Cultural Autobiography – Who Am I?

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**Abstract**

This autobiography explores the development of racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and religious identities of a current graduate student who wishes to bring awareness, make an impact, and educate Higher Education professionals and the campus community about what it means to have privilege. These six identities are analyzed and explained through childhood and adulthood experiences, in order to have a better understanding and be aware of privilege and marginalize areas.

**Racial Identity**

During my childhood, I was always regarded as “the white one” in the family. This always been a touchy subject to discuss among my family due to the fact that most of my family members are/identify as black. This always left me feeling conflicted, as I always have been in a constant fight between feeling guilty of receiving favoritism for being white versus trying to understand that it is not my fault of having such a privilege. I clearly remember realizing at an early stage in my life that individuals who identify as being racially white get preferential treatment within society and/or family based solely on their appearance. Growing up with the privilege of being “white” and seeing how poorly people of color were and still are treated based on the shade of their skin color makes me feel ashamed, disappointed, and guilty. Everyone experiences race differently but being racially white is having and being more privileged than others, even when it is not deserved or earned. Thus, I constantly find myself using the color card to my advantage because it helps me obtain almost whatever I want (e.g., entrance to places, network with successful people, etc.) and although being racially white makes me feel ashamed, I would never reject my racial group membership because it has opened many doors for me professionally and personally.

“In the context of the United States, this system clearly operates to the advantage of Whites and to the disadvantage of people of color” (Tatum, 2003, p. 7). Although I was born and raised in the Dominican Republic, the system in my country is similar to the one in the United States. People of color have more obstacles that they have to overcome in order to be successful and even to get somewhat of a fair treatment. “The differences in characteristics and attitudes between those Hispanics who call themselves white and those who identify as some other race, suggests they experience racial identity as a measure of belonging: feeling white seems to be a reflection of success and a sense of inclusion” (Rothenberg, 2008, p. 221). For me, being white means not having to think about being followed or watched when I walk around a store; it means not having to worry about being perceived as poor or even as criminal. Thus, being racially white influences my personal identity because I grew up with the idea that as a white individual I am treated as superior to people of color and as such, I need to use my influence to fight injustice while also take advantage of it.

Being white is a societal system and, as such, it must be openly and truthfully discussed. Although I came to terms with who I am with regards to my racial group membership, I still find myself in denial of having such privilege. This belief is why I sometimes blame my parents for not teaching me about the inequalities between races from a young age. Growing up with the idea of superiority and listening to others’ generalizations about who I was as a person was not easy. I found and still find myself constantly searching for an honest yet appropriate answer for people of color when they asked me, “Why do you think you are better than us?” “How can I know you truly want to be my friend and not take advantage of me?” Throughout the years, I learned to accept and be proud of being racially white and as such I am now selflessly looking for ways in which I can help people of color overcome and triumph.

**Ethnic Identity**

Having been born and semi-raised in the Dominican Republic to a Dominican mother and a Puerto Rican father has allowed me to become the cultured individual that I am today, as I have always lived my life while in sync with both of the aforementioned ethnicities. When my parents decided that our family would relocate to the United States, the thought of having to become accustomed to an entirely new and different lifestyle and culture seemed almost intimidating to my own sense of likeliness to succeed: to triumph in a country that was not my own, where Spanish was just a language spoken to communicate with your parents, and where I would be made fun of for my accent and mispronunciation were just some of the thoughts that flooded my mind at the tender age of 13, and these thoughts became my reality upon arriving to America.

Moving to a new country has taught me a lot about my ethnicity and myself. In particular, I have learned that my ethnicity is not limited to being Dominican and Puerto Rican, or to being a Latina: it encompasses so much more, like the foods and beverages that are native to the homelands of my parents and I (mangu, sancocho), the types of music we listen to and the different ways we dance to them (salsa, bachata, merengue, palos), the holidays we celebrate and how we go about celebrating them (Nochebuena, Semana Santa), and even our choices of clothing. Living in a different country helped me understand, accept and appreciate the fact that regardless of the differences that exist between ethnicities, we all have one thing in common: unity.

Growing up with a Puerto Rican father and a Dominican mother who encouraged me to embrace, be proud of, and celebrate my ethnicities is something that I will forever be grateful for. From a young age, I have been taught to appreciate and value my ethnicities and to have respect for not only my ethnicity, but for all ethnicities. I grew up watching and playing baseball with my siblings, dancing merengue and salsa, and traveling every year to Puerto Rico to not lose touch with my culture. Now that I am older, I still affirm my ethnic group membership by not losing touch with my heritage. Thankfully, I have always been an open-minded, positive, and happy individual and as such I have never rejected and/or let my ethnic group membership to negatively affect me. Still to this day, I struggle with my relatives and society’s opinions and stereotypes about being a part of two different ethnicities. I often find myself having to answer questions and comments such as, “do you consider yourself to be Puerto Rican or Dominican?”, “do you think salsa is better than merengue?” and “wow, I thought Dominicans and Puerto Ricans hated each other”. While these questions do not affect me negatively because I know better than to entertain ignorance, they sometimes make me question people’s thought process.

**Gender Identity**

Before we are even welcomed into the world, society has already put a title and expectations on our gender and gender identity. The doctor will say: “it’s a boy!” or “it’s a girl!”, and for some of us, this will define who we are, who we perceive, or aspire to be for the rest of our lives. I am female and I identify as one, but as a child, this came with expectations. I was always given verbal and physical cues as to what it meant to be a girl and how I was supposed to live up to it. There were set guidelines as to what colors to wear and which toys to play with. “Society teaches us that girls play with baking toys, dress-ups, Barbies, and dance, whereas boys play with tool-kits, balls, and play sports. Children who cross the boundaries of what is considered gender appropriate may be at heightened risk for rejection, harassment, discrimination, and abuse” (Gardner, 2015). In retrospect, my parents raised me according to this traditional way of thinking. I was always wearing dresses and chose pink as my favorite color, and I was spoiled with “girly” toys that were meant to represent my role in society: a kitchen set and baby dolls. Although as a child one is not able to see the harm in this, as an adult it is eye-opening and seems disheartening that children do not have any say in regards to their gender and therefore cannot form their own gender identity. Unfortunately, this may even carry on to teenaged years and even adulthood.

My gender identity has undoubtedly been a foundation in the development of my personal identity. Throughout my life, I have experience being judged not by who I am, but who others perceive me to be when they first meet me: a female. Admittedly, I too was guilty of this, but that was only until I learned to start asking people for their pronouns. I do consider myself a female and throughout the years I have affirmed society’s gender group membership by sticking to the norm of being “girly” and playing with hair and makeup, and liking the color pink. On the other hand, I have rejected the idea that women should stay at home, not play sports, cook, and clean; I believe there is a happy middle where one can be feminine and still explore outside of the norm. I oftentimes find myself having to prove and challenge generalizations about whether or not I am intelligent, capable, and not weak just because of my gender identity.

**Sexual Orientation Identity**

Even before I born, my parents had already made their minds up about what they were sure my sexual orientation was going to be: heterosexual. This is a common testament, especially within the Latino community, to the fact that “... sexual orientation is acknowledged to be something other than a ‘choice’ (Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002). My parents did not ever consider the possibility that their daughter might prefer or even identify sexually with the opposite sex, thus, they did not allow me the opportunity to explore my sexuality and get out of my comfort zone. On the other hand, growing up and identifying as a heterosexual female allowed me the opportunity to not be reprimanded or judged based on my sexual orientation identity. I grew up in a community where being a member of the LGBTQ community is still a sin and is heavily frowned upon. Identifying as heterosexual makes me feel secure because I do not have to hide and lie about who I am and what my preference is. Thus, my personal identity has been influenced by my sexual group membership because whether I like it or not, I know I am more privileged than others.

Although everyday of my life I affirm my sexual orientation identity by not denying it and being proud of it, I oftentimes encounter problems with others because they feel as if I am rejecting my sexual orientation group membership because I advocate for members of the LGBTQ community. I am a strong believer that individuals should be treated fairly and have equal rights, regardless of their sexual orientation. According to Stewart, Renn, and Brazelton (2015), it is hard to know student’s sexual orientation demographics due to Higher Education institutions not asking students to self-identify (p. 25-26). Due to this, I believe some generalizations others make about me because of my sexual group membership are that I do not understand or that I simply cannot empathize with others who are not heterosexual. Although those generalizations are heartbreaking to me, individuals that make them might be right. At the end of the day, there is only so much I can do and/or say. I am not part of the LGBTQ community, therefore, I might not be able to understand and put myself in their shoes.

**Social Class Identity**

I grew up in an upper-class family. My parents were usually working and because of this, I did not spend much time with them. I was fortunate to have everything I needed and much more, but I did not learn the value of money until I was a young adult. “Moreover, working-class and middle class parents in the United States provide different environments for their kids such that obedience rather than self-direction is emphasized by working-class parents more than middle-class parents” (Na, McDonough, Chan, & Park, 2016). At the age of 16, during my freshman year of college, my father was injured at work and it had a long-lasting consequence. He injured his spine and neck, and can no longer walk or stand for more than three to four minutes without hurting. As a result, he has developed depression and schizophrenia. From being an upper class family who lived as if we were on top of the world, we are now working class. “The burgeoning gap in income between working-class and middle-class Americans creates large differences in accessible resources” (Na et al., 2016). I started working at the age of 16 to support my parents and myself. Although my parents never mentioned anything, this was expected of me. The expectations now were for me to go to school, graduate, and to secure a career to help my family. I no longer was thinking for myself, instead I was thinking for the well-being of my parents.

I must admit that although I feel no resentment towards my parents for having me work so hard, I do sometimes feel jealous of others who can think and make decisions for themselves and not have to worry about making sure their family is okay before they are. Due to this, I often find myself analyzing the people I associate myself with. I have realized that I am closer to friends who are from the same economic status I am from, because we understand the value of money and we are able to put ourselves in each others shoes. From my experience, people who do not have the same social class identity as me tend to judge others based on what they can or cannot afford. Generalizations have been made about who I am as a person because when I go out I know how much I can or cannot spend, whereas some of my friends have no problem spending hundreds of dollars without even thinking twice. People may think I am cheap or boring, but I see it as being a responsible young adult. Moreover, I affirm my social class group membership by living paycheck to paycheck, but I reject and have not come to terms personally with being from a working class family because I know that sooner than later, I will be able to provide a better life for my parents and I and this is what keeps me moving and working hard to achieve my goals.

**Religious Identity**

I was baptized in a Catholic church before I was even conscious of the world around me. Unlike my cousins, I did not have the opportunity to choose which religion to be part of or if I even wanted to get baptized. My aunt waited until my cousins were old enough to make their own choice, which is something my parents did not do. Although I was baptized, I grew up in a non-religious household; I believed in God but did not worship him. As an adult, I consider myself to not be affiliated with any religion, but I still believe in the higher power that is God. I believe I do not have to attend church to affiliate myself with a religious organization to be a believer. Due to this, my personal identity has been affected because of the judgments and generalizations about who I am as a person.

“Based on existing research, the answer is very clear: … the more religious an individual is, the more intolerant he or she is likely to be” (Batson, 2013, p. 89). I oftentimes find myself lying about my religious identity because some individuals might not be understanding and/or open-minded about my choices. It is a constant battle between fighting who I am and the ideologies of others, especially of those who are followers and attend church. “The more one goes to church, the more likely one will be prejudiced against a variety of others” (Altemeyer, 2009, p. 18). From my experience, when someone is religious, they do not understand the reasons to why a person might or might not follow a specific religion. I have encountered individuals who have told me that I am going to hell if I do not start attending church and others who believe I am committing a sin by not doing so. Thus, making me reframe, reject, and deny/lie about my religious identity just so I do not encounter the negativity of others, making me not be able to affirm and come to terms in a personal and social level with who I am with respect to my religious group membership.

**Integrative Awareness: How and Where do I Enter?**

When I used to tell students and professionals that I was taking a diversity issues course, they used to second-guess and tell me things like, “you cannot learn diversity, you have to experience it”, “that class is not going to help you in the future”, or “you need to learn about diversity?” Before taking this course, I almost believed these individuals, but after listening, learning, and understanding some of the issues within an institution, professionals, and students it helped me understand that I have my own biases when it comes to diversity. “... students enrolled in a diversity course reported the lowest prejudice against Blacks whereas those never enrolled exhibited the highest prejudice” (Case, 2016). Having taken this course allowed me the opportunity to be knowledgeable about diversity as a whole, know my biases, try to advocate for others if and when necessary, and to try to work on being the best version of myself that I can be.

Being a non-religious, heterosexual, working-class minority, and female allows me the opportunity to lend a helping hand to students who may feel underrepresented in the campus community. Students of color will be able to relate because they will see someone who looks or comes from a marginalized community just like them in a position of “power”, and this is positive representation. Not only this, but it will give them a sense of pride in knowing that someone with the odds against them did it, so why not them. I will also be able to bring awareness to students, professionals, and the outside community who do not understand the power of privilege and the impacts they can have and make with it. We need to teach others and help them comprehend how privilege works before we can make them understand how diversity works. On the contrary, identifying myself as non-religious, heterosexual, working class, minority, and a female can affect my performance as a helping person because there is so much a person of color can do. Sometimes I might not be able to help a person, if I do not have an ally who is a white colleague that can vouch for the student and/or myself. Thus, students who are aware of this system may feel as if they do not have anyone that can help them succeed and make a change around the campus community.

Moreover, having different identities has allowed me to see how these interrelate and change across context. As such, racial and ethnic identity interrelate because as individuals we often assume people’s race and ethnicity based on their skin color, traits, and sometimes even stereotypes. Being a white Dominican and Puerto Rican female always has a negative impact at home and even at work. All my life I have encountered people’s insensitive comments such as, “If you are Dominican, how are you so light?” “If you are Puerto Rican, why is your hair curly?” Although my gender and sexual orientation are always constant across various locations such as at a job interview and work, these can have an impact. As a woman, I have to be able to adjust myself to the views of males and/or other females who feel entitled. Some men believe just because I am a woman, I am not capable of being successful at a workplace or not intelligent enough to complete a task.

When it comes to my identifying as working class it has a positive and negative connotation. When I go out of my hometown, people assume and know I do not belong there. Whereas, when I tell some professionals at school about where I am from and how I got to where I am now, it seems as a positive and good change. My last identity, religious, changes across context depending on how religious the town and/or the institution is. At the end of the day, I try not to talk about religion because it is a sensitive and uncomfortable topic to discuss.

By looking at my six group identities, one can infer for themselves the areas of which I am or perceived to be privileged or not. By using Hays (2001) Model of Cultural assessment, I was able to compare my privileges and marginalized identities and how these impact my personal power, knowledge and the campus community:

Age and generational influences: 22 years old; second-generation immigrant; millennial

\*Developmental disabilities: No developmental disability

\*Disabilities acquire later in life: No disabilities acquired later in life

Religion and spiritual orientation: Non-religious

Ethnic and racial identity: White – Dominican and Puerto Rican; White

Socioeconomic status: Working-class

\*Sexual orientation: Heterosexual

Indigenous heritage: African, Spaniard, and native Taino

National origin: Dominican Republic

Gender: Female

Out of the six identities discussed throughout this paper, my social class identity provides me with the most personal power. Having to live paycheck to paycheck is not the life I want for my parents and I. There is a lot more I want to achieve and knowing that at the age of 22 I have been able to take care of my parents while attending graduate school, gives me a sense of hope. Being from a working class family does not determine who I am and what I am capable of doing and achieving, it just helps me work harder to end the cycle of poverty. When it comes to the identity that provides me with the least personal power, it is my religious identity. I grew up praying and believing in God, but not attending church and this provides does not define who I am nor does it makes me more or less powerful.

Out of the six identities discussed throughout this paper my religious identity, non-religious, is the one I am least knowledgeable about and comfortable with. Due to identifying as non-religious, most individuals judge my character as a person. These individuals do not understand or are not even interested to know the reasons as to why I identify myself as such. On the other hand, I believe the reason to why I identify as such is because I am not knowledgeable about what it means to be Catholic and I never had someone genuinely talk to me about church, I was just expected to know. Throughout the years all I kept hearing about was how most priests were abusing innocent individuals and it made me not want to socialize myself with an specific religion. At this point in my life, I came to terms with who I am as a person but I still try to evade the topic of religion and although it does not personally affect me, it offends some. Thus, I choose not to discuss and bring up this topic up for discussion.

In looking at my privileged and marginalized identities, these may impact the way the students, colleagues, and even parents may see me. White privilege has a tremendous impact in Higher Education. As a Latina woman, sometimes I might have to either find a white colleague that can forward the message I am trying to convey and/or share and let him/her take my ideas to in order to see positive results. At the end of the day, my privilege and marginalize identities do not make much of a difference, if the colleagues and students are not open to professionals who do not mirror them. Although one of my goals as a future Higher Education professional is to be a guide, mentor, and an inspiration for students, there is so much one can do when not in a position of power. Professionals should allow themselves to be more open-minded, be aware of privilege, and try to have a workspace and campus community where minority individuals feel accepted and welcomed.

Higher Education is a career that will allow me to help others achieve and succeed despite the odds against them. I do know there is still a lot of growing for me to do both personally and professionally, but I will never stop trying to better and educate myself. Thus, my racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and religious identities will not determine my success in life. These are only identities that determine who I am, not my abilities and ambitions. I just have to keep moving forward, challenge individuals’ ideologies, educate others about privilege and diversity, take responsibility for my actions and never apologize for who I am as a person.

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