

Assignment 4.2: Personal-Cultural Analysis and Identity Development Paper

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Abstract

I currently define myself as a wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend, and student. I am embarrassed to say that I do not regularly interact with members of other diverse groups. But I am not afraid of interacting with people of different cultures, I am just introverted. In the deep south where I grew up, it was common for the races to only mix among themselves, and I was extremely young when I became aware of racism. The racial/cultural identity development model that currently best applies to me is the White Stages explained by Janet E. Helms (Helms, 1984). I really believe that I am in the Autonomy Stage of Helms' stages. I completely accept racial differences. People that are different from me are not better or worse, just different. I am not just defined by being White. I am also a woman and this has become extremely important to me (especially now that I am raising a daughter).

My parents raised my brothers and me to accept all people. I have introduced my parents to all kinds of friends: Black, Gay, Filipino, etc. They have always accepted them graciously and lovingly. My parents' acceptance and inclusion have had a huge impact on who I am today. I want to learn about all kinds of people and cultures, particularly cultures.

I worry about my ability to be an effective counselor because I have lived such a privileged life and have such a privileged background. I am especially concerned about implicit bias and microaggressions. One way I hope to work on my multicultural counseling competencies is through mindfulness. To be a good counselor to all kinds of people, I must be aware of the biases, stereotypes, and assumptions that influence my worldview.

Assignment 4.2: Personal-Cultural Analysis and Identity Development Paper

I currently define myself as a wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend, and student. I am a 48 years-old, heterosexual, White female. I have two white parents, and two older brothers. I grew up in a home where education was the number one priority. I graduated from the University of Michigan with a BA in Psychology in 1995, and I obtained a JD from Harvard Law School in 1998. I married my husband (a White man) in 1995, and we have one thirteen years-old daughter (born in 2008). I did not grow up in a religious house, and I have never been religious. I was born and raised in rural North Carolina, and I definitely consider myself “Southern” especially compared to my husband, who grew up in Michigan. My family was financially affluent, and money was not a huge concern. I definitely had advantages that other people do not...for example, we traveled a lot when I was a child and I went to boarding school for high school because my parents were convinced that I would receive a better education. All of this background has made me who I am today.

I am embarrassed to say that I do not regularly interact with members of other diverse groups. Honestly, I do not interact with many people on a daily basis. I am a full time mom (so I do not work outside the home), and we are not religious so we do not go to church. In actuality, I do not get out much. Even though I am a student, my school is held virtually (although with people from all across the country). Having said all of this, I am not afraid of interacting with people different from myself.

I love to travel and have traveled to France, Italy, Spain, Canada, Germany, Belgium, and Portugal. I am also excited about the cultural immersion assignments from this class. I have already attended a Jewish synagogue and a Hindu temple. I also plan on interviewing a close Black friend of mine that I keep in contact with (mostly via phone). I cannot wait to interview

her because we have never discussed race before. I know that seems strange, but I am so afraid of saying the wrong thing or offending her that I have never brought it up. I will say, although my husband and I are Caucasian, our daughter's three best friends at school are Indian. I do interact with the parents of her friends occasionally. I was fascinated to hear that one set of parents had an arranged marriage. This is not something I am accustomed to. They are wonderful people and have been wonderful to our daughter.

My lack of contact with other people is not a fear of contact, it is the product of being an extreme introvert. Of course, thinking about it now, the fact that I am a White woman may allow me to be more introverted, where a Black woman may not have that choice or privilege. A Black woman may need to be more friendly and outgoing in order to obtain the same opportunities that I have had. I had never considered my introversion a privilege, but it is worth thinking about.

I was not raised in a religious environment. This often makes it difficult for me to understand religious people, because I cannot relate to many of their experiences. I, however, have learned to accept people of all faiths. Maybe this comes from living in the South where Christianity plays such an important role in many families. Most people in my hometown went to church every Sunday (Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, etc). It was a huge part of their week, and I was forced to understand that early on (like when I wanted to have a sleepover on a Saturday night). It is also possible that my lack of spirituality allows me to be more open minded about people's various beliefs. I will need to work extra hard when I have a deeply religious client in my office to make sure I respond to their values and beliefs appropriately.

I grew up in a very privileged household. One experience that I have had (that most people have not) is that I went to boarding school for high school. As I mentioned, my parents wanted to give me the best education possible, and I believe that they succeeded. However,

there are many deficits that arose from my high school experience. My school was all girls, and I believe that it is important, especially for women, to learn to interact and compete with men. I was not given that opportunity during high school (and adolescence is such an important time for social interaction). Also, my high school was predominantly white (very different from my public school experience through eighth grade). Yes, there were girls from all races and ethnicities (my roommate was Filipino), but the student body was mostly white. Adolescence is a very important time developmentally. I do believe that I missed out on many cultural experiences because of my family's privilege and where I went to high school.

Growing up in rural North Carolina was also limiting in terms of my exposure to various races and cultures. There was only one Jewish family in the town where I grew up (Elizabethtown, NC). They had no children my age, so I knew very little about them...except that they were Jewish (that says a lot right there). Although I had a lot of exposure to Black people at school (I went to public school through eighth grade), our churches and extra-curricular activities (girls scouts, dance class, etc.) tended to be segregated. In the deep south where I grew up, it was common for the races to only mix among themselves. For example, there were definitely Black churches and White churches. I guess my parents could have tried to interact more with other races (signed me up for a Black Girl Scout troop), but I can see where that would have ostracized us from the community. It was not socially acceptable in Elizabethtown for me to be a part of a Black Girl Scout troop.

Due to being raised in a small southern town, I was extremely young when I became aware of racism; and I remember the exact moment it happened. I was in first grade. It was time for recess, and I was playing ball with my friend Lenora (who was African American). I had two friends in kindergarten named Carol and Cheryl (they were twins and were Caucasian like me).

Carol and Cheryl came up to me while I was playing with Lenora. They asked if I wanted to play with them, and I explained that I was playing ball with Lenora. I inquired whether they wanted to join us in playing ball. Immediately, they both said, “We are not allowed to play with Black people.” Luckily they were out of earshot of Lenora. My first grade self was speechless. As a first grader, I had never heard anything like this. I shrugged my shoulders and told them that maybe we could play together the next day. I remember (even at that young age) wondering if I should be embarrassed for even associating with Carol and Cheryl. It was a life changing experience for me. I will never forget it because I was not raised like that. I may not have been in Girl Scouts with Black girls, but there was never a problem with interacting with them at school or work.

I have come a long way since my first-grade experience with Carol and Cheryl. The racial/cultural identity development model that currently best applies to me is the White Stages explained by Janet E. Helms (Helms, 1984). According to Helms, Whites’ racial consciousness may occur via a progression through five stages: Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo-Independence, and Autonomy (Helms, 1984). I found these stages very complex and difficult to understand, but here is how I apply them to myself.

I know that I have passed the Contact stage because I am well aware that Black people exist (and have been for a long time). I went to public school with a lot of Black students who I interacted with on a daily basis. I was extremely interested in them, and they were interested in me. The Black girls always wanted to braid my hair, and I let them. Black people have always been part of my life. I acknowledge that I am White so I have definitely entered the Disintegration stage. In high school, as I learned more details about the civil rights movement, I definitely felt feelings of guilt and depression about being White. It did not help my guilt that I

attended a predominantly White boarding school. However, I never attempted to be Black or try to “protect” any of my Black friends. I have, however, had to stand up for my decision to associate with Blacks. I do not remember ever being hostile toward Blacks although I have often been more comfortable with my own racial group. Is this unjustified comfort my entrance into the Reintegration stage? I try not to stereotype people, and I am well aware of the guilt I used to feel (during high school) for being White. The Pseudo-Independent stage is characterized by an intellectual acceptance and curiosity about Blacks and Whites. I am definitely accepting of the fact that I am White, and I am always curious about different cultures and ethnicities. I do associate with Blacks, and I do not consider the ones I associate with “special” in some way. I have one very close Black friend and although we do not generally discuss race, I do not think of her as similar to White. I also worked at Wal-Mart as a cashier all through high school. Most of the employees were Black (including the store manager) so I have interacted with lots of Black people and accepted their various positions of power. I think it was extremely important for me to be exposed to Black people in powerful positions. I learned to respect authority, no matter what color they are. As a counselor, I will often be considered in a position of power. It is good that I had the experience of working at Wal-Mart so that I can relate to my minority clients. I really believe that I am in the Atonomy Stage of Helms’ stages. I completely accept racial differences. People that are different from me are not better or worse, just different. My one concern with claiming to be in this stage is that I do not actively seek opportunities for cross-racial interactions; however, I do not interact with a lot of people of any race. I am an introvert and do not communicate with tons of people.

I am not just defined by being White. I am also a woman, and this has become extremely important to me (especially now that I am raising a daughter). I have lived a very sheltered life.

I did not experience sexism until I graduated from law school and started working as a lawyer in a large law firm in Richmond, Virginia. If I wore a suit I was fine (although often called “Honey” and “Dear”). It was the days that I wore dresses that I would be asked by other lawyers and clients to get their coffee or make some copies. They assumed I was a secretary because I was not in a suit (although I always made sure I dressed professionally). It was frustrating to have worked so hard to be a lawyer and not be treated as such. I do not want my daughter to experience the sexism that I experienced. I have become a stronger woman because I want to be a strong role model for her no matter what she chooses to do in her future. I also think my experiences with sexism will make me a more empathetic counselor to minorities. I can totally relate to working hard to obtain a goal, but not be given the credit that you deserve. Everything happens for a reason...maybe that is why I had the sexist experiences that I did. They have made me a stronger mom and, hopefully, a more empathetic counselor.

I am also 48 years old. I lived through the Challenger explosion, experienced 9/11, and have friends who served in Desert Storm. I cannot deny that the world that I grew up in greatly impacted who I am today. My daughter has learned about 9/11 in school, but it will never be the same as experiencing it on live television. Our family was in Paris a few years ago when Notre Dame was on fire. My daughter still talks about it. That will probably impact her the way the Challenger explosion impacted my childhood.

I do not want to appear naïve, but my parents raised my brothers and me to accept all people. My mother grew up in Chicago, and my father lived in seventeen places before he turned sixteen. Even at an early age, they both experienced all types of people. Also, both of my parents owned their own businesses in a small southern town. My dad was a lawyer who represented all kinds of people. My mother was a real estate agent with her own business who

sold houses to everyone. I was often reminded that all types of people were putting food on our table each night. My parents needed clients of all races to help pay their bills. We also traveled a lot when I was growing up. We spent five weeks in Europe when I was nine years old, and we hosted two exchange students from Belgium during my childhood. Sharing your home with someone from across the ocean was exciting and opened my eyes to the many differences in people (even people who look like me). My parents used all of these experiences to teach my brothers and me to be kind, loving, and accepting people.

I have introduced my parents to all kinds of friends: Black, Gay, Filipino, etc. They have always accepted them graciously and lovingly. When I was in college, I had a friend who was from a large Greek family. She invited me home for a family dinner one night. It was amazing. Her family was huge and, of course, all spoke Greek (which I did not). They were so welcoming, accepting, and loving (and the food was excellent). My family is small in comparison, but they are just as accepting. My best friend in law school was a lesbian. She, her partner, and their son came to visit me when my parents and Grandmother were also visiting. It was a lovely visit, and everyone had fun. I believe my parents enjoy meeting my friends and being a part of my life (and everyone that includes).

My parents' acceptance and inclusion have had a huge impact on who I am today. I want to learn about all kinds of people and cultures, particularly cultures. My thirteen years-old daughter has already experienced France, Italy, and Canada. She would have traveled more by now if Covid had not hit. I want to pass along to my daughter the same love of people, culture, and travel that my parents passed down to me. All of this travel and exposure to different cultures will also help me in my future career as a counselor.

The main reason that I worry about my ability to be an effective counselor is because I have lived such a privileged life and have such a privileged background. Although I went to public school through eighth grade, have traveled quite a bit in Europe, and worked at Wal-Mart throughout high school, I still worry about my ability to connect with all kinds of people. I have never had to choose between medication and groceries. I have never had to tell my daughter we cannot afford to send her on a school trip. I have not been turned down from a job due to the color of my skin. Will this privilege influence the type of counselor I am? Will I be able to connect to people who are very different from me?

I am especially concerned about implicit biases and microaggressions. These two things are often invisible to the perpetrator (as well as the recipient) (Sue et al., 2007). I need to be very careful about microinvalidations (subtly excluding, negating and nullifying the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color) because so often the perpetrator is unaware of their transgression (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions can leave behind a substantial amount of damage and impair the therapeutic alliance. They can “lead to increased levels of racial anger, mistrust, and loss of self-esteem for persons of color; prevent White people from perceiving a different racial reality; and create impediments to harmonious race-relations” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 275). Microaggressions and biases place the victim in a catch-22: Did it really happen? Was it deliberate, and how should I respond? The scariest part is that I, as a counselor in a position of authority, may not even realize that it is happening.

One way I hope to work on my multicultural counseling competencies is through mindfulness (Ivers et al., 2016). To be a good counselor to all kinds of people, I must be aware of the biases, stereotypes, and assumptions that influence my worldview. I am currently in a Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) skills group where we focus a great deal on mindfulness.

We begin each session with an activity to practice this very important skill. Mindfulness is not a new concept to me, and I am trying to increase my mindfulness every day...especially describing my internal cognitive, emotional, and physical experiences into words (Ivers et al., 2016).

Because of DBT, I link being mindful to regulating my emotions. Being able to describe my internal experiences into words helps me regulate my emotions. I believe regulating my emotions allows me to be more empathetic. When my emotions are in check, I think less of myself and more of others. Thinking of others and trying to put myself into their shoes will make me more competent in multicultural counseling.

Multicultural counseling competencies are essential to being a good counselor. Being aware of my own attitudes and beliefs is the best place to start. When we know ourselves, we know our limitations and can strive to improve them. I believe that having a full understanding of ourselves increases our knowledge of others, and knowledge is power. This knowledge of ourselves and others increases our skills as a counselor, especially our culturally relevant skills (and that is the whole point of this paper).

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