Psychological Nigrescence Revisited: Introduction and Overview

Beverly J. Vandiver

The author presents an overview of W. E. Cross’s original (1971) and revised (1991) nigrescence theory in the context of developing a scale to measure the revised model. Also highlighted is the purpose of the other articles in the special issue of the Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development.


Individuals trained in the scientist-practitioner model are well aware of the importance of the reciprocal relationship between theory and research. Theory offers a logical framework to guide research, leading the investigator to pose hypotheses to be tested (Forsyth & Strong, 1986; Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1992). Testing hypotheses leads to the operationalization of theoretical constructs to examine whether what is theorized can be measured accurately. Consistent findings inform theory, either by providing support for the theoretical constructs or by suggesting revisions or disconfirming the constructs (Forsyth & Strong, 1986). This process informs both research and theory by expanding and refining the knowledge base of the scientific community. An overarching goal of the articles on nigrescence in this special issue of the Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development (JMCD) is to exemplify the reciprocal interaction between a theoretical model and empirical investigation.

This article begins with a summary of Cross’s original (1971) and revised (1991, 1995) nigrescence theories, highlighting the differences between the two

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versions. The last section of this article introduces the other articles in this special issue. This issue of the journal does not focus solely on the scale-development work or on nigrescence theory (Cross, 1991). Rather, the issue focuses on the dynamic interaction between theory and empirical research. In the course of developing the scale, the revised nigrescence model (Cross, 1991) underwent further changes, which are presented in the articles. For purposes of clarity, early articulations of nigrescence theory (Cross, 1971, 1978; Hall, Freedle, & Cross, 1972) are referred to as the original nigrescence model; Cross’s theorizing in the 1990s, which led to the development of the Cross Racial Identity Scale (CRIS; Vandiver et al., 2000), is collectively referred to as the revised nigrescence model; and the most recent version (Cross & Vandiver, 2001), based in part on the work presented in this article, is referred to as the expanded nigrescence model. The articles in this special issue, although independent, are part of a whole and should be read as such. Readers who wish an in-depth description of nigrescence theory are referred to other works (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1995; Cross & Vandiver, 2001).

the original nigrescence theory

Conceived during the Civil Rights movement, nigrescence theory was first proposed in 1971 by William E. Cross, Jr. This Black (see Endnote) racial identity model, named after the French term for turning Black (nigrescence), describes the process of accepting and affirming a Black identity in an American context by moving from Black self-hatred to Black self-acceptance. In the 1971 model, five identity stages (see Endnote) characterized the process: Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment.

Pre-Encounter (Stage 1) describes Black individuals whose identity is based on mainstream values. Pre-Encounter Blacks adopt a pro-White identity and an anti-Black stance. Blacks in this stage are believed to be self-hating, resulting in low self-esteem, impaired personality, and poor mental health functioning. During Encounter (Stage 2), Blacks experience an episode or series of events that lead them to question their belief about the role of race in American society. This reexamination of their belief system can lead to a reevaluation of their racial identity and propel them into Stage 3, Immersion-Emersion.

The Immersion-Emersion stage chronicles a volatile twofold transition from the old racial identity to a new one. At the beginning of this stage, individuals immerse themselves in Black culture to the point of romanticizing it. This immersion affects almost every facet of their lives and manifests itself in many ways (e.g., change in name and clothing, exclusive involvement in Black activities). A strong pro-Black identity is born (everything Black is good), and, concomitantly, a strong anti-White identity is also adopted (all Whites are evil). Emersion, which characterizes the movement out of Stage 3, results in another
reevaluation process. Individuals become emotionally calmer and rationally reexamine their experiences and racial identity. The balance of affect and cognition results in an abandonment of anti-White sentiment and movement into the Internalization stage.

Internalization (Stage 4) describes the intellectual and emotional acceptance of being Black. As a result, being Black is now the background of the individual’s existence, and other aspects of identity are considered as important as race. Stage 5, Internalization-Commitment, takes Black self-acceptance one step further into activism, characterizing those who have become involved in social change and civil rights issues. In contrast to Blacks in the Pre-Encounter stage, Blacks in the Internalization stages are viewed as psychologically healthy. Movement from Pre-Encounter to Internalization reflects a movement from psychological illness to psychological well-being.

Cross’s (1971) seminal work had an impact on the development of various cultural identity models: minority (e.g., Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1989), racial (e.g., Arce, 1981; Helms, 1990a; Kim, 1981; Ponterotto, 1988), ethnic (e.g., Phinney, 1989), feminist (Downing & Roush, 1985), womanist (Helms, 1990b), and lesbian/gay (e.g., Cass, 1979). The theory’s popularity was enhanced by the availability of a scale designed to measure nигrescence. Developed by Parham and Helms (1981), the Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS–B) has been used in numerous studies (e.g., Brookins, Anyabwile, & Nacoste, 1996; Parks, Carter, & Gushue, 1996; Speight, Vera, & Derrickson, 1996). In addition, Cross’s (1971) model has remained prominent because it is a straightforward theory. The theory is parsimonious and easily understandable, and it resonates for many members of oppressed communities. In other words, the theory has face validity.

the revised nигrescence theory

In his 1991 book, Shades of Black, Cross provided an extensive review of the extant literature on Black racial identity. On the basis of the empirical work he reviewed and the evolution of his thinking on the subject, he revised the nигrescence theory. The revised model contains the ideas expressed in the original five stages in the same sequence, but substantive changes were made, especially in the Pre-Encounter and Internalization stages. In addition, the difference between reference group orientation and personal identity was highlighted. Personal identity reflects the general personality or overall self-concept common to the psychological makeup of all human beings and is considered a minor component in nигrescence theory (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). In contrast, reference group orientation, the basis of nигrescence theory, “defines the complex of social groups used by the person to make sense of oneself as a social being” (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). Cross (1991, p. 190) also introduced the concept of race salience to the discussion of nигrescence identities. Race
salience refers to the importance or significance of race in a person's approach to life and is captured across two dimensions: degree of importance and the direction of the valence. Thus, race salience can range from low to high in importance and from positive to negative in valence. For example, a Black person can have either a high salience for race with a positive (pro-Black) valence or a high salience for race with a negative (anti-Black) valence.

In the Pre-Encounter stage, race salience, instead of the term *pro-White*, is now used to describe the degree of importance of race in the lives of most persons who are exemplars of Pre-Encounter. In addition, the acceptance of an American perspective and rejection of Black beliefs are no longer considered reflective of one identity. Rather, two Pre-Encounter identities are described: Pre-Encounter Assimilation and Pre-Encounter Anti-Black. Pre-Encounter Assimilation characterizes the adoption of a pro-American or mainstream identity, and race is not viewed as important. Individuals with an Assimilation identity are not anti-Black; rather, race has low salience (with a neutral valence) for them.

In contrast, the Pre-Encounter Anti-Black identity describes individuals who hate Blacks and being Black, and, as a result, being Black carries a high negative salience for them. Two aspects form the basis for the Anti-Black identity: miseducation and self-hatred. Cross (1991, p. 192) observed that Blacks have experienced "miseducation" and, consequently, hold negative stereotypical beliefs about Blacks. They believe the negative images (e.g., lazy, criminal, unintelligent) about Blacks depicted by mainstream society. To some extent, many Blacks hate Blacks as a group insofar as the group represents only negative stereotypes. However, Blacks who experience extreme miseducation personalize the negative Black stereotypes, which results in the rejection of Blackness at a deep structural level—Black self-hatred. Self-hating individuals fuse the negative stereotypes about Blacks into their personal identity. Thus, Anti-Black individuals have an extreme hatred of Blacks, in general, and hate themselves because they are Black, which, in turn, influences their self-esteem levels.

Thus, the separation of the Pre-Encounter identities led to the reconceptualization of the relationship between self-esteem and racial identity. Low self-esteem is no longer linked to the Pre-Encounter stage but only to the Pre-Encounter Anti-Black identity. The Assimilation identity is considered to have no relationship to self-esteem. In contrast, Blacks holding an Anti-Black identity may have low self-esteem because negative stereotypes about race are linked to their personal identity, resulting in Black self-hatred.

In the revised model (Cross, 1991), no changes were proposed for the Encounter stage. Cross reiterated the importance of an encounter in leading to an identity change. The encounter can be "a single event" or "a series of small, eye-opening episodes" (Cross, 1991, p. 200) and, if personalized, has the potential to precipitate a change in identity. Thus, the Encounter stage represents a very fluid period in development and is not as easily categorized as other stages.
Two changes were proposed for Immersion-Emersion. The first change represents a reconceptualization of the role of Black Nationalism and its movement from the Immersion-Emersion stage to the Internalization stage. In the 1971 model, Cross implied that the intense Black involvement that takes place during Immersion is a sign of Black Nationalist sentiment. In the revised model, Black Nationalism is viewed as a positive internalization of being Black (positive high race salience), characterized by “Weusi [Swahili for Black] pride and Weusi self-acceptance” (Cross, 1991, p. 210). In contrast, the Black fervor, depicted in the revised model of the Immersion phase, no longer reflects the Black Nationalist ideology, but rather intense racial discomfort or “Weusi anxiety” (Cross, 1991, p. 205).

The second substantive change involves a change in the number of Immersion-Emersion identities. The pro-Black and anti-White aspects of Immersion are now considered to be two separate identities, rather than one identity made up of two parts. An “immersed” individual can hold either one of the identities, or both, and as before, the emersion to Internalization occurs when the heightened emotionality of Immersion-Emersion is brought under control.

Two revisions were also made to the Internalization stages. Cross (1991) observed that “there are few differences between the psychology of Blacks at the fourth [Internalization] and fifth [Internalization-Commitment] stages of nигrescence other than . . . sustained interest and commitment” (p. 220). Consequently, these two stages are collapsed and are collectively referred to as Internalization. In addition, the changes in Internalization also revolve around multiple identities. Like the Pre-Encounter and Immersion-Emersion stages, distinctive multiple identities are believed to exist in the Internalization stage. Cross (1991) identified three Internalization identities: Black Nationalist, Biculturalist, and Multiculturalist. The commonality of the three identities rests on the original premise of Internalization: Black self-acceptance. Regardless of the identity, an “internalized” individual is comfortable with his or her Blackness. What distinguishes the internalized identities from each other is the number of salient multiple identities beyond being Black. Being Black is the only salient identity for the Black Nationalist and is actualized through social and political activism in empowering the Black community. The Biculturalist incorporates two cultural identities, typically a sense of Blackness, fused with a sense of Americanness, whereas the Multiculturalist identity includes a matrix of three or more cultural frames of reference (e.g., Black identity plus gender, sexual orientation, or racial reference group orientations other than Black).

In summary, Cross’s 1991 explication of nигrescence theory departed from the 1971 version in five major areas. One, Cross (1991) posited that multiple identities exist within each stage. Two, the link between Black identity development and self-esteem has been reconceptualized. Blacks in the Pre-Encounter stage do not uniformly hate themselves unless they internalize anti-Black beliefs. Three, an American (formerly Pro-White) identity is not an indirect
marker of Black self-hatred. Four, Internalization, once organized around a discourse that did not incorporate pro-Black identities, now points to a range of identity pathways, inclusive of a Black Nationalism option. Five, the fourth and fifth stages of nigrescence are collapsed and collectively viewed as being represented by one name, Internalization. Table 1 provides a summary of the stages and identities in the original (Cross, 1971) and revised (Cross, 1991) nigrescence models.

**operationalizing the revised nigrescence model**

Despite the revisions to nigrescence theory (Cross, 1991), the 1971 model continues to be cited in empirical studies (e.g., Plummer, 1995; Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997) and literature reviews (e.g., Sue & Sue, 1999). Perhaps the most compelling reason for this is the link between theory and research: that is, the existence of a readily accessible scale (RIAS-B; Parham & Helms, 1981) that operationalized the 1971 model. In light of the cultural changes over two decades since the original model was proposed and the significant changes in the revised model, a new instrument was warranted to adequately keep pace with the theoretical changes. In response to these changes, the development of a scale to measure the nigrescence identities was pursued. The initial CRIS was designed to measure six of the seven identities: Pre-Encounter Assimila-

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tion, Pre-Encounter Anti-Black, Immersion-Emersion Intense Black Involvement, Immersion-Emersion Anti-White, Internalization Black Nationalist, and Internalization Multiculturalist. A decision was made not to measure the Internalization Biculturalist identity. The following scale-development goals were established at the beginning of the process: (a) a minimum reliability estimate of .70 for scores on each of the subscales; (b) a maximum subscale intercorrelation of .30; and (c) the identification of relatively independent factors, through exploratory factor analysis, with items loading by subscale.

From the scale-development process, a twofold outcome emerged: the development of the CRIS (Vandiver et al., 2000) and an expanded nigrescence model (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). The next two articles in this special issue of *JMCD* chronicle the interactive process of theory and research in developing the CRIS. The article, "Cross's Nigrescence Model: From Theory to Scale to Theory," authored by Vandiver, Hagen-Smith, Cokley, Cross, & Worrell (2001), focuses on the interplay between nigrescence theory and the operationalization of the identities that are measured on the CRIS and presents data from 3 years of scale-development work. In the article, the authors illustrate the complexity of the theory–research interaction as described in this article, focusing on the identities in the three of the four nigrescence stages that are measured on the CRIS: Pre-Encounter (Stage 1), Immersion-Emersion (Stage 3), and Internalization (Stage 4). Stage 2, Encounter, by its very nature—potentially life-transforming experiences—is not considered a nigrescence identity and, therefore, is not measured in this operationalization of the model. In addition, only the Immersion phase of the Immersion-Emersion stage characterizes measurable identity clusters. The Emersion phase represents a transition period to Internalization.

In the third and final article, Worrell, Cross, and Vandiver (2001) culminate the special issue by evaluating the contributions of empirical research to nigrescence theory and conclude with a summary of reflections about the challenges, both theoretical and empirical, facing the area of racial identity. This article also includes a table summarizing the changes to the nigrescence model (Cross, 1971, 1991; Cross & Vandiver, 2001).

As was stated at the beginning of this article, there is a reciprocal relationship between theory and empirical research. The CRIS (Vandiver et al., 2000) was developed to measure empirically nigrescence in its current incarnation (Cross, 1991; Cross & Vandiver, 2001), resulting in the realignment of theory and scale. It is hoped that using the CRIS will challenge some tenets of the current nigrescence model and lead to a better understanding of Black racial identity. Ultimately, the goal of this special issue of *JMCD* is to capture and convey the essence of the theory–research interaction. If the revised nigrescence model promotes more research and theorizing in this area and furthers the interaction between theory and research, this project may represent a significant contribution to the research literature.
references


**Endnote.** To provide continuity between Cross's 1971 and 1991 models, the terms, *African American* and *Black*, are used interchangeably in this special issue. For purposes of continuity between the original and revised nigrescence theories, the term *stage* is used to describe the attitudes or ideologies captured. This term is not used to indicate a developmental process nor does it preclude Parham's (1989) concept of recycling.