

My Cultural Identity

Ashley Gartner

Wake Forest University

Abstract

Everyone has a cultural identity. Mine is a white, Irish, Protestant, working-class female who is a sexual abuse survivor, plus many other things. Just knowing these things about yourself does not do any real good, outside of general self-awareness. How one uses these stories to connect with others is the key. As a counselor, having self-awareness is crucial to being able to counsel another person appropriately.

My Cultural Identity

I was born a white female at the beginning of the Xenial microgeneration during the economic boom of Reaganomics. I identify as many different things, some of which have changed due to my experiences. Others have stayed rooted throughout my life. I am the youngest of three children for my father (two older brothers), the only child for my mother, and the youngest grandchild on both sides. I am also the only girl in my immediate family group. While I have always identified as female, I quickly learned that if I wanted playmates, I had to keep up with the boys. That means I had to be okay with rough and tumble play, climbing trees, playing ball, et cetera, even though most girls I saw on television or elsewhere in public did not display these things. This experience taught me, from a very young age, that I could do pretty much anything that my siblings and cousins could do, even though I was a girl. My parents were supportive in everything that I wanted to do. My mother taught me how to do basic plumbing and maintenance work, and my father reinforced my love of books, art, academia, and cars. They provided my brother and me with art supplies, books, music, sports supplies, or anything else that we wanted or felt we needed to round out masculine or feminine traits. In fact, they rarely enforced gender norms but encouraged us to explore ourselves as individuals outside of societal norms. As a result, the younger of my two brothers and I are both relatively androgynous. He is a compassionate, caring man, and I am a strong, independent woman.

One thing I never lacked, growing up, was cultural diversity. Being from a town with a globally-renowned university like IU, Bloomington is about as culturally diverse as any major city, with a population under 100,000. We have multiple museums (including a world cultures museum), libraries (including one of the largest in the nation), cultural research centers, ethic

restaurants, theaters, and proudly hosts one of the largest LGBTQ+ culture centers. However, as diverse as it is, like most places, the population is predominately white.

Fortunately, my elementary school was in the middle of town, very near the campus, so the parents of my classmates were IU students or professors. My classmates and I were a virtual sea of racial and cultural diversity. A cross-section of my classmates could have stood in for a United Nations meeting. Various religions (Christian, Mormon, Jewish, and Muslim), races (mulatto, black, Asian, and white), and other cultural delineations were well represented. Not only was I exposed to cultural diversity early, but I was also in school before special-needs children had different classes, so I had classmates who had disabilities as well. The best part is that we never questioned what it meant to be different from each other. Honestly, we probably did not even realize that we were different. We saw each other as equals, no one more privileged than another. We saw our similarities rather than our differences. Our families all supported us being friends and encouraged us to learn about each other's families, religions, and cultures. The one negative to come out of this experience is likely my resistance to fully invest in racial and ethnic privilege, as it was not my reality. It was not until much later in my life that I realized how unusual this upbringing was.

Another group to which I belong is that I am a sexual abuse survivor. This identity factor is likely my most defining characteristic, as it influences most other aspects of my life. When I was 6-years-old, my eldest brother began sexually abusing me and continued for four years until he turned 18 and left. For many years, being a sexual abuse victim was my only defining trait. It took over my entire life. It caused fear, anger, hatred, indifference, detachment, and risk-taking behavior. I did not care about myself nor anyone else around me. I existed, and that was all. It took many years and the help of the right counselor to change my identity to a survivor. I lost the

victim mentality and the chip on my shoulder along with it, and that change has made all the difference. Of course, there are still aspects of my life clouded by my history (my sexual relationship with my husband being an example). However, achieving this change in identity showed me that with a little work, a victim mentality could change.

The one area I see as a privilege in my life is that I grew up in an upper, middle-class family. My father is a dentist who worked hard as a carpenter to put himself through dental school, so we were not necessarily pretentious, but we never had to go without either. It was not until junior high, when I moved to a new school district in a poverty-stricken county, that I was exposed to real poverty. Even the government-assisted part of my hometown is upscale with lovely apartment buildings and well-maintained yards. I suppose, to a point, my parents shielded me from it, not necessarily on purpose, but just as a matter of daily life. Or, perhaps being so young, I did not see it.

The vast majority of my friends were all from middle- to upper-middle-class families, grew up in nice houses, with plenty of food on the table. We never had to ration snacks or meals and bought name-brand items. Designer fashion was well within my parent's economic reach, and I had a walk-in closet bursting full of it. This part of my life has afforded me several opportunities that I would never have been able to have otherwise, such as family and school trips to Europe, going to the theater in New York City, and bi-annual trips to ski in Colorado. Not to mention the tens of thousands of dollars that I wasted on my first attempt at college. In a word, I was spoiled, and it showed, even when I tried to suppress it.

My parent's economic status was my first experience with discrimination. When I changed school districts, my schoolmates bullied, name-called, and downright hated me because of my parent's economic status. My parents tried to help, but as much as they would attempt to

inform and educate my aggressors, it failed miserably and, in some cases, only made it worse. I recently found an email that I had printed out and kept that called me a rich bitch with no awareness of reality. While harsh, I am sure that a degree of this is true. Not because I actively excluded anyone or thought that I was better than anyone, but because I was unaware of how privileged I was. I never had to worry about my next meal in a school where provided lunches were the only meal some would receive that day. I never had to worry about new shoes or clothes when some were dependent on the local clothing mission and, at times, had to put cardboard inserts in their shoes to cover the holes.

It was not until my junior or senior year that these differences hit home. A pair of brothers that I was friends with had not been to school in a couple of days. I was worried, so I drove out to check on them. It turns out their mom had run out of her insulin, and they were trying to take care of her with what little they had. Their basement apartment was filthy and stank of death. There was little to no healthy food in the house, let alone something that a person battling diabetic shock should eat. The boys were afraid to leave her alone to get anything, and in reality, they would not have been able to afford it anyway. The experience of watching this family face a life and death situation because of money was a colossal slap in the face. I may not have known much about finances or insurance but knew that if she did not get to a hospital, she was going to die. I also knew that (at the time) hospitals could not turn away someone in such a state. Ultimately, I may have made the wrong decision, possibly putting the family in further financial straits, but I could not just walk away.

So, we loaded her up in the backseat of my car, and I raced to Bloomington, praying that a police officer would pull me over to acquire an escort. We got her there in less than half the time it would have usually taken and got her checked in. The hospital felt they needed to admit

her, so I called my mom and explained what had happened. She immediately offered our guest rooms to the boys to stay until the hospital released their mom. It never occurred to me that we might not have the ability to help; I just knew the boys needed a safe place to go that could provide for them until their mom was back on her feet. They ended up staying for over two weeks. I never did hear if they came under more financial burden, but I suspect my parents may have anonymously helped their family.

Because of my abuse, I had been in and out of counseling since I was 12 years old, but it was not until this time that I first felt the call to become a counselor myself. I could see what the experience was doing to my friends and wanted to help, but I did not know where to start. So, I tried talking with them in the way my therapists spoke with me. I got them to open up about how their abject poverty affected their lives and even helped one brother recognize that he did not have to continue that way. This experience made me realize that I could make a difference in someone's life. It made me understand that I was already someone that people talked to, opened up to, and could affect change in their lives if I had the opportunity.

Another lesson learned in this new school district was that of blatant racism. My favorite teacher in high school was black. That may not seem like a big deal, but in a small county with 97% white ethnicity that was 99% redneck, it was. The things I saw her put up with and fight daily opened my eyes to the reality of racism. For most of the student population, she was a beloved teacher, but for a certain few, she was a racial slur who was a blight on the school. And they let her know about it. She had to have a lock on her door that only she and the administration had keys to open because she would come in, and her room would be trashed with racial slurs written, in permanent marker, on her whiteboard. When she put the lock on her door, they broke her windows to get through that way. She was spit on and degraded when walking

down the halls. To stop this abhorrent behavior, some of us would be her gopher during school hours, and then one of the football players would escort her to her car at the end of the day. Unfortunately, this did nothing to stop the racist beliefs of my schoolmates, but it did keep her safe. I think it was here that I learned that ignorance is at the heart of all of the isms, and the only thing that can change the maladjusted belief is education. Even then, there will always be bigots on every side of the race war. There will always be people that hate others who are not like them.

My second-largest cultural identifier is my ethnic culture, especially my Irish-American heritage. Early in college, I began investigating my mom's family history. We had recently acquired the family homestead and found a lot of exciting stuff in it, such as old letters, pictures, and tools. We had a vague knowledge of our ethnic heritage (British mutts), but through using genealogical software, we traced back many generations to see where we originated. My mother even took it one step farther and had a DNA test done. We were surprised to find that not only were we English, Welsh, and Irish, but French and German as well.

The big surprises came when exploring my father's side of the family. My favorite uncle had been designated the unofficial keeper of the family history, so he and I got together and started plugging in the information that he had uncovered over the years. Every time a leaf would pop-up in my software, my uncle would either confirm or deny the relationship. As we got further into it, we made two fascinating discoveries. My father's side of the family had always claimed that the German heritage was the most prominent ethnicity, and with names like Junken, Basey, and Swickard, it seemed highly likely. It is here that the first surprise cropped up, Junken was an Irish surname! And it belonged to the family who brought Presbyterianism to America in the late 1700s, the Protestant denomination to which my family still belongs.

The second of our surprises explained why that side of my family is more swarthy than we, by all rights, should be—in all seriousness, when my dad would roof houses, he would have to show below his tan line to gain admittance into restaurants during segregation. The family joke was that there was “something in the woodpile.” Well, our surprise not only verified this joke as fact, but we also found that we have Native American ancestry. My uncle corroborated this information with a picture that he had of one of our female ancestors, showing her wearing feathers in her hair. He said that he had always wondered why she was wearing feathers, and now he knew. We do not yet have tribe information, but I am still actively seeking it.

As much as this information strengthened and changed my ethnic identity, it also created an intolerance for anyone who plays the race card, especially to me. Yes, I am white, but you cannot know from the color of my skin what my ancestors had to endure. Yet, because I am white, I am supposed to lay down and take a tongue lashing from someone who has a chip on their shoulder triggered by my skin color. I will never see how that is fair or beneficial to race relations. Over the years, this trigger has extended to anyone who plays victim or entitlement cards to me. I am often irritated by people who choose to blame others for their lot in life, rather than taking ownership of it and taking steps to do something about it.

However, knowing this about myself, I am able to check my responses and make sure that they are appropriate for the situation, no matter how I am feeling on the inside. As a counselor, just knowing the intricacies of one’s personal stories does not do much outside of offering some self-awareness (Adichie, 2009). Like any awareness, it is how the knowledge is utilized to connect with other people that makes it crucial information (Jones Thomas & Schwarzbaum, 2017). For example, my experience with turning a victimization story into a survivor story may help others change their stories. Sometimes, just knowing that someone else

could do it is all the motivation a person needs to change their life. Other parts of my history, such as my experience helping someone in poverty or working my way through trauma, will allow me to recognize the signs.

At nearly 40 years old, I am reasonably confident that my cultural identity is set for at least the next decade. Short of when I married, not a lot has changed about my identity since my early college years, which is in alignment with Erickson's developmental stage of identity versus role confusion (Berk, 2018). When I married, I settled into working-class life. My husband and I live paycheck to paycheck and work hard to save money to do things. We will never have the wealth that my parents have, even with me as a counselor, but we are comfortable. My parents still help out if we ask, but we do not like to use that resource unless necessary. However, my views on helping others have not changed. My house, nor my wallet, are as big as they were when I lived with my parents, but I will still give someone the shirt off my back, offer a place to stay, or food to eat. This trait is the most vital part of my identity, and I do not see it changing anytime soon.

My views on social norms have not changed either. I have always been encouraged to be true to and think for myself, no matter what is trendy or popular at the time. This notion is very strongly seen in my rejection of what the media tries to spoon-feed me in favor of scholarly articles and research. There are also many things that I feel have trendy bandwagons that everyone jumps on, which I tend to reject—for example, calling everyone a narcissist if they have the least bit of self-love or disagree with your opinion about something. When I come across people who do this, I try to educate and encourage them to check the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) for the official diagnosis. This approach is how I handle most

situations where ignorance is a driving factor behind a trend. Since this is my reaction to the general public, at least part of my therapeutic formula will likely be psychoeducation.

In general, my interaction with most people, both in- and out-groups, is strictly professional. Outside of work, the few people that I do interact with are similar to me. The people I socially interact with the most are my husband, my parents, my brother, my sister-in-law, and my co-worker and closest friend. He is part of the LGBTQ+ community, so we are different sexual orientations, but his views on politics and life, in general, are very similar to mine. I suspect that my inner circle is not manufactured this way out of malice toward diversity, but because I live in a predominately white area. I would welcome some variety into my friend group but meeting new people at my age is difficult.

Professionally, I interact with people of different races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and disability status on a daily basis at work. As the office and customer service manager of a luxury jewelry store, these interactions should be expected in a diverse town. I deal with people from all different walks of life every day, and I have to be empathetic to every complaint and every whim. Fortunately, I have many years of customer service and working with people from other cultures under my belt from working in the apartment industry of my town. It is this experience that makes me believe that, as a counselor, I will be effective when working with clients from a different culture.

Typically, regardless of the interaction type, I get along well with anyone, no matter what their cultural background is. To me, everyone is a person who deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, and it is how people want to be treated. This is true for all people of every race, religion, color, ethnic background, sexual orientation, or national origin. As a counselor, it is crucial to be aware of cultural differences and respect how those differences may affect a

person's life experiences. These experiences make up their identity and dictate how they react to the world. Good or bad, negative experiences tend to create negative reactions, just as positive experiences tend to create positive reactions. It is our job, as counselors, to help the client alter their maladjusted reactions to the world around them. To do that, the client needs to know that they and their experiences are respected. Once the client is aware that they, as an individual with real experiences, matter, we can begin to earn their trust and respect. This give and take is essential to the therapeutic alliance and to the healing of the client.

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