

Interactions with Diverse Groups: A Reflection on Cultural Competence and Counselor

Development

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The journey toward cultural competence as a mental health counselor is a deeply personal and ongoing process. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk on "The Danger of a Single Story" served as a compelling introduction to this topic. Adichie explains how people often form "single stories" about others—narrow, simplistic narratives that obscure the complexity and depth of individuals and groups. This idea resonated with me as I reflected on my own interactions with diverse groups and the misperceptions I have carried. The process of confronting these biases has been challenging but necessary for my growth as a counselor. This paper will explore my personal experiences with diverse populations, cultural identity development, and the lessons learned from this journey.

Acknowledging Single Stories and Implicit Bias

Adichie's (2009) concept of the single story compelled me to confront how I have engaged with diverse groups in the past. I have often prided myself on seeing similarities rather than differences between myself and others. While this approach allowed me to build rapport, I now recognize that it also allowed me to avoid acknowledging critical differences related to race, ethnicity, and cultural identity. Instead of addressing the social realities faced by marginalized groups, I unconsciously minimized the significance of their experiences. Adichie's talk exposed how I failed to recognize the broader structural inequalities and the unique lived experiences of people from diverse backgrounds.

Fear also played a role in my limited interactions with culturally diverse groups. I feared saying the wrong thing or unintentionally offending someone. This fear created a barrier to authentic engagement. An example of this is my experience with attempting to visit a mosque.

Although I reached out via email to local mosques, I failed to follow up with a phone call or an in-person visit. My hesitation was not rooted in fear of physical safety but in a fear of disrespecting the customs and practices of a culture I did not fully understand. I realize now that this hesitancy was an example of over-analysis and avoidance, which is counterproductive to my development as a culturally competent counselor.

Experiences at Fayetteville State University

One of my most formative experiences with cultural diversity occurred during my time at Fayetteville State University (FSU), a historically Black institution (HBCU) in North Carolina. I enrolled at FSU in 2003 while my husband was deployed to Afghanistan. At the time, I assumed that attending a university with a predominantly African American student body would have little impact on my daily experiences. However, from the first day, I became keenly aware of how being in the racial minority could affect my sense of belonging.

While no one explicitly singled me out, I felt a subtle discomfort that manifested in my physical posture and social behavior. I often demurred during group activities, agreeing with the dominant opinion even when I did not fully concur. Looking back, I regret this approach. By yielding to the group, I missed opportunities for genuine dialogue and self-assertion. This experience gave me a glimpse into the experience of people of color in predominantly white institutions. I now understand that being part of the “outgroup” can affect a person’s sense of confidence and self-efficacy. As Cross (1971) notes in his theory of racial identity development, the experience of being in an unfamiliar racial environment can trigger psychological responses that influence how one behaves and navigates the space.

Another eye-opening experience at FSU was the implicit bias of one of my professors. This professor frequently praised my work in class and occasionally made comments that bordered on disparaging toward my Black peers. I recall feeling conflicted—was I being genuinely recognized for my academic efforts, or was I benefiting from implicit racial bias? Cross's (1971) "pre-encounter" stage provides a lens for understanding this dynamic. It is possible that my professor, a Black woman, had internalized stereotypes about African American students' academic abilities and unconsciously favored me as a result. While I can only speculate, this experience highlighted how implicit bias can operate within marginalized groups themselves.

Current Interactions with Diverse Groups

My current experiences with diverse groups are shaped by the demographic realities of where I live and work. I reside on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington state, a predominantly white, older community. Most of my interactions with diverse groups occur at the school where I work. I interact with students from Mexico, Guam, Egypt, and Eastern Europe. Two students, Miley (from Egypt) and Maria (Mayan), stand out as examples of how cultural awareness shapes student support. Miley and Maria's experiences have illustrated how schools sometimes misattribute students' cultural identities. Both girls were mistakenly provided Spanish-speaking support, even though neither spoke Spanish. These errors reflect larger systemic challenges related to linguistic and cultural competence within educational institutions.

I have observed the ways these students navigate their social and academic worlds. Miley's preference for nonfiction animal books and Maria's repetitive reading of the same "Barbie" book suggest that both girls use books as tools for language acquisition. Watching their growth over time has given me a greater appreciation for the resourcefulness of immigrant

students. These experiences have deepened my awareness of cultural humility and the need for schools to provide accurate, culturally responsive services to multilingual students.

In my neighborhood, my relationships with two Filipino neighbors provide insight into how cultural identity influences one's experience of community life. One neighbor, D, is highly visible in the community, serving as a social organizer and member of the homeowners' association. The other, J, is much more reserved, often staying inside and avoiding social interaction. During one of our conversations, J confided in me that she experienced racism in our neighborhood. Her perspective contrasted sharply with D's visible presence in the community. This difference illustrates how individual coping strategies vary based on personal experiences with discrimination. It also highlights the mental and emotional toll of microaggressions, as noted by Sue et al. (2007).

Reflections on Cultural Identity

Through reflection, I recognize that my own racial/cultural identity is a work in progress. Cross's (1971) model of racial identity development suggests that White individuals may go through several stages before reaching autonomy. I see myself transitioning from the pseudo-independent stage to the autonomy stage. In the pseudo-independent stage, White individuals acknowledge racism but may still rely on intellectual understanding rather than direct experience to inform their views. Autonomy, on the other hand, is marked by active engagement with diverse groups and a willingness to confront privilege and bias.

While I understand the importance of active engagement, I also recognize areas where I still fall short. I do not actively seek out cross-racial interactions and am more comfortable in situations where I have past experience with certain groups. For example, I am comfortable interacting with Hispanic, Indian, and Asian populations, likely because of my exposure to these

groups during past employment. However, I feel less comfortable with African American individuals who use urban slang or individuals from Native American communities. I have no justification for this discomfort other than to acknowledge it as an internalized bias that I must address. Sue et al. (2007) emphasize the importance of confronting microaggressions, even those within us. I am committed to unlearning these biases and actively seeking opportunities to engage with a broader range of communities.

Lessons from Family Experiences

My family experiences have also played a significant role in shaping my understanding of cultural identity. My step-grandmother, Helga, was unapologetically racist despite having married both a Mexican man and an African American man. Her treatment of my younger sister, who had darker features, compared to her treatment of me was starkly different. This early exposure to racism within my own family has influenced how I approach conversations about race with my own children. I am committed to being open and honest with them, ensuring they understand the harm caused by racist language and stereotypes.

This course has prompted a deep reflection on my cultural identity, past experiences, and current engagement with diverse groups. While I initially believed that I treated all people equally, I now understand that this belief alone is insufficient. True multicultural competence requires active engagement with people from different cultural, racial, and ethnic groups. Drawing on Cross's (1971) stages of racial identity development, I acknowledge that I am still in the process of growth and transformation. Adichie's (2009) concept of the "single story" continues to inform my understanding of how narratives shape perceptions of diverse groups. As a future counselor, I will strive to remain mindful of my own biases, seek authentic engagement with diverse communities, and advocate for culturally competent care. Adopting the

multicultural counseling competencies outlined by Arredondo and Toporek (2004) will allow me to be a more effective, ethical, and empathetic practitioner.

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