



Can you please use the other door?: Maintaining authenticity

Keywords

Intersectionality; discrimination; prejudice; representation; authenticity; ethnicity; identity politics

Context

The context for this case plays out at the individual, organizational, and national levels between individuals from the United States and a country in the Middle East.

Case

Nora is someone you don't forget. She is always the one trying to pull people in from the fringe of a conversation. She is the first to ask your name and will be sure to remember it. She is always smiling.

However, Nora wasn't always smiling. She had a difficult childhood as a black girl in the southern part of the United States, a time when race relations were tense. She was targeted and often scared, but she had a very strong family. As she came to understand racial tensions, she fought hard for equality in a town where the remnants of segregation are still felt today. Her parents taught her to never be ashamed of who she was, to always be proud of where she came from, and to know that while she may not be able to change the hearts of some, she could certainly decide how she responded to the discrimination she was confronted with throughout her youth.

Nora graduated from high school and moved to Washington, DC. She began her professional career doing administrative work for a government agency. A woman in her office took a liking to Nora. She appreciated her gregarious and hardworking nature, and mentored Nora throughout her first few years in the city. In telling her own story, Nora will often mention her mentor as the single most important reason she is where she is today. Nora and her mentor often talked about what it was like to be a woman in a male dominated field. They shared stories about conversations they overheard and discussed ideas for how to best react when they heard or experienced something that troubled them. It was a different form of discrimination from her youth, but discrimination none the same.

Nora's identity as a person of color and as a woman were important to her. The intersection of these two identities was the place from where she made sense of the world. It was the lens through which she looked at current events, global crisis, and her own life. Her racial and gendered identities and the negative and positive ways she experienced both of these framed her view of the world, shaped her values, and molded her beliefs about equality and equity.

As Nora's career progressed and other opportunities became available, she took a position at the State Department, working as part of an outreach team to contribute to civil society initiatives abroad. Her responsibilities often took her overseas to collaborate with partners on development projects. She traveled throughout South and Central American, Europe, and Asia.



Then Nora had the opportunity to travel to the Middle East. She was not sure what to expect, but spent the weeks leading up to the trip learning as much as she could about the culture, language, people, and societal norms. She wanted her trip to be successful. And if things went well, she had the opportunity to be considered for a promotion.

As she aged, her professional identity became more and more important to Nora. In Washington, DC, a city known for its networking, Nora couldn't recall how many times she was asked, "What do you do?" It was an odd question the first time she heard it, wondering why the person didn't want to know more about her. But over time, she too started to view herself and her worth through the lens of others. She spent plenty of time trying to come up with the perfect answer, a blend of who she was as a person and what she did professionally, but inevitably would respond by providing a summary of her job description. It was, after all, her job and her career that she was most focused on.

When the wheels of the plane touched down in the Middle East and Nora looked around, she knew she was in for an adventure. This place was quite unlike any other she had experienced or seen before, yet as she spent time on the ground, she also came to understand many things were quite similar to the previous places she traveled. In fact, throughout the week, she was often simultaneously surprised at how similar and how different things were from the other projects she collaborated on with partners in different parts of the world. These comparisons dominated many of the conversations she had with her colleagues.

Yet, if you ask Nora about this very trip, this important project, and this pivotal moment in her life, she will recount a story filled with tension that lies at the intersection of her gendered, ethnic, and professional identities.

On the last day of the trip, a large ceremonious gathering was planned. As a myriad of cars arrived outside the venue and people from both governments were ushered in, one of the organizers walked up to Nora and politely, in a hushed voice, asked her to please use the other door, motioning with his hand to a small doorway on the side of the building. Nora froze.

She was taken aback and her feet wouldn't move. She was not able to contain the look of shock on her face. She harkened back to her upbringing and the segregation she experienced. She thought about how she and other women were often treated unfairly in the workplace.

But, she also thought about her role as representative of the United States and recalled the intercultural training she underwent when she started at State. Yet at this moment in time, she wasn't sure how to react or what to do. It seemed to Nora that whatever path she choose, she was denying a very salient aspect of her identity and betraying her core values.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What aspects of Nora's identities are salient for her in this situation?
- How would you describe the internal conflicts Nora must navigate to decide on a course of action?



- How does Nora maintain her authenticity while managing her obligations to her co-workers and hosts?
- How may Nora's decision and actions impact the project?
- Should Nora take any action upon returning to the United States?

Additional Resources

Additional recommended resources to explore the central themes in this case are available.

- Kimberly Crenshaw, [The Urgency of Intersectionality](#), TED Talk
- Frances Fukuyama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*
- Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald, *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*
- Claude Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*
- Andy Molinsky, *Global Dexterity: How to Adapt Your Behavior Across Cultures without Losing Yourself in the Process*

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