

Personal-Cultural Analysis and Identity Development Paper

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Personal Cultural Identity Development

The Multicultural Counseling and Theories are now central in being able to cross cultural lines when approaching counseling require three things of the counselor, or a tri-partite model (Arredondo & Toprek, 2004). First, a counselor must study and try to understand the unique dynamics of cultures not their own, so as to better serve their clients. In stepping into their worldview, a counselor is able to better grasp their struggles and objectives and the framework in which they are making their choices and behaviors. The second component of Multicultural counseling is that of using culturally relevant skills. This also takes time to shuffle through the counselors "tool box" and chose what techniques and discussions would best served the culture with which they are interacting (Ivey, 2007). The broad study of theories and skills, keep the counselor prepared to interact with clients and picking the skills though the lens of a culture, helps to ensure that the tools and discussion will be more effective with the client's specific RCID. The final part to the tri-partide model is the counselor's self awareness about who they are both culturally and how their experiences and biases affect their communication with their clients (Arrodondo & Tropek, 2004). Without this component to the multicultural model, there cannot be an honest connection between the counselor and the client, nor can there can be a true communication of empathy and understanding. For this reason, diving into ones cultural identity and worldview in paramount in embarking in a career successful in multicultural counseling.

In order to do this exercise, I will look into my own cultural identity and its development. Specifically I will search the experiences I have had with racism and

discrimination, and review the narratives I heard from my family and friend's about the subject of cross-cultural biases and stereotypes.

Cultural Development

I see my cultural identity in many different groups that all overlap. I belong to the physical cultural group of females and Caucasians, and ideological cultural groups of Christian, Americans but also a cultural group called Third Culture Kids (TCK). Furthermore, I am part of an affluent cultural group of highly educated people. Each part of my puzzle builds on who I am and my world view. If I were to shift any of these components just a little, it would result in a shift of how I see myself and how I relate to the world around me. I will try to break it down piece by piece to increase my self-awareness and in turn, improve my multicultural competencies in counseling.

Gender

First I focus on the obvious cultural identity by my appearance, the piece of my puzzle that I cannot hide if I wanted to. I am female and as a result I have experienced moments of stereotypes and "glass ceilings" and expectations. I didn't feel any kind of limits being a female growing up. My parents have a very egalitarian relationship, as did my grandparents. My father's father passed away before I was born so I watched my paternal grandmother, raise and run her home on her own like a champion. There was always tremendous respect for the women around me and I would hear comments like, "Your mother has such important insight" and "What would I do without your mother's smarts?". However, it wasn't until I was in college and watched the women picking their majors, often taking into

consideration what would work well with a family and the seeing the men free to pick as they wished (now I feel they probably had limits too, picking more lucrative majors so they could support their families), that I began feeling a difference in opportunities between the sexes. Furthermore, my family also lived in Japan during my college years and I remember being ignored in elevators, in a way that I had never experienced before. I grew up most of my life in Latin America and women were cat called and whistled at regularly, but I found the ignoring of women harsher than the cat-calls and flattery in Latin America.

A few years later, my son was born and I chose to leave a very competitive executive program at Unilever in Buenos Aires, because my hours were tremendous and I didn't want to miss my son's childhood. I had a feeling of letting women down, especially in Argentina, because the company had invested in me despite the assumption that women often left to raise their families, and that was exactly what I was doing. I felt this was hurting women looking to work for Unilever behind me. However, I was convinced, and still am, that no one was going to be as good as a caregiver for my children, as I would be. Along with this belief, my husband was being paid better at a bank than I was at Unilever and so we decided as a couple, I would stay home and he would keep bringing in the finances. Our structure became very "traditional" however, I was comfortable with the set up because it was a conscious decision and not by default. But as I looked at my life in my late 20s, I thought I had been sold a pack of lies, that a woman could "have her cake and eat it too". In order to do anything well, she had to choose and didn't see how I could have

balanced a full commitment to motherhood with how I would have liked to be committed to my career.

Now, with my daughter reaching fourteen, I see my role as homemaker with trepidation as I want her to reach for the stars and believe that she “can have her cake and eat it too”. We speak openly at home about sexism but also about the reality that women run a higher risk when choosing to drink at parties, walking home alone or have more pressure on their physical attributes than men do. My daughter, Lucia, also excels in math and we discuss that math is male dominated career choice and how surprised her friends are by her high math level. I try to be honest about the perceived restrictions with her but still encourage equality. I know how strongly I feel about these issues by the amount of energy and focus I place of these conversations at home with my children. Sometimes, I even surprise myself that I feel so strongly about this.

When I look at my experience with gender inequality, I feel like I have passed Helm’s stage of accepting cultural group differences and issues. Starting with being naïve about the issue as I child I moved toward disintegration, where I became aware of the inequality and I related more toward the plight of women, even as I followed a traditional role (Helms, 1984). Finally reaching autonomy where I am a woman in the cultural restrictions that that brings but place myself ‘above’ it or choosing not to let it bother me. It is a form of acceptance but also a form of activism by no accepting it as truth but I view it as a shortcoming of other’s worldviews.

Caucasian

A second cultural group that I am a part of that is obvious by my appearance is Caucasian and this too has moved across the spectrum of being oblivious to the difference to autonomy from this cultural label (Helms, 1984). Because I grew up abroad, being part of this cultural group has been a different experience than if I had grown up in the US. First, I was in Latin America, where my blond hair and light skin attracted a lot of attention. There was also the assumption because I was Caucasian that I was intelligent and affluent. As a young girl, I was asked to read for poor people who could not read instructions or medical labels. I gained access to concerts and restaurants because it was assumed I belonged there. At times I was compared to movie stars solely because of my blond hair. In high school, I moved to Asia where my Caucasian-ness became another focus. Often people would touch my hair in crowds because they were curious of its texture. I was asked to take photos with strangers, just because I was Caucasian. Simultaneously, I was often ignored as the Caucasian because they felt I didn't have anything to add or could not communicate with them. At the start of my time living in Asia, that was true. I didn't have the words to communicate with them but over time that shifted some. Furthermore, there was often the assumption that I was either there in Asia taking their business or trying to convert them to Christianity, both of which were either fascinating to them or they resented very much. So interestingly enough, I grew up as a minority in my Caucasian race. At times that was a perk with privileges of "white space", at other times, it was isolating.

In contrast, it wasn't until I attending Wake Forest as an undergraduate that I experienced the racial tension between American Whites and African Americans. I had read literature about it, studied it in history, was often asked abroad about racial issues in the US, but had never had a personal interaction with African Americans. My mother had marched in the 60's and told us stories about signs that said Black bathrooms while visiting the US South. I naively thought, that this was part of the US history. I learned quickly that although as a country we had come a long way toward equality, there was still a long way from healing. I felt an "uncomfortable-ness" between the races, mostly because of the uncertainty of the assumptions of the other race. So in order to protect themselves, they withdraw from interacting (Helms, 1984). It appeared to be a stage (disintegration) where there is fear resulting in "retreating back into their predictability of the White culture" (Helms, p. 156). This is what I saw at Wake Forest and I am embarrassed to admit, how I handled my first interaction with African Americans. Raised with the mantra that "We are all God's children" and "We have all been made in God's image", I didn't expect to respond in this manner when I first came in contact with the African American culture in North Carolina. With age and maturity, these fears subside and I move toward being more curious about how African Americans see their role in US history and how they chose to hold on to Black Culture today and curious about how they see me and my odd position as a Caucasian that didn't grow up in "White Spaces" (Denevi, 2004).

American

Beside these two cultural groups I identify with that are obvious in my appearance, I was influenced further by being an American and at Third Culture Kid. My journey toward accepting my Americanism is an odd one. As an American in Latin America and Asia until I was eighteen, I felt embarrassed by my country. I was embarrassed the United States always seemed to be sticking their nose in other country's businesses. The United States appeared to be the world's bully, and I was always apologizing to friends about our foreign policy and idiotic assumptions the US made over and over. In Latin America, they fought for independence from our financial influence, and in Asia, they resented our air of superiority and spreading of American pop-culture. Paradoxically, I could also see the envy there was toward the US's financial success, the educational opportunities, the American styles and movies. So really, it was a balancing act between respect and resentment toward the US. I learned very early, that I was a guest in a country, so I could listen to complaints about the US but I could never complain about my host country. It was a very lopsided relationship. My parents and other parents, would remind us we were guests and therefore ambassadors to our country and to our faith.

It wasn't until I came to Wake Forest as an undergraduate, that I started to appreciate being American. I could see the generosity of the culture, the honesty and kindness that was America and I finally, reached a point, where I could say, although, I didn't agree with the politics, I could be an American and be proud of that cultural identity. I learned to love hamburger and corn on the cob and football on Saturday afternoons. I experienced Halloween for the first time and Christmas as

a national holiday instead of a religious holiday. I left college to move to Argentina, where there are strong feelings against the imperial American policies. I learned to say I was “North American” instead of “American” because “isn’t every in the Americas ‘Americans’? Why do we claim to be the only Americans?” I learned also, that our transparent government system was a model to be admired and work toward. So I lived for seven years in Argentina, proud to be American and aware of the downfalls as well. In Argentina, unlike Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, where I had lived as a child, all things European were superior than things American so that was yet another shift in my understanding of what it was to be an American. I often saw graffiti saying “Yankees -go home” and my friends gave me the nickname, Gringa.

I learned through these experiences of being stereotyped because of my nationality and often being personally blamed for American policies, the importance of separating the person from their country of origin. I think today of the Muslims in America being targeted for the policies of their countries of origin and they are probably, similar to how I was, innocent and incapable of accomplishing the changes they wish they could see in their countries. They can love their culture, as I learned to love the beauty of being American, yet at the same time, be ashamed of choices of state or apologetic for what these decisions would mean to their families.

Third Culture Kids

It was in high school, that I was introduced to the concept of the Third Culture Kid. A TCK are children “who spend a significant period of their developmental years in a culture outside their parents’ passport cultures” (Pollock

& Van Reken, p.xi). I was aware of this term in high school but I didn't personally identify to this cultural group until after I reached college. It was there I became more certain that although I was American, I didn't feel at home in America and I had grown comfortable in a culture that was a result of living between cultures. The decision to identify with TCK (and as adults ATCK- *Adult Third Culture Kids*) meant I finally related to a cultural group, even though we are a hard group to pin down since we do not look a certain way, share a language or nationality. What we do share are experiences and worldviews. I feel most comfortable talking to other TCKs and I admire what they stand for, their perspectives and priorities and acknowledge that being a TCK also bring a certain level of isolation. Interestingly enough, I married a TCK, an Argentine who grew up in Singapore and the US, so we relate on a cultural level more than if I had married an American.

The defining factors of TCK are they are very adaptable (Pollock & Van Reken). Second, they have a unique perspective on the world and find it hard to state opinions in black and whites as they have seen and experienced various cultures on a very personal level. Furthermore, they find when returning to their "homes", they feel like foreigner in their own counties. This creates a feeling of greater isolation because the expectation is that they will feel comfortable again. What TCKs learn is they are not "home" anywhere but able to be comfortable in many different cultures. Finally, TCK's share a characteristic of having a harder time making decisions as a result of being aware that there are so many paths and options in the world and they have no tradition to follow without analyzing the decision.

As a result of this unique worldview, I find I have a very open stand toward other cultures but it does foster a bias as well. Because of our natural tendency to think globally and quickly think of the other perspective in a debate, I find I hold bias against those who I find have a narrow viewpoint and blind to other cultural perspectives. I find that I might take the stance as expert and try to “teach” those who haven’t traveled abroad that the world isn’t as the US media says it is. I have learned to catch myself and also have learned that I can learn a whole lot from people who haven’t moved around, because they have a view on family and friendship that differs from my own.

Christianity

My Christian faith is also central to my cultural identity. I attempt to make choices and interpret experiences through the Christian standpoint. This cultural identify is shared with my parents and grandparents, and extended family. The Christian values are actively kept central in my family of origin and the family I have made with my husband. However, because of my background as a TCK, I feel my faith is built away from Christianity that is tied to the American culture. I am actually resentful when I feel Christianity is “high-jacked” by political parties and American values as I see Christianity as so much deeper than rules and regulations. I am aware of the mission to Americanize the world instead of spreading the word of God and the Christian ideas of peace, forgiveness and mercy. Furthermore, I see myself as an ambassador of the Christian faith, probably from being the minority for so many years in Asia. I relate to Nabeel Qureshi’s book, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, where he explains his position as a Muslim child growing up in America, learning

how to defend his faith and being an example for those around him of what he felt Muslim ideals were and not what the media makes it out to be.

Affluence and Well Educated

The final piece of the puzzle of what makes up my person cultural identify and the development to who I am today, is having been privileged with affluence and education. Because I grew up not talking about this privilege, because it wasn't something we spoke about at home as the idea was "But by the grace of God, there go I", it is the hardest component of my RCID to address. Not only did I have privilege, but I was surrounded by international business families who were also highly educated and affluent. My graduating class from Singapore American School in 1991 had 100% college bound graduates, and I didn't even know community colleges existed until I was in the United States. Most of us had schooling, housing and cars paid for by our companies. Others were diplomats who may not have been financially as affluent, but their lives looked very glamorous with the diplomatic privileges, hosting world renown guests at the embassies and homes. Furthermore, we attended school often with the very wealthy of the host country as their families wished for the best schooling option for their children. The only exceptions in our circles were the missionary families. Moreover, we often lived in countries with greater visible poverty than the US, so we were accustomed to children begging, driving through slums, people with ragged clothes and the insecurities of being robbed as you went about your day. The contrast of our experience was evident to us regularly, adding to our sense of privilege.

So ironically, my expansive multicultural upbringing also brought some very narrow views into socioeconomic statuses. I was introduced to the lower-middle class as a young adult. I often connected this socioeconomic class with the people I saw as narrow-minded about the world and global issues and politics. I have found that my assumptions are off. It does not good to assume anything about anyone because one the beauties about the United States, is that you can't make assumptions about education levels by the jobs they hold, car that they drive or neighborhoods that people live in. I have affluent neighbors who can not see past the end of their noses and hard working middle class friends who read the Wall Street Journal and New York Times daily. So again, as I mature, I see assumptions are a waste of time and often limit your own experiences with the people around you.

Summery

By diving into my own RCID, I have a better understanding of what makes up my worldview. I can pinpoint moments that have challenged my initial thoughts and assumptions and other moments that have forced me to grow. I have listened to my parent's words that have lead me in one direction or another when it come to my own cultural identity and assumptions about other cultures. I can see that cultural identity an aspect of myself that keeps evolving even though there are pieces that do not change. As I interact with more cultures, I shift my thoughts about them and my thoughts about myself because I see their assumptions about me. Hopefully, being aware of the biases and assumptions will help me relate better to people of other cultures on a very real personal level. Anne Fadiman says it very

eloquently in her book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, when she says, “ If you can’t see your own culture has its own set of interests, emotions and biases, how can you expect to deal successfully with someone else’s culture?” (Fadiman, 1997, p.261).

Referance

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