

Cultural Analysis and Identity Development

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Abstract

The following paper represents my journey through life as I am today. This paper takes into account my upbringing which will help the reader understand how I have arrived where I am today. An arrival which is better than I was when I began, yet with the knowledge that growth must continue as with greater knowledge and education more is expected and necessary. Thus, the paper is written with this in mind, I know I have not arrived, it is simply a snap-shot look at things I have experienced to be here today. Cultural, familial, societal, influences have all played a role in my growth, which I have attempted to accurately depict below.

Background

In order to thoroughly understand my cultural identity, it is best to take a look at my heritage and the journey I have been thus far. I was born in Durham, NC to two white parents who had both grown up in Indiana. My father was from a low income family whose mother and father (who separated when he was young) obtained an 8th grade and 6th grade education, respectively. My mother was born into a middle income household and both of her parents received college educations. My mother and father then met in college at Indiana University, where they then got married and moved to Durham, NC just before my birth in order for my father to attend a medical residency in obstetrics and gynecology at Duke University. At the same time as my father was in residency, my mother was enrolled in classes at University of North Carolina to gain her master's in education. Their incredibly busy life took a toll on their marriage and they separated just after I was born. My upbringing was thus from two white parents in two distinct households, both with higher education and solid incomes. Despite living in a culturally diverse area of North Carolina, until third grade I had very little exposure to any culture that was dissimilar to my own. I attended private school early on (my mother worked there as a teacher), which consisted of mostly children exactly like me: above average income, white, educated parents, etc.

Then when I was 10 years old, we moved from Hillsborough, NC to Chapel Hill, NC and I began attending public school. This was the first time I was in a diverse atmosphere, where the population of the area was accurately reflected in the diversity of the school. I was very active in athletics and my main sport was basketball, which I played through high school graduation. Excelling at basketball allowed me to interact with the African American community as a whole and I often found myself not only in proximity to African Americans, but also frequently in the minority. I remained in the North Carolina public school system until I

graduated from high school, when I attended Wake Forest University, a private Baptist university. While Wake Forest was very diverse, many of the students tended to cluster with people they closely identified with culturally, lending the student body to somewhat segregate itself. Because I played basketball in college and was still active in sports, I believe my experience contained more diversity than most, as I was active in two separate groups: one group that was primarily upper-class white students with well-educated parents who grew up in similar communities (white, well educated, upper class), the other group being mainly minority students who were attending on athletic scholarships, the majority of whom had grown up with uneducated parents in poor communities (something I learned about their backgrounds as we practiced together and became close as friends and teammates). I often served as the flimsy bridge between these two groups in the rare times they interacted outside of class, despite the school only having 3,200 students.

After I graduated from college came my first exposure to the “real” world. My first adult job was working for my college roommate, who was a professional athlete in the NBA. While the world of professional sports is extremely racially diverse, there is very little socio-economic diversity due to large paychecks and prominent positions in society. I lived and worked in San Antonio, TX for Tim Duncan, a professional basketball player who was extremely popular publicly and very successful. While growing up in North Carolina the African American community made up most of the minority community, in San Antonio there were far more Latinos than African Americans, once again broadening my exposure to other cultures. After working for Mr. Duncan, I moved to South Florida from Texas, where I still reside today. I began working at a company owned by my family, so the prominence and wealth was still present for me. I also somewhat gained an understanding of other minority populations which had immigrated from islands close to Florida, and had their own heritage and culture. People

from Cuba, Haiti, Costa Rica, and many others make up much of the population of south Florida. Throughout my life, while I have been privy to experience many diverse minority cultures and heritages, I have always been a white male with means, education, and privilege, which is the background and lens I use to explore my own identity and cultural heritage, for better or worse.

After all of my family's operating businesses were sold, where we once were employers of over 1,100 employees of several diverse groups and backgrounds, we decided to begin a small single family office. At this point I was able to further my education, receiving a masters in accounting and passing the certified public accountant exam (CPA). My interactions with the diverse group of people who worked for our family quickly shifted into relationships with those who belonged to accounting firms, law firms, investment banks, insurance providers, and the like. This new group of people, while very diverse in heritage and culture all had prominent jobs with a large amount of education and experience. All had greater than average income, education, and extremely comfortable lifestyles. After work, my experiences remained with those that were very similar to myself socio-economically and ethnically. Mainly people I associated with were educated, white, affluent, and prominent members of the community and for the most part lived in the same neighborhood as I did. My experiences while working for the family office never really left the confines of my home "turf" and so my interactions were limited to those very similar to me due to how rarely I traveled outside of my neighborhood and office, which was literally across the street.

This leads me into the next chapter of my life, which from afar some perhaps would have observed as nearly perfect. I was educated, had a good job, lived in a prominent neighborhood, and from a prominent family. However, I was extremely unhappy and found my existence vapid and unfulfilling. Everyone seemed superficial and fake in an effort to conform,

and the relationships I had with others and myself contained many serious issues that came to light as time went on. On October 28, 2020, I realized living this life was taking me into a horrible and potentially deadly direction. What were once sociable drinks had overtaken my life and help was necessary in order for me to change course. I then made a decision that has changed my life incredibly for the better and has also changed the lens with which I attempt to see all people, wherein all people have a unique story, whatever story that may be, where feelings are felt instead of denied and changed in the blink of an eye, and perspectives can be honored as individual's realities.

Interaction with Diverse Groups

Since October 28, 2020 (so for a little more than 15 months), I have interacted with members of a very diverse group in a 12 Step Program. This group of people that I have come to share my feelings and thoughts and life with all have but one thing in common: they are alcoholics. I have been able to talk to people that have come from absolutely nothing, but now have the only thing that is truly worthwhile: happiness and a sense of purpose. How people are able to interact with one another when they simply want to be happy and of service is amazing.

So now, as I interact with people who have backgrounds vastly different from my own, which happens at events for my children, in the community where I enjoy providing service, events within a broad spectrum of recovery, they all seem to lead to professional, social, and spiritual (as opposed to religious) development. The one thing that I have truly enjoyed is getting to know individuals and the histories that come with them. I have enjoyed trying to find the uniqueness in each person, whether they are from a similar background or one that is extremely different from my own. This sincere desire to understand others helps people to open up and communicate in an extremely trusting way, where we can get to know each other

and I can also share my background and the fact I know I have a lot to learn about the world in order to better understand, trust, and communicate with my peers and potential clients.

First Understanding

I grew up in North Carolina and until the fourth grade, I attended private schools where my mother taught, among people who looked very similar to me and came from closely relatable backgrounds. I participated in sports from a young age, first swimming, then basketball, football, and baseball. In the fourth grade, I moved to Chapel Hill, NC, where the public school system was known to be very strong, thus resulting in my switch from private to public schools. It was upon entering the realm of public school that I learned that there were people who grew up much differently than I had. They did not get dropped off by their parents at school, nor were they picked up by them, but instead were on their own much of the day and lived a much less sheltered existence. Most of my new friends rode the bus to and from school, and I was told that all the African American (at that time “black”) kids lived in the same neighborhood, known as “the projects,” and also that most of “us” (i.e., white people) were not welcome there. Since I was in athletics, however, I went there all the time to play basketball with my friends as that’s where the public courts were. I knew many of the families that lived close to the basketball courts I grew up on and I was often welcomed into the homes of my friends’ families to have dinner and hang out as any other young adult in the neighborhood would have been. It was difficult personally at the time to understand why and how there was a perceived unwelcomeness as communicated by my white friends and families, and this was the first time I understood there were feelings and beliefs which existed that did not seem to coincide with my own lens of reality. In this instance it was prejudice about color and monetary status, however, I would come to learn that these issues did not stop with race, but also extended into sexual orientation, sexism, amongst a myriad of other aspects of being human.

There is not yet a theory that exists to adequately explain how white people develop specific attitudes about their own racial group and/or identity. While there is plenty of research regarding how white people identify others, they tend to identify themselves by their religion (christian, jewish, etc.) or their place of origin (Italian, Scottish, etc.). The article *Toward a Theoretical Explanation of the Effects of Race on Counseling: A Black and White Model*, not only explained the lack of adequate attention to the topic of white identity, but also attempts to explain how one's attitude can become prejudiced throughout a continuum. For white people, one's racial consciousness may occur by progressing through five stages: contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independence, and autonomy. The first stage, contact stage, is entered into when an individual learns that black people exist. At this point, other than the person's skin color, there is not a perceived difference from one individual to the next. However, because of cross-racial interactions and feedback from society, an individual then learns that they are in fact white. This is the disintegration phase, when an individual understands there is a perceived difference in white people and black people, and that racism and differentiation exists. As society continues to point out differences in individuals that have different skin color, a white person then enters into the reintegration stage. In this stage, a white person becomes biased toward his or her own racial group and is thus hostile toward black people. During this stage, a white person can accept these feelings as they are or begin to move toward an understanding and acceptance of the fact that they are in fact white and belong to a racist society, which has led them to the feelings they experience in the reintegration stage. If acceptance takes place, feelings of fear, anger, and misunderstanding can be greatly reduced, at which time an individual moves into the pseudo-independent stage. In this stage, an individual becomes interested in the differences between white people and black people, regarding what is similar, along with what is different between the two groups. In

this stage, if an individual is willing to interact with black people to find out the actual differences and similarities, and can set aside the misconceptions and misinformation that have been absorbed up until this point, an individual may finally progress into the final stage of autonomy. In this stage, there are no assets or liabilities regarding similarities and differences; people are simply accepted as individuals, and the individual that has moved through these stages is more than willing to be a part of cross-racial interactions as they continue to understand the uniqueness that exists among all people (Helms, 1984).

I find it very interesting to see how these stages can be experienced by any individual. At this point in my life, I feel grateful to be perhaps experiencing the final stage of autonomy. I understand and honor that there are differences between people, not only of different races, but also within my own race, in addition to variations of socio-economic status, education, and cultural background. I find it of utmost importance to keep an open mind and heart, as I do not know what any individual has been through in his or her life, nor do I know what they have been taught by society. As a result, I must also understand and accept that others may have preconceived notions of me, as I once did of them. Learning about and gaining insight into other unique individuals is something that I look forward to now, as I am constantly grateful for the privilege of getting to know other people's stories.

Family Background

My parents are both from Indianapolis, IN, but had very different upbringings. As discussed earlier, my mother was from a fairly middle-class family, and my father was from a family with lower socio-economic standing. They were married for a short time (long enough to have two children) and then their paths led in different directions. My mother was a teacher until her retirement, many of those years teaching where I attended school, and my father was a physician and a businessman. While both of my parents told us that all people were just

people, that everyone was born the same and had the same opportunities, my parents' actions did not always reflect these statements. Looking back at the way my father behaved, his mindset in reality was more along the lines of semi-acceptance. My father felt he was not racist because he had "black friends" and that he was aware that the world has "people like that" with which he occasionally interacted as a doctor. My mother, who was an educator, took a very opposite approach, more along the lines that black people were oppressed and deserved greater opportunity and assistance because of the inherent hardship that exists for people of color. It is an interesting thing growing up in a broken family where vastly different values are portrayed, but similar verbal messages are delivered.

Religion was something that was also deeply entrenched in me while I was growing up. These beliefs, similar to what was disseminated to me regarding race, were taught in different terms. My mother felt the Bible expressed mainly that we should treat others as we would like to be treated, and that God is loving to everyone, no matter what. My father had quite different beliefs and felt that anyone who didn't identify and live with his interpretation of the Bible meant that they would then burn in hell. This includes a person's sexual orientation and/or identification, amongst many, many other aspects of humanity that were then viewed through a prejudicial lens.

The impact that the beliefs and actions of my parents have had on my racial/cultural identity is vast and noticeably profound. It was very difficult for me growing up to reconcile the difference between what my parents expressed and did (which was often in conflict all on its own) and what I experienced once I was participating in society, and my friends and their families who were so much more different than my own. As a child, this forced me to develop my own feelings and lens since no matter what I felt, it was impossible to mirror the thoughts and or actions of both of my parents and make them happy. Thus I had to begin to explore

thoughts and feelings which were separate from the adults around me, and understand that their perceptions of reality were simply that, merely perceptions, all to be taken with some dubiousness and hesitation. While the beginning of this process was subconscious and full of conflict and confusion, as I have gotten older and gone through the stages described above, I believe I have been able to consciously put aside many of the prejudices and misperceptions inflicted upon me through education, experience, and a large dose of humility.

Identity and Counseling

Over the last fifteen months, during several of which I have been taking counseling classes and delving into my past to find what it is that has defined me then and now, I am beginning to understand more and more that each and every person is unique; that I truly know very little, perhaps even less and less, as time goes on. Everyone has gone through things that have been painful, whether they admit it openly and honestly, or are even aware of it consciously, or not. People have foundations that have not been built autonomously, as we are all influenced throughout our lives by vastly different people and life experiences. As we grow and shape ourselves through our ever-changing beliefs and lens with which we view the world, this character development will ideally translate into growth as counselors. In order to be the best counselor possible, I must be able to put myself into another person's shoes, into the lives they have led, setting my own life and past aside, simply trying to understand others and what their identity is, while also understanding that there will be aspects of their life that I can never truly comprehend, despite my best efforts. We are our own fingerprints: no two are alike. For better or worse, we can only perceive things in a way that has been informed by our upbringing, education, and experience (or lack thereof), and we are all both knowingly and unknowingly affected by those elements that stem from our own individual pasts. I think that

my continued efforts to understand both the lens with which I view the world and also how to help that lens evolve, will help me to become the best counselor possible.

Reference

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