

Applying Theory to Nancy

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Author Note

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Introduction

Throughout the past semester, I have had the privilege to spend 3 interviews with an involved student named Nancy. In the short amount of time that I have spent with Nancy, her maturity continued to impress me as I studied her development. In this process, I have learned about her development as a woman, as a white person, as a Greek member, and as an individual. In this paper, I will partially utilize the framework that is provided by Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity to understand the concept of identity and identity saliency. Subsequently, the term of identity will be synonymous with the multiple identities that an individual may assume. When discussing and considering her core self, intersectionality will be used as a term to consider the inter-related nature of Nancy's multiple identities, or her core self.

Of Nancy's multiple identities, her race and racial identity will be explored through Helm's (1993) White Racial Identity Development Model. This model is created with two distinct phases, each with three stages. The first phase, Abandonment of Racism, includes the stages Contact, Disintegration, and Reintegration. Navigating these stages respectively, involve a process of being oblivious or naïve, developing conflict and consciousness, to accepting white supremacy or the willingness to act on it. The second phase, Defining a Nonracist White Identity, is comprised of stages that lead to the Autonomy, a stage where Whiteness is accepted and where one actively seeks ways to abandon the entitlement that co-exists with being White. Leading up to this point are the stages are Pseudo-Independence and Immersion/Emersion where one begins to attempt to understand race and eventually challenge systems of privilege and oppression. Through deconstructing my conversations with Nancy, I was able to identify her as someone who has begun to enter Immersion/Emersion, a stage where one is able to act on

notions of racism and explore themselves as a racial being.

Comment [FH1]: Nice intro and excellent framing of the paper.

Description of the Student

Nancy is a second-year college student at UC San Diego who is currently a Human Development Major but is still exploring her major choices and options. While she was a member of Delta Delta Gamma and has largely had positive experiences with her sorority, she was deliberate in pointing out that it did not define who she was. Nancy comes from a small town in Connecticut, which has a population that is similar in size to the student body of her current institution. Her parents were divorced when she was in high school and she noted that her mother, who had primary custody of her and her two siblings, was an alcoholic. In high school, she moved in with her re-married father, who served as her parental figure. Her stepmother who was a member of a different sorority played a role in her parents' understanding of the Greek community when she was interested in going Greek. Her influence in deciding to go Greek stemmed from interest that was expressed by her roommate, who ended up in the same chapter as her.

Nancy has since entered a relationship with a man she met through Tindr, a social media application used for meeting people who share common interest, or friends. Further, her entire course load is now comprised of the Human Development major, a major she feels confident is well suited for her. She also provided the insight that she is considering becoming an inactive member or terminating membership with her sorority. This is largely due to the inconsistencies with her values as a self-perceived feminist and the culture of hyperfemininity found in her peers. In these conversations with Nancy, I was able to learn that her relationship with her family has been largely stable over the past two months until her grandmother on her Mom's side passed away. The funeral took place locally in Los Angeles, and her mother and brother stayed with her for a few days before and after the ceremony. She noted that during this time, both her

mother and her brother engaged in unhealthy alcoholic drinking behavior noting that they “both had a drink by 11 am.”

She considered herself to have experienced no major challenges, an idea that I challenged when it came to changes in her perceptions of involvement with her sorority. For Nancy’s development, a key theme in identity development was her Ethnic Studies course where her viewpoints were challenged. Through a supportive roommate who was co-enrolled in the course, Nancy mentioned was able to refine her thoughts, reinforce her learning, and integrate these ideas into her own thought process. In the case of gender, Nancy also mentioned a specific party she attended, where her peers felt pressured to engage in sexual activity with a fraternity because they hosted a party. She noted that when she declined an invitation a group of men that approached her and asked her to “take a shot with them”; they stared and walked away, not knowing what to do. This made Nancy uncomfortable because she felt that she should be able to have fun without having to drink. She noted that women were simply expected to engage in binge-drinking behavior by “taking a shot with every guy [she] met” and had to engage in intimate activity if there was a single guy who was not talking to a girl. These events at parties served as reinforcements for a sexist attitude that existed in the Greek community and injustices that exist between men and women. Throughout my three interviews with her, she began to take a firmer stance on the injustice that exists in the Fraternity and Sorority system as it pertains to equality in gender and race. She eventually decided to withdraw, with an indication that she had submitted all necessary paperwork to deactivate two days before we spoke. Conversations like these provided deeper insight into Nancy’s character and sophisticated development as a student.

Identifying Developmental Issue

Of Nancy’s multiple identities, her race and racial identity will be explored through Helm’s (1993) White Racial Identity Development Model. Having had an opportunity to reflect

Comment [FH2]: Outstanding job of discussing Nancy’s background and ugrad experiences that have influenced her development. That said, I would like to have seen more direct quotes from Nancy in this discussion.

on the students' identities, I became less interested in her gender, but more on her interest in culture. This occurred when she noted that she did not believe race was salient, but that culture was. When asked to define culture and define what it meant to her, she indicated that it encompassed “practices, actions, holidays, language, and different concepts that define a group of people.” She continued to state that while this was the case, she felt that race and gender were important, but culture was a more encompassing and inclusive term. This was an important marker for me, as her understanding of the importance of culture led to my interest in her racial identity and how her culture may relate to it.

With that in mind, race, as a vehicle for understanding her culture, became of interest when it came to understanding Nancy's development throughout her first two years in college. To me, the rejection of race and embracement of culture was a key marker of growth in actively choosing where she might find opportunities that can address systematic institutions of racism. This is particularly important to the field of Student Affairs in both theory and practice. By understanding students like Nancy and how they develop, it might further understanding and assist in developing an identity model for White individuals beyond the scope of racial prejudice. Further, this may provide practitioners with the understanding on how they might facilitate discussion with other students and encourage positive interactions that might deconstruct elements of systemic racism.

Presentation of Key Findings

Through looking at the various identities of Nancy, it becomes clear that there are certain themes that exist in her identity development. For each identity that we discussed, whether it is her identity of being white or a woman, Nancy had some shared common pieces: a starting state, a key event, reinforcement, and a marked transition. More specifically, there exists an ideal state, which is reached with the marked transition. There is also a theme of a starting state,

which is indicated by a point in time where her values or beliefs were incongruent with that of the ideal state. In regards to both of these identities, a key transition event or series of events also existed, which caused Nancy to develop consciousness and challenge her belief systems.

For her identities, Nancy's pre-collegiate years in her original town in Connecticut can be seen as the starting state. In the case of race, Nancy referred to her lack of awareness to issues pertaining to race and the concept of diversity. Because the town was so small, everyone conformed to a similar set of attitudes and beliefs, which coincidentally impacted her view of the woman identity. Women were expected to become stay at home mothers, even though they were expected to attend college and continue with their education. Transition occurred during her Ethnic Studies course where her viewpoints were challenged. These periods of dissonance allowed her to critically evaluate what she accepted beforehand and allowed her newly created beliefs on injustice to be reinforced through her interactions with her peers and dialogue with her roommates. Lastly, a marked transition occurs where the ideal state is either being reached or has been reached. In Nancy's case, she is continuing to develop a deeper understanding of what it means for her to be a White, and how she might be a feminist woman in a gendered environment.

Discussion and Application of Theory

While Nancy never considered herself an active racist, she was unaware of inequalities and injustices prior to arriving at her institution. She noted that her town, which has the same population as the number of students enrolled at her current institution, was predominantly white and she remembered only knowing one black peer in her high school. When she came to college, she started noticing the diversity that could exist, simply by observing and realizing the differences that existed between her and her peers; a place where the White population was not the majority. This applied to Helm's (1993) stage of contact, where Nancy was able to move

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from a naïve view to a conscious recognition of the idea that is race. Her ideologies that were engrained through her predominantly White upbringing were then disintegrated and reintegrated through her conscious conversations in the classroom, unintentional interactions with her peers, and intellectual dialogue with her roommate who was co-enrolled in the course. This navigation between the two stages occurred throughout the quarter that preceded the time I started interviewing her. As a part of this disintegration and integration process, she attended a panel, where individuals who identified as African-American shared injustices that they had experienced. Nancy noted that she felt bad, guilty, and like she wanted to help, but she did not feel like she could or that it was her place to comfort them. She noted that when she approached the panelists to thank them for an engaging conversation, she wanted to “apologize for White people”, she didn’t think it was appropriate and felt out of place even approaching them because she was White. This marked the transition between the two phases of Abandonment of Racism to defining a Nonracist White Identity, as defined by Helm (1993).

While I am unaware of the exact cause that perpetuated the development from Pseudo-independence to Immersion/Emersion, Nancy demonstrates qualities of one that has entered the fifth stage. In my conversations with Nancy, she was able to effectively navigate the issues that revolve around the theoretical concept of race and recognize the lack of any biological grounds in the creation of the categories. She demonstrated one that has started confronting racism through her job at the One Stop desk. She referenced a recent incident where a white male, who looked like he was in his early twenties and a student, asked if the Center for Student Involvement had endorse the “Black Power” movement on campus because they allowed a poster to be displayed. The student continued to probe Nancy, asking why there was not a White Student Union or why “White Power” was not a poster that was printed on the wall. She noted the frustration and hints of anger she felt when he expected her to agree with him. She was able

Comment [FH3]: Excellent job here!

to confront his views and challenge him by providing him with information revolving current incidents that have occurred on the east coast, and the student left frustrated. “He looked at me like ‘you’re white, you must get it’,” said Nancy while expressing her frustration over intolerance that exists. When asked how she might serve as an ally she referenced actively challenging others and picking times and places to have conversations with individuals such as the student she had encountered.

Nancy, however, still had yet to demonstrate a student who had reached Autonomy. Her indication of guilt is an initial marker of one who has yet to come to complete terms with their Whiteness. Further, when addressing her student, she remarked, “You are what is wrong with America.” While this was subtle and nuanced, that statement in it of itself perpetuates a certain amount of White privilege to associate the country with a specific issue that pertains to Whiteness and overt racism. While Nancy has a grasp of the theory behind issues and has even begun starting to combat and address racist incidents, I believe that she still has room to continue growing and developing.

Implications for Practice

Nancy is an incredible student. Despite the fact that she was White, her identities as an out-of-state woman who came from an alcoholic single parent family provided immense levels of challenge to her growth. Her ability to have navigated these issues demonstrates an impeccable amount of resilience that I cannot expect every student to have. That said, the first implication for practice exists as a need to provide a strong foundation of support as Nancy had initially received through her sorority and roommates to allow for challenging moments to create dissonance, and thus growth.

Nancy’s White Racial Identity was predominantly facilitated through her Ethnic Studies course, which was initially a general education requirement for the university. This course

Comment [FH4]: Great job of applying Helms’ theory. Good job of incorporating direct quotes from the interviews.

proved to be instrumental in her development as a White individual but also in a variety of other capacities, as demonstrated in conversations with her. This becomes an interesting consideration for campuses with less diverse populations as it creates a space for facilitated discussion to directly deconstruct preexisting notions that may exist revolving any given topic of privilege and oppression that on an overt or systematic level that now exists as a microaggressions. Nancy's impressive development occurred because of disintegration and reintegration that occurred in her personal life that was reinforced and allowed to become developmental moments through safe conversations that she had with her roommate. This demonstrates the need to foster communities and safe spaces where conversations and free flowing exchanges of information can occur as it has proven to be another instrumental element of her development.

All the while, utilizing Helm's (1993) theory to understand the White identity is challenging, as it offers little to no description to identity development beyond racial prejudice. A particular finding that challenges the proposed theory is the stage-like nature of the theory. Nancy seems to have clearly developed a theoretical understanding of race and racism, a feature of the Pseudo-independence status, but she still shows conflict and guilt, as suggested by the Disintegration status. Given that, she could still need to navigate her way through earlier stages, or it might simply be a weakness of stage theory as development of students are frequently complex, with various factors weighing in.

Summary of Learning

Throughout this interview process, I realized the strength of stereotypes that I might have of other people and it became a powerful learning moment for myself. I caught myself surprised, internally, when she had mentioned that she grew up from a divorced family, in a small town, and, as a first-generation college student. Because of her Greek chapter affiliation, I automatically assumed that she would be a privileged individual, given that she was at a "top

Comment [FH5]: Excellent point.

house” at the institution. This was when I found myself shocked at the inclinations to think of her as an individual with multiple privileges and advantages.

Upon further reflection, I started to realize that some of these expectations were perhaps imparted onto me as the result of my grandparents who raised me. When I lived in another country, anyone who was not Asian was treated as an outsider. Living in a predominantly Asian area, I grew up sheltered from other races and ethnicities. I was taught that White people were to be more successful and the other races less superior than ours. While I always felt comfortable interacting with those who identified as being White and saw myself as having a place in these interactions, this was the first time that I acutely realized that I had these predisposed views of what it meant to be White. This provided an opportunity for me to realize these inclinations and become critical of assumptions I may have of other people. In regards to the White identity, this interview process has reinforced the concept that those who are White have a certain level of blindness to their race and race as an identity in their starting state. At the same time, I am constantly amazed by Nancy’s resiliency to adversity in her family when I hear about her parents’ divorce. It challenges the notion that all White families are perfect and some challenges can occur anywhere. When considering gender, the interviews helped me realize my own expectation that women would enjoy presents and having things paid for. While I attempt to be open minded, I found this shocking and made me realize a need to be more critical in my reflective thought processes.

In my graduate course work, we are frequently provided with facts and statistics that revolve around the topics of racial injustice and how it may affect different populations at an institution. As a student of a historically underrepresented community that was a majority at the institution that I attended, I never felt this injustice or the need to prove myself. It was not until this process that I was able to see how this was a privilege and how white privilege can affect

Comment [FH6]: This is a very powerful reflection.

others, even those that are white. Nancy’s develop and growth has become an inspiring element of my practice in addressing inequalities that exist in Student Affairs. As someone who is interested in working in Fraternity and Sorority Life, I believe that this experience has taught me about the need to seriously address areas of injustice. While issues of sexual violence, hazing, and alcohol abuse are topics that are commonly espoused; I now see the need to also look at systematic injustices that may stem from the Greek system itself revolving the topic of race and gender. Having had the opportunity to interview a student and learn from her, I believe that this process has allowed me an opportunity to develop a need to create change and a belief that change can happen.

Criteria	Points Possible	Points Awarded
Introduction	2	<u>2</u>
Description of the student	3	<u>3</u>
Developmental Issue/ Rationale/Discussion of Relevant Student Affairs Literature	5	<u>5</u>
Discussion and application of <u>one or two</u> student development theories	8	<u>8</u>
Presentation of key findings	5	<u>5</u>
Implications for practice	3	<u>3</u>
Summary of learning	2	<u>2</u>
Technical requirements	2	<u>2</u>
TOTAL	30	<u>30</u>

References

- Helms, J.E. (1993). Toward a model of White racial identity development. In J.E. Helms (Ed.), *Black and White racial identity*, pp. 49-66. New York: Greenwood/Praeger.
- Jones, S., & McEwen, M. (2000). A conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity. *Journal of College Student Development*, 41(4), 405-414.