The Intersection of Oral History and the Role of White Researchers in Cross-Cultural Contexts

By Jan L. Petersen

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In the fall of 2005 and as a second year doctoral student in an educational leadership program, I was given the opportunity to participate in oral history research with three other White women, including one professor and two doctoral students. The oral history involved interviewing approximately twenty prior students of Frederick Douglass School in Parsons, Kansas. Douglass School was built in 1908 for the purpose of educating Black students in Parsons. During integration, Douglass was closed in 1958, and the building was destroyed in 1962 (Patterson, Mickelson, Petersen, & Gross, 2006).

The oral history of Douglass School emerged from a prior field study conducted in Parsons, a town of about 12,000 people, the year before by the same professor and three other doctoral students (Patterson, Niles, Carlson, & Kelley, 2005). The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the discrepancy between the academic

achievement of African Americans and White students in the Parsons school district. Through extensive individual and group interviews about the current achievement differentials, the Patterson et al. study revealed wounded and hurt feelings among the people in the African American community in Parsons regarding Douglass School, its closure, and the historical silence in the larger population about its very existence. In fact, historical accounts and records of Parsons rarely mentioned or acknowledged that Douglass School existed in the town. Additionally, the Douglass alumni described particularly poignant memories when they shared that Douglass and all of its treasured artifacts within the building were razed by a bulldozer in 1962 without discussion or prior knowledge among African Americans who attended Douglass or were associated with the school.

Stemming from the research team's desire to help recreate and restore the past and legacy of Douglass that had been egregiously lost to the Parsons community, we began initiating the necessary steps to conduct the oral history and to interview Douglass alumni who still lived in Parsons (Patterson et al., 2006; Patterson, Petersen, Mickelson, & Gross, 2007). The years these alumni attended Douglass ranged from the 1930s to the 1950s. Through listening to the stories of Douglass alumni, we found that although the school building and all its archival records such as photos, yearbooks, awards, trophies, and newspaper articles were destroyed when the school was demolished, Douglass remains very much alive in the hearts and minds of those who attended the school. Douglass School alumni shared that the school lives on as a powerful legacy in their minds, a legacy hurtfully ignored up to this point by historical accounts and the larger community of Parsons.

As four White female researchers, we approached this oral history with some agreements. We agreed to struggle against our White, middle class assumptions and to accept that our White notions of the world may influence and bias our interpretations of the stories that were told (Patterson et al., 2005). We remained mindful and sensitive to the sociopolitical influences of the larger society, specifically, oppression, racism, and dominant relationships between majority and minority groups (Sue, 1993). Further, we acknowledged that our participants were the experts of their own lives and that we had much to learn from what they had to say to us about their recollections of their lived experiences at Douglass School.

The belief guiding our research was that preserved memories of Douglass alumni and the legacy of Douglass School are pertinent to the community of Parsons and to society at large (Patterson et al., 2006; Patterson et al., 2007). Additionally, we considered the words and stories of African Americans as counter stories to the White perspective generally provided in accounts of history (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Further, we posited that individuals sharing their experiences provide deeper understanding of the past that continues to influence African American education today (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Finally, we deemed we have much to gain and to learn from the contributions of African American education in all Black schools.

In the midst of the oral history, another story emerged and that is the story of White researchers seeking to understand African American experiences and

perspectives. For me, questions arose in the process of the oral history research: As a White researcher, how did my background and White identity influence my approach to the research? How did the shared stories from the Douglass alumni influence and change me, particularly regarding my White identity? Finally, as I pursue further research in cross-cultural contexts, what have I learned from this experience? Through these reflections in this paper, I hope to contribute to the body of literature on White researchers who research across differences.

This article considers the intersection of the oral history of Douglass School and White researchers investigating the experiences of people of color. In the process of writing about this intersection, I chose to divide this article into five sections. First, I include my reflections on my background and influences on my White identity. Second, I share my initial reactions and approach to the oral history. Third, I discuss a synopsis of the themes that emerged from stories the Douglass alumni selected to share with the research team, resulting in greater awareness of my White privilege. Fourth, I discuss a brief overview of the literature on White racial identity, including sections on Helm's model of White racial identity development and my growth in owning a positive White identity. Finally, I share implications and considerations for oral history research and White researchers researching across differences.

The next section involves reflections on my background and influences on my White identity. Self-reflection about life experiences and the assumptions and biases emanating from them is important to the process of White researchers embracing more honest ways of thinking about race (Sue, 1993). My personal reflections for this article are attempts to explore a previously neglected thought process about White racial identity. These reflections include sharing some background information about my past experiences and beliefs which have influenced my White identity. Because of my longstanding social encapsulation in the culture and privilege of White people, I believe these reflections involve an ongoing journey of gaining new insight with the objective of learning how to more effectively influence needed personal and social change.

Personal Reflections of My Background and White Identity

This reflection about my past experiences and influences on my White identity serves the purpose of encouraging greater personal awareness and transformation. Helms (1990) stated, "the term 'racial identity' actually refers to a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (p. 3). Typically, White people are not aware they have a racial identity, while they easily identify others as people of color (Sue, 1993). Specifically, for White researchers conducting cross-cultural research, Sue (1993) noted they must recognize themselves as racial beings and become cognizant of the assumptions they bring to the research about human beings. Sue stated that White researchers "need to begin admitting that they are not immune from inheriting the racial/cultural biases of their forebears and work toward doing so in

an open and nondefensive manner" (p. 245). In this personal reflection about my process of developing a White identity, I include my thoughts about my childhood influences, White privilege, and growing personal transformation.

Developing a White Identity: Childhood Influences

I am a White female born in the early 1950s in a midsize city in the Midwest. Due to a busy and quiet family and my shy personality, I had very few reciprocal conversations with adults as a young person, but I had many opportunities to observe and listen to others. As a very young person, I spent copious amounts of time in my grandfather's tailor shop, located in the heart of the city and infused with a hub of activity. As sewing machines hummed, animated conversations were every day occurrences. My grandfather was a kind, intelligent, and interesting man, drawing lively people from all walks of life and cultures to his shop. I learned very early about the African American tradition of storytelling, as several Black men frequented my grandfather's shop and exchanged stories with him about their lives, politics, and families. I was not a part of the conversations, but I listened. I remember my grandfather's Black friends sharing stories about hardships they endured because of the color of their skin. I also remember vibrant discussions about families and family histories; I remember a great deal of shared laughter, too. I heard my grandfather talk with his friends about receiving threats in the past from the Ku Klux Klan claiming they would burn down his tailor shop if he continued to employ and befriend Black people. I remember him commenting that these menacing threats were frightening, yet in no way did these compare to the ongoing threats Black people encountered every day.

Contributing to my grandfather's approach to life was that his family left Switzerland due to religious persecution and immigrated to this country poor and unable to speak the English language. My grandfather remembered the merciless taunting and teasing of his classmates and vowed early in his life if he were to no longer live in poverty, he would work to preserve the rights and dignity of all people.

The last words I heard from my grandfather before he died in a nursing home at the age of 96 were words of encouragement to his Black nurse aide, thanking him for taking such good care of him and asking if he had considered going back to school to become a doctor. My grandfather looked at me and said, "See, I always told you our blood runs through our bodies just the same. This is a good and caring man." My grandfather left a legacy of understanding for me that there was more than one way to live a life and to view the world.

In addition to my grandfather's perspectives, I was also influenced by my father's political and community activity. For over 40 years, my father advocated for people of color and for the rights of women. Through his involvement in various community and political organizations, my father campaigned for prison reform, desegregation, women's rights, rights of minorities, and equitable law enforcement. I do not have enough information now to examine the lives of my father and grandfather critically, but my memories leave me with deeply held

impressions that these men genuinely cared about people, people often overlooked by dominant society.

As a child, one of the remarks I heard repeated many times by my mother and father was, "Don't judge a person until you have walked a mile in his or her shoes." Acceptance of others who were different than we were as well as community and political activism were values held in high regard by my family members.

I had been exposed to people from various backgrounds different than my own through my family experiences; however, in elementary school, I attended an all White school. In middle school, I did attend school with students of varying backgrounds, but while immersed in survival at a time of middle school angst, racial differences were not something I thought about during those years. In all of my early schooling experiences, White students and teachers comprised the majority population.

As a high school student in a large urban school district in the latter 1960s and early 1970s, I was influenced by the prevailing social and political unrest of the country and resulting youth counter culture and became somewhat more politically astute. I read books profusely such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Black Like Me* and was mesmerized by every word of Martin Luther King. My high school class peers elected the first Black student body president and Black cheerleader in our high school, which seemed like important accomplishments at the time. In terms of friendships with the Black students in my high school, I had a few Black friends, but exchanges outside of school were limited. I interacted with Black students in physical education classes and during sporting events and other school related activities; however, our interactions were at a minimal level. I had no thoughts then or any questions about why I did not have Black students in my honors or college preparatory classes. I remember one Black teacher in my high school, but all of the teachers providing instructions in my classrooms were White.

As I reflect about my experiences in my childhood and teenage years, I believe I gained an inchoate awareness of racial differences and racism as a poison in our society. As I look back, however, I see that I had no consciousness of White privilege and what being White allowed me to do. I see now that one of the most significant privileges I garnered was that I could choose to think about race and engage in the issues or easily choose to ignore them.

My White Privilege

After graduating from high school, I attended a nearly all White college, and any budding sense of social justice and need for political activism I gained from my family roots receded to the background. I had minimal exposure to people of color or of poverty during this time. I remember feeling displaced and puzzled that in the early 1970s on this college campus there was minimal mention of the Vietnam War, civil rights, or political activism. These conditions were odd and perplexing to me, but I did not analyze at the time why I felt this way. Obviously, I had given no thought to these issues when I applied for colleges.

These are the years in which my unearned White privilege screamed out loud and clear. Because of White privilege, I had access to college and the license to walk away from social consciousness and the traditions of my activist family. I ignored and denied what I had observed in my early years and toiled to fit into traditional White behavior, attributing minimal importance to issues of social justice and the rights of women, people of color, and other individuals/groups not of the dominant White culture. After I graduated from college, I married and became a mother of three children living in the suburbs and focused on caring for my children and houses with two car garages. We (my husband and children) did move to cities and school districts of considerable diversity, which exposed my children to various nationalities and racial ethnicities, but we were still living in a White suburban bubble.

Personal Transformation

In my latter 30s, my family experienced some harsh tragedies and our White suburban bubble burst. At the age of 10, one of my children became a survivor of a violent crime committed in what we thought was our safe neighborhood. Embroiled in grief and a difficult reality check of my perceptions of the world, I began to seek changes in my life. In this time, I began to feel restless and was no longer satisfied living in an all White world, which to me, then, appeared to be a world of ignorance and denial of social issues. I realized, too, this is what I had become. After much soul searching, I realized I was not living my life as I needed to and wanted to make changes in what I was doing.

With my restlessness and questions about what I was doing with my life, I decided to go back to college to obtain a master's degree in educational psychology and then an educational specialist degree in school psychology. During my studies, I made new friendships with people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives, which opened the door to a refreshing new world to me.

After I received my specialist degree in school psychology, I began working as a school psychologist in a large, urban school district with 50,000 students. Currently, I work in an urban high school with 2,000 students. Approximately 60% of the students in this high school are identified as economically disadvantaged, and the school serves a 'majority minority' student population in which 40% of the students are White.

As the school psychologist, I have had abundant opportunities to listen to the stories and perspectives of a variety people in the school building and community, such as students, parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, counselors, maintenance workers, and community police. Through the years of listening to and having empathy for the stories of others, I have had an awakening and call to social justice issues, which ultimately led me to a journey of doctoral research and study about race. Additionally, in the course work and qualitative research I have conducted in my doctoral studies, I have been encouraged to reflect on what it means to be White and, specifically, a White researcher researching in cross-cultural contexts.

An important part of this journey was my participation in the oral history in Parsons. Through the oral history, I not only gained further knowledge of African American experiences, but I also increased understanding of my own racial identity. Douglass alumni were not only excellent storytellers, but also were great teachers. Their descriptions of their lives became an important piece of my education about my racial past. Through the stories the Douglass alumni selected to share, I learned a great deal about their life experiences at the hands of White people. The next section discusses my initial reactions and approaches to the oral history of Douglass School.

Reactions to Participating in the Oral History

Initially, I experienced considerable anxiety in my approach to the oral history of Douglass School in Parsons. I felt that I did not want to be in the way—these stories were the alumni's experiences to tell—not mine. I entered the research with heightened awareness that dominant Whites have consistently marginalized the voices of people of color, and I did not want this to seem one more way in which Whiteness moved to the center. I was quite conscious of the severe hurt Douglass alumni encountered through being discounted in the past, and I did not want to do anything that would add one more hurt to their injuries.

My anxiety dissipated, though, when the Douglass alumni began animatedly sharing their stories. The alumni were vibrant and vivacious storytellers, and most exhibited considerable ease talking about their experiences at Douglass. Our approach to the oral history was to engage as learners, listeners, and hearers; and it seemed that many of our participants understood we were earnest in seeking their perspectives and wanting to give their stories back to the community of Parsons as well as to learn about their lives. The oral history provided the Douglass alumni a vehicle in which they could teach us what they wanted us to know about their lives and experiences.

Throughout the process of gathering the stories from the Douglass alumni, I kept in mind that this oral history involved just one aspect of the story of Douglass School and that is the story these particular alumni chose to tell four White researchers. Given that we were White researchers, the stories about Douglass most likely would have been told differently had the researchers been Black; however, significant consistency emerged across the alumni's descriptions of their experiences at Douglass. Additionally, the stories Douglass alumni shared about the close-knit Douglass School community and caring teachers with high expectations were consistent with prior literature and reports of segregated Black communities and African American teachers (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Edwards, 1996; Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lynn, 1999; Siddle-Walker, 2001; Tillman, 2004). The stories the alumni shared influenced me to begin a deeper journey of reflecting on my ignorance and the minimal attention I had paid previously to the high price of White oppression that continues to take its toil on all of society today. There were pertinent themes that emerged from the stories the alumni described about their lives at Douglass, which are shared in the next section.

Themes that Emerged and Learning from Them

For purposes of this article, I chose to briefly highlight and discuss three themes that emerged from the oral history of Douglass School. For purposes of this article, I chose to briefly highlight and discuss three themes that emerged from the oral history of Douglass School (For a more detailed discussion of the themes of the oral history see Patterson, Petersen, Mickelson, & Gross, 2007). First, the alumni depicted Douglass School as a strong and connected learning community that made an extraordinary difference in the lives of its students. Second, Douglass teachers were described as the highlight of the alumni's lives, exuding high expectations and belief in what their students could accomplish. Third, similar to school communities across the country, the African American voice in Parsons was excluded from the process of integration, creating significant loss for the Douglass alumni. In this section, I also include further reflections of greater awareness and knowledge gained from the stories the alumni shared.

Douglass as a Learning Community Making a Difference

Through the alumni's stories, a vivid picture was painted of how a small school learning community made extraordinary differences in the lives of its students. The Douglass alumni described close-knit relationships and affirmation of Black racial pride as central to the fabric of the Douglass School community. One Douglass alumni described the school this way:

> I enjoyed Douglass. Douglass was a great school. It was an extension of your family. There were a lot of activities. The teachers took time with you. It was part of the Black community—there's no other way to put it. That was your home away from home.

Within their tightly connected school community, the Douglass alumni reported they were immersed in messages of respect for Black culture at school, home, church, and social gatherings. These factors made enormous differences in students' attitudes toward school. Particularly important to the Douglass alumni was that their school curriculum was infused with historical accounts and portrayals of successful African Americans and African American contributions to society. Affirming respect for Black culture and having many Black role models served to counter negative stereotypes promulgated by the larger society. The Douglass alumni reported that despite obstacles, hardships, and racism in the larger society, their confidence and will to persevere prevailed due to the affirmation of racial pride and support provided them by their close-knit school community. According to one alum,

> We had to overcome a lot. But I think it made us stronger. It made us know that we were able to accomplish anything that we set out to do and know how to manipulate the system in order to get some of these things done.

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Teachers as the Highlight

The alumni indicated that within their close-knit Douglass learning community, their teachers were the highlight of their education. They portrayed their teachers as engaging, fun, caring, warm, and firm disciplinarians who were highly involved in their students' lives. The alumni indicated that the teachers did not simply tell them what they wanted them to know and then turn away. For example, one of the alumni reported that teachers said, "This is where we are going, and I will take you there. I will help you get there." Another Douglass alumni mentioned that if there was a negative comment about student behavior, it was balanced with "a thousand positive things." The balance of discipline, caring, high expectations, and rigorous academic and social skills training served to communicate to the students their teachers believed in them and in what they could achieve. Additionally, many Douglass alumni discussed that having educated and positive role models who "looked like" them inspired them to maintain high aspirations and to accomplish great things. Further, given the Black teachers' experiences with and knowledge of racism and oppression, they knew how to teach their students in ways that helped them counteract societal barriers. One Douglass alumni stated, "And this is one of the greatest things—they taught us pride—they taught us how to deal with what was coming."

Desegregation and Exclusion of the African American Voice

Despite many benefits provided for Douglass students in their segregated school, the African American community largely agreed to the closure of Douglass when integration was pursued in Parsons and across the country. Consistent with the rest of the country, the education of Black children was not funded equitably and the Douglass building was in dire need of repair. Many in the African American community believed that integrating to the White schools would expose their children to more educational opportunities and resources. Unfortunately, when Douglass closed, all but two Black educators were fired: one teacher was retained as a librarian and the principal was retained as an itinerant music teacher. It became evident that Black educators were not wanted in the classrooms of White students nor in contact with their former Black students.

In the process of integration and the closure of Douglass School, the African American voice was excluded, and Douglass students lost the connectedness to their Douglass community, camaraderie of their classmates, familiarity of a common culture, and support of their beloved and respected Black teachers. Douglass alumni poignantly described the losses they felt when they left Douglass. Several reported that they were treated as "second class students" and noted there were no Black staff members in the White schools they attended. One of the alumni expressed:

> It was like a bird that was just kicked out of the nest. Our culture was not there because Douglass was all Black. Teachers were all Black. Students were all Black And you take a 6th grader and kick them out of that and to something that is . . .

we always were made to feel that we were not wanted. We were in an environment that was cold because it was like the teachers did not want us there.

The White teachers' approach to teaching was described as much less engaging and nurturing than the approach of their Black teachers. In this foreign environment, the students became fearful of asking questions if they did not understand the instruction. An alum reported that students at Douglass made good grades, but when "they came to the integrated schools things changed. Because in a way they were scared to ask questions to get more learning." Regarding the teaching approaches of White teachers, one alum expressed that White teachers had the attitude "Either you got it or you didn't. And I didn't feel that the White teachers gave that concerted effort. By that I mean that they didn't spend as much time with us one-to-one." Another alumni reported he was told he might as well not think about college and another was told she should accept a future in housekeeping. Ignoring these remarks, both these alumni became college graduates, obtaining postgraduate degrees and successful professional careers.

Despite the numerous disparaging remarks and exclusionary and racist attitudes the Douglass alumni encountered, most reported that due to the support and solid foundation they received at Douglass, they were able to overcome these obstacles. Many Douglass alumni continued their education and became noted researchers, college professors, teachers, superintendents, psychologists, artists, musicians, and successful private business owners.

In summary, the close-knit learning community of Douglass School provided caring and connected relationships, affirmation of Black pride, high expectations, caring and demanding teachers, and rigorous social and academic skill training all of which served to sustain Douglass students when they faced adversity and discrimination in the White schools and larger society. The confidence their Douglass teachers and school community instilled within them regarding their abilities to achieve and to excel seemed to permeate the alumni's memories. Their memories of a supportive Douglass environment that helped them overcome the challenges and cruelty of racism, exclusion, and White privilege appeared ever present in the stories they shared.

Teachings of Alumni Promote Further Awareness of White Privilege

Much is to be learned from the Douglass alumni and the stories they chose to tell about Douglass School. In some of my reflections regarding the alumni's stories and my learning process, I noted that in my White privilege I had spent minimal time prior to the oral history contemplating desegregation and how it was mangled and brutalized by White power and dominance. Prior to this oral history and my readings about integration, I had no idea African American educators had been fired not only in Parsons, but also across the country. In addition, I had given minimal thought to what African American students endured during integration and the many brutal injustices that occurred. In the process of the oral history and listening to the stories of the alumni, I was constantly aware of my privilege of

ignorance; what I did not know; and how much I have to learn about the experiences of African Americans in this country.

Sense of Loss to Communities

As I read some of the related literature and listened to the alumni speak of their memories of their teachers and school experiences, at times I was overwhelmed by profound sadness and sense of loss. My realization became more pronounced that throughout our country's history and certainly during desegregation, we lost, tragically lost, the rich and dynamic influences of the African American culture in all of our school communities. Given the significant loss of African American educators in the United States during desegregation, a collective vision of educating African American students was lost, resulting in far-reaching consequences to Black communities and the education of their children that is still with us today (Edwards, 1996; Foster, 1997; Hudson & Holmes, 1994).

Egregiously devaluing the knowledge, wisdom, and expertise of African American educators, school systems were left with enormous gaps in educational practices, practices that historically and currently have not adequately met the needs of a diverse student population (Larson & Ovando, 2001; Morris, 2001). Educational policies and practices implemented without the voice and cultural knowledge of African Americans, particularly those policies and practices with crucial ramifications for Black children, are incomplete and continue to perpetuate severe inequities in public schools such as higher drop-out rates, less access to college prep curriculum, overidentification in special education with less qualified teachers, and higher incidences of discipline referrals, expulsions, and suspensions for African American students (Berlak, 2005; Contreras, 2002; Cotton, 2001; Farkas, 2003; Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Haycock, 2001 Larson & Ovando, 2001; Nieto, 2004; Shields, 2004).

Personal Sense of Loss

In addition to a greater sense of loss to educational communities across the country, I also experienced profound sadness for my own personal sense of loss. I realized I was robbed from exposure at a significant level in my predominantly White schools to African American culture, students, and teachers. When I reflected on how the alumni described Douglass as the highlight and exciting focus of their lives, I thought of my own education. I was a successful student, but I hated school. To me, my schooling was cold, institutional, distant, disconnected, boring, and too large. Throughout my schooling, I never had a personal or comfortable relationship with any teacher or with any adults that I felt I could turn to for that matter. I could only try to imagine what it was like for the alumni to adjust from the warmth, care, and high expectations of their Douglass School environment to another approach to education, which seemed not only cold and distant for them, but also disparaging. Certainly, my intent is not to romanticize Douglass School; however, I do believe we have a great deal to learn from the alumni's shared memories of their experiences.

Additionally, as the alumni shared their stories, I was overwhelmed at times by the differences between their stories and the stories I hear daily from many young people in my work as a school psychologist in a large urban high school. So many of the students I encounter express feelings of being disconnected from a purpose in life and the meaning of education to their lives. Frequently, their expectations of what they can do and learn are not high. Despite the stellar efforts of many teachers and administrators that I observe at school every day, I see the system holding students back and not meeting them where they are. Similar to schools across the country (Education Commission of the States, 2007; Sleeter & Grant, 2003), our special education classrooms and disciplinary actions involve far, far too many African Americans. I observe heroic efforts to minimize these factors, but I believe we are hampered by being too large and too bureaucratic to truly be making a difference in our students' lives in the ways we need to.

Growing Convictions, Passions, and Vision

Through participating in this oral history research with Douglass alumni, my convictions, expectations, and passions have grown greater and more intense than ever: (a) we need more educators of color; and (b) we need schools as small learning communities, sensitive to the needs and backgrounds of all students. Of significant concern is that while the population of students of color in our schools is rapidly growing across the country, only 10 to 20 percent of our teachers in the teaching force are teachers of color (Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Nieto, 2004; Rakosi-Rosenbloom, 2004; Seller & Weis, 1997). Further, what few educators of color we do have in our schools, we need to not only listen but also to hear them more. We also need schools as small, non-bureaucratic learning communities in which racial identity is affirmed, high expectations are the norm, and students feel cared for. Douglass School serves as an exemplary reminder of how a close-knit and connected school community makes a difference in the lives of students. These are issues I will advocate for in my profession, school community, and in further research. Through the oral history and further research in my doctoral work, I have become better educated, resulting in more informed advocacy for those staff members, students, and families not of the dominant perspective. Additionally, I am approaching my profession and research passions with much greater awareness of my White privilege and its influence on my thoughts and behaviors. This is not an end point for me, but involves an ongoing process of growth, awareness, and change.

I am also convinced we need to hear more stories of every day people of color describing their experiences living in this country. The stories of every day people have much to contribute to the understanding of society, individuals, and self. For me, as I interacted with Douglass alumni and heard their personal stories, my perspectives on education and African American experiences broadened considerably. I gained greater insight on the history of African American education, the experiences of African Americans during desegregation, and the ongoing personal effects of

White oppression. Additionally, hearing the alumni's stories resulted in reflection of my own life, challenging my assumptions, biases, and White privilege. Through this experience I gained greater vision of my own growth as a White researcher in cross-cultural contexts.

In the process of listening to and learning from the Douglass alumni and contemplating my own racial identity, I began specifically reading about White identity in the literature, particularly White researcher identity. Included in the next section is a brief synthesis of what some of the literature has to say about White racial identity and its influence on White researchers. Information such as Helms' model of White racial identity development and White researchers owning a positive White identity is included.

White Identity and White Researchers

Many authors have written about Whiteness and the importance of contemplating the significance and meaning of White racial identity (Clark & O'Donnell, 1999; Fine, Weis, Powell, & Wong, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Helms, 1993; Helms, 1990; Howard, 2006; Hurtado & Stewardt, 1997; Ostrander, 1984; Roediger, 1991; Sue, 1993; Tatum, 1999; Vavrus, 2002; Wildman, 1996). Given the attention and emphasis on Whiteness and White identity, concerns have been expressed about "the phenomenon of White fetishism" or discourse in which Whiteness becomes faddish, dominant, and center to the discussion of multicultural issues (Clark & O'Donnell, p. 4). In focusing on Whiteness, the tendency may be to accentuate White identity by overly promoting rhetoric of blame or shame (Howard, 2006) and embellishing on Whites as the 'good guys' or Whites as the 'bad guys' (Clark & O'Donnell, 1996). With this rhetoric, focus, and overemphasis of Whiteness, the voice and experiences of people of color recedes unacceptably to the background and genuine reflection and transformation rarely occurs.

In addition to the concerns of fetishism, Sue (1993) raised the following issue regarding White researchers: "Many White researchers are perceived by their minority counterparts as lacking soul and heart in their research and publications" (p. 247). He goes on to say,

> Many minority researchers, rightly or wrongly, perceive the White researcher as a sterile observer who sees multiculturalism as intellectual curiosity, a fad, or an area of exploration devoid of humanistic meaning. White professionals must realize that multiculturalism deals not only with abstract, theoretical ideas but with real human conditions. (p. 247)

In order to avoid unintended perpetuation of White dominant paradigms, treating research simply as a field of study and humans as objects, White researchers must investigate their own place or standing in the dominant structure. Rather than overemphasizing Whiteness, authentic contemplation of White identity involves the willingness to struggle against White oppression and sense of 'rightness.' Of significant consideration is that research cannot be neutral. Research either perpetu-

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ates the status quo, maintaining what is with White perspectives in the center; or it stands for humanity and seeks to provide witness to the experiences of the under-represented in society (Ayers, 2006). Considering that White researchers historically have used their research to constrain minorities and to perpetuate the belief that minorities are genetically inferior to Whites, it becomes critical to conduct research that counters unjust structures that have historically oppressed and silenced people whose characteristics differ from those of the dominant culture (Mio & Iwamasa, 1993; Stoddart, 2002).

Owning a Positive White Racial Identity

Clark and O'Donnell (1999) postulated that in order for White Americans to own a positive racial identity, they must accept and admit the historical and current reality of racism and acknowledge that White people benefit from racism whether they (we) want to or not. Whites have unearned benefits from being White; specifically, Whites have the power and luxury to ignore issues of race and to conclude that racism is a nonentity, while at the same time enjoying privileges associated with Whiteness without scrutiny (Wildman, 1996). Because racism is not the experience of Whites, they can discount the accounts of racism by people of color or pretend they do not see the inequities.

Helms noted that according to White identity theory, the process of developing a positive White racial identity requires White researchers to engage in two critical steps of reflection: (a) accept and examine the meaning of Whiteness, White racial identity, and inherent biases and privileges attached to this identity and (b) acknowledge the meaning of being White in sociopolitical contexts that oppress people not in the dominant group. Howard (2006) posited that these critical reflections lead to personal and social transformation in which the perspectives of others are actively pursued and authentic commitments to opposing oppression and promoting social change are primary focal points of activism.

Helm's Model of White Identity

In order to contemplate White identity, Helms (1994) provided a model delineating six statuses that characterize the development of White racial identity. These statuses provide a guide as to how White individuals may internally or externally respond to racial situations, ranging from naïve to more sophisticated responses. The model does not represent a linear or literal approach or a model inclusive of all possible phases of awareness of White racial identity. Further, the model needs to be interpreted with caution as individuals may or may not experience all or any of the six levels of the model as they are described.

The following brief descriptions of Helm's six statuses were drawn from previous works of Tatum (1999), Helms (1990, 1993), and Howard (2006): (a) Contact involves initial first encounters with people of color, obliviousness to privileges of being White, and limited understanding of sociopolitical power structures influenced by race; (b) Disintegration involves increased exposure to people of color, awareness

of White privilege and race-related dilemmas in society, and dissonance concerning prior beliefs about race; (c) Reintegration involves increased racial consciousness which may lead to guilt, sadness, anxiety, and speaking out about injustices; which may lead to social isolation and rejection; which then may lead to retreating to the status quo and preservation of White dominance; (d) Pseudo-independence involves intellectualizing racial issues and adopting the attitude that Whites have the correct answers; hence, people of color need to act more White; (e) Immersion/emersion involves ceasing efforts to 'fix' people of color, growing toward seeking change in self and others, and joining others who seek an authentic positive White identity and positive ways to define Whiteness; (f) Autonomy involves emotionally internalizing intellectualized approaches to race and White identity, confirmed by life long activities and commitment to resisting racial oppression and by ongoing openness to new information and growth.

In conjunction with her six statuses of White identity development, Helms (1993, p. 243) established the following table to summarize assumptions and varying stages of development White researchers may bring to their research. These stages of development range from the White dominant approach of denying the importance of race and ethnicity in research to the racially cognizant approach of accepting White racial identity with its inherent biases and not imposing them on others (see Table 1).

Helms (1993) discussed the influences of White identity on White researchers' approach to research and suggested that unresolved issues of White identity are fundamental dilemmas in cross-cultural research. She stated,

> To the extent that White researchers have been the primary gatekeepers of cross-cultural research (e.g., journal editors, dissertation advisers), then it is possible that those with restricted worldviews encourage constricted study of cultural diversity issues. (p. 242)

Helms proposed that racial identity strongly influences decisions of researchers from the selection of the design of the study to the interpretation of the findings. She noted that if researchers possess minimal understanding and awareness of their White racial identity or of the importance of seeking multiple perspectives from varying cultures and racial groups, they most likely would not conduct research for the benefit of others outside the White dominant group. Further, she reported that if researchers' beliefs, assumptions, and standing in the dominant culture remain unexamined, their research is in jeopardy of providing no transformational information and perpetuating the status quo and structures of oppression in the literature. Helms challenged researchers to examine "how their own resolved and unresolved issues of race/ethnicity potentially color their cross-cultural perceptions" (p. 240) and approaches to research.

In the next section, I apply the framework described above to the process of owning my White identity. I examine where I find myself in this journey of discovery.

Table 1

Summary of the Influence of Stages of White Identity
on White Researchers' Cross-Cultural Scholarship

Identity Stage	Assumption	Implication
Contact	Universalism of White culture	If they are included at all, data from people of color in predominantly White samples are not analyzed separately. Results are assumed to pertain to people regardless of race.
Disintegration	Ambivalence regarding study of race	Diversity research is permitted only if it conforms to standards of excellence of White research despite reality constraints.
Reintegration	Ethnocentrism	Whites are the standard for normal behavior or behavioral norms. A study is deficient unless Whites are used as a control group.
Pseudo-independence	Liberalism	When racial-group differences are found, principles of cultural disadvantage are used to explain people of color, but Whites are not explained.
Autonomy	Pluralism	Scholar recognizes inherent cultural assumptions of one's work and does not impose them on non-group members.

Helms, J.E. (1993). I also said, "White racial identity influences White Researchers." *The Counseling Psychologist, 21*(2), p. 240-243.

Owning My White Identity

In terms of an analysis of my White identity, I consider that for many years I was stuck in the Contact phase in which I was aware of racial divides and inequities but was naïve and oblivious about how White privilege allowed me to walk away from these issues of social justice. Howard (2006) described my Contact status well: "Privilege allows us not to know, not to see, and not to

act. Privilege provides moral insulation against the cold winds of reality and awareness" (p. 65).

After many years of the Contact stage, I entered and have remained in the Immersion/emersion phase in which I have explored at an emotional level issues of individual and institutional racism, White dominance and privilege, and my prior choices years ago to isolate in a White college campus and later in a White suburban world. In the Immersion/emersion phase of my growth, I continue to seek others with similar views and who are seeking a more activist/antiracist way to be. In this phase, I consistently acknowledge how interacting with people and engaging in friendships from all walks of life and perspectives enriches my life.

I believe I did not encounter the other phases of Helm's model due to my upbringing in my family in which people of color were treated as equals and inequities due to race were talked about and recognized. Once I reentered a more honest world that included diverse people and particularly through the influences of my doctoral program and oral history research of Douglass School, I began authentically looking at my White privilege and the sociopolitical contexts of oppression for people who are not of the dominant group.

Also, due to my background training and early exposure to my grandfather and father's perspectives and my own struggles as a female and a parent, I instinctively understood in my practice as a school psychologist I did not need to 'fix' anyone. I felt most of the students and parents had more of a realistic picture of what it takes to live a life than I did. I have had the privilege of listening to numerous stories of heartbreak, heroism, courage, and perseverance. I have learned from many of my students and their parents how to cope with my own losses.

Several other factors have further influenced my growth in the process of owning a positive White racial identity. While pursuing my doctorate in educational leadership, I have learned from the coursework, readings, and the mentoring of a White professor who has modeled a positive White racial identity for her students by discussing issues of race, racism, and White privilege openly. Conducting research in cross-cultural contexts such as the oral history in Parsons, Kansas, and my dissertation work in a multicultural urban high school has given me the impetus to consistently be aware of oppression and domination, White privilege, and to work towards social change.

Finally, considering the lens of autonomous thinking encourages me to seek ways to grow in positive White researcher identity and move from personal transformation to actively pursue social transformation and justice. Autonomy and owning a positive White researcher identity involves and ongoing journey of personal and social transformation with the aim of promoting greater consciousness regarding past and present structures of White dominance, collective healing, and social change.

While I continue to walk in the Immersion/emersion stage of owning a positive White researcher identity, I look ahead to the challenges of autonomy and seeking an active voice in resisting inequities and oppression in society. The autonomous stage is not an end or fixed point, but an ongoing process of learning and growing. I realize I have much to learn in considering this phase of my growth.

The next section involves further reflections and is followed by implications and considerations for White researchers researching cross-cultural communities. Actively promoting personal and social transformation is key.

Further Reflections and Implications for White Researchers

In further reflection about my journey and growth as a White researcher, I am challenged by Sue (1993) to place heart and soul into my writing and research. Communicating with heart and soul requires reflecting and involving self in the research, refusing to stand at a distance. Oral history is appealing as it pulls the researcher from focusing on numerical data to focusing on human conditions and the emotions, feelings, and experiences of others. My goals as a White researcher involve doing research that stands witness to the voices and stories of every day people previously silenced by White traditions in research and counters the bias of and my place in dominant paradigms,

In terms of White researchers researching across differences, letting go of prior notions of who and what defines research; questioning choices that are made regarding research design and analysis; and interrogating White privilege, biases, and assumptions we bring to the process are all critical to transformational research that seeks to improve human conditions. I do have concern that in our training to write academically we lose the raw emotions we encounter as we hear stories of suffering, oppression, courage, and hope. Racism, inequities, and oppression are brutal, ugly, and cruel and the effects on human life cannot be dressed up, intellectualized, or simply shoved into numerical measurement. Lived experiences are real and to minimize the feelings, emotions, and memories of the people is a travesty. Oral history is one approach in which the stories of people previously ignored in the accounts in history are told, reflecting real human conditions. Oral history research and contemplation of White identity have important implications for White researchers researching across differences. In this case, oral history became an important tool for Black participants to teach Whites about their own race.

More stories need to be told about the experiences of every day people of color in this country. If White researchers join in the storytelling, they must participate in ways that reflect self- awareness of White racial identity and its influence on research, genuinely learn from and humanize the voice of the people, and actively promote personal and social transformation.

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