevance and

purpose. Of the 125 surveys distributed, only fourteen were returned completed. Several subjects returned unfinished surveys along with comments about the offensive nature of the scale. Many felt that the items on the scale were racist and unnecessary. For example, many were offended by item 21 which states: "I believe that Black people came from a strange, dark, uncivilized continent." Also, the use of the term "Black" was considered offensive. Many felt the term "African-American" should be used so as not to evoke anger and defensiveness when completing the survey. Questions regarding participation in "Black activities" were deemed unnecessary since many subjects did not know what would be considered as such. Still others believe racial identity is an aspect which can not be measured. They believe that identity exists and can be measured, but that it transcends race. They suggest that, at least in America, they do not develop an identity as part of a group or race. Instead, their identity is developed on an individual basis, and can not be placed into stages with reference to others in their race.

So, although the authors of the scale are distinguished psychologists who have made significant contributions in the area of racial identity, perhaps it is time to reexamine the aspect of racial identity. The authors of this scale seem to contradict themselves in that their theory of racial identity suggests that identity develops as a stage process yet the scale is a four-dimensional attitude scale that is used cross-sectionally.

Many who wrote believe that racial identity can be measured without the use of stereotypes and forthright questions regarding one's involvement in so-called "Black activities." Again, no generalizations can be made from this study because of the sample size and the restrictive nature of the subject pool, which was derived from members of African-American organizations, which, in itself, creates a confound. However, it is apparent that the field of racial identity needs to be examined and explored further.

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Racial Identity Attitude Scale

Appendix A

The Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS) Items

Strongly Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5

- 1. I believe that being Black is a positive experience.
- 2. I know through experience what being Black in America means.
- 3. I feel unable to involve myself in White experiences and am increasing my involvement in Black experiences.
- 4. I believe that large numbers of Blacks are untrustworthy.
- 5. I feel an overwhelming attachment to Black people.
- 6. I involve myself in causes that will help oppressed people.
- 7. I feel comfortable wherever I am.

- 8. I believe that White people look and express themselves better than Blacks.
- 9. I feel very uncomfortable around Black people.
- 10. I feel good about being Black, but do not limit myself to Black activities.
- 11. I often find myself referring to White people as honkies, devils, pigs, etc.
- 12. I believe that to be Black is not necessarily good.
- 13. I believe that certain aspects of the Black experience apply to me, and others do not.
- 14. I frequently confront the system and the man.
- 15. I constantly involve myself in Black political and social activities (art show, political meetings, Black theater, etc.).
- 16. I involve myself in social action and political groups even if there are no other Blacks involved.
- 17. I believe that Black people should learn to think and experience life in ways similar to White people.
- 18. I believe that the world should be interpreted from a Black perspective.
- 19. I have changed my style of life to fit my beliefs about Black people.
- 20. I feel excitement and joy in Black surroundings.
- 21. I believe that Black people came from a strange, dark, uncivilized continent.
- 22. People, regardless of their race, have strengths and limitations.
- 23. I find myself reading a lot of Black literature and thinking about being Black.
- 24. I feel guilty and/or anxious about some of the things I believe about Black people.
- 25. I believe that a Black person's most effective weapon for solving problems is to become a part of the White person's world.
- 26. I speak my mind regardless of the consequences (e.g., being kicked out of school, being imprisoned, being exposed to danger).
- 27. I believe that everything Black is good, and consequently, I limit myself to Black activities.
- 28. I am determined to find my Black identity.
- 29. I believe that White people are intellectually superior to Blacks.
- 30. I believe that because I am Black, I have many strengths.

- 31. I feel that Black people do not have as much to be proud of as White people do.
- 32. Most Blacks I know are failures.
- 33. I believe that White people should feel guilty about the way they have treated Blacks in the past.
- 34. White people can't be trusted.
- 35. In today's society if Black people don't achieve, they have only themselves to blame.
- 36. The most important thing about me is that I am Black.
- 37. Being Black just feels natural to me.
- 38. Other Black people have trouble accepting me because my life experiences have been so different from their experiences.
- 39. Black people who have any White people's blood should feel ashamed of it.
- 40. Sometimes, I wish I belonged to the White race.
- 41. The people I respect most are White.
- 42. A person's race usually is not important to me.
- 43. I feel anxious when white people compare me to other members of my race.
- 44. I can't feel comfortable with either Black people or White people.
- 45. A person's race has little to do with whether or not he/she is a good person.
- 46. When I am with Black people, I pretend to enjoy the things they enjoy.
- 47. When a stranger who is Black does something embarrassing in public, I get embarrassed.
- 48. I believe that a Black person can be close friends with a White person.
- 49. I am satisfied with myself.

50. I have a positive attitude about myself because I am Black.

Appendix B

Sex (means)	Pre-encounter scale	Encounter scale	Immersion- Emmersion scale	Internalization scale
Female	1.69	2.42	2.18	3.90
Male	1.63	2.28	2.36	3.98

Education (means)	Pre-encounter scale	Encounter scale	Immersion- Emmersion scale	Internalization scale
some college	2.22	3.00	1.86	4.78
bachelor's	1.47	2.50	2.11	3.92
master's	1.74	2.67	2.48	3.85
Ph.D/Ed.D	1.93	2.00	2.19	3.63
Other	1.41	2.00	2.43	4.07

Appendix C

Job Type means	Pre-encounter scale	Encounter scale	Immersion- Emmersion scale	Internalization scale
managerial	1.74	2.56	2.38	4.07
professional	1.59	2.22	2.37	3.80
clerical	1.89	2.67	1.57	4.33

Appendix D

Pearson Correlations		
	Salary	
Pre-encounter scale	433	
Encounter scale	163	
Immersion-Emmersion scale	.529	
Internalization scale	071	