

Cultural Self-Analysis

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Cultural identity is a compilation of different experiences, patterns, ideals, and values that a person holds. These factors encompass heritage, geography, race, religion, relationships and family structure and more. It is important to understand our cultural identities as counselors because they can impact the relationships we have with our clients. This paper will explore my own cultural identity so that I can understand how it may influence my work as a future counselor.

Race, Ethnicity, Geography, and National Origin

I grew up as the eldest daughter in a family of six in a suburb 30 minutes outside of Minneapolis, Minnesota. My lineage traces back to Swedish decent, although both sides having been in America for multiple generations. Both sets of my grandparents grew up in the Midwest and both of my parents were raised in Minnesota. Having also been born as a white female in the U.S. I have identified as a Caucasian American my whole life. The values that come to mind when I think of the Midwest are the priorities around work and family. These values intertwine with many of the Scandinavian roots that have heavily influenced Midwestern culture.

Due to overpopulation and a fractured economy, many Scandinavians immigrated to what would become Minnesota between 1851 and 1920. Scandinavians were used to the cold hard winters back in Europe, so it made them uniquely adapted and capable of surviving the fridged winters in Minnesota. It is joked that so many Scandinavians fell in love with our winters that the Twin Cities are now regarded as the unofficial capital of Norwegian America.

The Norwegian Culture especially stands out when traveling up to Northern Minnesota. There, Norwegian crafts, hobbies, and traditions are shared. Many of these hobbies and ways of life invoke a deep connection with nature. One of my favorite ways to connect with my

Norwegian heritage is through baking. In the cold Minnesota winters I love making Lapskaus, or meat and potato stew, and in the summers it is common to snack on Lutefisk, which is a form of dried whitefish. Although now I live in Utah, I will always carry my Midwestern roots with me. They fuel my love for the outdoors and the ability to make any house a home with a simple bowl of stew.

Religion and Spirituality

When I was a kid I grew up with religious parents outside of a church system. My dad grew up Lutheran and My mom grew up Catholic, together they melded their beliefs to create something of their own. My parents have always been people to pave their own way, and religion was no exception. The religion I grew up with had one God, a heaven, and a hell. This religion is made up of concrete values that do not adapt well to cultural shifts. Due to its rigidity, it can be hard as an adult to see eye to eye with my parents. The only way I have found to discuss things around religion is by concealing my views as to appear to be aligning with theirs, so that they will openly consider different ideas. Scandinavians have been known for being true to their ways, I think my parents have a bit of that in them, as I have a bit of it in me.

As an adult I would describe myself as spiritual, not believing in any one thing. This was a slow transformation that happened as I left my home state and spent more time on the west coast. During this time many of my friends were more free spirited and connected with spirituality through avenues like body work, tarot, and drugs. I never got into the drug scene but I enjoyed hearing stories of their experiences. Body work however did connect with me, and proved to help me through a difficult time of my life. Since then, I take a holistic approach to spirituality. It isn't one thing for me, and it can take many forms.

Gender and Sexuality

At birth the sex assigned to me was female which is still the gender I identify with today. I consider myself to be primarily heterosexual, which aligns with the value systems of the family I grew up in. My family is fairly close minded in the way that they view a person's sex and attraction, which are heavily tied to their religious beliefs. If I, or any of my siblings, were to come out as bisexual or gay to my parents it would have a huge negative impact, and we all know it. That being said, family dynamics around gender roles have always been relaxed. As kids my two sisters and I have always had the opportunities to defy traditional gender roles. Growing up we were all tom-boys, learned about money, and got jobs in whatever field appealed to us.

The culture in American has been built on the values and ideals of white men. As a result this has created inequality between men and women. These inequalities show up in the form of pay gaps, position placement, maternity leave, expectations, etc. In the work force especially, woman tend to be viewed as less capable, but there are many studies expressing that women have the capabilities and confidence, however face backlash and a high chance of being devalued when they advocate for themselves or their beliefs.

One way that woman can address the discrimination in the workforce is by learning how to negotiate and advocate for themselves. In America, many woman take the approach of advocating for themselves during the job interview process, which is socially acceptable for men but abnormal for woman. As a result this can leave the hiring team feeling defensive, or they may label the woman as "needy" or "unreasonable". To avoid this, woman need to put in the extra effort to learn how to negotiate within their role. They do this by learning to advocate from the perspective of a team. This is more effective because woman in American society are viewed

as the ones who are typically serving the family and being the care providers in America. When woman carry a team attitude into their negotiations, it can be an effective tool because it plays into their cultural role. That being said, they are still jumping through hoops to align with the role that society has given them in order to work toward change.

To close the gaps between gender discrimination in America we need to be reflecting on our own actions and educating others on how our roles influence society. For example, as woman, we can have a tendency to tear down other woman when they reach for success. Knowing this we can recognize our role and work to change that. Another example is as employers we can understand our own status and be open to giving people the tools they need without receiving their requests as unreasonable or a threat. These changes start with self-reflection, conversation, active listening, and an open mind.

Age and Accessibility

At the age of 30, I am the oldest out of four siblings. Being the oldest, I was given a lot of responsibility. I was expected to watch my younger siblings and model behavior for doing chores. My Mom has carried unresolved trauma from her childhood and interactions with her own mother, and as a result being the oldest female meant that I inadvertently triggered and absorbed many of those unresolved feelings. This often times put me into a position where I was apologizing for the sake of the family, had the feeling of protecting the family, and felt the need to appease those around me. This manifested in the relationships I made throughout my life and how I was treated by people. For example, I would put in a lot of effort to make those around me happy but get nothing in return.

As an adult I have learned how to recognize these patterns and behaviors and learned how to set my own boundaries. I think these experiences have helped me view everyone as an

individual person no matter where they are at. I do my best to treat younger people as capable learners and older generations as capable mentors. That being said, younger people can also be my mentors, especially with how fast technology has progressed. Older generations can be good friends too, giving a refreshing taste of connecting without technology. As a 30 year old who grew up without technology in my childhood and transitioned into technology during my adolescent years I view technology as a generational divide. Sometimes it feels like I know how to speak two different languages, which is something beautiful my generation holds being in the middle-years of life. I respect this about my peers, and I am inspired watching what the people my age are accomplishing as they enter their 30s.

Class and Socioeconomics

Growing up my family could be described as middleclass. This means that while we grew up “tight” on money, we still had the privilege of growing up in a house, affording food, and going on the occasional vacation. When I think of our home, we always had access to creative material like craft supplies and had our own yard to run around in. Our family did not have too many nice things, and my dad always said that it’s easier to get things done in a T-shirt than in a Suit.

After I left college, my dad started his own company which has since turned into a multi-million dollar company. While his lifestyle has gotten significantly cushier, he believes that it is important for his kids to make their own way with the exception of emergencies. The comfort of having a financial net to fall back on if I ever get into trouble has been one of the greatest privileges of my life- especially as someone who has a history of struggling with their health. This net means that if I am ever short on rent, need help with bills, or run out of money for

school, I will be able to maintain good standing. Although I rarely use his money, knowing it is there gives me freedom to make moves in my life that I might not choose to do otherwise.

I have always been on top of budgeting and I consider my dad taking the time to show me how as a huge privilege of my childhood. I fall into the category of low middle-class, and am currently working two jobs, one of which is fulltime, while going to grad school. I was not given any help by my parents for school so I have a substantial amount of student debt. That being said, I know that this is just a phase of my life, and know that I will have access to better income opportunities once I complete my masters.

My parents have always been passionate about politics, and after watching how their emotions around politics drove people I loved out of our lives, I developed a sour taste for it. My Dad grew up in a rural town around hard working farmers and my mom came from a long line of farmers as well. Their conservatism stems from a hard-working financial perspective that has been reinforced through-out generations in our family. I believe their political orientation has also stemmed from a place of privilege, and disconnect from cultures and perspectives outside of what they view as normal.

Although I grew up following my parent's beliefs, I have grown to appreciate the social issues that the democratic party advocates for. This transition happened when I got into the sport of slacklining, which took me different places and introduced me to people all over the world. Although I have never been one to pick sides but I value people who are willing to sit with me in the middle and have conversation about different perspectives. In my mind, my politics is adaptable and shifts over time based on what our country is facing.

Personal Relationships

I grew up in a suburb consisting primarily of middle class white people. My graduating class in High School had about 150 students, and out of them I could count the diverse individuals on one hand. That meant that there were a surplus of white people reinforcing one another's beliefs about themselves and their "non-existing" white privilege. For us, the only place you could see diversity was in the Twin Cities, which contained the majority of Minnesota's homeless population, had high crime rates, and run down neighborhoods. I can see how the people I grew up around associated these negatives with diverse communities, I can also see how their fear for their own livelihood and safety kept them from acknowledging the systems that kept it that way.

I grew up in a conservative family that viewed diversity, particularly the black and Samali populations, as problem communities. Growing up I was instilled with a large amount of fear surrounding their communities. Although, I will say that I always had a side of me that was curious and liked to figure things out for myself as well. I remember a teacher asking if anyone wanted to stay inside for recess and play games with the new girl, Julia, who was African American. Only a few of the other kids raised their hands, and I was selected to stay inside and play games with her. I remember really enjoying her company, but feeling shame because I felt like my family would not approve.

My parents have always prided themselves as working as a team and sharing common values. They both determined the social norms we grew up with and they both enforced them in their own different ways. As a kid, I typically knew when I had crossed a social norm because it would activate an episode of my Mom's or earn me a lecture from Dad about how we don't want to be (insert label) like the others. So they were typically enforced with blame and shame. My

parents thrive with control, and while our relationship and exchanges have improved as I have gotten older, they are still my reminder of why looking inward is the first step to creating change.

As a kid, I had no diverse friends that I was close to, but that has dramatically shifted as an adult. As an adult I have lots of diverse friends in many of my social groups. In some I am the only white person, which can feel intimidating at times. Regardless I love hearing their perspectives on society and listening to the experiences that they have had in their lives. I would not describe my friendships as with people in multicultural friendship different, as much as I would describe myself as feeling different. My feelings do not change in a bad way, I think that I just tend to feel more self-conscious, especially in groups where I am the minority. I love these friends and am present and relaxed like I would be in any other setting, but it is a little off-putting sometimes to be surrounded by people that have a different appearance than you.

Group Membership

The first time I truly became aware that I was apart of different groups that shaped my identity was when I was undergoing treatment for cancer at the Children's Hospital in Minneapolis. I was around 14 years-old, and while I was undergoing treatment I would overhear my parents conversations with doctors, and watch their reactions. I also had many diverse doctors and nurses, many of whom I was very fond of. These interactions sparked a lot of curiosity in me, and the cancer experience itself gave me a lot of love for life and the people in it. During this time I remember thinking that I did not want to be judgmental like my parents because I wanted to get to know people from all walks of life.

Getting a cancer diagnosis was a crash course for identity in itself because at an age where I was supposed to be discovering my own, I was given the label of cancer kid. For four years that was primarily what everyone in my life viewed me as. This process taught me that

identity is who you view yourself as, not what society sees you as. Although I get to pick who I am, being a part of the childhood cancer group has definitely influenced who I am today.

The second group that significantly shaped my identity has been the slackline community. I would describe people in that group as creative misfits in society, and for a while I embraced these characteristics in my core. There was a long period of time when I felt displaced from the values and rules I grew up in, and I found a safe place to explore that within the slackline community. It was in this community I made some of my closest friends from all walks of life. Value in this group included play, mindset, balance, and support. It was through this community that I was able to network my way out of Minnesota and live a life that feel more authentic to who I am.

Conclusion

The person I have become has been shaped by where I have come from and the relationships I have been surrounded with. As I have grown I have been able to reflect on my past experiences and interactions and use them as stepping stones to learn and grow as a person. I will always have ties to my Norwegian roots and Midwest culture and I can use the traditions and practices of them when I am feeling disconnected with who I am. I also recognize that the person I got to become was in part due to the privileges I have in this country. Recognizing these privileges is essential in my future work as a counselor because the people I will be counseling will have their own personal identities that are different than mine. Being aware of these differences will help me keep my own worldviews and bias in check during the counseling sessions so that I can show up to them with an open minded and curious perspective. This self-awareness will aid me in connecting with my clients and meeting them where they are at in their journey.