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## **Pioneers of Multicultural Counseling: An Interview With Janet E. Helms**

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This article presents an interview with Dr. Janet E. Helms, scholar, researcher, and mentor in the fields of multicultural counseling and psychology. In this interview, Dr. Helms reflects on her educational and professional development and gives her thoughts about multiculturalism as it relates to her own work.

Over the course of the last two decades, Janet E. Helms has been a major force in psychology. Since graduating from Iowa State University in 1975, she has been a major contributor and driving force in innovative empirical research and theory building pertaining to issues of race, gender, and culture in psychology. Her influential theory building, specifically regarding racial (Black and White) and “womanist” identity, reaches outside the boundaries of psychology. She also has, in collaboration with her associates and students, given empirical validity to multicultural counseling and psychology. Her research and theories are frequently cited, and many of her publications are seminal in the field and soon will be classics.

In addition to her roles as scholar and researcher, she has served as a mentor both for practitioners and for aspiring academics. She makes time for those students for whom she is responsible and she also gives unselfishly of her time to undergraduates, graduate students, and colleagues from around the country who seek her guidance. The standards she has set for the level of quality, responsibility, and commitment as a scholar and practitioner are such that students with no such interests have been inspired, through her influence, to respond in kind by pursuing academic careers. More important, people who have received her gifts have been taught to reach out and share them with others.

Not only has she been committed to scholarship and research, but she has also contributed to psychology through her work as secretary and executive board member of the Counseling Psychology Division (Division 17) and as a member-at-large of the executive committee in the Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues (Division 45) of the American Psychological Association. She has been appointed a Fellow in both divisions in recognition of outstanding and unusual contributions to the science and profession of psychology. She also serves the profession through her work on editorial boards and national review panels for the National Institute of Mental Health.

Janet grew up in Kansas City, Missouri. She was the second born and the first daughter in a family of seven children and in an extended family network. She attended school from primary to graduate school in Kansas City. She attended the University of Missouri at Kansas City and received her bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Janet revealed that she knew from the age of 7, when she was in second grade, that she wanted to be a psychologist. When asked if she knew what she wanted to do in college she responded:

I decided—actually in second grade—that I would be a psychologist and work with autistic children because I read about it in a magazine and that sounded like something good to do.

Even though she knew what she wanted to do in college, once at the University she began her studies as a math major because that was what her father wanted. She found that she did not have the same interests as math majors, however, and that her real interest was psychology

I wasn't very much like other math people, they were mostly men, and they were very competitive, and I was more interested in the psychology courses than I was in the math courses as such. So I eventually shifted, and my father promised not to disown me.

Throughout college she worked full time and attended school full time, completing her bachelor's degree in 2 \_ years. Her primary support system, throughout her education, was her family. It should be noted that when she attended the University of Missouri at Kansas City, the University had very few Black students.

After completing her bachelor's degree in psychology, Janet entered a 2-year master's program in what might be called today a behaviorally oriented child clinical program. Her master's thesis addressed the attrition and test scores of Blacks students. In the following interview with Janet E. Helms, which took place in Washington, DC on April 30, 1994, she reflected on her background and her career in psychology.

**RC:** *Did the experiences in predominately White environments influence the way you thought about multicultural issues as you began to develop your own ideas?*

**JH:** They taught me about racism—I learned how it felt up close and personal—that influences how I think about various multicultural issues.

**RC:** *What are some of the things that you recalled about the lessons in racism?*

**JH:** Well, interestingly, I didn't have too many before high school because I was in predominately Black schools, which is probably why I was able to adjust to being in predominantly White high schools—because based on that experience in the predominantly Black schools I got a sense of where my competencies were and where they were not, so that when I was in a White school and people were trying to communicate the message that “you're not competent,” I could say there's something wrong with them because I know I'm good—so it must be something with what they're doing. I think getting that earlier foundation (in a Black school) helped me survive later.

**RC:** *Can you summarize what the themes of your lessons were?*

**JH:** Well, one thing is that I learned that your level of competence might not have anything to do with how you were evaluated. I clearly remember a civics course in which the instructor had never given an A to a Black person—that was her claim to fame. And I made up my mind to get an A. She used to give these quizzes from the back of the book. She'd read a question and you were supposed to write an answer on your paper and she'd write an answer on her paper. If you were really astute, you could watch her write down the answers and see how you were doing. So I decided, since I always ended up getting a B on these quizzes, that I would compare the answers. So she'd read the question, I'd write down my answer. Then I'd look to see what she was writing down, and we had the same answers. So I knew I was going to get an A in the course this semester. When the grades came out, she didn't give me an A. And so I said, Well—instead what she wrote down was a B+ to A-, which meant that the real grade I got was a B. So I asked, “Why didn't I get an A?” She said, “Well, you didn't put in extra effort, and so if you put in extra effort, next time you will get an A.” The next time I put

in extra effort, I did extra projects that no one else in class did, and she still gave me a B+ to an A-. I said, "I put in extra effort, why didn't I get an A?" "Well, you just need to put in more effort." So finally it occurred to me that there was nothing I was going to do in that system with her in power that was going to give me an A grade in the course. So that's how I learned that what you did know didn't necessarily have anything to do with how you're valued.

**RC:** *What about in college?*

**JH:** College—I was an invisible person, so I learned how to be invisible. I don't know [if] that was particularly useful.

**RC:** *What do you mean?*

**JH:** Well, if no one thinks you have power in the system, you are basically invisible in that system.

**RC:** *How did you get support for graduate school?*

**JH:** The only way I got letters to get into graduate school was that I was assigned a research paper to do in one of my upper-level senior classes, and I did it and apparently did it very well. So the instructor wrote on my paper, "Gee, I'm surprised. I didn't know you had this talent, you really should go to graduate school, it would be a waste if you didn't, and I'll write you a letter of recommendation." And so that was the first time I thought that graduate school was an option that I could pursue, because nobody had mentioned that to me before.

**RC:** *So if it hadn't been for that person making that comment, you might not have gone to pursue a doctoral degree.*

**JH:** If it hadn't been for that person, I probably wouldn't have done several things. One, because I wouldn't have known what you needed to do to get into graduate school, and two, I would not have thought of that as an option.

**RC:** *Did you follow up and apply to doctoral programs?*

**JH:** Yes. But he [the instructor] was no longer around and didn't write a recommendation. I was finishing my course work at Missouri. I happened to be passing by the Psychology Department bulletin board and there was a notice from Iowa State with postcards that said, "If you're interested in going to graduate school, send in a postcard." So I sent in a postcard and I began my application to Iowa State.

**RC:** *You applied to one place?*

**JH:** Yeah. Was I supposed to apply to more?

**RC:** *So that was it, you just applied to Iowa and that was it?*

**JH:** That was it. The way I chose my specialty, on the postcard they said, "Which one thing do you think you would be interested in?" I went down a list of things that they were offering and I knew I didn't want to work with autistic kinds, so anything that sounded like that, I said no, and at the time I didn't want to do psychometrics because I was burned out on ANOVAs. And on the list I chose the one thing that I thought I might

be able to stay in, and I found I liked counseling, and so that's how I ended up in counseling psychology.

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

After graduating from Iowa State, Janet took a position as a counselor and faculty member in the Department of Education at Washington state University in Pullman, Washington. After a year or two, a chance phone call from a friend led to an application, and in 1977 Janet moved to a full-time academic position in the Department of Psychology, Southern Illinois University. In 1981, she moved to the Counseling Psychology faculty at the University of Maryland, where she became a full professor in 1991.

**RC:** *Could you talk a bit about the development of your thinking as you began to move more into some of your areas of scholarly interest? It sounds like some of your research interests, except women's issues, which you were already writing about, began to emerge in your work with Black students at Southern Illinois University.*

**JH:** It probably emerged from the beginning. It probably emerged when I first discovered there were White people in a Black community. I think what happened at Southern was I began to think about race as something that one could address in a systematic sort of way, and I began to think of it as something that one could really do research on and still be able to get ahead; because prior to that time, people always said, "you want to do this race stuff, you can do this race stuff, but you have to have a REAL topic." At Southern I began to believe it might be possible to study race as *real* research.

**RC:** *What made you believe that?*

**JH:** Well, I was able to publish an article on Black woman, and as far as I could tell from the literature, that hadn't happened very often. So that was one thing that made me believe. Then, I was invited to join the editorial board of the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, and the person who invited me clearly knew that my research area was racial and cultural diversity. So that suggested that maybe it wasn't going to be as big a problem as I thought it was going to be, and as other people had told me it was going to be.

**RC:** *So how would you say your thinking has evolved over the years with respect to your areas of scholarship?*

**JH:** Well, I don't know. It has evolved in different areas in different ways. Stan Strong makes the distinction between types of thinkers and researchers—*inchworms* and *hoppy toads*. Inchworms are people who take an idea and continue to work on that idea until it's perfected. Hoppy toads are people who move from topic to topic. In some sense, I think my style is hoppy toad; I like to study subjects of interest to me at the moment. But I think societal forces are forcing me to become an inchworm with respect to racial identity. I hadn't really expected racial identity to be a topic that would catch on in the way that it has. It has caught on with all sorts of new measurement, theoretical, and methodological issues, that no one seems to be addressing. So I find myself addressing those issues just to make sure that they get into the discourse, just to make sure people at

least begin to think about it even if they don't like the way I think about it. I suppose a lot of my evolution in that area has occurred because I didn't have any choice. Somebody had to deliver it, and I seemed to be the person who was best able to—it's that sort of thing. So that's an area where I'm an inchworm. On the other hand, I always had in the back of my mind—and I guess this is reflected in my master's thesis—the issue of how do we get students of color to get access to educational systems? The problem being that standardized testing is how we get people into systems or keep people out of systems, as the case may be. At Southern, one of the ways we were able to admit and retain Black graduate students was not by using the Graduate Record Examination but rather using social criteria for selecting people for the program, and we had a very good graduation rate. We had some very strong psychologists of color who came into the department during the era I was there. But when I came to Maryland, it was necessary to grapple with the issue all over again, because clearly the field thinks about tests, standardized tests, as valid information of how people of color perform. So in my “hoppy toad” fashion, one of the things that I'm working on is the issue of cultural equivalency in standardized testing. Now most people think that's been addressed, that we already know that tests are not appropriate criteria. What I do is present the current theory that there is no way that tests could show precultural bias because they already start with the assumption that the tests measure the same thing in different groups, and so I actually wrote an *American Psychologist* article in which I say if you want to know whether tests work equally well in those groups, which happens to be just a step back, what is it exactly that you're measuring in the two groups, and is it the same thing? So are tests culturally equivalent? And that, interestingly, seems to be an approach that has picked up since the article was published. So I'm finding that I'm probably going to have to be an inchworm in that area because people keep asking me how to study cultural equivalence, and that's never been done before. So I would do it. I've also had to think of ways to get them to do it; because if I don't, then given the new Civil Rights Act, what will happen is that we'll continue to use standardized tests in the same ways for people of color which will mean that we'll go back to the status quo.

**RC:** *What does the new civil rights law say about standardized testing?*

**JH:** Well, let me back up. Psychologists, and psychometricians have known for a long time that tests don't work equally well for people of color, particularly African Americans, as they do for White people. So the way they compensate for that is suggesting that we use separate norms for the two groups. When you're selecting the highest scores you select the highest scores from the Blacks, for example, and the highest for the Whites. The Civil Rights Act refers to that as “race norming” and disallows it. Therefore, it says you do not use race norming, you must use the same standard for everyone, you're going to be selecting White people primarily, because that's the group for which the tests were developed and that's the group in which the test should be culturally appropriate.

**RC:** *I see.*

**JH:** So the way around that is if you can either show that the test measures something different culturally for Blacks and people of color, or if you can find a way of adjusting the standard measures so that they include the culture of these other groups and, in a

sense, balance out culture, or the lack of cultural equivalency. So people are beginning to ask, “Well, how do we do this.” I hadn’t planned to be the one to figure that out, but I may have to be the person who at least proposes some ideas so that people can begin to figure it out.

**RC:** *So those are two areas that you’ve talked about, culture equivalence in testing and racial identity. Are there other areas of interest that you “hop around” and pursue?*

**JH:** I’m still interested in issues of women, and I do have a model on how women develop identity in a paternalistic society, and so I periodically talk to that topic area.

**RC:** *It seems natural that you might develop interest in racial identity. As it pertains to experiences of Black people it was a theme that you’ve struggled with through your own development, but it seems a little less obvious that you would develop interest with respect to the racial identity development of Whites. Can you talk about your interest in expanding racial identity models beyond Blacks to Whites? How that came about?*

**JH:** Well, remember the accidents in life. It first started when I submitted an article on Black racial identity and the reviewer sent back comments that essentially said, “Well, why are you talking about Black Identity? What about White Identity? How do you know that White people don’t have an identity?” I was able to essentially finesse—I ignored it, if you will. But as I had to submit manuscripts the topic kept coming up. I remember particularly the grant proposal I submitted to the National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH) was turned down, and the primary reason it was turned down was because they said there was no evidence that Black people had to develop identity that was any different from White people’s identity, and therefore this was not a relevant construct. So I pursued the literature, as you may or may not know, and didn’t find any evidence, any published evidence of anyone who was studying White identity. So I began to ask myself questions about whether or not White people did, in fact, think about their racial identity. It was something not I worried much about before, but I began to think about that. And so I sent my trusty graduate student, Robert T. Carter, out into the field to ask random White people whether or not they did develop White racial identities. Based on the answers that he was able to get from the people he interviewed, I began developing a model of how that might work for White people. Contrary to what recent authors would suggest, the answers that you brought back to [me] made me think about White racial identity as a culture shock experience. And so my perspective is based pretty much on the culture shock framework, with race being the source of shock.

**RC:** *As you look over your published works, which would you list as the most significant?*

**JH:** Well, the one I did comparing the counseling issues of women to— analog results of women’s problems. I took an analog study of women’s counseling issues and tried to see if the same kinds of relationships that were found in analog actually occurred in regular, ongoing counseling relationships. And I guess, in a sense, all of my research before and around the late 70’s, early 80’s—that research helped define me as a methodologist, someone who could do methodology, so that people wouldn’t discount my work because I didn’t know what I was doing. So in that sense, I think most of my early work was significant, because it established me as a researcher.

**RC:** *Were there other articles that stand out for you as significant?*

**JH:** I think the '81 article on racial identity and preference for counselor race (Parham & Helms, 1981) was significant because it's the article that apparently launched people into thinking about racial identity as a research area. Before that time, we pretty much thought about race as a nominal or categorical variable. People were comparing racial groups and no one ever looked at the psychological mechanism of race. I think that article was one of the first where we actually said, if you're going to study race, you need to study it as a psychological construct. I like to think that it probably got people to think about race in that way—that was significant. I think my article on Black-White counseling interactions (Helms, 1984) may have been most significant because it was the place in which I presented the idea that White people have racial identities and that their racial identities would influence how they treated people of color, in particular Black people. And it's also an article where I presented the notion of interactions, racial identity interactions—the notion that where I am [in racial identity development] and where you are [in racial identity development] influence how we relate to one another. Prior to that time, I don't know that anybody had quite done that in a systematic way, so that's a significant article.

It also was probably significant because it seemed like people could understand it even if they were not scholars, so that one is still often used in undergraduate classes to get people to think about issues of racial identity. So that was probably significant. I think cultural equivalence, which was published in 1992 (Helms, 1992a) is going to be significant because it's already begun to get people thinking about the issues of cultural bias differently than they did before. Even if they don't change, they have to think about what they're doing in order to explain to me why my perspective is wrong, which is a positive thing. I like my book, *Race is a Nice Thing to Have* (Helms, 1992b), because I think it's the first statement that clearly says to White people who are not scholars "here's something that you can do to change the racial climate." And so I think that has to be significant.

**RC:** *In 1991, the Janet E. Helms Award for mentoring and scholarship in professional psychology was established at Teachers College, Columbia University, and you were its first recipient. Recently at a conference, someone said it must be strange to have an award named after you. What is it like having an award named after you?*

**JH:** Well, it never occurred to me that it should feel strange, so I suppose that probably means something about my level of egotism. I actually don't know that I think about the award as really being named for me. I actually think about it as being named for the people of color who have gone before me and gone after me and are with me presently who usually aren't acknowledged by the system for what they do. So I think about the award, as a way of someone saying, "We're trying." And they're not just saying it to me, but they're saying it to other people who may be trying but might not be getting the attention and recognition they should be receiving in the system. So I'm happy that the award happened while I was still alive to know that it was there. I think actually it would be nice if most awards named for people were given before they die, because after they're dead how do they to know how you felt about them? I'm honored that I was the person

that Teachers College, Columbia University chose to name the award for, but I think it could have been any number of people to name an award after.

**RC:** *Consider the various areas of research interest that you've had. Is it possible to identify some essential them that cuts through all your different areas of interests?*

**JH:** In some way, they're all concerned with integrating or evaluating diversity.

**RC:** *Today that word is used in a lot of different ways with a lot of different meanings. When you use it, what do you mean?*

**JH:** I mean it in a lot of different ways with a lot of different meanings. My ultimate notion of diversity is that it involves a variety of identities such as race—associated with race is ethnic group, occupation, and so on. I think ultimately what has to happen for a person, both internally and externally, is that you have to learn how to integrate those various aspects of self. But before the integration, you have to understand how each of those components of the self contributes to who you are. So my research at various times focuses on one or the other collective identity, but the thing is always how can we figure out how to eventually integrate those things so that individuals are more healthy, more attuned to themselves—but also how can we teach society to value each of those aspects of “personhood” as opposed to maintaining the rigid kinds of structures that currently exist.

**RC:** *So you don't mean it in a sense of “let's celebrate, have a potluck dinner of different kinds of ethnic meals.”*

**JH:** No, I mean it in a sense of “let's suffer, let's learn where the main growth areas are and do the kind of self-examination that's necessary to develop those growth areas.”

**RC:** *Growth areas?*

**JH:** Growth areas. A growth area is, for instance, if you have rigid stereotypes and you don't know that, there's not too much need for you to grow and move. If I could teach you what those stereotypes look like and how they affect your own interest then you've got a potential for that to be a growth area. You've got a potential to learn how to change early socialization and to approach that particular growth differently, from the outside, that is, in a way that you enjoy it with others—but also on the inside, in terms of how it is that you interact or communicate with yourself. I feel growth areas, in this instance, are an opportunity to self-examine for the purpose of accepting a diversity within and without.

**RC:** *Much of your work, as you had indicated earlier, in your early years, was designed to ground you as an empirical researcher. I'm wondering how come you chose to develop such a strong research side, and in what ways do you think that it is important to be able to communicate or to demonstrate the things that interest you in empirical terms?*

**JH:** There are lots of answers to that question. One of them is that psychology has a very strong empirical tradition and so people who are socialized in the Psychology Department should learn fairly quickly that if you are to continue to exist in that environment, you have to be able to do empirical research. And that hasn't changed, that's the message in graduate school, that's the message throughout one's life as an academic psychologist, so

that's the message for a clinical practitioner. Part of the reason I intended to be an academic psychologist, at least in part, is because of a longing to communicate. I think part of it is that no one in the graduate program really expected that I would be able to do empirical research. So, in a sense, when I go against expectations, the negative expectations, it shatters the stereotype. So that's another reason I do empirical stuff. I also do empirical stuff because I teach graduate and undergraduate students. A lot of them are students of color and White women, none of the students are expected to be able to do research. They need a mentor, and I've got to be able to teach them to do the right thing, otherwise they go out into the field and reinforce the stereotypes that people have of them. So, it's a moral responsibility. And I guess a fourth reason is because there's not much empirical research on issues related to diversity—meaning race, ethnicity, and gender—and I think we have the responsibility to be able to prove what it is we believe. Part of what I attempt to do is not [to] devalue speculation and theoretical foundations, but to take a look at a way we can actually provide evidence for those speculations.

**RC:** *How come you have chosen diversity as the central theme of all your work?*

**JH:** It's obvious. I study myself in one way or another. In research, writing, seeing clients. In many ways it is therapy for myself. By learning how people integrate themselves, I also teach myself how to integrate myself.

**RC:** *And so the areas you've chosen are areas that have more to do with your personality?*

**JH:** Yeah.

**RC:** *In psychology and education, over time, people have moved from interest in race relations to what is now called "multiculturalism." Some would say that you're a contributor to the multicultural movement. What would you say about how you understand your contribution, and what are your thoughts about multicultural counseling?*

**JH:** Well, I don't know. I guess I could say I have mixed feelings about that. I certainly am in favor of multicultural—it is simply that I don't quite know what that means, and to me that usually means that people are studying anything or everything except their race and/or ethnic group. I think that's a bit premature because I think in our society, in people's lives, we have a number of mental health issues that are clearly socioracial and ethnic issues, and if we don't resolve those, then I think we will not contribute to reducing the tensions in society, or on a practitioner level, we won't understand the clients. So one of the things that distresses me about the multicultural movement, that I hope I haven't contributed to, is that we think about any aspect of a person as being the equivalent of other aspects. So I heard someone the other day talking about a diversity issue involving a White man. The White man might have been involved in some sort of discrimination, but it's not the same sort of discrimination socioracial group people have to deal with. I think if we reduce the larger issues, make them less complex than they are, then we're going to get into major trouble. And so the way I think about what I do is that I am concerned about issues of diversity, but I am concerned about the major issues, that have long-lasting societal implications, because those are the ones that I think are important.

**RC:** *And those are?*

**JH:** Those are sociorace, those are ethnic group, those are gender, and/or any combinations of those things.

**RC:** *Is there something you would like to say to people who respect and admire your work or to those who are troubled by your work?*

**JH:** Well, I suppose to either person I would say that whether you respect it or whether you have trouble with it, it's not intended to be the last word. And so what I hope my work does is to inspire people to move in whatever directions it's suggested that they should move, but that at least they address the issues, at least they communicate about the issues and talk to one another, and *most important, that they tell the truth about what it is that I say.*

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