Covering-up in San Antonio: How I Wished I Had a Hispanic Last Name

Sarah Abdin

Sarah Abdin grew up in San Antonio, Texas, the daughter of an Arabic father and Latina mother. Although her last name is Arabic, Sarah barely knew her father growing up and was raised by her mother and other members of her mother’s family. As a result, Sarah always thought of herself as “Hispanic.” After the terrorist attacks hit New York and Washington, DC in September 2001, she was forced to confront anti-Arab discrimination for the first time in her life.

Growing up, I always knew that there was something different about me compared to most people that I encountered. Not only did I feel different from my friends, but I felt different from my family as well. This “set-apart” feeling came from the fact that I am of mixed race, specifically Hispanic and Arabic. However, I did not fully understand how my racial identity affected me in many, if not all, aspects of my life. Not until I was older did I gain a better understanding of what my racial identity means to me and what it may even mean to others.

The first major difference that I noticed in myself was that of my family setup. I am an only child, and I grew up in a single parent home. My entire life, it has just been my mother and I. Not only did I grow up living with my mother, but I actually don’t really know my father. I have met him before, and I had contact with him growing up, but only very sparingly. I do not have any kind of relationship with him, and I do talk to him at all anymore. Some of my cousins from my mother’s side of my family grew up in very similar situations, so this family dynamic was normal to me. I didn’t realize that it is actually quite different from what society defines as a “normal” family. However, for a Latino family, not knowing your father is quite unusual. Hispanic families are usually very close to one another and the father figure is the most important one. The father is the head of the household and it is a very bad thing for this leader to be absent within a family. There is an essence of “machismo” that Latino fathers possess. This is often seen as a negative thing in U.S. popular culture, though. “Machismo” is usually thought of as a very aggressive and controlling way of heading a household and raising children, but what most non-Hispanics do not realize is that this behavior stems from a very deep love. What these macho fathers are striving to do is provide for their families and this is how they show that they care. They simply become extremely protective. Those not part of this culture view it as domineering and authoritarian (Mayo, 1997). Even though this “machismo” father-identity is prevalent among
Covering-up in San Antonio

Hispanic families, I did not grow up with a father, so I did not experience it in the same way that most Hispanic children do. However, I still received this overprotective yet extremely loving kind of childhood. Since my father was not around, my mother assumed the role of not only being my mother but being my father as well. My extended family, such as my grandmother and my aunt, have also played a major part in my upbringing and were just as protective of me as my mother, and all of them still are to this day. Even though my father was not around, we are still of Hispanic descent and those family ideas are still cemented in us through our culture and the upbringing of older generations. When someone is not making her full contribution, the rest of the family adjusts so that everyone is provided with all the support they need. I have seen this shift happen within my family more times than I can count, especially for me. One example of this shift that I remember very clearly while growing up was how other family members would attend different programs that I participated in. My mother works full time, and if there was every any program at school that children’s parents would attend, my mother would try her hardest to go, but sometimes she could not take off from work. In those cases, my aunt would often attend, bring me goodies, and just be there to support me. My family took great measures to make sure that I was not that one student without any family there to cheer me on. They realized that being without a father affected me in many ways that I didn’t even realize at the time. Everything they did served to tell me that, regardless of my less than ideal parental situation, they were there for me whether it was something as big as financial help or something as small as watching a school play. However, even though my family adjusted to provide me with support, trying to replace a Hispanic father figure, my father is actually not Hispanic. This macho male figure was never part of the equation of my life. My father is Arabic. This multiracial facet of my identity actually further impacts how I view myself and certain aspects of my life.

Although I have the heritage of two distinctly different ethnicities and could very easily identify with both, I have only come to identify strongly with one of those ethnicities. The heritage that I mostly identify with is my Hispanic heritage. It’s not that I do not want to connect with my Arabic roots or for some reason view my Hispanic background as better; this is simply due to the fact that I do not know my father and was never given the opportunity to be exposed to the Arabic part of my background. My father is the only person in my life who could have really introduced me to Arabic culture, but since he was never around, I never developed a strong connection to it. I have always been with my mother and her side of the family, so it makes sense that I solely identify with that ethnic part of my background. It is in this way that the concept of ethnic/race socialization comes into play in my life. This is the way in which families will teach their kids about what exactly their ethnic and racial identity means socially. It was inevitable for me to only be exposed to my Hispanic heritage because my father and his family were not around at all, and, since my mother is Hispanic, that was the part of my heritage that I was surrounded by. My mother never actively taught me about my Hispanic heritage or made an effort to not teach me about my Middle Eastern roots—she simply went about her life doing what she knows, and I learned through observation. My everyday life experiences are what socialized me ethnically and racially. However, my mother is very open with me, and if I ever have any questions about my father, she will answer them honestly. But since she is not Arabic, there is only so much that she can tell me. There is no doubt that if I lived with both my parents or at least had each of them actively involved in my life, I would have substantially more knowledge about the other half of my heritage. The only thing that my mother ever did to teach me more about my Hispanic background was to send me to a predominantly Hispanic middle school. The student population was about 99% Hispanic, and the majority of the
students had family in Mexico. These students were also from very low income families, had been kicked out of previous schools, and were mostly receiving government assistance of some sort. She knew that although we are Hispanic, we live more comfortably and have a somewhat better socioeconomic status than most other Hispanics. One thing she said to me was that she wanted me to “learn about my Hispanic side.” She wanted me to see how she lived when she was growing up. This was her only explicit effort to socialize me with my Hispanic heritage (Brown et. al 2007). The most exposure that I ever had with my Arabic heritage was receiving a few necklaces with Arabic symbols that my father sent me. I do not know him and I do not know any of his family. However, even though I don’t know anything about this part of my background, I do feel a slight connection to it. My Arabic heritage will always be part of me, no matter how strong or weak my connection with it is, so I naturally have a curiosity about this part of my background. As I grew older and met more people of Arabic descent, I began to feel that I could relate to them in some way, even though it was small. I felt more drawn to them and wanted to know what their culture was like. It was my way of learning about my dad and that entire half of my background that has always remained a mystery to me.

With the ethnic/race socialization that I had experienced, another part of my life had become influenced due to my ethnic identity. After going to middle school with predominantly Hispanic students who were constantly struggling financially and realizing exactly how much my mother and her siblings went through while they were growing up, I developed a newfound motivation to succeed academically. I had always been a good student, making straight As, but my good work was mainly done so I wouldn’t get in trouble for making bad grades. After seeing how others with whom I identified racially struggled just because they didn’t try very hard, I made a decision to continue to do well in an effort to not fall into that category of low income Hispanics. My mother’s father was killed when she was only seven, so she grew up in a single-parent home with four siblings. She made the same decision to make something of herself and offer me more than she had while growing up. My mother did better than her mother, I want to do better than my mother, and I want my children to do better than me. The mindset that drives me towards academic success can be identified as a Minority Racial-Ethnic Self-Schema. This kind of self-schema is one that “emphasizes the need to overcome obstacles to fully engage with broader society” (Altschul, Oyserman, and Bybee 2008). This means that I don’t let all of the obstacles that I encounter in my life due to my ethnicity, such as lower socioeconomic status, hold me back. Although they may make my life a little harder, I know that if I just work hard and stay focused I can overcome those obstacles. I do not give in to the negative stereotypes associated with my race; Instead, I am pushing through them. My way of thinking is that, if I want a more prominent place within society instead of being viewed with the negative stereotypes of my race, I have to stay focused on school. As a result, I will gain academic success and an eventual better life for myself and my future family (Altschul, 2008). I did not develop this way of thinking just from going to a mostly Hispanic middle school. Although that experience did greatly impact me and really cemented in my mind what kind of life I wanted to avoid, my family constantly encouraged me with my studies.

My family’s encouragement of academic success was another factor that really pushed me to strive to do better. I can recall many different times when family members would ask me about school and would subsequently go into how important it is to stay focused. They always told me how much they regretted not continuing with school and that they didn’t want me to give up. Watching different family members struggle here and there and seeing their frustration at not having complete financial freedom only reiterated the importance of school for me. Studies have
been conducted, mainly with minority groups, that have found a positive relationship between family attitudes about school and the academic success of a child. The more positive a child’s family is about school and the more they encourage the child, the more effort the child puts into their academics. This relationship grows even stronger when a child’s parents have a lower amount of education than the child. The reason for this is that the more academic success the child gains, the more successful she will be in life, and the more she can help out her family (Esparza and Sanchez 2008). I fit perfectly into this category since my family is not only extremely positive about my academics, but also because I am a first generation college student as well. Their modest academic backgrounds have motivated me to do something more for not just myself but for them as well. Watching my mother and the rest of my family work hard to provide for me, sacrificing so many things just so I can have what I need, has contributed to my determined way of thinking about my academic success. One huge payoff for me and my entire family is the scholarship that I received to attend college. It is a full scholarship that pays for my schooling for up to ten years. My family was just as excited as I was when I received it. All the encouragement that they gave me that pushed me to do well in school was rewarded in a very substantial way. And the encouragement has only gotten stronger since I received the scholarship. I can recall numerous conversations with my mother about how, when I’m a successful adult, I will buy her a brand new house or how my house will be so big that she’ll live with me and my family and have an entire wing to herself. My success is their success. This is a strong way of thinking among Hispanic families. We all help each other out in every way that we can. My family has always been there for me and has supported me in everything, especially since there was never a father figure in my life. The least that I can do is make the most of my life and share my success with them.

Even to this day my family still supports me in many ways, whether it is academically, financially, or emotionally. Although I have grown up only knowing and identifying with my Hispanic heritage, my family realizes that the fact that I am of mixed race brings in a lot of different issues for me that they never had to face themselves. It is in this way that covering has played a role in my life. Covering is a social mechanism used by minorities to safeguard themselves against social stigma. It involves downplaying or “covering up” some aspect of your identity to avoid discrimination of some sort. The part of my identity that I have downplayed throughout my life is my Arabic heritage. Even though I am not ashamed of this background, I have, to a certain extent, covered up this part of myself (Yoshino, 2006). I actually feel quite unique with my particular racial mixture and like the fact that I am of more than one race. However, there are many different ways in which I have covered, and there are different reasons why I do this. One way that I have done this is with the pronunciation of my last name. The emphasis should be on the last part of my name, but most people incorrectly place the emphasis on the first part. Although it is an honest mistake for people to mispronounce my last name, I often do not correct them, and there have been many more times where I’ve initially introduced myself to someone with the incorrect pronunciation. I have justified this to myself with the argument that it is simply easier to mispronounce my name because that is how many people say it anyway. Nevertheless, as I delve deeper into the exact reason why I do not correct others and in a way encourage them to say my name wrong, I have come to realize that it goes back to the fact that I do not identify with that part of my background. My Arabic heritage has never been a significant part of my life and I want people to view me as Hispanic. The incorrect pronunciation makes my last name sound less Arabic as well, only further covering up that part of my background (Yoshino 2006). There have been a number of times where I have explicitly told my mother and friends that I wish I had a Hispanic last name. That is the ethno-racial identity that I
connect with, so I want my actual name to be consistent with it. But I do not have any control over this.

Although I have covered in this way my entire life, it was something that, until a certain point, I was not very aware of. This changed when the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001 occurred. It was at this time that people began to form extremely negative attitudes towards those of Middle Eastern descent. Stories of Middle Eastern people experiencing hate crimes when they had never experienced such explicit discrimination before began to appear on the news. Suddenly Arabic people were hated and feared all at the same time. Regardless of all this happening, I didn’t feel affected by it since I view myself as Hispanic. I only viewed all these hate crimes as acts of ignorance since the people committing the crimes were generalizing to an extreme. Just because someone is Arabic does not mean she or he is a terrorist, and I could not understand why people didn’t realize that. Not until my grandmother mentioned something to me did I begin to realize that I could very easily be categorized by others as one of these radical Middle Easterners. A few weeks after September 11th, I was visiting my grandmother when she suddenly blurted out, “Sarah, don’t tell anyone that you’re Arabic.” When I asked her why, she brought up all the hate crimes she saw on the news, which were the same news stories I saw that did not originally make me afraid for my own well-being. Seeing the worry in her eyes and hearing it in her voice brought to my attention how directly these terrorist attacks affected me. This was the first time that I had ever felt somewhat afraid to be Arabic. It was at this point that I began to actively cover up my Arabic heritage (Yoshino 2006). I did not want to be treated differently because of my heritage, so I made a conscious effort to downplay my Arabic background. In the weeks following September 11th, I noticed that more people began to notice my last name and would flat out ask if it was Arabic. Even friends that already knew that I am Arabic began to ask me. It seemed as if they were double-checking if I was Arabic or not. Whenever I would encounter this, I would confirm the Arabic assumptions but then quickly say that I only know my mom and she’s Hispanic so that’s what I identified as. This was an acceptable answer for most people, and any apprehensions they had about me would disappear with my “I’m actually Hispanic” statement. I did not like feeling this uneasiness that I had never felt before due to my Arabic background, but it was something that I accepted and just dealt with. All I wanted to do was avoid being seen as one of those “radical terrorists”, and I didn’t want to be treated differently. Although the chaos from the events of September 11th has significantly decreased, I will probably always cover to an extent from fear of being clumped with a group of radical people that I know nothing about.

All of these events that have taken place in my life have shaped me into who I am. Applying these concepts of family dynamic, ethnic/race socialization, racial-ethnic self-schemas, familial attitudes, and covering have helped me understand not just my behavior, but also my family’s and society’s behaviors. However, no matter how stigmatized my specific ethnicity may be, I will always be proud of my background. Regardless of how strongly I may identify with it, all parts of my heritage will forever be part of me, and I will never forget that.
About the author

My name is Sarah Abdin and I am a Sociology major and Psychology minor at Trinity University. I am from San Antonio, Texas and wrote this essay during my junior year. The class this essay was for has been one of my favorite classes during my college education. It forced me to think critically about all kinds of ethno-racial issues affecting society today and I learned a great deal. Along with learning more about these issues on a nation-wide level, I learned how they affect me personally and I was able to examine my experiences on a much deeper level.

References


Battling an Imposed Identity: The Life of a TCK Perceived as “Another American Girl”

Gabriela Alvarado

Gabriela Alvarado grew up in several different Latin American countries as her father was transferred from one branch to another of an international company. Gabriela’s father is Costa Rican and her mother is Mexican. Gabriela herself, however, is a U.S. citizen by birth, although she never lived in the United States until she moved to San Antonio to attend Trinity. In her essay, she reflects on her identity as a “third culture kid” (TCK) and what it has meant for her to be a U.S. citizen child of non-citizen parents.

My life has been marked by movement, so much that my family jokes that the closest place my brother and I have to a home is an airplane. While my first cry echoed across the white halls of Valley Baptist Medical Center, located in Harlingen, Texas, this city remained for a long time only one of the many trifling details of my birth; for me, Harlingen did not hold much significance in my perception of my identity. However, while I may have never identified with my country of birth, I have found that my language, education, and primary form of identification, have deemed me an “American” in the eyes of the United States, provoking an identity crisis within me. In this paper I recount how my experiences moving from country to country have given me first hand insight into the phenomenon of “Third Culture Kids”. Additionally, looking at two examples from my life, I am able to illustrate how symbolic capital and cultural capital inform differing perceptions of identity to US Authority figures and to me. While my perception of my identity is informed by the mixture of cultures and experiences that I have attained in a number of different countries, American authorities have projected a national identity onto me with which I do not identify, giving me the privileges and treatment that my parents will never experience.

My life as a “TCK”

By the age of six, I had already lived in three different countries besides the United States: Costa Rica, Brazil, and Mexico, where I first learned to speak Spanish and Portuguese, before ever mouthing a word of English. The movement in my life, however, did not stop there, as it was driven by the invisible force of the international corporate world, shaping my identity as the economy saw fit. After four years in Mexico, my family climbed back on the plane of change to Venezuela, where we stayed for eight years. Finally, I graduated from high school in Costa Rica, our final destination as a family before my own trip back to Texas, the place where my life originally began.
Much to my surprise, many social scientists have written about my type of life, as it is officially classified as the life of a TCK, a relatively new acronym standing for “Third Culture Kids.” The term, coined by researcher Ruth Hill Useem, refers to the lives of children who have spent a significant amount of time in one or more culture(s) other than the one in which they were born, “integrating elements of those cultures and their own birth culture into a third culture” (Eakin 1998:18). This lifestyle is driven by the TCK’s parents’ occupations, many of which are associated with international business, missionary work, or the military (Pollock and Van Reken 1999). Consequently, our TCK identity is constructed out of an amalgamation of different cultures, always leaving us with a question mark whenever we are asked to define a single national identity. The fact is we don’t have one!

While initially the lifestyle of a “TCK” seems romantic and adventurous, it is inevitable that in a world where nationality and citizenship remain crucial to the perception of identity, TCKs are doomed to struggle with self-identification. After all, even if social scientists brilliantly categorize us as “global nomads,” this term does not suffice as a way for international bureaucratic processes to identify and classify an individual; there is a need for a form of identification to prove essentially who we are by seeing where we come from (Eakin 1998; Wang, 2004). For a TCK, this proves to be ultimately complicating as there does not exist a passport communicating a national identity composed out of five plus countries. As a result, most of us use primarily one passport, in my case, the American, when interacting in these types of situations in the United States of America. By analyzing the following encounter my father and I had with a U.S. Border Patrol officer, one can notice, however, that this booklet proves to be more symbolic than a simple document used in bureaucratic transactions; a passport serves as symbol of identity.

Encountering Authority in the US/Mexican Border: Father’s Experience

On one of our many trips to visit family in Brownsville, Texas, I remember sitting in my mother’s old Cutlass as we approached the guard on the bridge connecting Matamoros, Mexico and Brownsville, Texas. My older brother, who never missed an opportunity to bug his thirteen year-old sister, pinched my leg and did not wait for long to hear the glorious sounds of my cries and whines. In one swift movement, my father turned around and scolded, “Enough! Behave. Hold out your passports and do not say another word.” The shock of the sound of his voice completely numbed my pain and left me wondering why my father was especially serious as we approached the young patrol man who did not seem especially scary to me. I glanced down at my two booklets, one green and the other blue. I remember asking my father faintly, “which one?” “The blue one. The American one,” he responded quickly, putting my brother’s and my green one away. I did as I was told and did not think about it. When we approached the inspector, I noticed his constant questioning of my father. “What are you doing here, sir? Why would a Central American ever want to enter the United States, especially through Brownsville?” My father answered slowly with very little expression on his face; still he expressed a sense of uneasiness. He glanced down, and that’s when it hit me—my father, the epitome of strength for me, was put down in this scenario. I didn’t understand how or why this occurred. We passed the bridge and my father said softly, “for a moment, I was sure he was going to stop us and direct us to the inspection room.” For once, I realized that the times my father was stopped in
the border and questioned extensively were not moments of unluckiness but in fact something far more in-depth than that, lying substantially in the color of our passports.

Before one can analyze the difference in experience that my father and I had with the border patrol officer, as well as each of our reactions, one must first seek to analyze the bureaucratic organization at the border and the meaning behind the interactions crossers have with this authority. According to Josiah McC. Heyman’s ethnographic research, inspectors at the border, “represent the sovereignty of the U.S. state; they hold significantly unchecked rights to detain, search, and interrogate all persons, citizens or not, who must surrender themselves for inspection before they acquire permission to enter the country” (Heyman, 1995:271). In other words, in the eyes of the state, inspectors have a largely unregulated power that allows them to become the superior in the crosser-inspector relationship.

The key question remains: why have I not felt the same sense of subordination while interacting with these inspectors? Why I am not as extensively searched and questioned as he is? The difference in treatment and experience in the border lies in the importance of passports, and the perceived identities they communicate. According to scholar Horng-Iuen Wang, passports can be initially defined as “institutional devices that link the state to individuals, behind which state sovereignty and individual citizenship are signified” (Wang, 2004: 354). Thus, this document communicates that the passport holder is a representative of a nation and emphasizes that the individual “belongs” to this particular state. In turn, the passport holder is a member or part of this specific territory, deserving of the privileges and rights offered by this country.

Wang later emphasizes that while ethnographic studies of immigration checkpoints show that the process of admitting people into the country is not solely based on the passport, this booklet has great importance because many times “primary inspectors have to make a decision under time pressure— normally within two to three minutes.” Thus, the passport becomes a tool that state officials depend on, “behind which hidden assumptions and cultural/ethnic stereotypes are then generated” (Wang, 2004: 258). By glancing at my blue U.S. passport, inspectors inevitably make an assumption of my identity as a national citizen who is returning “home,” while my fathers maroon passport established for them a sense of skepticism based on the fact that he was a foreigner entering their place.

Further research on border immigration institutions elaborates this idea of quick categorization by inspectors, mentioning that “persons are reduced to essential categories of ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’, and the latter are excluded from the norms of hospitality” (Heyman, 1995:263). At least twice in these last two decades, my father has been not only questioned about his reasons for crossing the border, but also asked to prove his identity extensively. He has been asked to show documents that reaffirm his occupation in an isolated questioning room. My father is set aside as an “other,” in the eyes of the inspector, he “enters the United States without the right to be part of the charmed circle” that is reserved only for Americans (Heyman, 1995: 268). Interestingly enough, this is the same “charmed circle” that I am supposedly a member of, simply because of this document that reaffirms my birth in this country.

The experience of being questioned and searched extensively is one significantly affected by my fathers passport. Interestingly enough, Wang additionally discusses in his research, that passports serve as a way to not only distinguish “insider” from “outsider” but to also simultaneously “define, classify and evaluate people along the line of trustworthy vs. untrustworthy” (Wang, 2004:356). Once again, this emphasizes the numerous messages of identity communicated by a single document. Therefore, one can further describe the passport as a type *symbolic capital*, a concept
coined by Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu, *symbolic capital* “stems from one’s honor and prestige” (Ritzer, 2008:533). In other words, *symbolic capital* refers to an item or an image that carries a positive and prestigious status. In my case, my American passport, as a source of *symbolic capital*, communicates that I am part of this country and thus am an “insider,” a “trustworthy member” in the eyes of the U.S. authority and deserve the hospitality and privileges offered by this country. My father remains categorized as an “outsider” and conversely untrustworthy. It is this perceived difference that gives me not only the privilege over my father to not be treated in a demeaning manner, but also to a type of acceptance that he may not fully feel during this interaction and his visits, despite the fact that he has lived in the United States for a longer period of time than I have.

Finally, it is crucial to notice in my reflection the fact that I did not know which booklet to hand over to the officer. This is more than a childish misunderstanding, as it proves to be very symbolic of the way I perceive my own identity. When I crossed the border and selected to hand in my “blue passport,” the identity I communicated to the inspector was that of an American. However, for me, this decision did not inform my own perception of self. The border inspector may see me as an “insider” in this country, yet I continuously see myself as a visitor, identifying more with my father, a member of the out-group. I know now, however, that I will never experience the excessive questioning and harsh tone given to my father, even if I can relate to and see myself as part of “his” group more than the American one. I’ve acquired a sense of privilege that he will never achieve because I am called a representative and member of the United States of America; I am called a representative and member of a place I do not know and given a national identity that I feel completely estranged from, a fact that the blue passport is incapable of communicating.

**Schooling: A Constant in a Life of Inconsistency**

Within my life of inconsistency, there has always existed one consistent trait. Since my parents were always concerned about keeping my schooling as consistent as possible, with efforts to establish a well-rounded education, all of my schooling took place in private, “American” schools, in which the content of the classes and academic grade construction all mimicked the public and private schools of the United States. This meant that in seventh grade, I learned world geography, math, and science in a very similar manner to my American student counterparts. The textbooks I used referred to topics that included information about United States history, and in many cases, even used units of measurement that were not applicable in the country I lived in. Classes referred to American popular culture and, consequently, introduced me to life in the United States. By the second grade, English took the role of my primary language, making me forget Portuguese and butcher my Spanish sentences by sneaking a couple of English words I had learned in school into phrases I spoke in my native language. I viewed American television and eventually understood the dynamics between American teenagers and learned what their slang and body language meant.

The experience of learning in an American school can be further analyzed using another concept introduced into the scholarly literature by Pierre Bourdieu: *habitus*. According to this esteemed sociologist, people are “endowed with a series of internalized schemes through which they perceive, understand, appreciate, and evaluate the social world” (Ritzer, 2008:531). While much of my habitus was developed through a mix of social worlds, the distinct cultures, it is interesting to notice that it is also constructed by an additional “social world” in these schools. This social world involved the cognitive schemes utilized in the United States. By learning in an American school environ-
Race, Ethnicity, and Me

ment, my education, absorption of the English language, and fascination with popular culture all instilled in me a way to look at the world from a somewhat generalized “American” perspective, so to speak. However, the fact that I entered multiple social worlds (i.e. the country I currently lived in and my school) was at times conflictive. This conflict made me understand both social worlds separately, and built my own habitus out of a mixture of both. This means that while I never fully identified with actors in American television shows or the ones exemplified in my text books, I still understood them. Additionally, some of the cognitive structures used to perceive, understand, appreciate, and evaluate interactions or concepts were at times even the same! It is in this overlapping of habitus that my identity is mistaken again as American, which is seen in the second encounter with authority I describe in the next section.

Encountering Authority in the Highway toward Brownsville, Texas: Mother’s Experience

We were on our way to Brownsville for Christmas last year and my mother decided to drive down with me from San Antonio. This was my first time personally driving my mother four hours to the border city. As we passed a construction zone, my foot accidently stepped on the accelerator, making me drive five miles over the speed limit. Meanwhile, our minds were set on the music as we concentrated on singing along instead of the speed of my vehicle. Minutes later a policeman ran his siren and followed us to a complete stop. He stepped out of the car and stood next to the opened window of the passenger side. He asked me for my license and registration and mumbled a question about where I was going. My mother, whose proficiency in English has slowly deteriorated due to lack of practice asked me in Spanish, “what did he ask?” Immediately, the fair skinned officer quickly lifted his pen off his book and asked in harsh tone, “What did she just say to you?,” failing to even acknowledge my mother. My mother glanced down, almost gluing her parted lips together knowing that she no longer had a voice. The officer asked me to step out of the car and walk to his own car so that we could “talk better”. My mother nervously glanced at me as I got out of the car. When I reached his car, his tone changed. He asked me where I was from and if I went to college in Texas. He asked me who the woman in the car was, to which I dryly replied, “my mother.” I walked back to my car and noticed my mother’s face remained facing directly in front, carefully glancing at the mirror beside her to have a faint idea of what was going on. I sat in my seat, buckled up, and realized that this was the first time my voice ever overrode hers.

This second encounter my mother and I had with an authority figure in the United States proved to be somewhat different. In this case, my mother, a Mexican native, did not seek to cross over into the United States of America. Nevertheless, this experience shows that a document was not required for me to be perceived as “American” in the eyes of this Anglo officer. First, while my level of authority in this situation may initially stem from the fact that I was the driver, the difference in his tone and reactions when referring to my mother and me prove that there was more to the officer’s actions based on his conceptions about the people in the car. One can analyze this phenomenon by recognizing that the treatment my mother and I received was based on cultural capital, yet another concept coined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, to refer to “the knowledge of the norms, values, beliefs and ways of life of the group to which people belong [usually] acquired over time through the process of socialization.” (McNamee and Miller, 2004:71;80). The importance of cul-
tural capital lies in the fact that the possession of such knowledge allows the individual to “fit in” in a given society and thus be perceived as being part of that society. By learning to speak English proficiently and by growing up in an educational environment that taught me the forms and norms of American society, I accumulated the knowledge and way of communicating in such a way that was perceived as American. One can see this especially when the officer asked me to step out of the car in order to “communicate better,” making an indirect reference to the lack of cultural capital my mother had. Additionally, the fact that the officer changed his tone when I got out of the car showed an established sense of trust, the idea that he perceived me to be an entity that was not threatening and could communicate the norms that are acceptable in this country.

By being perceived as an “insider” and consequently having my mother be perceived as an “outsider” in this situation, based on our levels of social capital, the treatment completely changed. When the officer asked me to step out of the car, he physically reaffirmed that my mother was an outsider and therefore did not possess the privilege of being part of our conversation. This, in short, took away the voice of my mother and gave it to me. However, it is vital to recognize that this idea of privilege spurs not only from the perceptions of “insider” versus “outsider,” but also, more specifically, from the idea of perceived “whiteness.” The fact that my mother was viewed as a foreigner, once again due to her lack of cultural capital, inevitably deemed her “less white” than me. It also does not help that I am a couple of shades lighter than her. As a result, this experience becomes an example of “white privilege,” defined as “the unearned, unjustified advantages not automatically afforded to people of color in this country and generally taken for granted by those of us who are classified as ‘white’” (Schlumpf, 2006:12). By speaking Spanish and looking darker, my mother communicated that she was of Hispanic descent, influencing her treatment. Meanwhile, the officer’s perception of my identity being in accordance with what is perceived to be an “American identity,” and thus a “white identity,” made me have some sort of authority over the situation and over my mother; after all, the officer spoke to me and treated me as an individual while leaving her behind in the car.

This experience proved especially disconcerting to me as I would have never imagined having a sense of power over my own mother, based on how I was perceived by an American authority. In a sense, this individual communicated that, in this country, my voice is louder than my mother’s and the power that I hold as an “insider” to this group will never be experienced by mother, who does not belong here. Meanwhile, I am faced with the same lack of comprehension experienced during my father’s experience. I may understand and speak English proficiently and may choose to continue an “American” education, but, in my eyes, that does not make me an American. Additionally, in my eyes, my mother will always hold authority over me; it is in her wisdom and cultural experience that her voice counts more than mine, something that the officer failed to see when he silenced her and gave the voice to me.

**Battling Imposed Identities**

For many, the question that immediately remains “so, what is the problem?” After all, in the end, the way these authority figures perceive me will give me advantages in the future; by remaining “insider” in this culture, I will not face the negative confrontations my parents do today. The answer lies back in the concept of a TCK; for us “third culture kids,” accepting a single, imposed identity becomes an existential problem. It is just not who we are, nor who we will ever be. The truth is I have never felt a specific passion when hearing the United States’ national anthem nor do
I feel a special tie to the red, white and blue during the Independence Day celebration. These, to me, are all mere traits of a country I actually know very little about, and have only now begun to learn about as a college student back in my “birth country”. While the national anthem and flag are, without a doubt, clichés of what it means to be “American,” the fact remains that for me to pretend to identify with my monocultural American counterparts is impossible; it just does not fit.

As a result of these experiences with US government authorities, I have learned to articulate this identity crisis and remain conscious of it during my daily interactions. Interestingly enough, it is this consciousness and ability to articulate my situation that has allowed me to become comfortable with my identity as a “Third Culture Kid”, making me exert my real identity proudly on a daily basis. I project my self-perceived identity through various means that simply spark conversation and I find it’s a way for others to not confuse it with another. I will wear activist pins with Spanish phrases, I will find people to speak to in Spanish, and, finally, I seek the opportunities to share with others the fond memories I have acquired in all of my “homes,” which have constructed who I am. It is in all of these encounters that I reaffirm that I am not “just another American girl” but that, in fact, I am a “global nomad,” formed by the distinct experiences achieved by not having a single home. And, for once, it feels great!

About the author

I was born in Harlingen, Texas but grew up in multiple Latin American countries: Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela and Costa Rica. Each of these provided me with cultural richness however also contributed to a confused national identity. Today, I am a junior Sociology major and Women’s Studies minor at Trinity University. While my interest in both of these areas is extensive, I am especially passionate about issues concerning human rights, gender inequality and cultural identity. Upon completing my undergraduate studies, I hope to to pursue a career in Human Rights Law or non-profit work.

References


Am I Still Latina?

Monique Arendale

Monique Arendale is a white Venezuelan from an economically well-off family who immigrated to New York City when she was eight years old. Living in the United States, she experienced a variety of conflicts between her cultural identity as a Latina and the world of white privilege in which she was immersed while attending an elite college preparatory academy in Manhattan. In her essay, she discusses some uncomfortable decisions she felt forced to make regarding her cultural and class loyalties.

Assimilation is a profound kind of self-wounding because it forfeits our personal, political, historical, and scared uniqueness. We are not allowed to be authentically American and Latino but are forced to be either an excluded minority or an assimilated individualist. As Latina women and Latino men we choose liberation, which means to be both Latina/Latino and American and to participate in fulfilling the principles upon which this nation is founded. Perhaps our greatest contribution will be to witness to the right of each person to be a self in a community of equals who are committed to each other’s advancement because they love others as themselves.

—David T. Abalos,
Author of Latinos in the United States: The Scared and the Political
Venezuela

Everyone’s stories start out differently. Mine starts in an exclusive private community in Caracas, Venezuela. It is called “La Lagunita Country Club.” My mother and I lived with my grandparents, for she was twenty years old and needed help raising me. In our community, the houses were large, the landscapes were perfectly kept, and the country club was exclusive. Everything was picture perfect. In hindsight, even the coordination of peoples’ skin color was harmonious—everyone was white. As I reflect on what constitutes white habitus and residential segregation, I recognize my neighborhood was as white and segregated as it gets.

In Venezuela, race relations are very different from those in the United States. There is no national census that tracks economic or social factors based on race; therefore the notion of racial minorities is unfamiliar. The lack of any tracking system demonstrates how race is unhealthily ignored. A perfect illustration of this is one written by Winthrop Wright. He writes, “Venezuelans would not admit that racial discrimination existed in their country. And, as a corollary, they considered any expression of racial discrimination foreign in origin or un-Venezuelan” (Wright 1990:125). Consequently, as I grew up, concepts of racism or skin color were never acquired. I never knew that color should be or was a distinction made between individuals. I especially did not know that skin color could or did dictate quality of life. However, the mindset with which I grew up was an illusion.¹ The majority (about 68 percent) of the population is of mixed ancestry consisting of a combination of indigenous, European, and African roots. (Wright, 1990). Although Venezuelan history has shown little racial tension because of the overall mixing of races and common heritage, there has been plenty of socio-economic tension. Nonetheless, when looking at the distribution of wealth in the country, there is more left to be said about race relations. Wright elaborates,

In their minds [Blacks and Whites] these two minority groups lived apart from each other on a socioeconomic scale and constituted minorities at opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. Most blacks lived in poor, rural, and isolated enclaves scattered along the northern coastal crescent. The majority of whites lived in urban centers and made up a wealthier group (Martin 1990:126).

In addition to the clear physical separation, there is also an economic discrepancy. In Venezuela, about 37 percent of the national wealth is concentrated in 10 percent of the population (Encyclopedia of the Nations 2007). As indicated by Wright, white Venezuelans make up an overwhelming majority of the rich. Coming from a family of considerable means, I was in that top ten percent. I also happened to live in the urban center of the country, Caracas.

Although research on white habitus applies to U.S. race relations, the same basic principles operate in Venezuela. Poorer populations are darker and richer populations are whiter. In light of this, I finally comprehend my heavy dose of white privilege. I lived in the most affluent neighborhood (all white) and went to a private school (all white); I was outrageously privileged. Had racial equality existed, my privilege would not have been so extensive. There would have been greater numbers of blacks, mulattos, and mestizos in exclusive neighborhoods and schools. Aside from being materially privileged, my racial socialization also was privileged. I interacted mainly with rich whites. Had I stayed in Venezuela, I probably would have derived numerous benefits from associating with these people.

¹Venezuela is a mestizo and mulatto country. Mestizo is a person of mixed European and Indian ancestry. Mulatto are people of mixed Black and White ancestry.
The separation of white from black in Venezuela never exposed me to considerable numbers of blacks. I knew a considerable amount mulattos and mestizos, but never anyone who was simply black. So, I never processed the concept of blackness. The truth is, to this day, I can’t remember having met any purely black Venezuelans. Whiteness has been my norm. Without knowing it, I was socialized towards a white habitus.

Bonilla-Silva defines white habitus as, “a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters” (Bonilla-Silva 2006, p. 104). He examines different situations through this lens. For instance, he investigates what some white individuals’ experiences were like in school. When questioning whites who went to relatively integrated schools he found that only a small proportion “developed meaningful associations with blacks” (p. 109). He proceeds to attribute one possible factor of this to the ages of integration. He argues that schools tend to integrate in later grades such as in high school. By then, white kids have already developed preferred tastes for other whites. Bonilla-Silva ties this preferred taste to the kind of neighborhoods that whites live in.

In an attempt to further understand the socialization process, Bonilla-Silva surveyed some white individuals about the neighborhoods that they lived in. Most said that their neighborhoods were predominantly white. They also mentioned that they didn’t find that strange. Some said, “I really didn’t think about it” (p. 112). Bonilla-Silva elaborates on the psychological basis for whites’ attitudes:

This lack of reflexivity is not surprising since, as psychologist Beverly Tatum argues, dominant identities tend to remain inarticulate precisely because they are seen as the “norm”… Thus, whereas whiteness is not perceive as a racial category, other categories are; whereas a white neighborhood is a “normal” neighborhood, a black neighborhood is “racially segregated” (Bonilla-Silva 2006:112).

White habitus normalizes the experience of the majority, meaning whites. White tastes and preferences develop in dominant culture. Anything outside of that whiteness is abnormal. Society in the U.S. is far more racialized than Venezuela. However, this is not to say Venezuela doesn’t suffer some of the same symptoms. In my personal experience, I felt those symptoms every day. They plagued where I lived, where I went to school, and who I played with.

First Year in the United States

One day, my second grade class had to dress up. My family had been in the United States for a few months, and I was just starting to get acclimated to my new home. I had a crush on a boy and thought he looked nice. I didn’t know that there was a male version of “pretty,” so I told him he looked pretty. He proceeded to laugh hysterically, only to be joined by the rest of the class. He then told me that he looked “handsome,” not pretty, because he was a boy. I was inconsolable. I stopped speaking Spanish at that moment. I covered and passed from then on. Individuals who cover are defined as “persons who are ready to admit possession of a stigma [who] may nonetheless make a great effort to keep the stigma from looming large” (Goffman, 1966:102). Kenji Yoshino (2006) distinguishes covering from passing saying “that passing pertains to the visibility of a characteristic, while covering pertains to its obtrusiveness.” I covered by barely speaking. Being a recent immigrant, there were hints of an accent. Not only did I sound funny, I also lacked enough vocabulary to safely navigate a conversation. Passing came easier than covering. Because of my
light skin, all I had to do was just stand there. I looked as Anglo as the little blonde, blue-eyed girl next to me. When the two phenomena converged, the result was a total disconnect from my culture, language, and nationality. I still suffer this disconnect today.

Kenji Yoshino addresses several aspects of this phenomenon in his article, “The Pressure to Cover.” He identifies language and grooming as essentials to the process. In the language portion, he states, “Mungin [a black man used as an example] covered by eschewing black vernacular, suggesting a nexus between language and race” (Yoshino, 2002:896). Yoshino emphasizes that a specific vernacular can typecast an individual. Having an accent and limited vocabulary, it was difficult for me to escape my immigrant status. The only escape was covering. Forgoing the mocking was accomplished through a dual process of: (1) minimizing communication with natives and (2) ceasing to speak Spanish. In the months following my incident, I lost most of my Spanish. At one point, I could not remember the Spanish word for spoon.

After hiding myself for so long, I forgot who I was before moving to the United States. I lost myself to U.S. culture. I began to believe that once I was eighteen I would move out of the house, that at nine years old I could question my parents, and that I could date whomever I wanted, whenever I wanted. In my culture, such notions are unacceptable. Potential suitors are always brought to the house, you live at home until you are married, and you do not question your parents. I began to absorb American values at the expense of Venezuelan values. I was starting to become American.

High School

New York City is perhaps one of the last places many people would expect to find white habitus at work; the city has some of the largest numbers of immigrants and minority communities. However, neighborhoods are severely segregated, thus providing a perfect display of white habitus. The Upper West and East sides are comprised mostly of rich white people. Most visible minority individuals are black nannies, Asian delivery boys, and Latino bagboys. Harlem, Washington Heights, and Spanish Harlem are poor, heavily minority-populated areas. Distinct features include bodegas, dirty sidewalks, and an absence of white people. Where one neighborhood begins and another one ends is obvious. Michael Martin examined demographics of minority segregation, indicating that “while Latino/Anglo segregation is increasing, Latino/black segregation is decreasing. The weighted mean (D) score for Latino/black segregation 54.1 [the higher the more segregated] in 1990 and decreased to 49.1 in 2000...highly segregated Latino/black metropolitan areas decreased from 31 in 1990 to 17 in 2000” (Martin 2007:39).

Although Martin doesn’t elaborate on neighborhoods within Manhattan, Latino/black segregation from Anglos and Latino/black integration is emphasized. In New York, many of the Latinos and Blacks are segregated into Spanish and Black Harlem, respectively while many of the whites are segregated in the Upper East and Upper West sides. These are manifestations of whites’ and minorities’ preferences for themselves. More specifically, these are manifestations of white habitus.

Living in such an environment exacerbated my identity crisis. I went to a private school in New York City named Fieldston. At Fieldston, cliques were the social way of life. The two main ones were rich white kids and poor minorities (Latino and black kids). I didn’t wear couture or drive a BMW, so being part of the rich kids was out of the question. On the other hand, I was from Venezuela and spoke Spanish, which was perfect for the minority clique. Within my first week, I joined the minority kids. For two years, I was a member of the group, but, by the end of my second
year, I was getting terrible grades, partying every weekend, and constantly fighting someone. This lifestyle began to wear me down mentally, emotionally, and physically. As a result, I left and joined a different clique made up of laid-back, athletic guys, who were all white, except for one Asian. Those first two years are what truly awakened me to race relations.

While I was part of the minority group, I learned to spot white habitus at work. My school participated in one of the numerous programs that send qualified inner-city kids to top private schools, so it lent itself to observing interracial dealings. Lunchtime was the most obvious; a clear division existed. Minority kids sat at the same two tables every day, and white kids sat everywhere else. Bonilla-Silva offers a good illustration of this. He quotes one student as saying, “I’ve definitely seen that [minority self-segregation]. I think one thing that sticks out the most, the one example, is just like, like dining facilities. Like it’s never, its never integrated. It’s always they have their own place to eat” (Bonilla-Silva 2006:115).

This discernable segregation can be identified one of three ways. Either the black students segregated themselves, or the white students segregated themselves, or they both did. Whichever it might be, there was a clear manifestation of habitus at work. is white habitus. I personally believe that the minority students at my high school did self-segregate. Their behavior consisted of always being loud and obnoxious, not caring about grades, and being rude to white kids. Yoshino describes the following situation as another example, “Williams is entitled to her race, but not to make ‘too much’ of it—there is some excess of race that she can and should control” (Yoshino, 2002, p. 887). This can be partly explained by the concept of oppositional behavior. John Ogbu covers some material on why this behavior occurs. He explains,

In school this oppositional collective identity is characterized by affective dissonance in the two ways indicated earlier: (a) perception of school culture or curriculum and school language as an imposition, and (b) their negative experience with the school curriculum and language because Whites use them to communicate the message that Black people are inferior to White people…Because they interpret school curriculum, language, and even the classroom pedagogy as White and as impositions, minorities may consciously or unconsciously resist them (Ogbu, 2003:174-175).

I believe that the minorities at Fieldston wanted to maintain a sense of ethnic identity. By behaving in a particular manner, they could remain different amid a sea of white people. They had to come face to face with some of the things they believed they’d never obtain. White kids drove BMWs, went on expensive vacations, dressed with brand names, etc. Almost all of the minority kids were receiving major financial aid.

A sense of inadequacy plagued the group. It was deep rooted and noticeable in everyday conversation. Comments ranged from “I’m a make me some money like these white kids’ daddies,” to “I can never be friends with such an entitled little princess”. Those feelings were often directed at me. In their eyes, I was a paradox. I had light skin and was of considerable means, but I was also Latina. However much they wanted to dismiss me, they could not. In principle, I was one of them. Were they to kick me out, they’d violate their own code. For two years, I was marginally accepted, but there were impenetrable barriers because of my socioeconomic status. I finally realized my privileged status was too much for them to take.
Am I Still Latina?

As I find myself reflecting on experiences from my past, I am hit with a swirling mix of emotions. I feel angry, confused, frustrated, and guilty. Of all these emotions, the most consuming is guilt. Members of my own community suffer due to forces out of their control, yet I shun them, much like others who harbor contempt for them. This realization leads me to accept that my habitus is mostly defined by my class and not by my culture. Having been privileged all my life, I’ve grown accustomed to the perks. I’ve gone to private school all my life, I’ve had excellent health coverage, and I’ve been able to travel. It is these things that have defined me most. My high school friends never knew what that was like. To them, I was a traitor of what they stood for: a struggle against The Man. My conviction of opportunity and success beyond high school was just unacceptable. Paradoxically, most of them performed well academically. In fact, many of them went on to excellent universities like Stanford, Harvard, Yale, and the University of Pennsylvania. Knowing this, I feel as if they themselves may have faced inner struggles like mine. They wanted an ethnic connection, but also wanted to leave.

As I struggled with my habitus, so did they. White habitus is specific to white people. There is also the generic term ‘habitus’, of which white habitus is a specific example. This term has been defined as “…a set of dispositions created and shaped by the interaction between objective structures and personal histories, including experiences and understanding of ‘reality’” (Thomas:2002:430). While my reality was defined by my family’s wealth, their habitus was defined by their families’ lack of wealth. They had to choose between ‘conforming’ to a white culture and succeeding or retaining their own ethnic identity at the expense of that success. Our realities, and therefore our respective habitus, were based on entirely different contexts.

My habitus started in Venezuela. There, I was a privileged member of the top socioeconomic class. I now live in the United States, and I’m still in that very same class. I’ve managed to carry both my Latina and class identities all my life. In high school, those identities were at odds with each other, so I came to the fork in the road. I could either reject my class habitus or I could reject my cultural one. I eventually realized that my financial upbringing was what defined me most and that I just couldn’t overcome that definition. I did not want to ignore my mother’s self-made wealth; I did not want to refuse opportunities gained with social and economic capital. To this day I am dealing with the guilt of choosing economic opportunity over my friends.

I understand that what I chose, in the eyes of my former friends, is de facto assimilation. In their eyes, I have become white. I no longer exhibit the oppositional behavior which set us apart. I no longer behave as a Latina. If being Latina means having a self-inflicted racial construct of oppositional behavior, then I don’t want it. Because I don’t want the only thing that has identified me as Latina in this country, I fear that I can no longer claim myself as such. I struggle to find something else that makes me a Latina woman in this country. My inability to do so makes me fear that my assimilation not just to the United States, but to the white habitus of this country, is near complete.
References


Understanding White Habitus and White Privilege

Ange Atkinson

In her essay, Ange Atkinson reflects critically on her upbringing in a largely white, affluent suburb of Austin, Texas. Her parents taught her to respect “everyone for who they were,” regardless of their race or culture. Nonetheless, she was raised in a racially-segregated environment that had a strong impact on her world view and sense of herself and others in the world. She shares several anecdotes that illustrate how white girls growing up in a segregated environment are often not as color-blind as they might like to believe.

... 

My story ostensibly begins twenty-one years ago, the day I was born to a mother and father of mixed European heritage. I am White. Some think this means I lack culture, heritage, and tradition. I have been told it means I am privileged and that I am treated better than people of other races. After hearing these things all my life, some of them must be valid; however I am not sure if it is all completely true. One thing that has remained true for much of my life is reflected in the quote, “For most whites, racism is like murder: the concept exists but someone has to commit it in order for it to happen” (Akintunde 1999:2). I have never been personally subjected to any sort of racism, and I cannot even remember witnessing outright discrimination most of my life. All of this is due to many things: my race, my ethnicity, my socialization, and my story.

I am going to begin my story in the middle because I perceive the beginning of my story differently than I used to due to personal changes. I was raised in a family that taught me that I should treat everyone equally no matter who they were, no matter their skin color or culture, no matter whom they dated, or what they looked like. It didn’t matter; they all deserved respect. I now understand these ideals as the basis of my own color blindness. In trying to treat everyone equally, I ignored every person’s experiences, thus subjecting them to a form of racism—color blind racism.

In high school I had friends that were black, Hispanic, Asian, and white, but I do not think that I really understood race or racism until college. After all, color blindness can only take you so far before the harsh reality comes into focus. Growing up, my parents emphasized having an open mind and respecting everyone for who they were, but I also remember hearing things from my parents and other family members that were not always open-minded or respectful. Things like “Lock your doors, there is a guy over there asking for money...” or “Why can’t they just go get a job like everyone else, it isn’t that hard.” I realize now that these ideas come from my own habitus, or “the ‘mental or cognitive structures’ through which people deal with the social world” that consist of “…‘internalized, ‘embodied’ social structures” (Ritzer 2008: 531). Habitus is created through a long term habitation of a social position, so it is different for different people...
but also malleable because social positions are flexible. Habitus is like common sense, it reflects the ostensible “objective” divisions in social institutions such as class, gender, and race (Ritzer 2008). Therefore, the idea that I should lock my car door while sitting at a traffic light because someone is asking for money is a deep-seeded assumption stemming from my habitus. This assumption is part of an internalized schema (probably something along the lines of poor people are criminals), which then produced a reaction to the situation (lock the car doors so that person cannot come too near us).

This particular reaction due to an overall assumption about people on the street slapped me in the face one day. I was driving somewhere by myself in an unfamiliar area, and I ended up turning the wrong way on a one way street without even realizing it. An older white man with a scraggly beard, a walking stick, and a bunch of bags piled on his back on the corner was trying to get my attention. I remember getting a weird feeling in my gut and quickly avoiding eye contact, locking my door, and turning up my music. The man continued to motion at me and got a little closer to my car, and I felt nervous. Finally, I cracked my window and heard him say “Ma’am you’re turned around; this part of the road is one way.” I smiled, said thank you, and drove away feeling shocked and appalled at my own behavior. Why was I so shocked? Did I really think he was going to break my window, push me aside, and steal my car? No, that is absurd. At any point in my life had I ever witnessed or even heard of a homeless person really harming someone at a stop light? No! However, my reaction was based on an incredibly embedded and internalized structure regarding the way I perceived homeless people. I will come back to this idea of habitus in conjunction with my whiteness.

Despite that last story, I know that I still sometimes react that way to homeless people on street corners. I have held these ideas in my head for a long time, and I know that they are still there to some extent; however, sitting in an upper level anthropology class during my sophomore year at Trinity, I finally started to realize that it is difficult for some people to simply go out and get a job. I did not understand; our country was about equality and capitalism was about equal opportunity, right? I felt like I understood things that alluded to inherent inequality in our society from other classes and discussions, but it really began to sink into my head in this class. I find it absurd that it took me over twenty years to come to this realization. The only rationale I can think of to explain this is that I had never truly been confronted with inequality. Even after that class, it all seemed so abstract—yes there are people that are underpaid and exploited because they lack economic and social status. They are taken advantage of in order to keep our economy booming, but they are not knocking on my doorstep; it was not real.

During the summer after my sophomore year in college I was accepted to an anthropological research internship at The University of North Texas. All summer, I was exposed to concepts such as epistemology, postmodernism, and self-reflexivity. It seemed that my understandings of inequalities of all kinds were beginning to make more sense. I clearly remember a discussion about agency versus structural or cultural violence and institutional racism, and how every person’s outlook on these ideas will shape their conceptualization of humanity. I surprisingly found myself distinctly under the belief of cultural violence (which is defined as “any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form” (Galtung 1990:291)) and institutional racism. I say surprisingly because most of my family believes otherwise as understood through them saying things like “Why can’t they just go get a job like everyone else, it isn’t that hard.” This realization in turn made me realize myriad things. The economic and cultural world-system that we all live in is not exactly made for me, but I fit most of the criteria that will lead to success, i.e. white privilege
has allowed me to benefit from not having to cope with the difficult experiences non-whites may run into. Yes, my family was lower middle class when I was growing up, but we were by no means extremely poor. White privilege persists in my life; I do not have to cope with centuries of racism and culturally embedded norms that provide access to education and better-paying jobs to whites.

It might sound a bit dramatic, but this realization truly changed the way I perceived humanity. For the first two years at Trinity, my education had taught me the ambiguity of truth, but it just never seemed to fully click into gear. Now, I could see the many realities behind capitalism, the American experience, Western ideology, and racial dialogues. The color blindness that I learned growing up (treat everyone equally and with respect) was not a complete solution to overcoming racism; in fact, it was a part of the cultural system that reinforced whites as the powerful, dominant majority. Color blindness ignores the different realities people experience based on their gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education, and the like. This is not to say that my parents set out to create particular biases in my world view, but it happened because there are so many other social and cultural processes that create world views. I had to understand these in addition to my own constructed world views in order to comprehend other truths behind color blindness and racism. With a postmodern understanding of racial and ethnic issues, including my own racial experience, I was able to understand them more holistically.

It is important to understand the modernist paradigm before delving into postmodernist thought. Modernism is a framework that constructs the world according to Western culture. It was created according to Western culture because Western culture is the dominant culture; using the Foucaultian idea “knowledge is power,” dominant cultures are able to create the knowledge people recognize as true, which reinforces the dominant cultures’ power. (Akintunde 1999; Foucault 1999). Color blindness is a facet of a racial ideology produced by the modernist paradigm and a tool used by whites to justify and rationalize white dominance. A color blind racial ideology is one that rationalizes white supremacy and white privilege and overlooks the underlying racial structures, thus allowing blame to be placed on individuals for their struggles and lack of success rather than recognizing that certain people succeed due to white privilege (Akintunde 1999; Bonilla-Silva 2006). As Jensen said, “White people, whether overtly racist or not, benefit from living in a world mostly run by white people that has been built on the land and the backs of non-white people” (Jensen 1999: 1). With the creation of a white history, the “white” perspective is perceived as neutral instead of just one viewpoint of a story. This allows for further white supremacy to prevail because “…white privilege becomes invisible” (Akintunde 1999).

Postmodernism is a complex paradigm seeking a holistic understanding of humanity through multiple epistemologies. It also recognizes the self-reflexive concept that everyone’s experiences and thoughts are products of their conceptualization of humanity and that everyone thus has biases (Akintunde 1999). Through this lens, I began to at least recognize that my experience and my education (what I had learned for over twenty years) was only one reality that shaped my own biases. This takes us to the beginning of my story.

I grew up in Round Rock, Texas, which is suburbia. When my parents moved there over 20 years ago, it was just a small town north of Austin. Today it is part of the growing Austin metropolis with its own outlet mall. I attended public school there for 13 years— my pre-K through high school years were spent in the land of suburbia with mostly white peers. I recognized that some people were of different races; I even remember looking around the student center at my high school and seeing some segregation. The blacks by the water fountain, the prep, jocks, and cheerleaders by the stage, the Mexicans congregated by a bench, and the Asians mixed around through the
Understanding White Habitus and White Privilege

groups. I feel like mostly everyone classified the white groups by what they did in school, athletes, cheerleaders and dancers, nerds, etc., but the other racial groups were just known by their racial titles (blacks, Hispanics, Asians, etc.), or by a racialized activity (the black athletes, Asian nerds, etc.).

Looking back on this now, I think I can understand this segregation and labeling as a form of white privilege acting itself out. The non-whites automatically received a racial identity while the whites were assigned an activity-based identity. These labels automatically completely liberate whites from racial categorization. Whiteness becomes transparent and neutral, while other races are highlighted and “othered”. Continuing to ignore that whiteness has been racially constructed as neutral and normative further empowers and privileges whites because whiteness and the power that accompanies it remains discrete and hidden (Akintunde 1999). In turn, people in power make their own distinctions or labels normative, thus reproducing their power at an unconscious level (Bourdieu 1977). This is vital to the understanding of underlying racial ideology; people are not overtly racists or violent, but the cultural system allows for the creation of symbolic violence that continually occurs unconsciously. For example, embedded dominance allows people to use their white status that is allegedly normative to exploit other non-whites (Bourdieu 1977).

In retrospect, I also recognize the educational and residential segregation that took place in the town I grew up in; although growth has made Round Rock into a booming area, many of the residential segregation boundaries still exist. When I was in first grade, we moved to a house that was on the other side of the railroad tracks, and my parents still live there today. This neighborhood consists of lower middle-class residents, including many Hispanic or poorer white families. This neighborhood was somewhere between the standard upper middle-class white cookie cutter suburban homes and the “ghetto”. To be honest, I am not sure if Round Rock really has an area that is so poor that it could be considered a ghetto, or it could be that I have just never seen it (which also says something about my upbringing), but I do remember people jokingly referring to my neighborhood as the ghetto. There is an elementary school within walking distance of my house, but my parents insisted that my older brother and I continue attending the school we started at in our old neighborhood. My Mom said that it would just be easier because my brother and I already had a good group of friends and also because she had to take my older sister to school over there too. At this time, my sister was attending the local middle school, which my brother and I would be attending no matter which elementary school we ended up at. When I was in high school, I asked my mom about transferring schools in elementary, and she said that it was more convenient, but she wanted me at that elementary because it was a better school. It was not as overcrowded and received more funding because it was located in a better neighborhood.

This obviously displays the residential and educational segregation that occurs all over the country and, more specifically, happening in Round Rock. As Douglas Massey discusses in Categorically Unequal (2007), people of similar racial background tend to live in the same residential areas for various reasons. In my neighborhood, most of the families were Hispanic or lower middle-class white families, with a few black and Asian families, so the residential segregation occurring was presumably based on socioeconomic status rather than race. The interesting thing is that the neighborhoods north and west of mine increase in wealth and are predominantly white, so if race was not a factor at all, these neighborhoods would continue to be racially mixed. One reason these neighborhoods may not be fully racially mixed is tied to the idea of habitus. If whites mainly interact with only each other, then they can share their similar racial experiences and attitudes, thus reinforcing their “habitus”. Applying Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to this position is known as
the “white habitus” (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Ritzer 2008).

This “white habitus” was exemplified many times when I travelled with the women’s basketball team during high school. We would play at other schools in our district and out of town for tournaments. I remember visiting different schools in our district. These high schools were in Round Rock or nearby towns (more suburbs of Austin). The schools east and south of mine were predominantly black or Hispanic, and the schools north and west were mainly white. Again this is evidence of the residential and educational segregation occurring in this area. More memorable were the trips into inner-city Austin, where our coach would tell us to keep all of our valuables with us and to take a buddy when going to the restroom. These statements were only made when we travelled in certain areas. They were obviously based on assumptions about the people at certain schools because of the location and type of school it was. Similar to the discussion about my habitus earlier in my story with regard to my reactions to homeless people, “white habitus” creates stereotypical ideas and assumptions of non-whites. This was evident when my coach would only say to protect your valuables at certain schools; there is an underlying stereotype that inner-city schools were obviously heavily populated by minorities and thus were full of criminals. At the time, I do not recall thinking it was out of the ordinary that we would need to be careful in these “types” of areas. Obviously this idea is a construct of my white habitus reinforced by other whites to create behaviors that are seen as normative in certain situations. I did not see these reactions as having anything to do with race because race was not discussed; the idea was just there, and it just made sense. Ignoring race at an unconscious level in these situations allowed me to continue with my color blind ideas that everyone was the same—human—thus they deserved respect, without recognizing that I and my other white community members were already treating people differently and unequally.

My color blindness came with me right into my first year here at Trinity University. Demographically, Trinity is not that different from the high school I grew up in. Perhaps more Trinity students were from a higher socioeconomic status background than the general population from my high school, but that is a broad generalization. Trinity is a white school. Yes, it prides itself on diversity, and I do recognize that every student here has a different background, a different story to tell, but this is a different type of diversity. Racially, Trinity really is not that diverse, and even the non-whites at Trinity tend to be from families of privilege. My first-year roommate and one of my suitemates were black. We had some memorable conversations about various racial concepts—most of the time in a humorous manner. One time, I asked my roommate if she would rather be called black or African-American, and she replied, “Well, I’m sure as hell not from Africa, so I’m black.” Another time, I was listening to a country song and she asked me what “white girl music” I was listening to.

Both of these conversations made me laugh because they were both full of generalizations and assumptions from both racial perspectives. Perhaps these comments are not exactly humorous on a deeper level, but it seems that we both used humor to make the sensitive topic acceptable. Looking back, I now recognize that my roommate and I both carried a color blind racial ideology. Although I cannot speak for my roommate (or to say that either of our perspectives represent each others respective races), but the ideas behind both of those comments are full of assumptions that people from one race are all the same. To my roommate, the term “African-American” implies that she has some sort of African heritage, which she does not identify with, and thus she considers herself “black”. Before this, I do not think I ever really thought about the ideology behind the term “African-American”. At the same time, my roommate’s comment about my music was also
full of assumptions and generalizations. Asking me what “white girl music” I was listening to automatically assumes that all white people listen to the same music. Now I do not believe that either my roommate nor I are racists, but these conversations really display how color blindness can create generalizations for people that are ultimately racist on a deeper level.

Remembering and realizing all of this, I ask myself, where does that leave me? I am white, so I have experienced white privilege. As Jensen discusses in his two articles about white privilege, I do not believe that I have not worked hard to achieve my standing in society, but I realize that my position is not solely based on merit (Jensen 1999). Practicing self-reflexivity with this allows me to recognize that the experiences that others have been through are immensely different than mine due to differences in habitus, socialization, etc. This is not to say one person’s experience is better than someone else’s but that certain experiences are favored in our society over others (whites, males, higher social class, etc.)

In addition, it is vital to recognize that in much of the race and racism literature, the negative effects of racism are discussed, while the positive results for whites are not even mentioned (Fishman and McCarthy 2005:354). Unless white privilege is recognized and reflected upon by individuals that have gained from it, a productive dialogue about race cannot occur. I try to shed my socialization to the idea that “we are all the same”, but it is hard to completely let go of. I still see the world as “we are all humans”, but now I try to recognize that we are all humans with different realities, different identities, different habitus, and different stories. This postmodern, multicultural world view still is not a complete solution, however, the way I see it, there cannot be a complete solution to racism until the institutions and rhetoric used to racialize the world no longer exist. Currently, there is no other way to discuss race but with a hierarchy. Yes whites can productively add to the ongoing racial dialogue by understanding white habitus and white privilege (which is much improved from the early discussions about race), however we are still left discussing race with a white rhetoric. This makes the race dialogue seem hopeless, but even though I do not have any idea of how to escape a white rhetoric, I will do what I can by recognizing my reactions to situations as part of my habitus and use reflexivity to continually attempt to mold my habitus.

About the author

I’m a graduating senior at Trinity University majoring in Anthropology with minors in Geosciences and Media Studies. During my time at Trinity I have been involved in Alpha Phi Omega and Residential Life as well as working in the Admissions Office as a Technology Recruiter. Next year I will be moving to southern California to teach environmental education at an outdoor science school, and I plan to return to graduate school for Anthropology in the next two to three years.
References


Born in Deep South Texas: An Autobiography

Miguel Guerra

In his essay, Miguel Guerra discusses the challenges he faced in making the transition from attending Latino-majority public schools in a South Texas border community to attending a white-majority private college in San Antonio. He explains how in San Antonio he encountered both “old-fashioned, overt bigotry from ignorant people” and “more modern, ‘colorblind’ racism from well-intentioned people.” These experiences led him to reflect on what role he would like to play in U.S. society as a “light-skinned, middle-class Latino.”

Deep in the heart of South Texas is a place along the border where its people are often considered ni de aqui ni de allá— not Mexican, not American— the Rio Grande Valley. It is an area comprised of nearly a 90% Latino population where Spanish-speaking or bilingual households are common (U.S. Census Bureau 2006). The majority of public schools offer bilingual or dual-language programs to meet the needs of the English-language learners in the area. The four counties which make up the Rio Grande Valley— Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Willacy— also rank among the poorest in the nation. Here, I formed ideas and opinions, reaffirmed my beliefs and values, and socialized as a member of the ethnic majority: a Latino.

With parents expecting me to go to college since I was born and cousins attending universities during my grade-school years, I knew early on I would attend an institution of higher learning. Friends dropping out of school to lead more unfortunate lives also reassured me I had to continue my education. So I did.

Trinity University, in San Antonio, is 250 miles north from home. Located in a city that is 61.3% Latino (U.S. Census Bureau 2006), Trinity is a 62% White/non-Hispanic campus that finds itself an anomaly in this city (Trinity University 2007). This is my new home.

After 18 years of being Latino in the Rio Grande Valley, literally overnight, I was Latino at Trinity University— two very different worlds. While there were a few white people in my high school, I now shared a suite with three white guys and a hall with only one other Latino who identified more strongly with the non-Latino community— I quickly realized I was no longer in my element. For the first time in my life, I socialized as the ethnic minority. Though I did not feel like myself around my peers, staying on this campus, this microcosm of what is considered “mainstream,” would be the only way I would see first hand what mainstream society thought of me. I had to stay. Facing the fire my first couple of months at Trinity, I had to figure out how to socialize with the white majority— the dominant “in-group.” How white did I have to be? How Latino could
Born in Deep South Texas

I be? How could I make my peers see that I belonged in the classroom next to them when most Latinos on this campus serve them food at lunch or clean their rooms every other week? I had to find a middle ground between my “Latino-ness” and my “white-ness.” I had to balance myself on the Latino-white spectrum while always being wary not to assimilate into “white mainstream society” for fear of becoming part of the “out-group” among my Latino community at home. This is my story.

Growing up in the Rio Grande Valley is a unique experience. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva attributes “white habitus” to the residential and social hypersegregation of whites from blacks (and other minorities). It is this hypersegregation that furthers the socialization process known as “white habitus” (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006). Using Bonilla-Silva’s definition of “white habitus,” one could argue that the Rio Grande Valley forms a type of “Latino habitus.” Bonilla-Silva states that “[w]hite habitus geographically and psychologically limits whites’ chances of developing meaningful relationships with blacks and other minorities” (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006:1). Such is the case for Latinos in the Rio Grande Valley.

I recall a specific moment in my Senior English Class right before lunch. As the bell rang and my peers prepared to leave, a friend yelled out, “Don’t forget we’re in Lent and today is Friday so don’t eat meat!” No one questioned the comment. I immediately thought, “What if someone wasn’t Catholic? They do not have to avoid meat.” Still, as I saw everyone in the class leaving for lunch not giving what had been said another thought, I realized that I went to church with the person who made the statement and did not mention it to her.

This memory is significant because, for the first time, I recognized the true impact that the “Latino habitus” formed in the Valley had on me. Nobody questioned my friend because almost everyone was Catholic. A similar comparison can be made in regards to political affiliation. Latinos have historically voted in favor of the Democrat Party (Coffin 2003:217). As a result of residential segregation, I grew up surrounded by Latinos, the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church, and views of our nation and government with a bias towards the Democratic Party.

The housing segregation leading to the “Latino habitus” did not happen by accident. There are two main reasons the Valley is in its unique position. The most obvious is geography; the Valley borders Mexico and was once part of Mexico. As a result, much Latino—specifically Mexican—influence can be seen. Another reason for the Valley’s unique segregation comes as a result of disparity in wealth between whites and minorities. Since laws before the middle of the 20th century were unequal, among a variety of other reasons, “[w]hites had a head start to accumulate wealth that ethnic minorities did not have access to.” (Lareau 2003). The Valley’s main commercial activity was and still is agriculture. The area was once full of predominantly white farm-owners and mostly Latino farm-workers. The McAllen-Edinburg-Mission Metropolitan area at the heart of the Rio Grande Valley has a per capita income of $9,899—the lowest of any metropolitan area in the country (U.S. Census Bureau 2006). I grew up in a world where the majority of people I interacted with were low-income, working class Latinos that practiced the Roman Catholicism and were biased towards the Democratic Party. I exhibited all these attributes except one.

Because of the emphasis put on education by my grandparents unto my parents, my mother and father grew up to be educated professionals. Due to job promotions and wise investments, my parents received a significant jump in income at the start of my teenage years. This permitted us to move out of the old neighborhood—or “barrio”—into a gated subdivision and drive newer vehicles—nothing extravagant, just newer. As I was sitting in the passenger’s seat of a new car on my way to school, I saw, just as we exited our gated subdivision, the city’s housing projects where
some of my peers lived. I realized that I was attending the same school with the same friends who were still in the same class as most Latinos in the Valley. I rarely invited friends over to my house and was hesitant to ask for rides home from people at school knowing they would find out I lived in the new gated community in the city. I was covering my class to fit in with my peers.

As a result of housing segregation, schools were segregated. About 95%-98% of my classmates through grade school were Latino. While I knew somewhere in my mind that this was not the norm, I did not completely understand, as it was all I knew. The average Hispanic child in the Texas metropolitan regions of Laredo, McAllen, and Brownsville goes to a school that is more than 95% Hispanic (Logan 2002). Thus, the majority of my interactions with people my age were also with Hispanics. The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics determined that the best way to measure the quality of schools was to take note of the poverty rate of the school. The same report stated that the “average poor student in public schools attends a school that is 63% poor (the average Hispanic student attends a school that is 66% poor), as measured by the percent of students qualifying to receive a free school lunch” (Logan 2002). Interestingly enough, so many students qualified for a free lunch in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo School District, officials decided that every student in the district would be eligible for a free lunch. Only in the first grade did I take a lunch box to school or ask my mother for 60 cents to buy lunch. Every year after that, lunch was free. Here again, I felt that this was not necessarily the case for most of the nation’s students, but again, I did not pay much attention.

While colorblind racism and aversive racism are newer forms of racism since the Civil Right Movement, this does not mean old-fashioned, overt bigotry has vanished from society (Doane 2003). I can recall the first time in my life that a stranger of another race made racist remarks, intending offense.

During my sophomore year of high school, I participated in the University Interscholastic League\(^1\) (UIL) One-Act Play competition. Our company was doing a production of Man of La Mancha—the story of Don Quixote. We had advanced to the regional competition at Reagan High School in San Antonio, Texas. We were ranked among the top 24 plays in the state of Texas. As we drove through the neighborhoods surrounding the high school in a large, yellow school bus, we noticed that the majority of homes were relatively new and relatively large in comparison to what we were used to seeing. “We’re not in Kansas anymore,” one of my friends said in an effort to fight off this feeling of uncertainty that had come across us as we pulled up to the school. We got off the bus, stretched after a long bus ride, and walked into the theatre through the loading docks where we would be unloading our sets, props, and costumes. As we walked in, we saw the other teams unloading equipment and they turned to see us. Silence. We had come to compete at a predominantly white school against predominantly white casts from the San Antonio area. Of the companies that had ethnic minority cast members, most had a couple to a few, but we walked in with nearly thirty Latino cast members. We had never seen a completely white cast and it appeared they had never seen an all nearly all-Latino cast. I say “nearly all” because our assistant director was white and one of our actors was African-American. “Well, let’s go find our dressing room,” our director instructed in an effort to break the silence. Our director feared the dynamic of the moment and of the situation as a whole would cause the company to lose focus. The rest of the day was full of comments to the tone of “Did you see the way they just stared at us?” and “Had they never seen that many dark-skinned persons before?” I knew it was going to be an interesting competition.

\(^1\)This organization facilitates many interscholastic competitions involving public schools in Texas
We competed the next day. We took our all minority cast and performed Cervantes’ classic tale of a dreamer traveling the countryside—a Spanish play featuring Spanish characters, portrayed by Spanish surnamed people, at a predominately white school. Our performance was phenomenal and the judge agreed. We were awarded the most individual awards and the competition’s top honor of “Best Play”, which meant that we were to advance to the state final competition where the top eight plays in the state would compete. Comments such as “The Spics won?” and “How could we lose to the brown people?” were spoken by the cast members of other schools. We heard these comments and more as we sat down to receive a critique session that follows the awards ceremony and as we loaded our equipment back unto the bus. Our director had previously warned that if we heard such remarks retaliation of any kind would lead to immediate removal from the company. I thank God to this day no one in our cast retaliated with words or physical violence.

While the situation was not nearly as drastic as what minorities experienced in the early to middle 20th century, it was, by far, one of the most uncomfortable moments of my life. It showed me that even in a city with a large ethnic minority population and even in the 21st century, overt racism is still practiced by some people.

By the time I was a senior in high school, 95% of Pharr-San Juan-Alamo North High School was Latino. I attended school with few Asians and whites and even fewer blacks. To add stereotype to a segregated student population, the one Asian in my class was the valedictorian and the one black student was the football team’s running back. Nearly 52 years after Brown v. Board was decided in our nation’s Supreme Court, I left the comfort of segregation for the discomfort of integration at Trinity University.

Trinity University is the first private school I have ever attended. While some students at Trinity would not dream of going to public schools, public education was all I knew. My parents work for the Texas public school system. My mother is the Region One Director of Bilingual/Migrant/ESL Education for the Rio Grande Valley and believed that the schools she vowed to better were good enough for her children.

It was on the second day at Trinity University that I realized I was way out of my element. “Well I don’t know, ask Mike he’s “the Mexican,”’ my suitemate of one full day told the group at the lunch table in an effort to crack a joke at my expense. I was called “a Mexican” in a pejorative tone directly to my face by someone of another race, and for the first time, I was the only Latino in the group. Most at the table glared at me not knowing whether it was all right to laugh or not. Others, embarrassed by the comment, just kept eating as though they had not heard anything. “I am Mexican-American,” I responded. Those thinking about laughing did not, those pretending not to hear acknowledged, and my suitemate looked at me with a blank stare, speechless. “It means I was born in the United States and have Mexican ancestry. Also, the term ‘Mexican’ is usually applied to a person from Mexico and does not ring with a pejorative tone in my mind.” The rest of lunch was silent, but more importantly, the rest of the year was respectful.

Although I did not understand the significance of the situation at the time, I was sure of one thing—I was definitely part of the “out-group”. For the first time in my life, I almost doubted myself asking, “Is being Latino a bad thing?”, “Am I wrong?”, or “Have I been wrong all my life?”

At Trinity University and in the United States in general, “there is a fundamental denial that race is a central feature in a ‘colorblind’ America” (Fluehr-Lobban 2005). Many people at Trinity claim they are not racist and “don’t see color.” This aligns with the egalitarian values our society lives by. Still, when I arrived at Trinity, I thought about why no one really wanted to talk about race. The more time I spent at Trinity the more I realized that some people wanted to talk about
race, but whites, in particular, did not. Granted, most did not have the intention of being racist, yet most practiced colorblind racism.

I have always felt that if someone chooses to not recognize my race, he or she cannot fully understand me. While it may be a social construct, race has played an extremely important role in my life. Race was what made me part of the “in-group” for the first 18 years of my life and then an “out-group” member in an instant, when I arrived at Trinity University.

My race helps explain who I am, where I come from, and where I am going. Race helps explain who I am because, through this social construct, I have questioned and reaffirmed my beliefs, formed and defended my opinions, and met and socialized with my friends. Race helps explain my family’s generational story. The story of where they came from, how they were treated by others, what they did and who they were has been affected by their race. This is also my story. Race will also have influence on where I go, whom I meet, and what I do in my life. For people to say “they don’t see my color” is saying they do not understand nor care about any of these things and, in turn, could not possibly understand me.

Growing up in my proposed “Latino habitus” has given me a unique perspective from which to view the world, the people in it, and the problems they face. While my point of view was not formed in a “mainstream white society”, it is important, valid, and essential as we, as a society, continue to shape the future. Latinos are currently the largest ethnic minority and the fastest growing in the United States. Latinos are an important part of our country’s history and will be essential to its future. Bonilla-Silva states “light-skinned” Latinos will be “honorary white” or white in the future (2006). I feel it is my responsibility as a light-skinned, middle class Latino who grew up in a low-income, working-class community, to always ensure that the voices of the poor, non-English speaking—the unheard in this country—are heard.

About the author

I am a Junior at Trinity University double majoring in Communication and International Studies with a concentration in Latin American Studies. I am originally from Pharr, Texas in the Rio Grande Valley along the United States-Mexico border. During my tenure at Trinity, I have served the community as a Resident Mentor helping first-year students adjust to college life. Additionally, I am an active member of Trinity’s Theatre Department where I have appeared in numerous performances. I am also heavily involved with Trinity’s television station—TigerTV—where I serve as Producer, Reporter and Lead Anchor for Newswave—Trinity’s weekly newscast. I hope to continue my career in academia past Trinity and enjoy a life full of several careers.
References


The Racialized Me

Cortney Heard

Cortney Heard analyzes her experiences growing up in “a privileged, upper-class African American family” on the suburban north side of San Antonio, Texas. She was one of the few black students present in the public schools she attended. Unlike her parents and grandparents, Cortney did not experience much in the way of overt racism at school or in her community. Nonetheless, she was pushed by her family to work hard and excel at school in order to be able to compete in a white-dominated world where “people are judged on both their race and their qualifications.”

I come from a privileged upper-class African American family where racial disparities never truly concerned me growing up. Raised on the North side of San Antonio, Texas, I was never immersed in the black community. I was brought up in a white community where I attended predominantly white schools. As a black woman, there are times when I think about race and times when I leave race on the backburner of my mind because I do not want to deal with it. Growing up, I tried very hard not to be involved in any struggles or discussions dealing with racism. I have never experienced any major hardships based solely on the color of my skin. I was aware of the racial disparities minority groups experience in the United States, but I did not personally concern myself with them since I believed that they did not drastically affect my personal everyday life.

Before college, I never truly looked at how the institutionally structured white-based systems have affected my family, in turn socializing me as an African American minority in the United States. Individuals, particularly whites, have made it socially acceptable to make racial jokes or slurs with the clarification or adjustment that they are not racist. I never understood why whites never claimed to be racist, but they always needed a clarifier for the things they said even though they were not truly racist. Unfortunately, it seems that, in current times, people are living in their own world, acting as if racism is no longer a relevant issue or pretending as if it does not exist.

Before coming to Trinity University, I saw myself steadily falling into this particular group of people. Using their dominant power, whites freely state that class, not race, is the deciding factor that creates the differences within the socioeconomic levels in the United States.

Racial structure is the totality of the social relations, frameworks and practices that reinforce white privilege. When race emerged, it formed a racialized social system/structure, referred to as white privilege, that awarded systematic privileges to whites over non-whites. Since students of color are actual or potential deviants of the institutionalized white privilege system, the majority works hard to hide it (Lewis 88). Racial ideology consists of racially-based frameworks used by individuals to explain and justify or challenge the racial status quo. The dominant race, whites in
this instance, imposes the original framework on which all other non-white groups base their racial ideological thinking either for or against the status quo. As a person of color, I feel that in order to challenge racism and hierarchical oppression it is necessary to understand the dominant racial group whose power and privilege are dependent on how it normalizes and makes unnoticeable the ways it gained, maintains, and perpetuates white supremacy/privilege.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s analysis of colorblind racism concentrates on describing four central frames or themes: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization. These frames describe the ways in which the dominant racial group, white individuals in America—particularly white males—understand, articulate, promote, influence and reinforce our current social hierarchy, making race appear invisible, as if it is no longer an issue. According to Bonilla-Silva, “these ideologies of the powerful are central in the production and reinforcement of the status quo” (Bonilla-Silva 2006:26). As a necessity, the ruling dominant group must convince itself and other minorities and out-groups that their place on the top of the social hierarchy has been justly earned through honest hard work. Being a black American, I was taught by my grandparents to be wary of white people. I was encouraged to keep a safe distance from them. It was, however, difficult for me to follow the advice my grandparents offered. My family and I reside in an area of San Antonio where, in the beginning, there were very few minorities resulting in my attendance at predominantly white schools. As a result, I had no choice but to interact with white individuals. My grandparents, having grown up during a very violent and racially charged time in the United States, believed that blacks should be wary of white people because they lied and exploited minorities, particularly blacks, for their own selfish benefit. Earlier generations of my family experienced oppression by whites in the form of slavery, Jim Crow policies, and segregation, which they can never completely forget and forgive; they are truly and understandably products of their time and environment.

Since the founding of the United States, racial ideologies believed and reinforced by many within the white dominant group allowed minority groups throughout the country to be exploited in the name of American democracy. The principles of liberalism are deeply imbedded in the United States and its citizens. These principles very strongly supported and justified racism and racial inequality. Despite popular opinion, liberalism should not be celebrated or glorified because many terrible things, such as slavery, relegation of African Americans into the out-group, and the creation of Jim Crow laws, were done in the name of democracy in the United States. Abstract liberalism involves using ideas associated with political and economic liberalism in an abstract manner to explain racial matters within society. Abstract liberalism promotes the idea that there are equal opportunities for everyone; equality among all racial groups is now achievable because gains made by the struggles that occurred during the 1960s Civil Right Movement have completely leveled out the playing field with regard to education and employment. This particular frame of colorblind racism allots everyone the same opportunities and choices, turning them into colorblind individuals who believe that discrimination is just a matter of individually isolated prejudice. Abstract liberalism is the rationalization of racial unfairness, ultimately attributing racial inequality to individual efforts and shortcomings. It is a manner of defending white privilege, stating that people are seen by their qualifications and not race. Abstract liberalism states that reparations since the Civil Rights Movement have been made in an effort to right the wrongs made in the past, in order to give everyone a fair chance. We are not living in a society where there is an equal playing field, yet colorblind racism has proven to be a conveniently easy way for many white Americans to ignore race. In reality, abstract liberalism just places a tiny bandage over the race problems being
hidden by the institutional and structural policies that create, promote and reinforce white privilege. Abstract liberalism obscures the institutional and structural policies put in place by a country founded upon slavery and racial inequalities as if power and privilege is not still in the possession of the dominant group—the white, propertied, upper-class.

Abstract liberalism comes in many forms (Bonilla-Silva 2006). It clearly reinforces the idea that whites have earned everything they have, when in reality their white privilege was developed from the exploitation of minorities, such as blacks who were forced into slavery. Abstract liberalism also promotes laissez-faire ideals, stating that time and people will balance out the playing field for all citizens without any unnecessary intervention or support from the government. It is not the government’s job to force integration and ensure equality with programs such as affirmative action; citizens must be able to decide that for themselves. To say that everyone has the same opportunities, choices, responsibilities, and concerns is just another way to justify the racial disparities created through the institutional and structural policies of the government.

Despite the social changes that have occurred throughout history, including the abolition of slavery, racial disparities are still rampant throughout society. Hence, this underlying ideology of abstract liberalism works as the marketing plan for the quintessential American Dream. Since we supposedly all have the same opportunities despite our outward appearance, abstract liberalism allows whites to blame poverty, crime, and drug use on minorities instead of focusing on how the institutional systems privilege the dominant white group. Abstract liberalism praises white individuals, claiming they have worked hard for and have earned everything that they have, essentially fulfilling the American Dream. On the other hand, people of color are blamed for what they have not achieved. This results in the creation of stereotypes and generalizations about certain minority groups, which include referring to blacks as lazy people on welfare. This frame of colorblind racism tells minorities, such as myself, that if we work hard, like white people, we too can attain the American Dream. Even my own family has ingrained this doctrine into me; I was taught by my grandparents that I had to work ten times harder than any white individual in order to succeed in life. I come from a family who believes that with God, intelligence, and an excellent work ethic anything is possible. My great-grandparents, whose parents were slaves, had nothing, but they worked hard and eventually bought five hundred acres of land in Louisiana, which, during those times, was rarely heard of. My immediate family has pushed me all of my life to work hard and learn everything I can in order to give myself an edge over whites, since people are judged on both their race and their qualifications.

Naturalization is the second frame that allows whites to justify racial inequality as something that is naturally occurring (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Naturalization is usually used in reference to social segregation by way of self-segregation. For years, the unearned privilege of being white has affected the residential patterns in the United States. White America has segregated Americans according to their race, creating a disproportionate and unequal distribution of wealth and resources among specific out-groups in certain areas, ultimately creating a society that does not provide equal opportunities for everyone. Race is an element that powerfully shapes African-Americans’ residential options; African-Americans and other minority groups, who do not benefit from the unearned privilege of being white, have been denied land and other means of socioeconomic equality (Alba, Logan, and Stults 2000:544). When the dominant group states that minorities, including blacks, segregate themselves, they are not acknowledging the history of race-based policies, such as redlining and discriminatory and exclusionary real estate practices that have made it difficult for people of color to own homes and property of their selection, wrongly minimizing them. Scholars “have
shown that overall residential segregation between whites and blacks remain astonishingly high and is receding at no more than a glacial pace” (Alba 544). In reality, it is not the minorities who are segregating themselves; it is the dominant white majority that separates itself from people of color. The white habitus in the United States is a “racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, emotions, and their views on racial matters” (Bonilla-Silva 2006:104). The term white habitus made me think about my own life, examining where I go to school, where I live, where I go, and what I do to have fun or relax. I fully acknowledge that I live in a world dominated by whiteness and white privilege. The white habitus “promotes a sense of group belonging and negative views about nonwhites” (Bonilla-Silva 104). My grandparents and parents planned and worked hard to build their dream homes. “Home ownership is a particularly important measure of black-white housing equity since African Americans have historically faced great difficulty in converting income gain into home ownership due to institutional and overt discrimination” (Conley 2001:267). When looking to purchase land both my grandparents and my parents ran into difficulties. In Louisiana, my grandparents wanted to live near Louisiana State University. Unfortunately, at that time, they were prevented from making the purchase because of the color of their skin. In the end, they had to build their home in a predominantly black lower-middle class neighborhood. They built a beautiful house that will never be sold for its true value and worth because of the neighborhood in which they live. My parents experienced the same type of discriminatory real estate practices in San Antonio. Twenty-three years ago they were not allowed to purchase a home in the Alamo Heights area because they were black. Alamo Heights, also referred to as Alamo Whites by many people, including minorities, was quite well known for their exclusionary real estate practices back then. As a result, my parents built their home on two-and-a-half acres of land in the hill country on the North side of San Antonio. Until recently, we were the only two black families living in a predominantly white neighborhood. Entry into more affluent neighborhoods is linked to the growing frequency of whites, given the slight socioeconomic differences between whites and blacks (Kluegal 525). The white habitus is not natural because racial segregation and isolation are not natural; they are forced. Living in a predominantly white upper-class area, I had the advantage of living in an almost completely crime-free residential location and had the opportunity to obtain a good education. Unfortunately, I was never able to connect with other blacks the way my parents did growing up in Louisiana. In San Antonio, the black population is small and concentrated in one area. Unlike my parents, I have not had a chance to immerse myself into the black community and culture. My family is proof that residential segregation is not a natural phenomenon among minority groups; the majority forces residential segregation.

Naturalization is also used to talk about school segregation, also calling it a natural phenomenon, where the disproportionate funding to schools in communities of color are justified and deracialized. Before coming to Trinity University, I attended public schools in the Northside Independent School District. At the time, the N.I.S.D was one of the best school districts in the city, educating a mainly white demographic. At these schools, I received a thorough education. Nevertheless, being raised in San Antonio, where the black community is an isolated minority group, I became frustrated with being the only black person in many of my classes in school. There were many times when I felt like the token black person in class, since I was asked many times by teachers to answer questions on behalf of the entire African American community. Despite my frustration, I received a good education. Before coming to Trinity, however, I was ignorant of the fact that different schools depending on where they are located do not provide students with the same thorough
education that I received. I became aware of this information when I began tutoring at Sam Houston High School, a predominantly black facility in the San Antonio Independent School District. At Sam Houston, they do not have the resources they need in order to provide books for all their students. In addition, many of the students cannot read or write past an elementary or middle school level. The No Child Left Behind Act causes and spreads many racial disparities. Sam Houston High School is seen as an institution where students learn the bare minimum in order to move onto the next grade level or to participate in a sport. This separation in residential and cultural life among whites and minorities, particularly other blacks, shaped my ignorance on certain racial matters such as education. Naturalization justifies racial inequality, blurring the fact that where people live determines where they can go to school, making the racialized policies that cause this to occur unfair. Colorblind racism is a direct result of the segregation and isolation of whites from minority communities.

Cultural racism is another way whites justify the modern deracialized society (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Since race as a biological phenomena has been disproven, racial differences among individuals still needs to be explained, and, consequently, culture is looked at as a marker of social, political, and economic inequality. This frame of colorblind racism relies on culturally based arguments to explain the socioeconomic standing of minorities, an example being that blacks do not succeed because they are lazy. Whites are able to maintain the status quo and their white privilege by not taking responsibility for the racial disparities they created and perpetuated in society; instead, whites blame minorities who are the victim. Cultural racism blames the social status of minorities on cultural values, which lack emphasis on education and hard work. My family, however, strongly stresses the importance of a higher level of education and working hard. I come from a family of educated individuals where all except for three after my great-grandfather earned a college degree. People, after meeting me, are surprised to learn that I am earning two major degrees and two minors degrees from a private liberal arts university while working at least two jobs. I am proof that not all blacks are lazy individuals who want everything handed to them. Cultural racism inappropriately applies some unfounded generalizations or stereotypes on the entire minority group.

Minimization is another way for the dominant racial group to explain that racism no longer exists (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Minimization allows whites to ignore claims of racial inequality from individuals and communities of color who are personally experiencing it. In essence, minimization gives whites another reason to disregard the racial disparities in society as complaints from minorities about their lack of social and economic success. I have heard whites say, in regards to the African-American community, that if blacks worked hard instead of complaining about nonexistent injustices, we would not have to beg for help. The minimization of racism suggests that discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life opportunities with sayings such as “It’s better now that it was in the past.” “Many whites admonish blacks for being ‘too race conscious’ in a world that would be better off if everyone would be ‘color-blind’” (Jaret and Reitzes 1999:732). Minimization also allow whites to be racist through the rhetoric of colorblind racism, by silencing the voice of the oppressed, telling those who are experiencing racism that they are being “hypersensitive” and allowing the oppressor to analyze and determine what is and is not considered to be racist (Bonilla-Silva 29). There are times, even at Trinity, when I feel that I have to censor myself in order to prevent myself from becoming the “‘hypersensitive’ African-American” woman. Most whites believe that discrimination only exists in isolated pockets, not affecting society as a whole.

Few whites claim to be racist, asserting that they do not judge by race, but by character. They
claim minorities are responsible for the current race problems that may exist. In contemporary society, minorities lag behind whites in almost every area of life, including education, wealth, and housing. Whites rationalize this disparity by saying that it is the product of market dynamics and naturally occurring phenomena, which is not the case. Racial disparities are the result of white privilege. White privilege is the unfair access to wealth and resources; it is unearned, allowing the dominant majority to claim it and not be held responsible for it. Unfortunately, as a result, minorities find themselves living in a society that rewards whites over non-whites.

References


Maddie Jager grew up as a white, middle-class girl in Seattle, Washington. Although her skin is lightly-tanned year-round, acknowledging her Chippewa heritage has always been optional. In her essay, Maddie explains that she has mainly identified as a white, Anglo American throughout her life. As a consequence, she has had the privileges of whiteness conferred upon her in a variety of ways. On the handful of occasions where she has had to personally contend with racist comments made about American Indians, Maddie has been confused about how she should respond, since she has “always been Indian mostly on paper and partly in appearance.”

In our society, some features or physical attributes that valued more than others, such as a flat stomach, a small nose, and tan skin. Living in a place like Seattle, Washington, it is a difficult feat to obtain naturally tan skin year round, and it is definitely noticed in the dreary winter. This might be one of the reasons that as a child and teenager my naturally brown skin was pointed out and commented on constantly. Because my skin tone is not dark enough for me to be classified easily as black and yet not the right shade to be thought of as Latina, I get the question “what are you?” almost every week. Technically, I am Italian, Danish, Swedish, English, and Native American, but what that question really means is “why are you that color all year round, and why do you look so different from your sisters?” Growing up in a mostly white, middle class community, my skin color was always seen as an advantage, a positive feature; I had tan, olive skin in the winter when everyone else was complaining about being pasty. I never had to worry about being looked at twice in a nice store, or being pulled over for no reason. Though I am a minority in the technical sense, because of the advantages of my economic background and skin color, the amount of negative experiences due to my skin color have been minimal.

Though I have never met the tribe I come from, the Chippewa, and have never participated in any sort of Native American cultural ritual, I have still identified myself as American Indian throughout my life. I consider myself a prime example of what Joane Nagel calls individual ethnic renewal, “when an individual acquires or asserts a new ethnic identity by reclaiming a discarded identity, replacing or amending an identity in an existing ethnic repertoire, or filling a personal ethnic void” (1995:948). My Indian ethnicity has always been optional; I have always been able to drop or reclaim it depending on the situation. This has been possible for me because of collective ethnic renewal, which was the resurgence of American Indian pride, brought about by a variety
of factors that led to the Native American ethnicity having a more positive connotation (Nagel 1995:948).

Because my mother, the parent from whom I receive the Native American genes, was already figuring out her ethnic identity during the Civil rights era, she did not think to classify herself as Native American. The collective ethnic renewal had not yet become widespread enough for her to consider identifying as American Indian because not only did she live in an urban area and have no contact with our tribe, but there were no cultural, social, or material benefits yet. Because of this timing, I am the first in my immediate family to not only attempt to identify as an Indian, but try to take advantage of the benefits as well. I think of myself as a “new Indian” (Kelly and Nagel 2002:284) or even a wannabe Indian because of how flippant I can be with my ethnicity, as well as how little an effort I have made to be active in the Native American culture. If it were not for the fact that I “look Indian”, I believe that I would do as my two sisters do, and identify only as Caucasian. I have the same debate Nagel and Kelly address in their article about ethnic re-identification, the question of which is worse, ignoring my Native American ancestry altogether, or recognizing and acknowledging it, but only superficially (2002:285).

Although I know that I am of another race besides Caucasian, those who see me and make judgments on one glance do not. Because of this, I have often received the advantages that whiteness can bring. Even though the racial structure of the United States usually works to my benefit, I still live in a racially structured society (Frankenberg 1993:1). I do not want to seem like I have always been racially aware and that I have suffered any hardship in my life because of my somewhat ambiguous skin color. I have had a few incidents which I believed to stem from racist attitudes, and I have been mistaken for other races numerous times, but, overall, society has allowed me to pass as white at my whim. While thinking about a possible topic for this paper, I debated about whether to focus on the confusion that comes with looking different from my family and having an ancestry I do not participate in, or whether to talk about the advantages of being white that I am just now acknowledging. One of these advantages, being categorized as “normal” or avoiding prejudice other minorities have to encounter, is detailed in the article “Chivalry, ‘Race’ and Discretion at the Canadian Border”.

This discussion on racial, ethnic, and cultural profiling is exceptionally relevant to me because although I have never lived in Canada, I have made over 16 trips over the U.S./Canadian border in the last 3 years. Because I am what the article refers to as “low risk”, meaning a female, American, and with no obvious disabilities, I have almost never had a problem at the border. The one time I was temporarily detained was when I was 17 and forgot to have my parents sign a note attesting that I was not running away from home. However, I was treated extremely well, and after a quick call to my parents, was released. On the other hand, I have been on a bus with immigrants from Africa and Asia who, for no real reason have been questioned for over 20 minutes and then released, with no explanation. Though it is denied that race is officially taken into consideration at the border, one Border Officer stated that “some passports are better than others” (Pratt and Thompson 2008:627).

Until recently, I have always assumed that I have avoided trouble because I am polite and always have my documents in order, but, in fact, I have no idea if the other passengers act the exact same way yet are treated differently. Another incident I have witnessed had less to do with racial profiling and instead involved cultural profiling. I was traveling on a Greyhound bus to Vancouver, B.C. from Seattle, Washington when we stopped at customs at the Border. All the passengers lined up to approach the officers with their paperwork, and everyone made it through except for two
men and a woman traveling together, all in their early twenties. From first glance, one might have labeled the trio as hippies or slackers because of their dress. After looking at their paperwork, the officers ended up questioning them for over an hour, and eventually not releasing them, telling the bus to leave without them. Eventually we discovered that the reason the three had been detained is because one of them was arrested for possession for marijuana as an 18 year old, but never charged. With that record you are allowed to cross the border, and, in fact, the officers had no real reason to detain them except for the suspicion that they might possibly try to buy and/or bring weed back across the border. Cultural profiling is obviously usually less serious than this example but can often be similar to race when assumptions are made about a person simply because of their culture. For example, a person might be detained at the border not because they are black but because they are obviously Muslim. The officers in the article admit that there are assumptions about certain races that they act on, but because these assumptions are sometimes proven true, it is OK to continue acting on them (Pratt and Thompson 2008:629).

Whereas my lack of incident with the Canadian Border was what showed me the advantages that certain races and ethnicities get, multiple specific occurrences with the Seattle Police Department have illustrated the breaks that certain types of people can receive. When I was sixteen, a few of my friends and I were caught in a parked car with open containers of alcohol and with the keys in the ignition. Technically, because the car was on and the underage driver had open containers in the car, the driver should have been given a driving under the influence ticket, and the rest of us given minor in possession tickets. However, even after the police found more alcohol in the car than we initially told them about, the cops ran all our licenses, asked us to step out of the car, and then informed us that if we could find one person to pass a sobriety test, we would all be able to leave scot-free. After the driver went through one sobriety test, we were allowed to go because the cop said “we looked like good kids”. Everyone I was with that night was white, wearing “preppy” clothing, and, guessing by the car and our clothes, obviously middle class. At the time, I thought nothing of what had happened except for that I was overjoyed at my luck, not realizing that what had happened was extremely odd. I have no idea if the actions of those policemen would have been any different if they had found 4 black teenagers in the car instead of my friends and I, but according to the article “Racism and Classism in the Youth Justice System: Perspectives of Youth and Staff”, “62% of youth in custody in 1999 were of color, with Black youth having higher custody rates” (Holley and VanVleet 2006:47).

According to Holley and VanVleet, the advantages I have seemed to receive from the police may be an example of institutional racism and classism. In this case, racism and classism are not just beliefs of an individual, but actions that affect other people (2007:48). In my situation I was not affected negatively, but it might have been an example of oppression because “systematic oppression results not only in disadvantages for members of subordinated groups, but also unearned privileges for members of dominant groups” (Holley and VanVleet 2006:49). Holley and VanVleet address my issue of ignorance about the advantages I unknowingly receive by stating “whites are privileged based on their racial group membership. They do not have to deal with the negative stereotypes that our society has created about people of color and are socialized so that they are unaware of the unearned privileges that they result of their racial group membership” (2006:49).

Holley and VanVleet argue that discrimination and prejudice are not just individual acts that one person decides to undertake, but are instead part of a larger system in which assumptions about certain groups of people are ingrained into beliefs and practices. Discrimination can also occur when a structure fails to see the problems of anothers situation, such as Holley and VanVleet’s
example of systems using practices like “relying on telephones for contacting families when not all families have telephones, requiring families to keep appointments when transportation is not universally available, and not providing child care for families with young children” (2006:50). Because I have never had to deal with problems of these magnitudes, and instead have been able to skate out of trouble such as an MIP, I have become reliant on good luck and the assumption that there will always be a way out.

This belief of invincibility is obviously not universal in all Caucasians, but one way that race has affected my life is that, for a while, I felt that, in certain situations, I was immune to punishment or trouble, that certain things went my way because I was lucky, not because there was a system at work that made it easier for people of my background and appearance to succeed. Another example is that three months after I narrowly escaped a ticket for underage alcohol possession, I was in a car with someone who had been drinking and was pulled over. The police spotted a liquor bottle in the backseat, administered a breathalyzer test, and determined the driver was too drunk to drive. Believing I was sober enough to drive the 5 blocks home, I volunteered to drive and was also given a breathalyzer. The result was well above the legal limit of a twenty one year old, not to mention a sixteen year old. Again, I should have received a ticket at the very least, and my driver taken to jail for drunk driving, but instead we were given a reprimand and driven home.

Though I am still not sure whether my lenient experiences with the police are because of the area I lived in, the personal experiences of the police I encountered, luck, or something larger, my obliviousness of my luck is an indicator of how privileged I was. To not think anything of escaping two major offenses in a matter of months when I was obviously guilty proves my own ignorance of the experiences others go through, especially those of other races.

My oblivion might have been a result of associating or choosing friendships only with those similar in race and class to me. Friendship choices are extremely important, especially in younger years because they are a sign of personal beliefs and prejudices, or lack thereof, and also influence exposure to other cultures. Because I ended up forming friendships with girls very similar to me in race, class status, and beliefs, I wound up developing a form of “color-blindness”, or “a mode of thinking about race organized around an effort to not see, or at any rate not to acknowledge race differences” (Frankenberg 1993:142). As a teenager, I went to a fairly ethnically diverse private high school, with about 65% of students being Caucasian, about 16% Asian, 11% African American, 5% Hispanic, and the remaining students in the “other” category. Despite this racial diversity, most students were of the same middle-class economic standing as me and all lived in very similar neighborhoods.

Though I recognized that some of my peers were of different races and backgrounds than me, I never took into consideration how these differences might affect our individual experiences in life and, more specifically, in our high school. It was a common acknowledgement that girls of a certain race, such as the African Americans, tended to hang out together, sit next to each other in class, and sit together at lunch. The separation was not so drastic that no one from different races spoke to each other or were friends but instead just seemed natural that those of apparently similar backgrounds and appearances would want to affiliate with each other. It was still noticeable and gossip-worthy however, when someone who was obviously different became closely integrated into a specific group. Now that I look back, the choice of a best friend was a significant one in that those who had “random” best friends, meaning that they did not seem to belong together, were commented on and wondered about.
The significance of a “best friend” is acknowledged in the article “Friendship Choices of Multiracial Adolescents: Racial Homophily, Blending, or Amalgamation”. The authors comment that “best friends not only indicate with whom an individual perceives having similar experience and characteristics, but also mutual acceptance” (Doyle and Kao 2004:6-7). My best friend throughout high school was a Caucasian girl named Liz, who, like me, had American Indian heritage, though it was not apparent from her appearance, and lived in a neighborhood extremely close to mine. Looking at my “choice” with Doyle and Kao’s theory, it can be concluded that I thought of myself as white. Instead of affiliating with a different group that were obviously minorities, I befriended the all white group of friends, all from similar middle schools and with comparable financial backgrounds and values.

Though a few of my close friends were “new Indians” like me, in that they had Indian ancestry, acknowledged it, but did not participate in the culture at all, none of them looked anything other than Caucasian. Because of this, I was the only person in our group that was actually acknowledged as a whole as being Indian, and was the only person that could pass at all for a different race. I would not consider myself especially sensitive to comments or jokes about being Indian or my skin color, but there was one instance that made me more sensitive to how people look at me. I was hanging out with some friends, one being a boy I had just met that day, when I took someone’s baseball hat and put it on. The hat was white, red, and blue, and I was wearing jeans and a white shirt. Ethan, the boy I had met earlier that day looked at me and said “Hey! That hat matches you exactly!” Confused, I asked where I had red on, and he replied it matches your skin! I cannot remember if I ever mentioned that I was part Native American, but I do know that I immediately assumed he was referencing the old term “redskins” for Indians, and immediately become embarrassed and confused.

I had never had my heritage be portrayed as anything other than unique and exotic, and did not even really identify with being Native American very much, so I did not know whether I was allowed to be offended or how to respond. I have always been Indian mostly on paper and partly in appearance, so responding to insults and rude jokes can be difficult. Am I allowed to take jokes about interpreting smoke signals and having a tendency towards alcoholism personally, or because I have separated myself from the culture, do I have to let the jokes go? These types of questions are just part of the puzzle I have to solve when it comes to the amount I identify as Caucasian or Native American, as well as whether I do benefit from being white, and if so, how much?

When first contemplating this assignment, I was under the impression that I was not affected by racial systems in the United States at all. Through reading about various issues and opinions concerning personal ethnic identity as well as discrimination, I have come to realize that I, in fact, have been affected by pre-conceived prejudices that have luckily been positive so far. It is important to realize that though my success in life is mostly because of my hard work, I have definitely received breaks and free passes in situations that others do not. The need of our society to be able to label each other into certain ethnic or racial categories has shown me that being hard to label and define is not a sign of an identity crisis or being a race imposter, but instead is another facet of who I am.
Both Obvious and Subtle

References


Who Will You Let Me Be?

Claire Murphy-Cook

Claire Murphy-Cook comes from what, in her words, can only be described as an alternative family. She has two lesbian mothers who have been in a relationship for nearly thirty years. Both her mothers are non-Hispanic whites. Her father is a mixed-race, gay man from Brazil who was asked by her mothers to be their sperm donor. He has, nonetheless, been an active presence in Claire’s life. In her essay, she describes how traveling to Brazil with him as a teenager gave her a new sense of her own identity in racial and ethnic terms.

To be mixed race means not having a place in any defined racial categories. It means being defined by standards that do not recognize who you are or where you came from, checking too many bubbles on Scantrons, and puzzling over census categorizations.¹ What is it exactly that places us in these arbitrary categories? How does a person come to terms with the gaps in society’s perceptions about you and the way you see yourself?

I come from what can only be described as an alternative family. I have two lesbian mothers who have been together for almost thirty years. After meeting and living in Texas for a number of years, they moved to Seattle, where one of my mothers had been accepted to a graduate program at the University of Washington. After moving to Seattle, they decided to have a child and began looking for a sperm donor. Around this time, one of my mothers, Mary, met and befriended a Brazilian immigrant named Leandro, also gay, while working as a social worker.² A short while later, my mothers and Leandro decided that he would act as their sperm donor. They had always envisioned a situation in which their children would know and have a relationship with their (my) father, and did not want to use something as anonymous as a sperm bank.

In April of 1989, I was born, and my father legally signed over his parental rights. This decision was not made in an effort to cut him out of my life. In reality, one of the reasons Leandro gave up his rights was to make adoption easier. Because of the federal government’s issues with gay marriage and essentially all forms of domestic unions, while my birth mother, Sheila, had parental

¹Before 2000, there was no way for multi-racial persons to identify themselves as such on government census forms. Instead, they were forced to choose a single race category to define their identity (Morning 2003). I have found this to also be true of many forms asking for a race categorization, and I would usually put myself into the “other” category if there was no “mixed” race category available.

²Leandro moved from Brazil in the mid 1980’s. He held a green card for many years before becoming a U.S. citizen in 2002. This means that my sister and I are technically the second generation of an immigrant family. I never realized this fact until very recently and never considered myself to be “second generation.” It was never something discussed while I was growing up.
rights, my other my mother had to go through the adoption process in order to gain legal custody of me. This was the only way my mothers could have joint legal custody of me.

Despite our lack of a legal relationship, my father was still a part of my life growing up. A few years later, my mothers decided that they wanted to have another child. In the spirit of equal experiences, my other mother, Mary, would conceive and carry my sibling and Leandro would be her father. In January of 1993, my sister Sarah was born, and the same legal process occurred with my mother, Sheila, adopting her.

Honestly, although I am aware of my race and the way it affects my place in our stratified society, my association with the LGBT community and that aspect of my background has always been more of a focus than race. Part of the reason for my increased focus on this aspect as opposed to race is probably because, while I pass as white until Leandro is identified as my biological father, my unique family composition is obvious with one visit to my house. Growing up, I was often thrust into the role of explaining what it meant to be gay and how it was that I could have two mothers and parents who were not married. While I did not particularly enjoy playing this role nor sought it out, it was a position that I occupied until the end of high school. Even sometimes in college I am forced back into my old role explaining to some people, who may have been more sheltered growing up, what exactly my family means. Now, however, with the facts less visible, I often choose not to explain because the role has grown tiring over the years.

On the other hand, no one has ever directly asked me about how a white women and darker skinned man could have a child together; this is a question not usually posed publicly, especially in the politically-correct, post-Civil Rights Era we live in and certainly not in a left wing, “progressive” city like Seattle. However, I realize if I were the product of a more traditional multiracial family, race would probably have been more important to me.

Though I am aware that American society perceives me as white, I view myself as half Irish (white) and half Brazilian (Latina), someone multiracial. Growing up, there was always an emphasis on both of these identities; I can remember numerous times when my parents told me that I was “not just white.” They also told me that because of societal perceptions of my race that I was treated better than if than if my skin were darker. They were not so overt as to tell me that I had white privilege, but we always talked about how my dad used to be stopped and searched in the airport all the time. Then my moms would bring up how we never got stopped or searched at the airport, and tell my sister and I that it was because we were two white ladies traveling with young daughters. Although never explicitly mentioned as such, I have always been both aware and wary of my white privilege.

My younger sister, Sarah, and I do not look anything alike. She has always had a much darker complexion and skin tone, with dark wavy hair and brown eyes. For this reason, it is always easier for people to tell or to accept that she is half Brazilian. Since we have the same father but different mothers, we are technically half-sisters. Despite this fact, we were raised together and we have always thought of each other as “real” sisters. Since we grew up with the same family situation and experiences, we are as much sisters as anyone can be.

My father grew up in a wealthy family in the northeast of Brazil in a town about a half hour from the coast called Campina Grande. He too came from a mixed background, although multiracialism in Brazil is very different from the United States. In the United States, he is considered Latino,

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3 Even before September 11th, as a dark skinned, non-American citizen who traveled alone to South America quite often, he was often stopped and searched or held up at customs for a long period of time.

4 In the United States, the existence of the “one drop” rule and the long standing traditions of racial segregation create a divisive black white dynamic. This leads to tensions in the formation of mixed racial groups. In Brazil on the other
because of his relatively dark skin, while in Brazil his skin color shows his high class and privilege. My father also comes from a racially diverse background; his maternal grandmother was an indigenous native who married a white Dutch descendant, and his paternal grandfather was black man who married a white women. This amount and variety of racial mixing is not uncommon in Brazil.

One of my closest friends since middle school is a girl named Marina who is also of mixed race. I grew up in a fairly diverse community and many of my friends were also of mixed race. Her father is a Mexican immigrant and her mother is white, but she and her siblings are much darker and are seen as Latino by society. In many ways, our racial experiences have been very similar yet at the same time there are many differences. She is beautiful, and there are few who would deny this fact. Despite this, she has always hated the way she looks. Her skin is a light brown, but when we were younger and she spent a significant amount of time outside, her skin was much darker. When we got into high school, my friend started wearing lots of makeup, trying to lighten her skin with power and foundation, avoided the sun, and put on lots of sunscreen when she did go out, in order to prevent her skin from getting any darker.

I never used to understand why she did this. Even with what I knew about whiteness and the privileges associated with it, I always thought this somehow would not affect her. Growing up in the post-Civil Rights Movement era, I always thought discrimination was motivated and justified by insecurity and the perception of threat. How then, with this understanding, could anyone perceive my cute young female friend as any sort of threat and treat her differently in a negative way. It was not until recently that I realized that she was not covering to avoid discrimination, but rather to fit in. Whenever we went to parties, concerts, or even to school, she was the one who was hit on or approached by guys because of her attractive and exotic looks. It was not until this last year that she told me how uncomfortable that had always made her feel, not because she did not like the attention but because she felt objectified for looking different. With this, it all began to make sense— the makeup and the hair straightening was about fitting in and looking “normal.” Since I do not have dark skin, hair or eyes, I appear much whiter than she ever has; in spite of this, I never tried to cover my Brazilian heritage. For me, the impulse was quite the opposite. I have always sought recognition of my heritages and have always wanted to feel more connected with my identity.

hand, a long-standing tradition of racial mixing has created a different sort of stratification, literally along color shade lines. This should not be interpreted to mean divisions between the classes do not exist, because this is untrue. As a product of decades of discrimination and oppression, the whiteness ideal still exists. Over the past century, there has been a movement to “whiten” the culture through intermarriage. (Daniel 2003)

The longstanding idea of Brazil as a “Racial Democracy” is one that is simply untrue. Even though the Brazilian system of segregation and repression is different than in the US, with less overt official discrimination, it is still very prevalent throughout the country. Studies have found that Brazilians with darker skin are less likely to receive higher paying jobs and are more likely to live in poverty. (Twine 2005)

In Brazil the idea of “mestiçagem” or racial mixture, is a prevalent idea used to celebrate the racially diverse society and downplay the existence of racism. These ideas are also tied heavily to the whitening ideal, which celebrate racial mixing as a means of lightening the entire population. Studies have also found that Brazilian culture extols light skin and Caucasian features, like blue eyes and straight hair, labeling them as the standards of beauty. (Twine 2005)

Kenji Yoshinos article (Yoshino 2000) provides an excellent description of the struggle Briana was going through at the time. In an effort to pass as white she affected characteristics associated with whiteness, like light skin and light eyes (she also sometimes wore blue contacts.) Characteristics she was unable to change like the texture of her hair, which is very dark and thick, a relic from her Incan heritage, she made an effort to cover them. By keeping her hair short and always straightening it, she kept its “foreignness” from being less obtrusive and obvious. Interestingly enough there are worries among scholars that the introduction of the multiracial identity, will cause more people to identify as white, instead of relegating themselves to minority status. (Spickard 2003)

Which in this case means white.

In somewhat the same way, Mary Waters describes the manner in which recent immigrants to New York City hold
Who Will You Let Me Be?

My chance to further explore my Brazilian identity came when I was in eighth grade as my family planned our first trip to my father’s native country. While my family has always been middle class, there was never time or enough money to pay for all of us to get visas and plane tickets to Brazil, though my father flew there all the time. Neither my sister nor I had ever met any family on Leandro’s side, nor did we speak enough Portuguese to communicate effectively with non-English speaking family members.

That first trip to Brazil was one of the most powerful, life-changing experiences I have ever had. It is hard to feel a connection with a place and culture that you have never experienced on a large scale. After spending over a month there, I came back to the States with a renewed sense of self and connection to my heritage. One of the most powerful experiences I had in Brazil was simply having people come up to me in stores and on the beach to ask me a question or for directions. Although I barely spoke enough Portuguese to tell them where to go or that I did not understand what they were saying, the simple recognition by these strangers that I could easily be and, in fact, was one of them changed the way I thought about myself and afforded me a sense of belonging.

After having powerful self-discovery experiences in Brazil and coming back home, I was prouder than ever of my heritage. I came back to school wearing Brazil t-shirts and put a Brazilian flag up in my locker. While in a market in Recife, my dad took my sister and me to a little shop tucked away in the back of the hall where two old voodoo priestesses blessed us and explained their version of Brazilian folk religion. After my dad finished translating, the women gave my sister and me each two simple beaded necklaces representing our protective goddess. Deeply moved by this experience, I also began wearing the beads as a bracelet, taking power and strength from another aspect of my heritage.

My sister was equally moved and empowered by our experiences in Brazil. While we were in Brazil, she bought a bunch of sarongs with the Brazilian flag on them from a market. Upon our arrival back in the States, she hung all of them on her walls, covering her formerly purple walls with the green and yellow of the flag.

I found that back in the United States I did not receive the same recognition of my Brazilian identity as when we were there. Whenever someone finds out that I am half Brazilian, they always respond very positively, telling me how “cool” it is. However, as time progresses my ethnicity usually becomes a joke, “oh don’t say that around her she’s ‘ethnic.’” Not surprisingly, my multiracial friends, who appear darker, are never subject to the same doubts about their heritage as I am.

In general, my white peers joke about my identity or try to tell me that I am “not really” Latina. I have found that when I tell other “minorities” that my father is Brazilian and that I consider myself multiracial, they are more supportive than their white counterparts. For quite a while, I have wondered why this is the case and thought this situation would be much more likely to be the other way around. Nonetheless, it always made me feel better to have these people stick up

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10 Meaning, in reality, white people
11 This initial acceptance and interest in other “minority” cultures is in line with Bonilla-Silva’s ideas about color blind racism in accordance with their egalitarian views. (Bonilla-Silva 2006)
12 From the amount of worry in the minority communities over the possibility of the “multicultural movement” and its effects on the size of these populations, this begins to make sense. Many representative from minority interest groups, like the NAACP, worry that the new push to have people identify both of their races, will cause the opposite and instead people will begin to identify only as white, even though society does not see them this way. (Harris, 620-2) With this knowledge it begins to make sense that seeing a “white” girl identify as part Latino would be a positive thing to those worried about this.
for me in conversations where my white peers jest about my “ethnicity.”

Even though I am well aware of my white privilege and its impacts on my life, there have still been many times in my life when I wished my whiteness were not so obvious or rather than my Brazilian ethnicity was more apparent. There was a time when I was younger, right after we got back from Brazil, when I would have given anything to be darker and to have more of my peers accept my identity. In the subsequent years, I simply learned to ignore people making made fun of me. I stopped trying to fight with them or tell them that I was “just as Latina as Marina!”

Recently, since entering college, I have become more defensive about my heritage. I realized that it simply was not right to let other people degrade something so important to me. This year, I have pictures of my whole family up in my room, including some of my dad and I, so that I can “justify” that I am Brazilian. Now, when people make fun of me or say that I am not “really” Brazilian, I can point to my dad and say “why not?”

As I mature and work to discover who exactly I am, my race and ethnicity will be an important issue. Despite its importance, I do not think it will ever be the most important issue in my life. It has and probably will always be second to my family situation and support of gay rights. The fact that my race has never been as important to me shows that it is not something that society sees and expresses the depth of my white privilege. In short, I have the time to worry about something other than my race because of my whiteness.

It has taken me a long time to come to terms with my whiteness and learn to accept that people do not see me as anything other than a white girl. These revelations have also come with the acceptance that despite what society sees, I can be half Brazilian and identify that way even if not everyone is willing to accept it. In the future, I hope to continue to be able to stand up for myself and keep the strength I feel due to my heritage. If I have children and depending on what their race and ethnicity is I will always try to let them choose how to define themselves, in addition to making them aware of societal perceptions, just like my parents did with my sister and me.

Really, it all comes back down to those tricky standardized forms. I always stumbled at the beginning of the form, choosing which bubble to fill in for “race,” but always recovered quickly. A simple scan for “other,” “mixed,” or “multiracial,” usually solves the problem. It is only continuing down the form and stumbling on questions about “Father” and “Mother” that truly make me balk. My father’s emergency contact information really is no use to you and why in the world does father always come first? These are the things that make me pause and the most uncomfortable. My whiteness keeps race from being a larger concern or issue to me, instead it is our society’s objection to my family for other reasons that has become a much larger part of my life.

As I have grown up, I have learned to simply ignore the confusion and sometimes jest my cultural, ethnic and racial background can cause. Instead, I fill in the bubble on the form, cross out “Father” and “Mother” and write “Parent 1” and “Parent 2” because I know that while society may not understand what I am, I do.

However, my tendency to highlight my connection to my darker heritage, makes more sense in a Brazilian context. Along with the tendency of Brazilians to highlight the racial diversity of their heritage, Sociologist France Winndance Twine notes, “In contrast to their working class counterparts in the United States, [working class Brazilians] usually emphasized what they shared with Afro-Brazilians.” (Twine 71)

13 Sometimes I wonder if to those who know my family history the silent reply is simply because he’s not really your father, implying that because he did not raise me that is somehow less legitimate.
About the author

I am a History and Communications major, originally from Seattle, Washington. This essay was written during the fall semester of my sophomore year at Trinity. During the fall of my junior year, I studied abroad in Budapest, Hungary. Although I loved my time abroad, I am overjoyed to return to San Antonio’s amazing Mexican food. At Trinity, I am a DJ on KRTU and work on “Studio 21” on TigerTV.

References


Socialized into Whiteness

Roxana Rojas

In this essay, Roxana Rojas discusses the development of her Latina identity as a second-generation Mexican immigrant who grew up in a predominantly white Anglo environment in the Chicago, Illinois metropolitan area. She analyzes the repercussions of her socialization towards “whiteness” at school and in the community while remaining engaged in intense relationships with her Mexican parents and Mexican American extended family. Roxana explains how her own sense of her self has been challenged from two opposing directions.

...“When I first met you, I thought you were one of those Hispanics, you know? I mean, you seemed like stuck up, like a white wannabe.”

—My boyfriend, 2008

W hen I heard my partner say this to me regarding the moment when we first met, it was not the romantic love story I expected to have him reconstruct. This simple line repeated itself in my head and in my subconscious. After hearing it, I adamantly tried to defend (and prove) my Latina-ness. It was the first time my authenticity as a Mexican-American was challenged and questioned by another Mexican-American. I found myself in a serious identity crisis—more so than I already was, having been thrown into a predominantly Anglo institution of higher education. I had little to prepare me for this environment. Besides the academic preparation, there was not much else and I had to rely on my cultural and religious background to get me through. In the fall of 2006, I had come to Trinity University with a very strong sense of who I was and very conscious of my Mexican-American-ness. I had learned since childhood that I was different from the rest (“the rest” being a white majority), so, by the age of twenty, I knew in what ways I was/am different. Yet, there was something disconcerting about my partner’s comment that sent me into the exploration and examination of my perceived whiteness, this sort of privilege.

Mexican-American women at predominantly Anglo institutions of higher learning, like myself, often define themselves as being perceived as the “other” and are marginalized as result of their differences (García 2004:145). This makes the university experience much more difficult to navigate because there is a constant negotiation with responsibilities that are expected of ourselves as daughters of traditional Mexican immigrant parents who often need our help navigating the English-speaking world. As García states, “The lives of second generation individuals are ones
characterized by tensions, conflicts, and negotiations between themselves and their immigrant parents and between themselves and the larger society” (2004: 15). This experience challenges the longstanding theory of assimilation and asserts that “adjustment to the new society does not necessarily erase all of their culture and that assimilation is more a “process through which immigrant groups experience varying degrees of integration into American society” (García 2004:15). Therefore, any type of desire to advance is not the result of wanting to be perceived as white or to fit in as white, but rather as an attempt to reach personal and familial goals. I propose that the “you are selling out” attitude comes from third generation Mexican-Americans whose parents don’t have immigrant experience and thus do not subscribe to the same set of values as do first and second generations. They tend to reject institutions and view social mobility as buying into the “white man’s system,” not as a way to do better and help other Latinos. Yet, even within the immigrant experience and desire to move upward, there are contradictions. There are barriers specifically for women as a result of machismo and marianismo that emphasize the idea that women should be mothers and concentrate their activities in the home; doing otherwise is considered deviant (Doob 1999: 197). The idea of an educated, social mobility aspiring Latina is like desecrating the sanctity of La Virgen María. Thus, the barriers are many, but the reasons to overcome them are even more numerous and outweigh them enormously.

The complexity of relations among Latinos considering themselves Hispanic or white and those Latinos who identify ethnically with their Latino ancestry, be it Colombian, Cuban, Mexican, etcetera, is such that there are schisms created among Latinos and on the personal level even between family members. There are many reasons for which one may wish to pass for white or be seen as whiter. Additionally, there are certain “advantages” that allow for being perceived as white. Some of these so-called advantages include lighter skin, no discernable accent in speaking standard English, a college degree, circle of friends that include many whites, a private school education, and even certain manners of dress. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva categorizes this type of Latinos into a group called “honorary whites.” The Latinos that can gain admittance to this group are typically lighter-skinned, college educated, and include those married to whites, those with higher income (higher class distinction), those who are half Latino-half white, and so forth. Generally, any Latino with characteristics that place him or her in a position that is “significantly better off than the collective black (the last group in Bonilla-Silva’s proposed triracial order of racial stratification)” can be included in the “honorary white” category (Bonilla-Silva 2006: 194). This is where I come in: relatively light-skinned, no accent to give away my ethnicity, private schooled, and yes, most of my friends have been white. So is it my fault that I grew up in a predominantly Anglo environment? My Latina cultural capital is questioned because of these features and I am often taken for a Hispanic or of non-Latino roots. Once, I was asked if I was Italian and the woman looked disappointed at having guessed wrong; she pursed her lips and squinted, in a perplexed sort of way, after I said I was Mexican. She followed by saying, “Well, you don’t look Mexican.” Well of course once again, she felt that I didn’t have the stereotypical dark-skin and the accent to give my ethnicity away.

There is significant privilege in being able to be classified as an “honorary white.” But that same perceived privilege results in negative perceptions of who I am and what I stand for. My own extended family and other Mexican-Americans tend to see my “privileged” status as a result of my lack of identification with my heritage. According to Bonilla-Silva, many Latinos who would

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1I believe there to be a difference between those who call themselves Hispanic and those who call themselves Latino. This difference is namely that those self identifying as Latinos have a closer connection to their particular ethnic background, whereas those who self identify as Hispanics simply identify as such to differentiate from whites or to designate non immigrant status.
be a part of the “honorary” group often classify themselves as “white”; in fact, 60% of them do so (2006:187). Mexicans are not generally considered a part of the “honorary white” group due to the high level of immigrant population that comprises the Mexican population in the United States but, once again, certain exceptions can be made if the “prerequisites” have been met. As Bonilla-Silva states, those certain honorary whites may be “believing that they are different (better) than those [he] argue[s] likely to comprise the collective black category,” there is a notion that these “honorary whites” have a sense of haughtiness that accompanies them (2006:186). Though this can be true for some, there are Latinos that may be perceived as a part of the honorary white category who do not necessarily identify with that category. The fact that the Latinos considered a part of the honorary white category might be acquiring “white-like racial attitudes” and distancing themselves “from the members of the . . . collective black” (2006:186) makes all possible honorary white Latinos suspect of having this same “I’m not one of them” attitude in regards to Latinos who would be considered as a part of the collective black group (recent Latino immigrants, darker-skinned Latinos etc).

“That ‘goody two shoes’ thinks she’s better than us because she goes to a private school. She thinks she’s so smart, she’s always correcting us. She even dresses like a white kid.”

—My cousin at a family gathering, 1998

As a result of this type of perception held about honorary whites,² there is a sense of scorn towards this group or those perceived as part of it by those who don’t identify with it. Common terms used to refer to these Latinos include “coconuts” and “sellouts.” Often, I have felt a sense of scorn from family who feel like I am stuck-up since I go to a four-year private college instead of Palo Alto, the community college of the barrio, I sometimes tend to use vocabulary not commonly used among them (seen as my way of showing off) and have even been looked down upon for the way I dress (seen as preppy and white). I don’t have the “urban” look and therefore am not “in.” All of these characteristics, though, are a result of the way I was brought up. I grew up in Addison, a small German town outside of Chicago. My father was able to purchase a house very cheaply as a result of connections his older brother had with a real estate agent from whom he and three other brothers bought houses in the same area. I was always enrolled in a private school and thus always wore a uniform. My parents have always upheld the value of a good education because they saw it as a way for us to have a better life than they did; a way to reach the fulfillment of the American Dream. Mexican immigrant parents generally instill this “dream in their American-born daughters, grounding them in their immigrant world view—a belief in striving for a better life” (García 2004:145). They made every sacrifice—even paying for a private Catholic education—necessary to ensure what they thought would be the best education for my siblings and me. Growing up, all my friends were always white; I never had any interactions with Mexicans except at home or at family parties. My entire personality, including language, dress, and attitude was formed in this environment. The Mexican immigrant parents included in a study by ethnographer Alma García, as a norm, “gave their daughters solid roots they hoped would guide them as they navigated through American society”, and my parents are no exception to this (García 2004:145). Yet, the issue that arises here is the fact that “as the second generation progress[es] through higher

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²This is the term I will use from here on to describe Latinos who do not necessarily identify with being Latino or identify more with white, suburban, middle-class America
education, their parent’s universe compete[s] with their emerging one, playing an increasingly significant role in the unfolding of their ethnic identity” (Garcia 2004: 145). Therefore, the effect of having a white middle class teacher throughout early identity formation causes the instilment of white middle class values for a Mexican-American child. The muddled experience of values and nuances call into analysis the process of assimilation that minorities are said to undergo. In my case, as in the case of all minorities seeking social mobility, there is scorn from our minority counterparts because of the “explicit linkage of social mobility with assimilation,” but, as in the studies of Ruben Rumbaut, the once perceived linear process of assimilation that lead to the “further dilution of ethnicity”, is challenged as empirical data suggests a not so linear process (1997: 925). For example, Rumbaut states, “students whose parents are both immigrants outperform their counterparts whose mother or father is US-born” (1997: 938). This empirical data reported by Rumbaut backs my experience in outperforming my cousins who had at least one parent US-born and his findings on the outperformance of white peers by children of immigrants also corresponds with this non-traditional interpretation of assimilation. So, contrary to what some Mexican-American peers may say about my “assimilation” or selling-out to the dominant society, I am only falling within the normal performance of second generation immigrants.

The Mexican-American family holds several distinct features different from the typical white family, and, thus, this identity development is much more conflicted and complex. Caldera, Fitzpatrick and Wampler explain, “The Mexican-American family has been identified, typically, as adhering to traditional values that include familism, traditional male/female roles, and extended family networks. Even with changes resulting from acculturation and socioeconomic pressures, the importance of family unity continues as a major characteristic among Mexican-Americans to this day” (Caldera, Fitzpatrick, Wampler 2002:112). As such, my parents always stressed the importance of good behavior or buen comportamiento to me as their young Mexican daughter. I was taught to do all the things expected of a woman: cook, clean, look after children (I have two younger siblings), be responsible and, of course, be a good, traditional Mexican Catholic girl. According to González, “In response to subalternity, the emotion of minority status…Mexican-origin families selectively and strategically deploy certain cultural traits to differentiate themselves from the ‘outside,’ Anglo world” (González 2001:64). In suburban America, playing these roles was not easy for me because of the environment I was in. What was valued and taught at home was usually not the same as what was valued by others in my surroundings outside my home. I was always taught about my ancestors and my family, heard stories of their journey from Mexico, and often travelled to the town where my parents are from. These trips to Mexico usually occurred at the end of the year for Navidad and Las Posadas, which made what is Mexican directly connected with music, joy, food and family and thus constructed a positive identity for me. Unfortunately, this positive connection with what is Mexican was often shunned in a predominantly white school. I learned to speak only Spanish before attending school where English was the only acceptable means of communication. Who I was at home and who I was being taught to be at school were strikingly different and often clashed. According to González, “within a ‘zone of proximal development’ [children] receive each caregiver’s personal rendition of the many macro forces in a society” (2001: 62). Some aspects of my behavior were favored or disdained depending on whether I was in my familiar (home) or public setting (school). On many instances, I found myself getting odd looks from others while crossing myself at school Mass. The way that the Sign of the Cross was taught to me as the proper and appropriate way involved a longer prayer in Spanish. The way that was the “right” way at school was a shorter version in English. So, while I continued through my motions
at the benediction, I would see perplexed looks and was at one point approached by my teacher who asked me why I crossed myself that way if I had learned the “right” way. The two settings, private and public, pulled me in two very opposing directions and, according to González, “For the Mexican origin child, the issue of language and linguistic input is complicated by hegemonic structures that inhere in minority status. Language is not simply a vehicle for communication, but the site of a highly politicized and vitriolic debate concerning the nature of who speaks what language where and under what circumstances” (González 2001: 54). With González’ statement in mind, the experience I narrated above is a good example of how language and what is acceptable in one language versus another can take on a very political meaning for both parties involved.

“You can't speak Spanish here.”

—My elementary school teacher, 3rd grade

As mentioned before, I did not speak any English when I started school and it was my experience growing up that Spanish was not preferred there. My school did not have a bilingual education program or any type of language transition program for Spanish speakers. This made my learning experience within the classroom a distinct one. As Bonvillain states, “When Spanish-speaking children enter a traditional classroom where the teacher does not understand Spanish, the children often become silent, and are not expected to respond” (Bonvillain 2003:320). This was the case for me, and I sat through a meeting with my parents and the teacher while the teacher explained her “concern” at my slow learning and suggested that I be tutored or examined for mental incapacies. I was the only one in my class when I started school and one of very few students in the entire school that spoke only Spanish. Language is one of the most important factors in identity formation, and, therefore, when a child’s native language is forbidden, something vital is taken away. In my case, communication was barred, and because I did not speak English, it was as if I didn’t exist— “English was the currency of exchange for securing personhood” (González 2001:50). Even after I learned English, the invisibility did not go away; it persisted, for I was still not one of “them.” English was still my second language and a monolingual English student has privilege over a bilingual student if the first language is something other than English. One time, once I was older and I had learned to speak English, I was conversing with another girl in Spanish and I felt as if this action— just being myself— were a violation. Indeed, it was. Shortly thereafter, the other girl and I were asked to report to the principal’s office and received reprimand for speaking Spanish in front of other students who could not understand us. We were asked to not dialogue in Spanish while in school from that point onward. Soto indicates that language is pivotal, stating that “for children, especially younger children, issues of language and culture are intertwined and directly related to the formation of a healthy identity as members of a family and a nation” (Soto 2002:2). Therefore, if there is a rejection of the mother language within the educative sphere, there is a rejection of identity. This feeling of rejection that I was met with led me to try to become accepted, and, as I got older, I made it a point to have an extensive vocabulary and become an avid reader. Yet, this same ambition and the resulting expansive vocabulary was not well met by other Mexican-Americans who thought my way of speaking meant that I was attempting to be white. My feelings were captured by González, who stated, “It is an emotion that juxtaposes assimilation and alienation” (Gonzáles 2001: 59). Children like me find it difficult to navigate this “living heteroglossia” and thus a bicultural negotiation, “On one hand, such children evince a seep and fierce loyalty to the emotions that being Latino engenders. On the other, there is a desperate bid to belong to a
totality that is greater than they, powerful and alluring in its domination of their lives” (González 2001: 60). In the midst of this, my parents, like other Mexican immigrant parents, divulged “intergenerational transmission of useful knowledge in the quest for ‘disambiguating’ the paradoxes of Latino identity” (González 2001:63). This “useful knowledge” was usually of a religious nature, but often included anecdotes of their own experiences or that of my grandparents and extended family that could serve to help me in navigating my experiences.

“So you gunna go to one of those white people schools n’ shit?”

—My cousin from Los Angeles, when visiting my family in San Antonio, 2006.

As a result of my language acquisition in combination with my non-Latino academic environment during my early identity formation, my upbringing as a conservative Catholic, strict traditional Mexican upbringing, and my continued private school education, I was not exposed to the rougher side of being a low-income, minority that is typically described in statistics. I was on the “servile” side of the spectrum of “highly subordinated minorities.” Brint describes that, “if they [members of highly subordinated minorities] are agreeable, they are scorned as servile. If they are assertive, they are characterized as overbearing” (1998: 215). According to him, among “highly subordinated minorities…as a result of denied status in the terms valued by the larger society…develop an alternative status system based not on ‘respectability’ but on ‘reputation’ for eye catching behavior” (Brint 1998: 215). I was not allowed to follow into the typical rejection of institution and because of this; I had no other Mexican-American friends that held the reported views of low expectation for social mobility. My father always said that pride in being Mexican comes from hard work and perseverance in reaching the American Dream. There is a tendency among first and second generation immigrants that as a result of “highly traditional culture” they “had grown up believing that their children’s success in an alien world required a disciplined, dedicated approach” (Doob 1999: 191). This tendency also partially explains the rate of college completion of Mexican-Americans that “peak[s] with the second generation and then decline[s] with the third generation” (Doob 1999: 159).

I had no solidarity to build with my Mexican-American peers. The alternative solidarity and ethnic pride that comes from “eye catching behavior” was not a part of my experience and thus I have no “street” credibility and, consequently, I am considered less Latina or not “down” like other Mexican-Americans. It is the result of hegemonic institutions of education and social constructions of segregation that cause these inequalities among Latinos. Studies by Murguia and Telles indicate a correlation between phenotype and educational attainment; it’s not wanting to be white that has allowed for me to more easily “fit in” and it is clear that there are other factors such as “generational status, religion, and predominant language of the neighborhood” that are also at play (1996: 276). There are factors beyond what I can control that allow certain Latinos to gain advancement over others; it is not necessarily a selling out of the self to the white dominant society. The idea that any attempt at social mobility is seen as a movement towards whiteness is one with which I have become very familiar and it is the statistics of low educational attainment and high poverty that my parents have tried to help me overcome. I do not aspire to gain a higher education because I want to be white; it is because I want to bring pride to my family and my people. I work against the odds to be accepted not for the sake of having a special privilege with white people, but for the sake of fulfilling an “American Dream,” which includes educational attainment at the highest degree possible. Contrary to the perceptions of some Mexican-American peers and family members, my
ambition is not for the purpose of self-achievement; it is solely for the purpose of bringing pride to and being a tool for the advancement of my family and my Latino community.

About the author

I am a first generation college student and daughter of Mexican immigrants. Spanish is my first language. I make sure to make my Mexican/Chicana identity evident in every facet of my life. I have been attracted to a varied set of courses offered in Spanish and Latino Studies at Trinity, where I am majoring in Spanish and International Studies. I am also minoring in Sociology and American Intercultural Studies. Having an interdisciplinary background has also led me to ask questions through different lenses about the perception, self-perception, and immigrant experience of Latin@s in the United States.

References


A Racial Autobiography

Florencia Rojo

Florencia Rojo, an Argentine immigrant to the United States, describes how she has struggled to identify herself racially and ethnically in this country. Depending upon the context, she is sometimes perceived as white and at other times as Latina. In high school in Ann Arbor, Michigan, she started thinking critically about whiteness and became radicalized about racial inequality. In this essay, she describes her struggle to come to terms with her identity while pursuing an anti-racist political agenda.

My parents and I moved to the United States when I was two years old. We moved to Knoxville where my dad got a job at the University of Tennessee. I have heard many stories from my mother about that time in our lives, the two years we spent in Knoxville, our first years in the U.S. My mother has related to me many anecdotes, both funny and sad, about how she dealt with the culture shock, adapted to her surroundings, and raised a two-year-old while my father spent a great amount of time at work. One particular account that has stuck out in my mind was about her frustration with the language when she first arrived. My mother went to a bilingual school in Buenos Aires, and thought she was fluent in English before she arrived to the U.S. In high school she had always excelled in English, and she was comfortable using it. The English she had been taught was British, however, and when she arrived to Knoxville she found it extremely difficult to understand what people were saying.

Not only did my mother find it difficult to understand what people said, she also had a hard time relating to and connecting with people in her new home. She has told me many stories of feeling like an outsider and struggling to find something to connect with. When she started looking for a job in Tennessee, more to get out of the house and interact with people than anything else, she also started looking for a preschool to send me to. She said that she met with different preschool directors but that they all looked like “Dolly Parton” and that she “just couldn’t do it”. She said that she did not identify at all with people at most of the preschools she went to. They looked back at her confused when she said she was from Argentina, which made her feel distanced and strange. As it turns out, people also had a hard time understanding her, and they did not always treat her graciously. Even though my mother looks white, she was associated with negative anti-Latino sentiments from people because of her accent and because she spoke Spanish (Cobas and Feagin 2008). Eventually she saw an ad for a Jewish preschool, one that claimed to be open to all kinds of people of different denominations, so she went to take a look. At the Arnstein Jewish Community Center she said she felt like less of an “outsider” and more welcomed, even though
we are not Jewish. It was not the Jewish culture she identified with, but being with other ethnic minorities who embraced diversity made her feel comfortable. She ended up sending me there, and now laughs when she tells me about how I sang Hebrew songs at home after preschool.

I am from Argentina. I have a strong Latina identity because of my nationality and because I was raised in a Spanish-speaking, Latin-American household. Like many other Argentineans, my family has a European background and I have a light complexion. Although I do not identify with U.S. “white culture”, I am frequently perceived as racially white, which means that I am sometimes awarded certain unearned privileges in U.S. society. Unlike more visible racial minorities, I am not considered suspicious because of my race, I am not singled out in stores or on the street, and I am not perceived as a threat because of negative associations with my race. In a job interview, I do not have to worry that a negative stereotype about my race is going to lower my chances of getting the job. I can make a mistake, and as long as people are not aware of my Latina ethnicity, I do not have to worry about them attributing my mistake to my race. There are many everyday conveniences I can take for granted. I can find greeting cards, posters, picture books, toys, and magazines featuring people who look like me. I can find bandages that somewhat match my skin color. (McIntosh 1998). I did not ask for these privileges, but it is important that I recognize that I have them, and work to undo them. This does not mean I am granted all “white privileges”. Many authority figures may look like me but not relate to me on more than a surface level, many white people I grew up with did not experience immigration. The point is that I do have many social advantages because of my racial appearance. Understanding these privileges while still maintaining my Latina identity has been an ongoing process for me. In this paper, I explore parts of that process thus far, looking at different situations in my life that have influenced the development of my racial identity.

I have been asked a number of times in personal conversations and diversity forums to recall a memory where I was first aware of race. The point I think the people asking the question often try to make to me or the group is that white people are first made aware of race and racism by noticing someone else, and that people of color in the United States are aware of race much earlier. Minorities frequently have to deal with and are forced to be aware of race because of their subordinate position in society, which becomes apparent very early on. White folks can make a choice to ignore race because they do not have to deal with complications that come with being non-white. I cannot recall any specific moment that I was made aware of race. Maybe this is because I am a “minority” and have had to deal with race my whole life, but, most likely it is because in reality it is difficult to recall early memories about anything, and race is one of many social identities I have become aware of over time. I have a few early race-related memories; some are about other people and others are about myself, but all of them have influenced my thinking of race and my racial identity.

In first grade, there was an argument in art class between two students over the black student’s skin. Hunter insisted that he was black and the white student (whose name I do not remember, most likely because while there were many white students; Hunter was one of only a few black students in the class) argued that his peer’s skin color was brown, and kept showing Hunter examples of objects around the room that were literally black. Clearly the black student had already developed an idea of race and his own racial identity, while the white kid was talking about the literal color of his classmate’s skin. This is an example of how black people are confronted with the concept of race earlier on than white people, and it happens to be one of my earlier memories about race as well. Not only does this situation demonstrate different levels of racial awareness, it also provides an example of a common scenario in which a person of color struggles to assert his own identity and a white person feels he has the authority to define and categorize people of color (Wise
2005). The white student most likely did not have malicious intentions; he had not been exposed to race in a way that would make him understand why taking ownership of Hunter’s identity was not appropriate. At the time, I did not reflect on it extensively, but I do remember thinking that Hunter was right. I reasoned that he must know better, and I still think that now. One of my first memories about race was also one of my first looks at white entitlement and white privilege.

Ms. Copes was my third grade teacher; she was one of the few black teachers I would have, but I was unaware of her race. I do not recall thinking she was white, but I was not aware that she was black until I was in Middle School. She was not especially dark, but she is someone who would be generally perceived as black, so I am not quite sure why I did not realize that she was at the time. I know that I was aware of race at that point, especially in terms of black and white. In fact, she had a special unit on Black History Month that I remember she particularly emphasized. Perhaps at this point I had learned about racial categories but was not always applying them to people around me. It is also possible, though, that because my parents did not see her as black, I did not either.

My parents did not come to the United States with a full understanding of the racial categories here. One particularity about race in the U.S. that they learned over time was the “one-drop-rule” used to classify blacks. When I recently asked my parents about Ms. Copes they both answered similarly, saying that they had not perceived her as black but instead as “morocha”, an Argentine colloquialism for a person of dark complexion. My mother said she did not realize Ms. Copes was black until my teacher was being considered for school principal. Another parent said it would be great to continue to have a black principal since the last one had been black. My dad did not realize it until a recent conversation when I pointed it out to him and insisted that in Argentina she would not be considered black. Both of them said that they are more sensitized to race in the United States than they were ten years ago and that they probably would perceive her as black now.

My parents have been outsiders when it comes to racial categorization and identity for most of my life. They never said that they were Latina/o or white when I was growing up—just that they were argentinos. Because I grew up in the United States, I was socialized into U.S. race and racial categories (Chávez and French 2007). I developed a racial identity independent of my parents’ and any feelings about race they may have had. In some ways, it was good not having my parents impose a racial identity upon me, since it allowed me to explore for myself who I thought I was. At times it was difficult for me, however, I did not feel they understood where I was coming from when I struggled between my white and Latina identities.

There were people of color who worked at Community High School in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I went to school. There were black secretaries, black and Latino janitors, black and Latino aides, and a black hall monitor, but there was only one black and one Latina teacher in the four years that I attended Community. They did not teach at the same time, and I had no classes with either of them. This was problematic for me personally, but it was also part of a serious problem at my school that erupted in the second semester of my sophomore year. Though not involved in the conflict initially, I did become very involved in the management of the issue and attempts at resolving it.

The problem began when a group of black students, who were friends with each other and often congregated in the hallway, were told numerous times by a few teachers to quiet down. The students perceived this and other complaints as racially-charged, saying that they were being singled out because of their race, that they were often treated differently in and out of the class than white students. The school brought the Black Student Union (BSU) to a staff meeting and facilitated a “fishbowl” dialogue, where the black students had a conversation amongst themselves about the
discrimination they felt they faced at school and the teachers sat around them and watched, not able to intervene. The meeting ended up being highly negative and emotional for many people involved; students were put on display, teachers were powerless and unable to either comfort the upset students or defend their own actions. Afterwards, people were more hesitant to engage in race-related dialogues and tensions were escalated.

At this point, the school brought in a “diversity consultant” to deal with this and other issues by promoting understanding of racial diversity, facilitating dialogue on racial privileges and disadvantages, and proposing initiatives to increase the racial diversity of the school. I met Joe, the consultant (everyone addressed each other by first name at Community), at the beginning of my junior year when he came to speak to one of my classes about a group called the Committee on Race and Diversity (C-RAD). The group was essentially a forum of both staff members and students to talk about issues of race, as well as a group that organized diversity-related school-wide events. I spoke with him afterwards and he encouraged me to join the group and to participate in anti-racism activism in my school. Joe became a mentor of mine for the rest of high school and a close friend. He was, in some ways, my “agent of epiphany” and introduced me to the concept of white privilege. Joe had me read books and articles on whiteness and invited me to lectures and workshops on race and diversity. Generally an agent of epiphany is a black person who first explains white privilege to a white person. The white person then goes through different stages of processing this new, disturbing information, which includes resentment of the person who first spoke to them about white privilege (McKinney 2005). My case was slightly different because although Joe is black, I am not white, at least not a self-identified white person. He did not include me when he talked about “white folks” so I felt more like I was getting let into a secret club than being called out for my privilege. It was not only because I felt “cool” that I enjoyed talking to him, I also had found someone to talk with about my experience which at the time I struggled to explain to most of my friends. Many of the concepts he explained helped me articulate to them the frustrations I felt. However, I did not challenge myself to interrogate my own position the way I challenged my white peers. The full “epiphany” happened over time, but he did initiate it. I did see, however, how Joe was the agent of epiphany for many of the teachers at my school.

One of Joe’s responsibilities was to lead discussions during staff meetings, so he talked at a room full of white teachers about their privilege. Many of the teachers were very offended by his supposed accusations, denying any racism on their part and revealing their own color-blind racism. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva describes four frames of color-blind racism including abstract liberalism. Abstract liberalism “involves using ideas associated with political liberalism… and in an abstract manner to explain racial matters” (Bonilla-Silva 2006:28). Teachers would often say “I treat all my students the same” or “I see them for who they are, not what race they are”. They used the abstract idea of equality to deny minority students racial equity. There was an achievement gap at Community and district-wide between the black and white students, and it was clear that treating everyone the same was not solving any problems. I began to resent and dislike many of my white teachers for not understanding a concept I thought was so crucial in creating a positive learning environment for students of color.

It was then that I began to become seriously committed to racial equality and fighting racism, and spent a great deal of time on my own exploring issues of race and inequality. I sometimes went to the Ann Arbor Public Library after school to browse the Black Studies section, checking books out and reading them in my own time, sometimes neglecting my studies. I got highly involved in extra-curricular activities; I helped start and promote a diversity book club which was a branch of
C-RAD. I joined a group called “Tuned-In” that dealt with an array of issues relevant to my high school and performed skits related to race and diversity. Though I was not a part of BSU they sometimes included me in their events, and I became allied with other minorities at my school. I did not know of any other Latinas or Latinos in my grade, and knew of only a couple of others in other grades, so I tried however I could to find people that I could relate to on some level about my feelings on race and inequality. At Community, race was talked about almost exclusively in black-white terms. In most of the country, this bi-racial order of racial stratification is the norm (Bonilla-Silva 2004). It was partly for this reason that I have reflected so much on the black minority experience and cannot remove my experience as a Latina from black-white racial experiences. I felt in some ways that I could navigate both groups, with whites perceiving me as white, and blacks perceiving me as a minority.

As I further explored the topic of race, I began to notice more and more the privilege white people received in everyday life and subsequently noticed how I was granted those privileges and advantages. To distance myself from the white majority that I was growing to resent, I tried to show in ways I could to people around me that I was Latina. I put an Argentine flag on my backpack, making sure it was visible on the bus ride to school when I heard people speaking Spanish to one another. I would also speak Spanish loudly on the phone in public. When I was meeting someone, I often found a way to incorporate into the conversation that I was Latina or Argentinean. Having people around me perceive me as Latina legitimized my feelings about my identity (Waters 1994).

My racial identity greatly influenced my romantic relationships and friendships in high school. As I became more aware of white privilege and aligned myself more with a racial minority identity, I became distant from a lot of my white peers. Most of my friends at the time were white and I felt that they could not understand experience and my feelings, and that they were unaware of and apathetic about their privileges and social advantages. There was one relationship in particular where my feelings on race became a conflict between me and my partner. During my junior year, I began to start considering colleges; I considered some all-women's colleges. I spoke to my friend CJ, who was a senior and applying to some historically black colleges, about the idea. Nick, my boyfriend at the time, said he did not see the value in self-segregation and thought there was no way it could be a good idea to go to a school that excluded a certain group of people. I became very annoyed that he did not understand my perspective on the issue, which was that blacks and Latinas and Latinos are excluded from colleges all the time, and that institutions like historically-black colleges were offering opportunities for people who may not have them at traditional colleges. We began to argue about it, but I had a hard time explaining and rationalizing my views. Although I was not the one applying to historically black colleges, it was a personal and emotional subject to me. Like many other conversations we would have about race and gender, another important part of my social identity, this one ended with me angrily saying “of course you couldn’t understand you’re a white man!”, which let out my frustration but was not constructive. Eventually, the distance I felt he had from the issues I cared so much about and my inability to productively explain myself to him were some of the reasons we broke up. With my growing awareness of white privilege also came a deep anger towards white people which began to seriously hurt my personal life.

During my senior year of high school, I became increasingly distant from my white friends to whom I felt I could not relate because of the racial barrier between us. It was also difficult for me to explain my frustration to my parents, who did not experience race the same way I did. I started to feel extremely lonely and at times depressed about my situation. This, coupled with my anxiety over college applications, other senior-year stressors, and overall teen angst made me noticeably
upset. My parents perceived that something was wrong, and I eventually asked my mother if I could see a therapist. She agreed it was a good idea, but when I told her I wanted to talk with someone who was not white, she was confused. First, she asked me if I wanted to talk to someone in Spanish, and said I could have therapy sessions over the phone with someone in Argentina which they had known people do to in the past. I explained that the issues I was dealing with were very specific to my surroundings, and it was not the language or the Argentine culture that I needed to relate to someone about. We were having this conversation in the car; my mother was driving to the bank. As she pulled into the parking spot she turned to me and asked, “but aren’t you white?”

This question posed by my mother was frustrating to me at the time that she asked it, since I constantly felt I had to justify myself and my identity to those around me. It became part of the important process of coming to terms with my whiteness. I never came to terms with the weight that whiteness carries in society, nor did I stop challenging racism, but I began to slowly understand the complexities my own role in U.S. racial structure. As a Latina with a light complexion, I am presented with some choices about how to self-identify. It is not uncommon for Latinas and Latinos to identify with a race apart from their “Hispanic ethnicity”, and it is also not uncommon for Latinas and Latinos to change their racial self-identification over time. Latina is a confusing label because Hispanic/Latina/o is not considered a race but instead an ethnicity in the U.S. census. Seeing where we stand racially is not always very clear to Latinas and Latinos, since we only imperfectly fit into the U.S. racial categorization system (Golash-Boza and Darity: 2008).

In high school, I felt pressure, perhaps from others or perhaps self-imposed, to fit uniquely into a single racial category. I tried to assert my Latina identity and reject my whiteness, but the problem was that no matter how much I renounced it, my whiteness did not go away. Right now, my identity is far more fluid, and while I am not satisfied knowing white privilege exists in society, I feel must recognize and accept that it is part of who I am. Resenting and hating whiteness and at times white people was part of this process. As writer Robert Jensen points out, “hating white people” and being able to say it is a liberating part of a process towards accepting and liking them. Hating the whiteness in me was part of coming to terms with it as well (Jensen 2005). I still think there are experiences I have had in my life so far that are unique to my ethnicity, and I believe it is all right for me not to feel that I am white as long as I continue to be aware of my privilege.

It is quite possible that, in the near future and by the time I have children myself, racial categories will have changed dramatically. Perhaps the Latina/o category will become too broad, and my Argentine nationality or my children’s national heritage will no longer be relevant at all next to actual skin color. Different assertions about the changing face of racial order have been made; the argument made by Bonilla-Silva about a tri-racial stratification system describes where I might end up being defined racially in the future (in some ways this has already happened). He argues that color gradations will matter more as they do in other countries, which makes sense since minority populations like Latinos are growing in such great numbers in the U.S. Latina/os, depending on their skin color and level of assimilation into white culture, will fit one of three categories: “whites,” “honorary whites,” and the “collective black” (Bonilla-Silva 2004). Basically Latinos will be either white, honorary white, or be black. Perhaps my children will not cross the black-white divide in high school (assuming they are racially similar to me, which quite possibly may not be the case), but instead remain part of the “honorary white” middle, or lose Latina/o identity to their white identity altogether. I have already felt this sense of losing my latinidad to whiteness as I enter the “white” or “honorary white” categories. For now, I am comfortable navigating more than one
racial/ethnic category; I try to be as honest with myself as possible in order to understand my own position in society so I can work to change the reality of racial privilege and oppression in society.

About the author

I am originally from Bariloche, Argentina and I grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I spent my first three semesters in college at Trinity University. Currently I live in Chicago where I am majoring in sociology at DePaul University. I am a committed anti-racist, feminist, social justice activist and a member of Ella’s Daughters, a network of women activists, artists and scholars working in the democratic, egalitarian humanistic tradition of Ella Baker. I have worked and volunteered with bilingual women and youth, and hope to continue my career in either education or public health.

References


Rising Above the Stereotype Threat

Ronald Satterthwaite

As an African American man, Ronald Satterthwaite has had to deal with stereotypes about his academic abilities. He has attended private, white-majority schools his entire life, where he has performed academically on-par with, if not better than his white peers. In this essay, Ronald analyzes his own school experiences with regard to Claude Steele’s social-psychological concept of stereotype threat, which refers to the way in which negatively-stereotyped minority students frequently perform down to expectations on standardized tests of academic ability.

Since I was a young boy, my parents have always encouraged me to do the best that I can and to try to perform to the best of my capabilities. I was taught to put forth my best effort in whatever I did, whether it was in the classroom, on the job, or on the field. In fact, from an early age, I always remembered my dad telling me that he and my mother would never be angry with me for a poor grade if I had tried to do my best; however, since I consistently performed well in most everything I did, my parents soon realized that if I did not do well in class, then I was not trying my best and not living up to their reasonable expectations. As I grew older and attended more competitive schools, I soon found out that, as a black male, I was not supposed to be performing as well as I was. It appeared that everywhere I looked, whether it was in the classroom, in childhood organizations, on the television, or in the newspaper, I was reminded of how minorities, African-Americans in particular, consistently score lower on standardized tests and perform poorly in the classroom, especially in more complex subjects, such as math and science. These happened to be my best subjects. No matter how hard I tried, it was an issue that I could not escape. The social psychological term for this is called the stereotype threat and is used to explain why minorities and women perform lower on standardized tests. I have, however, wondered why the stereotype threat did not seem to affect me. Was it because I was “covering” to such an extent that it didn’t affect me, or was it because of my parents and their social status and income? These explanations do not, however, suffice as an explanation to my being an exception to or for my escaping the stereotype threat. I plan to examine and try to explain why I am seemingly an exception to the stereotype threat.

The term “stereotype threat” was first coined by Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson when they were studying the discrepancies between African-American students and White students on standardized tests (Steele and Aronson 1995). They explain that the stereotype threat exists because there are negative stereotypes, which means that anything one does or any of one’s features that...
conforms to these stereotypes make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the
eyes of others and perhaps in one’s own eyes (Steele and Aronson 1995). It refers to the phe-
nomenon whereby individuals perform more poorly on a task when a relevant stereotype of stig-
matized social identity is made relevant in the performance situation (Schmader and Johns 2003).
Steele and Aronson argued that, after exposure to the negative images of their abilities, the stu-
dents are likely to internalize an inferiority anxiety that can be aroused by race-related cues in
the environment (Steele and Aronson 1995). The stereotype threat can affect anyone with a group
identity for which the negative stereotype exists, even if the person doesn’t believe the stereotype.
All they need to know is that they have the possibility to stand as a representative of the group
that they identify with and, therefore, in the situation where the stereotype is relevant (Steele and
Aronson 1995). The person begins to focus on the situation, the stereotype threat, the possibility
of being judged and treated stereotypically, and possibly of even self-fulfilling the stereotype (Steele
and Aronson 1995). This means that for black students who actually care about the skills that they
are being tested on, such as their intelligence, the negative stereotype adds an extra degree of self
threat to the testing situation not felt by people not stereotyped in this way (Steele and Aronson
1995). This hypothesis appeared to be true when tested by Steele and Aronson. They found that
black participants scored significantly worse when the researchers activated their stereotype threat
perceptions by saying that the test was a measure of their ability and intelligence (Steele and Aron-
son 1995). Furthermore they found that when the researchers did not phrase the test in a way that
would be deemed threatening to the participants, they scored significantly better and were even
on par with the scores of whites (Steele and Aronson 1995). The study provided direct evidence
that manipulation of the test-aroused stereotype threat in black participants by showing that it ac-
tivated the racial stereotype and stereotype-related self-doubts in their thinking. It even showed
that by merely recording their race, black participants showed diminished intellectual performance
(Steele and Aronson 1995). Subsequent tests have shown that minority representation and diversity
philosophy cues can also interact to signal a degree of identity-contingent threat, suggesting that
even environmental stressors can activate the stereotype threat (Purdie-Vaughns 2008). These tests
suggest that the features of a setting can convey threatening identity contingencies that manifest in
lower trust and comfort in that setting (Purdie-Vaughns 2008). This might provide insight into my
situation because, while I never feel anxiety during tests, I do feel a little anxious when I go into an
interview with someone that I do not know. This could mean that I am affected differently by the
stereotype threat; I feel the effects when a person who I must impress is unfamiliar person and in
the same room.

While the stereotype threat is one theoretical explanation for the gap in performance on stan-
dardized tests between minorities and whites, it can affect any group of people who have a stigma
or negative stereotype and has been known to affect women, Latinos, blacks, and even white men
when they are being compared to Asians with regard to intelligence or when being compared to
blacks with regard to athletic ability (Schmader and Johns 2003). While income, schooling, and
socioeconomic status remain explanations for the disparity, the stereotype threat serves as an ex-
planation as to why African-Americans and other minorities of the same socioeconomic status
score more poorly than their white peers on standardized tests (Steele and Aronson 2004). It offers
a uniquely situational explanation for the gap in scores (Steele and Aronson 2004). The stereotype
threat can affect performance in a variety of ways including anxiety, expectancy, working memory
interference, cognitive load, withdrawal effort, and reactance (Jamieson and Harkins 2007). Steele
and Aronson maintain that the reduced performance results from an added pressure or concern
that a poor performance could be seen as confirming a negative social stereotype about their group (Schmader and Johns 2003). Schmader and Johns conducted a study researching the effects of the stereotype threat on cognitive memory, and they found that it can lead to a measurable decrease of cognitive memory and resources (Schmader and Johns 2003). They found that individuals from stigmatized groups perform worse on tests because the stereotype threat reduces an individual's working memory capacity (Schmader and Johns 2003). Their studies provided evidence that manipulations of the stereotype threat can lead to lower working memory capacity among individuals who are being targeted by the stereotype (Schmader and Johns 2003). Also, these reductions in working memory capacity can cause reductions in performance on standardized tests (Schmader and Johns 2003). They surmised that members of stigmatized groups score lower on standardized tests because the stereotype threat adds an extra dimension to the situation that interferes with their attentional resources, making it difficult to recall working memory (Schmader and Johns 2003). Furthermore, Schmader and Johns found that people who have been affected by the stereotype threat might not even be aware of their situation. They found that the targeted group might not think of the test as more difficult or become more anxious, yet they could still experience lower levels of working memory capacity (Schmader and Johns 2003).

All my life, I have gone to private schools. Even before kindergarten, I went to a private school, and from second grade until now, I have gone to predominantly “white” schools. Despite the stereotype threat, I have performed on par with my white peers, if not better. Prior to entering the second grade, race was never really an issue for me. I attended pre-kindergarten at a school that was rich in diversity, and I was so young that I never really thought of myself as different from the other students in terms of race. There was a good mixture of black, white, Hispanic, and other races, from the students, to the teachers, to the administration. This continued when I went to kindergarten and first grade because I went to a private Catholic school that was also rich in diversity. This diversity was due primarily to the locations of the schools in South Dallas, which has a greater proportion of minorities, especially blacks, than other areas of the city. However, when I entered the second grade, my family moved to North Dallas near the suburb of Plano, which is a more affluent and a less diverse area. It was there that I began to realize that I was different because I was black. It is important to mention, however, that while it was made known to me that I was different by my classmates, I was still accepted for who I am and I made some very close friends in the second grade, many of whom I am still friends with today. It was, however, very difficult for me at times because of the stereotypes that came with being black. As I grew older, I became more aware of the negative stereotypes that came with being a black male as far as intelligence and schooling are concerned. I learned that on the standardized tests that I was taking, I wasn’t supposed to be scoring as high as I did and that, eventually, I had a 20 percent chance of dropping out of school and ending up in jail (Black in America 2008).

I had always wondered why this was; I didn’t feel or act differently than my white peers. In fact, I was accused of not acting “black” enough, a comment that I always hated and still do to this day. One could say that I was guilty of what Kenji Yoshino terms covering (Yoshino 2006). Covering is referred to by Erving Goffman in his book, Stigma, as “persons who are ready to admit possession of a stigma but may nonetheless make a great effort to keep the stigma from looming large” (Yoshino 2006). I personally never thought that I was covering or that this was an explanation as to why I did well in school. I had always considered myself to be smart. I didn’t talk “black” because it wasn’t proper English and my parents and especially my grandmother always had stressed proper English since early on. Also, I was always proud to be black and never had a problem identifying...
myself as such. This pride was instilled in me by my parents at a very young age and they always preached to me to be proud of who I am. Covering does very little to explain why I was doing well in school. This is because covering is a term used more to describe social situations rather than as an explanation for standardized test scores. It is a coping mechanism that is used as a way to conform and assimilate in a different environment (Yoshino 2006). As someone told Yoshino when he first became a law school professor, “be a homosexual professional and not a professional homosexual,” meaning that covering is used in order to down play the stigmas or differences in the dominant society (Yoshino 2006). So, while covering does not suffice as an explanation for my scores on standardize tests, one could argue that I still used the covering technique in order to make friends, since I attended a predominantly white school. However, since I and my classmates were so young, we were not yet aware of the negative stereotypes that were present in society, and, by the time we were old enough to truly understand them, my classmates had all known me for the better part of their lives, since most of us had gone to school together from 2nd to 12th grade. This is why covering is not an adequate explanation for the stereotype threat’s apparent lack of effect on me.

Children are not immune from the stereotype threat. As a result, I should have seen the effects on the stereotype threat in my performance at about the same time that I entered the second grade because this is the time when children are able to identify differences between ethnicities (Ambady, Shih, Kim, and Pittinsky 2001). Ambady and her colleagues conducted a study on the stereotype threat and how it affects children. Their results were consistent with the development of children’s social awareness. They found that, as the children grew older, they became more aware of the negative stereotypes that were associated with their ethnicity and gender (Ambady, Shih, Kim, and Pittinsky 2001). In addition, Ambady found that, as the children became more aware of the negative stereotypes, they also became more susceptible to the stereotype threat (Ambady, Shih, Kim, and Pittinsky 2001). They set up a study that would test the effect of the stereotype threat on Asian girls in lower elementary, upper elementary, and middle school. First, they established the negative stereotypes that came with being female during a math test and then established the positive stereotypes that arise from being Asian. They then compared the results of the tests to a control group that wasn’t affected by the stereotype threat (Ambady, Shih, Kim, and Pittinsky 2001). They found that in elementary school and middle school, when gender differences are well established, the girls performed worse when compared to the control, and, in lower school, upper school, and middle school when they were characterized as being Asian and as having a positive stereotype with regard to intelligence, they performed better on the tests than the control (Ambady, Shih, Kim, and Pittinsky 2001). These findings suggest that the stereotype threat can affect someone at a very young age, including the age at which I was entering the second grade and becoming aware of the differences in race between myself and the other students. Furthermore, the stereotype threat lowers performance because it diverts the cognitive resources that are essential to the task, to processing the information that resulted from the activation of the negative stereotype (Jamieson and Harkins 2007). Jamieson and Harkins, however, also found that this activation causes an increase in motivation to perform well, which potentiates prepotent responding (Jamieson and Harkins 2007). They found that, when given more time on the tests, the threat participants performed better and even outperformed the control group because they were given sufficient time to correct their mistakes (Jamieson and Harkins 2007). This mere effort theory was further supported by the faster reaction times observed by the threat participants compared to those form the control group (Jamieson and Harkins 2007). This suggests that when threat participants are being tested,
the increase in motivation causes non-selective dominant responses; however, when given sufficient time, these dominant responses are corrected when the participant realizes their mistakes, producing comparable scores to the control group (Jamieson and Harkins 2007).

This lack of awareness and increase in motivation might explain why I think that I was not affected by the stereotype threat. It might be the case that I was affected by the stereotype threat but just didn’t know it. I do not, however, think that this is the case because whenever I take tests, whether it was in the past or very recently, I have never been under the impression that I was and being compared to my white peers. When taking tests, I always approached the task as just another challenge. It had never occurred to me that I wasn’t supposed to do well on standardized tests no matter how well I had prepared for them. I had always thought that, if I prepared for the tests well, everything else would take care of itself. I always considered myself to be fairly intelligent, and I never allowed myself to be intimidated by forces that were beyond my control. My parents have always been an influential part of my life, and they have always advised me to only worry about the aspects of life that I can control. They said that I can’t control how people will react to me or what they think about me, but I can control my actions and how I carry myself. They told me that if I respect other people and carry myself in a respectable manner then I need not worry about how others perceive me because it will all work out for the best. They also mentioned that if I did carry myself as a respectable and classy individual, I would be able to walk away from any situation with dignity and pride, no matter what others’ perceptions of me were. As a result, I never felt anxiety when taking tests because my parents’ words always stuck with me. I knew that if I did my best and prepared properly, I could perform well because I had been taking tests for my entire life. I did, however, feel the anxiety of the stereotype threat in a different arena. Whenever I met the white people of authority or parents of my white friends, I would start to doubt myself and whether or not they would like me. I would always have the thought in the back of my mind that they were judging me because I was black. I would always think that they would think poorly of me because of negative stereotypes. This anxiety followed me when I met people of authority such as in interviews for jobs or for schools, which might have affected my performance during such interviews.

Schmader, Johns, and Forbes noticed that the stereotype threat can affect anyone in any stigmatized group, and it is not limited to race or gender (Schmader, Johns, and Forbes 2008). They found that psychology students and people from lower socioeconomic status are also affected by the stereotype threat and even whites who are typically socially advantaged can feel the effects of the stereotype threat (Schmader, Johns, and Forbes 2008). They asserted that the threat to self-integrity that the stereotype threat poses during or in anticipation of performance causes a sequence of processes that can disrupt optimal performance on a variety of tasks (Schmader, Johns, and Forbes 2008). They inferred that the stereotype threat activates three core concepts: the concept of one’s in-group, the concept of ability, and the self-concept; furthermore, they also surmised that the stereotype threat can impair performance in three ways: direct physiological impairment of prefrontal processing, increased vigilance towards endogenous or exogenous cues to assess the self in the situation, and it causes active efforts to suppress the stereotypic thoughts and anxious feeling (Schmader, Johns, and Forbes 2008). The stereotype threat reduces working memory, and the extra anxiety that the person feels causes stress levels to rise, thus increasing the cortisol levels in the person’s blood, directly impairing cognitive functioning (Schmader, Johns, and Forbes 2008). Furthermore, studies have shown that, even when dealing with concealable stigmas, people can still feel effects similar to the stereotype threat (Smart and Wegner 1999). Smart and Wegner conducted
Rising Above the Stereotype Threat

a study of concealable stigmas and found that those who were trying to suppress the stigmas demanded a great deal of mental control in order to keep those stigmas hidden (Smart and Wegner 1999). This relates with the stereotype threat because like the stereotype threat, concealable stigmas increase the accessibility of stereotypes and failure-related thoughts among participants (Smart and Wegner 1999).

It is very difficult to figure out why I was seemingly not affected by the stereotype threat. This is because the stereotype threat is just one explanation among many to explain the gap in performance between minorities and the white majority. However, there are also just as many explanations as to why I was seemingly not affected in school when I took standardized tests. One explanation is that I went to private school and currently attend a small liberal arts college. It has been suggested that relationships that students form with faculty and staff at small institutions help to minimize the effects that negative stereotypes have on the students (Rivardo and Klien 2008). At small institutions, students receive more individual attention than they otherwise would, see the experimenters as playing the role of a supportive instructor, and the students are also more familiar with their surroundings, which can diminish the effects of the stereotype threat (Rivardo and Klien 2008). Another explanation is to look at the stereotype threat versus being stigma consciousness. I think that stigma consciousness, studied by Pinel, more accurately describes me because, while the stereotype threat refers to a concern about one’s own behavior, stigma consciousness reflects an expectation that one will be stereotyped (Pinel 1999). She says that stigma consciousness has the potential to shed light on the perceived and actual experiences of stereotyping on the targets of stereotypes (Pinel 1999). The article found that people who possessed high levels of stigma consciousness suffered from the same effects as those who were victims of the stereotype threat (Pinel 1999). Pinel found that women who were highly stigma conscious tried to disprove the negative stereotypes or stigmas against them and that this effort had the tendency to actually backfire (Pinel 1999). She also found that whether or not stigma consciousness is high, it still may have cognitive and behavioral consequences on the individual (Pinel 1999). I think that this is a better description of my experiences because, while I do experience high levels of stigma consciousness at times, I was never concerned about my own behavior as I have mentioned earlier. I only worried about the aspects of my life that I could control, and, while I did have feelings of anxiety due to a stereotype, I had to perform to the best of my abilities irrespective of others’ beliefs.

Another reason as to why the stereotype threat has had little effect on me might be due to the fact that I come from a fairly wealthy family. When considering the disparities in tests, it has been found that income level is a poor indicator on how well one will perform (Conley 2000). This is because black children from families of high income still score lower on tests (Conley 2000). Instead, it has been found that wealth is a better indicator on how well a person will perform (Conley 2000). There is a huge disparity gap in terms of wealth in the U.S. between blacks and whites where blacks own on average, about one-twelfth the amount of property as whites (Conley 2000). Also, it has been found that when black children come from wealthy families, the gaps in performance close, the disparity in college attendance vanishes, and disparities in the chances of using welfare disappear as well (Conley 2000). I think that this is another reason as to why I was not affected by the stereotype threat; I come from a family where both of my parents went to college and own a home and both of their parents went to college and own a home. So, I had a very good chance from birth of following in their footsteps and doing well in school.

There are many reasons as to why there are disparities in performance on tests between blacks and whites. Stereotype threat is just one. Some of the reasons include income, wealth distribu-
tion, educational opportunities, and segregation. However, for just as many reasons as there are to explain the disparity, there are as many reasons to explain exceptions to these disparities, such as parental support, positive reinforcement, self esteem, and equal opportunities. Although I and others with backgrounds similar to mine may not have been negatively affected by the stereotype threat, it remains a threat as long as negative stereotypes about any stigmatized group continue to exist and an individual’s identity and self-worth continue to be associated with the negative images of the groups he or she represents. It is important to study the gap from a sociological perspective in order to help close it. If one understands why problems, such as the gap in performance between blacks and white on standardized tests exist, one might be able to help fix them. The stereotype threat is not a personal problem but a societal problem due to the historical discrimination against and disenfranchisement of non-whites in the United States. Hopefully, the replacement of negative stereotypes with more positive images, such as a president of mixed race, and a better understanding of the reasons behind the disparity will aid in fixing the problem and close the gap in performance, schooling, income, and wealth.

About the author

My name is Ronald Satterthwaite, I am a senior at Trinity University. I am a Political Science major from Dallas Texas. I graduated from Jesuit College Prep, and played football at Trinity as a defensive end and four year letterman. I would like to thank my parents and family for giving me the opportunity to attend Trinity.

References


Rising Above the Stereotype Threat


Coping with Growing up as a Minority in a White-Dominant Environment

Amy Vielma

Amy Vielma grew up in Austin, Texas in a working-class minority-majority neighborhood. Her grandparents were Mexican immigrants and many other Hispanics lived in her neighborhood, but she never learned to speak Spanish, even though many other members of her extended family did. This left her feeling “like a traitor” to her ethnicity, as if she were not “a true Mexican American.” In addition, she attended private, Anglo-dominant private schools that further distanced her cultural experiences of those of her family and neighbors. In her essay, Amy relates how her efforts to excel at school made her feel guilty of betraying her ethnicity and “trying to be white.”

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My education started with private, religious daycares and kindergartens and continued through my enrollment in a private, religious college. Though I eventually transferred from that college to another private, secular university, the majority of my life and education has revolved around private, religious institutions picked by my parents. Within the walls of these private schools, however, there were limited minority populations, and I saw myself as significantly different from my peers, not just physically, but also economically. Their parents drove nicer cars and they had brand-name clothing and all the latest toys. Play dates at their homes made me further realize that my family was significantly less well-off and lived in what could be considered a “bad part of town.”

Living on the south-east side of Austin, I spent most of my childhood in a small, rented three-bedroom house in a majority-minority neighborhood. The neighborhood children were mostly Hispanic, like me and many of them spoke Spanish with English as a second language. However, I have never learned Spanish, though it is spoken by my parents and by all of my other relatives. My brother and I are both third generation Americans, and, as stated in Meyers (2007:106), “by the third generation English use [is] . . . so dominant that the family’s historic tongue has been reduced to only a few words . . . ” My parents later revealed that they chose not to teach my brother and me Spanish because of their fears of possible learning difficulties associated with learning English as a second language and thus being put in special classes. Unfortunately, I have always felt like a key part of my personal identity was lacking as result of this missing component of my culture.

The fact that the vast majority of all my relatives only speak Spanish makes things more difficult for me because I do not speak it. Even in my youngest days, I remember being frustrated and embarrassed when relatives visited because of this inability to communicate with my own family
members. To this day, I have not had a single conversation with either of my grandmothers, who speak only Spanish. A vast majority of my cousins also, like me, mainly speak English, but their parents still taught many of them Spanish. Essentially, my constant inability to communicate with my relatives has left me feeling greatly alienated from them and like a traitor to my ethnicity, as if I am not a true Mexican-American. The growing importance of Spanish in American culture, as the Hispanic population grows, only serves as a reminder of this inability to participate in my own culture. In college, I experienced the humiliation of encountering people like my Italian-Irish-American roommate and Indian-American friend who could speak Spanish almost fluently and who were both shocked that I, a person with Hispanic heritage, spoke very little Spanish.

I believe that my lack of Spanish-speaking ability combined with my attendance of white-dominant private schools for the majority of my schooling experience has led to a personal identity that is more inclined to be termed as white than associated with perceived Hispanic cultural norms. While many comments are jokingly made towards people being “Twinkies,” “Oreos” or “coconuts,” in reference to their skin being one color and their culture being another (the internal is always white), I feel as if I do fit into the category of “coconut” or, in other words, “brown on the outside, white on the inside.” With supposed cultural ideas that are white-associated and a lack of knowledge or ability to perform Hispanic culture, I am constantly battling between my physical identity as a Mexican-American and my internal personality with more culturally acceptable White ideologies and norms.

I feel as if race was never really an issue until high school. Obviously, young children are not as susceptible to racial ideologies since they may not understand them, and, in my small school, most everyone was friends with each other regardless of race or sex. My alienation from my neighborhood friends began with the school I attended. All the other kids in my neighborhood attended public schools, and the only other kids from my private school that I knew within the larger neighborhood were also Hispanic. This is the first known alienation and discomfort that I remember having experienced in my childhood because of both race and socioeconomic factors. I was constantly battling with being different in school and then coming home to being different in my own neighborhood. I was physically different from the kids in class but internally different from the kids with whom I lived. Through my immersion in a white-dominated private school, I began to distance myself from the children in my neighborhood. They did not go to private school, did not care for doing well in school, and together we both seemed apprehensive about socializing too much with one another. I was convinced that they saw me as rejecting Hispanic culture both because I did not speak Spanish and because I was trying to be “too white” in my attendance of a private school.

Yet it was not merely my attendance at private school but also my success in school that contributed to my sense of “social isolation from the relationships and values of neighborhood friends and family” (Herr 1999:114). For some reason, I felt that by doing well I was somehow betraying my ethnicity and “trying to be white,” resulting in the children of my neighborhood, fellow Hispanic kids in my school, and even my cousins thinking “Why can’t you be more like us?” (Herr 1999:119). Few of the other Hispanic kids I knew in elementary school did very well in school or held doing well in school as something worth working towards. Yet my goals of doing well in school were greatly the result of wanting to “fulfill family expectations” as well as experiencing a belief in my abilities in my school environment (Esparza and Sanchez 2008:193).

My academic achievements were somehow presented to my peers as a qualifier for my right to be a part of their privileged environment. This concept carried through high school with the
idea that “I’m not supposed to be smart...I’m female, and, second of all, I’m a minority” (Herr 1999:118). My achievements were just another way of placing myself within the dominant white culture, a way of being accepted despite my skin appearance. In this way, I began my method of “covering,” a way in which I “assimilate[d] to dominant norms” (Yoshino 2006).

“Covering” has had a great deal to do with my adolescent and young adult life. While I could obviously not change my dark skin color, which advertised my Hispanic heritage, I was immersed in a white-dominant and somewhat elitist culture that led me to adopt their ideologies. I valued education and strived to do well. This is not to say this is solely a white ideology but that I had witnessed fellow minorities, like many of my own cousins, who attended public schools and whose future enrollment in college was not a given, since to them and their parents it was somewhat more realistic or acceptable for them to immediately get a job with just a GED. College for me, however, was never an option, the “high familism” that drove me to “contribute to the overall welfare of [my] family” made college more of a matter of not if I would attend but of which college I would attend (Esparza and Sanchez 2008:193). So, in order to fit into these private school atmospheres of competition and privilege, I would try to prove my worth; I had to prove that I belonged just as much as any of the non-Hispanic whites in school.

To me, private school was not a right; it was a privilege. It was a constant reminder of “being given an ‘opportunity’ that a lot of other people don’t have” (Herr 1999:118). Especially in high school, when I was more aware of money and my family’s finances, I realized that it was only by scholarship that I was able to attend a private, college-preparatory high school. While I knew my family was far from poverty, I was still constantly reminded that we were nowhere near the financial situations of many of my peers and their families. My high school itself was set in a large private neighborhood with a country club just down the street and mansions that were more than five times the size of my home.

There was no end to the subliminal messages that I was somewhere where I did not officially belong. Besides the actual setting of my high school, there was almost no minority presence. I remember many of the students, often the minorities themselves, would joke about their admittance to St. Michael’s based on race alone and the school’s need for “diversity.” Indeed, it seemed as if, often when a school promotion or open house was planned, that I, along with the other handful of “ethnic” students (Blacks, Hispanics and Asian) would be called upon to help promote the image of St. Michael’s as a diverse atmosphere that allowed all students to thrive and strive for excellence. In reality, the school was not just lacking a minority presence in general but specifically had almost no African American students. As was once brought to my attention, a majority of African American students, indeed about five out of the entire eight, were in one class alone so that upon their graduation our school’s “diverse” composition drastically changed.

While race never seemed to be a stigma in this environment, I did notice underlying stereotypes and comments made that served to show that racist ideology did still have a subtle existence, as suggested by Bonilla-Silva. An example of stereotyping includes the favoring of many Hispanic males on the soccer teams as especially inclined to excel at the sport and that it was a skill that came naturally. I think the most obvious racist ideologies, however, came during the years of high school that involved college applications and admissions processes. I remember overhearing conversations about the issue of affirmative action and the need for non-Hispanic whites to suddenly adopt a racial identity other than “white.” I overheard a conversation of one girl boasting her heritage as one eighth Cherokee Indian as another complimented her for this fact, going on to suggest that this trait alone would enable her to get into the college of her choice. It recalled the idea that
whites often think that minorities only accomplish things at the expense of whites and that whites cannot possibly have any personal fault that would make them undesirable (Bonilla-Silva 2006).

Even a close friend of mine made a frustrated commented one day about the unfairness of minorities getting priority over whites simply because of race. While at the time I felt somewhat outraged myself by this very statement I thought that it was somewhat true. Why should any race get preference over the other? Yet as stated in Dovidio et. al., “equal opportunity and color-blind procedures...[are] not sufficient to reverse the effects of years of personal and institutional discrimination.” Through this, I feel I have a better understanding behind the real motivations behind not just affirmative action but also those comments made against it (1992:95). Negativity towards affirmative action was due to the threatened feeling of my White peers because it was not just a matter of trying to give a boost to long-opportunity-oppressed minorities but because of their learned ideology that minorities did not truly earn their education but were treated to it as a condition based solely on their skin color instead of any possible true academic achievement or skill.

My high school was a private institution, of which white was the dominant race, therefore resulting in the majority of my friends being mostly white. As such, another result of a white-dominant school ended up being that my boyfriend was white. As stated in Kreager (2006:6), “racial compositions within the school [are] important in determining potential...opportunities for interracial contact.” In my case, it was a combination of a lack of minority males to choose from, as well as the consideration of myself as an honorary member of the non-Hispanic white population that factored into my obtaining of an interracial relationship, exemplifying the idea that “interracial dating attitudes and behavior [were] shaped by [my] environment” (Northcutt 2006:7). I had no fear or reservations about our relationship or telling our peers and parents because I considered myself so distant from my true race/ethnicity that I did not feel a part of it and did not think I would be subject to any of the taboo associated with interracial relationships. While Kroeger and Williams (2007:9) found that “ethnic diversity...is positively associated with how often a student dates inter-ethnically,” I find that the opposite seems to be true in my case. I feel that it is not just me but my entire family that has succumbed to white-dominant cultural ideology. Since my parents have many white friends, mostly other parents from the high school friends of my brother and me, and sent us to white schools, it again contributed to the idea of our honorary entitlement and limited aspects of being White.

Up until this course, I had barely given any thought to the racial differences between myself and my significant other. True, the physical differences are obvious, but, with the mindset of myself as being only Hispanic on the outside, I felt that it was uncontroversial. It was only when it came to meeting family members and having to endure race/ethnic specific questions (such as: Do you speak any Spanish? Does your mother/grandmother make homemade tortillas?) that I was reminded of the underlying cultural differences that accompany my physical ones.

Another determinant of my relationships that I attribute to the lack of minorities in high school comes from my lack of any meaningful friendships with any minorities. I feel, in a sense, that I have adopted many of the racist ideologies held by my white peers due to my constant exposure to white culture from a young age. I cannot recall any meaningful friendships with either black or Hispanic individuals. I perceived many minorities to be lacking in desire for education and found myself mimicking, in thought, the common racial/ethnic stereotypes of blacks and Hispanics as boisterous, unfocused in school work, and intimidating. However, not all responsibility for these stereotypes lies with my school environment but with my home environment as well. It has not
been until these later years of my life, after exploring sociological concepts of underlying bias and racist attitudes, that I have come to realize the racist ideologies held by my own parents. While a majority of their racist quips come in the form of jokes, I now sense the underlying message. An example is their common jokes about Muslims and terrorism, concluding that all Muslims or “Muslim-looking people” are potential threats.

Progressing from a white-dominant elementary school to a white-dominant high school, I then continued on to an even more white-dominant college: College of the Holy Cross. In my naiveté I did not think race would be an outstanding issue, considering I had gone to a majority white high school and had managed to excel and make friends without any stigma or prejudice. Holy Cross was an entirely different experience. I should have known from the beginning, when I attended a week long, all-minority orientation to the college that was designed to help prepare “diverse” students for the different atmosphere that was Holy Cross. It was not long after classes actually started and the rest of the campus moved in that I realized just how much of a minority I was. I had come to college with the expectation of meeting people from all manner of diverse backgrounds, yet Holy Cross was nothing but an intensified version of my high school. It was home to majority white students from the surrounding areas who had attended even more elite private college-prep schools. The two biggest realizations of my feelings of displacement occurred first in my on-campus job and then in a personal encounter.

Part of my scholarship award to Holy Cross included a Federal Work-Study job. Working behind the scenes in the commercial kitchen of the university, I realized the overwhelming majority of us were of some minority, mostly black and Hispanic. I was again reminded of my attendance there as more of a privilege than a right, and that I had to somehow earn my way of staying. Secondly, my inner-white identity became increasingly conflicted as I realized that I most obviously did not fit anywhere close into this white-norm of even more affluent white peers than those at my high school. Yet I saw that a large majority of other minority students seemed to cope with being blatantly different by embracing these differences and joining one of the many racial or ethnic groups on campus like Asian Students In Action or the Black Student Union. However, a majority of these minorities were comfortable in their own cultures. For example, the Hispanics and Latinos were fluent in the languages affiliated with their race/ethnicity. I was caught between my failure to cover as part of the incredibly affluent white group and my inability to relate to anyone in my own culture due to growing up no having been a part of it.

Inevitably, my growing sense of alienation and displacement in the Holy Cross environment led to my transfer. Still, Holy Cross was not the only place where my personal identity in terms of race/ethnicity was brought to question or attention. In my work at a local daycare, I again felt the discomfort associated with what could be considered as not being true to my race. My fellow employees were majority African American and Hispanic with only two non-Hispanic white workers—a lead teacher and the daycare director. A majority of these non-white workers had not gone to college or were not planning on attending college. Just having attended college was enough to make me feel alienated from my co-workers, a result of years of accumulating a white-dominant mindset that placed both the job and the people as somehow inferior to me on the basis of both educational attainment and personal attitude. Many of my Hispanic co-workers fit the “ghetto” Hispanic stereotype of wearing baggy clothes, liking rap music, using slang-talk, and exhibiting a nonchalant attitude towards doing their job. I constantly struggled between wanting to do my job to the best of my ability and feeling that as if by doing so that I was somehow trying to be something untrue to my culture and again “too white.”
Coping in a White-Dominant Environment

This constant struggle for personal identity has persisted throughout my educational and occupational careers and continues even now at Trinity, as, even though it is situated in the heavily Hispanic-populated city of San Antonio, it is still considered to be a “white school.” I still tend to hold myself above the ethnic and racial stereotypes directed towards others of my race, working to prove them wrong both academically and personality-wise. My personal upbringing in a white-dominated atmosphere, combined with my parents’ failure to teach me about my heritage has resulted in what I believe to be the loss of my true ethnic identity and the adoption of a pseudo-white identity that has continued to come under question from both myself and others as I try to both fit in and cover as part of white culture and separate myself from any negative stereotyping of Hispanic culture.

About the author

I am from Austin, Texas and I am a transfer student to Trinity University. My first semester at Trinity was Fall 2008 and I had planned on declaring an Urban Studies major, which was what led me to take the Contemporary Minorities course that resulted in the writing of this autobiographical essay. However, I have since declared myself as an Art History major with an Urban Studies minor. My two greatest passions in life are children and art and I hope to work in the non-profit sector someday, hopefully combining these two. I am studying abroad in Florence, Italy next semester (Fall 2009) and hope to graduate in Fall 2010.

References


Racial Interactions at an American Public High School: My Experiences at Central High, * 2001-2005

Katie Warren

Katie Warren grew up just outside a large city in the Southwestern United States. She attended a rigorous international baccalaureate (I.B.) program located on the campus of a minority-majority high school campus. Katie is white and she became painfully aware of the racial tracking that occurred on the campus when she took “regular” classes outside the I.B. program. Her classmates in the academically-accelerated I.B. program were mostly Asian Americans and fellow whites. In the “regular” classes, they were mainly African Americans and Latinos. In her essay, Katie relates the insights she gained about race relations from attending school in a setting that was quite integrated in some ways and highly segregated in others.

For the first fourteen years of my life, race was never really an issue. My parents both worked at the same racially mixed public school, allowing for exposure to different types of people in small doses. My real socialization processes, however, took place at a small, private Christian school from the ages of three to fourteen. It was there that I made my first friends, played on sports teams, and interacted with others on a regular basis. The demographics of the school were extremely uniform: white, middle to upper-middle class, and Protestant. In fact, the big discrepancies in the student body really came down to the distinct Protestant denominations, with Church of Christ, the school’s affiliated church, and Baptist being the two largest contingents. Of course, both groups are remarkably similar, with the only real difference being whether or not accompanying music was allowed during worship services, so there existed only superficial differences between the two groups. In my grade of approximately seventy students, there were three African-American students, one Hispanic student, and one Asian student. The other sixty-five students were white, including myself. In this environment, there existed no real diversity, and I lived within this white world not understanding the different experiences and points of view in the world. My entire view on the world completely changed when it came time for high school and I transferred to an inner city, racially diverse public high school. Central High School (CHS) and my experiences there completely shaped my perspective by allowing me interact with all races and economic classes while at school.

* All names of schools, places, and persons in this essay are pseudonyms.
Located just outside of a large city in the Southwest, Central Independent School District has a very racially diverse student population. According to district information, the school district is comprised of around 50,000 students, whose racial makeup is roughly forty percent Hispanic, twenty percent African-American, one-third Anglo, and between five and ten percent Asian. Central High School, one of seven high schools in the district, was located in the poorer, downtown area of Central, so its numbers differed significantly from the district averages. CHS had much high proportions of African-American and Hispanic students than did, for example, the high school located near the town’s golf course and shopping mall. Central ISD attempted to rectify these racial discrepancies by instituting a program that allowed any student in the district to attend whichever school in the district they choose without being confined to geographical restrictions. CHS, in a bid to try to keep their demographics roughly equal racially, housed the prestigious International Baccalaureate (IB) gifted program. This program was the sole reason that I, and most of my friends, ended up attending CHS.

Though all physically within the same building, there was strict segregation between IB students and other students. As was true with other studies, the “regular” students (that is, students in “regular” level classes, as opposed to Advanced Placement or IB classes) were mostly separated along racial lines. In the cafeteria, there were strict African-American sections and Hispanic sections; there was no crossover. Interestingly, the regular white students, who were mostly either in the agriculture program or were skaters, usually spent lunch in the “Ag” room or the courtyard with their skateboards, no matter the weather. The only real example of racial mixing in the social lunch period was if a fight broke out and everyone congregated to watch.

Conversely, the IB and, to a lesser extent, the AP students all congregated together, regardless of race. The only examples of racially mixed tables in the CHS cafeteria were with IB students. Here, the bond was not a single race, but rather the shared experiences of classes. White, African-American, Hispanic, and Asian students all mixed together quite harmoniously.

Though this distinction may, at first glance, may be a bit confusing, it actually fits quite well into the larger ideas about race relations. People naturally associate with people who are, in their opinion, most like themselves (Saportio 2003). In many cases, the easiest similarity to recognize right away is skin color and a perceived shared racial background. In fact, Moody (2001) explains that racial segregation in schools tends to peak in environments that are moderately heterogeneous environments, but decline in situations of very high heterogeneity.

Moody then goes on to describe the different mechanisms at work in this segregation. Acknowledging the previously mentioned theory about people preferring to be friends with other people they perceive to be like them, he also cites educational tracking (like the IB program) and extracurricular activities as tools of segregation, along with a fear, especially at the middle range of heterogeneity, of minorities overtaking the majority. The final portion of this argument does not really fit within the schema at CHS; the first two ideas, however, directly mirror experiences at CHS. The regular students, who were exposed to a much larger number of different students each day, sought those most like them, usually those who shared racial qualities. Within the tracked IB student body, being deemed “gifted” and sharing the same advanced classes with a limited number of other students was a much stronger shared experience than race. For example, it was virtually unheard of for a Hispanic IB student to socialize with or choose friendship with regular Hispanic students; despite a shared racial identity, the different educational tracks were believed to be a more significant factor in choosing friends.

In fact, despite these set factors, there were still some struggles for minority students in the
IB program. As described by Yoshino (2006), these students often had to “cover” their cultural heritages in order to fit into the largely white social atmosphere of the IB culture. That is, while acknowledging their race, they did not flaunt or revel in it, but, rather, they focused on making themselves seem like the white and Asian majority of the IB student body. However, they also often had to cover their IB tendencies when trying to fit into their respective racial categories. Two acute examples of these struggles are exemplified through two of my classmates, Hannah and Eric.

Hannah, a Hispanic female and close friend, was firmly planted within the IB social scene. Though she came from a traditionally large, Spanish-speaking, Hispanic family, she never spoke Spanish at school, except for Spanish class, and even then it was the formal language spoken in Spain rather than Mexican or Central American dialects. She also actively hid some of her family’s cultural traditions, only inviting me, and no one else from our group, over to make tamales one Christmas after we had been friends for four years. She often spoke of her Hispanic heritage in deprecating terms, explaining things like “Mexican time,” which meant being twenty minutes late at all times, or making fun of the large family structures that are stereotypical of Hispanic families. All of these examples point to Hannah trying to downplay her race, since typical Hispanic culture was more commonly associated with the regular students who, in the eyes of the hypercompetitive and somewhat elitist IB students, were much less than ourselves.

However, an interesting counterpoint to these examples came during junior year. Hannah was running for the position of prom chair for the next school year, a position that was voted on by the entire grade level. On her campaign posters, she emphasized her last name, Sánchez, by literally writing it three times as large as her first name. During her speech, which was broadcast over the loud speaker to the entire school, she not only incorporated a few Spanish phrases but she also changed her speech patterns by rolling her “r” sounds and changing her accent slightly. Hannah knew she had to appeal to the large Hispanic population at school, but she worried that if she spoke with her normal accent and speech she would alienate the Hispanic students who thought she was “too white.” Hannah ended up winning the election.

My friend Eric, an African-American male, experienced a similar struggle. Along with the idea of covering, there has been more discussion about the struggle of inner-city African-American males who are academically oriented. These young men, referred to sometimes as “schoolboys,” often struggle to balance neighborhood and school pressures and expectations. Gunn (2004) explains that these schoolboys try to let other males in the neighborhood know they are like them, even if they do different schoolwork. Eric exemplified all of these ideas.

Like Hannah with her Mexican heritage, Eric would often cover his African-American heritage. During class, he spoke completely differently than he did during lunch or after school. He was quite smart and academically oriented, taking advanced physics classes and the like, but he more often talked about playing on the basketball team, a stereotypically African-American pastime. However, the most interesting way Eric worked to exemplify his sameness with the larger African-American community was the “IB gang” he co-created. Eric, along with another African-American IB male, a Middle Eastern IB male, and a Hispanic IB male, created “IBT.” The meaning behind IBT remained a mystery for a while, with no members explaining the genesis of the group or the name. Similar to other street gangs, they had secret rituals, like handshakes and nicknames. However, unlike street gangs, whose focus is usually violence, IBT simply had matching t-shirts and sat together at lunch. It was basically a sanitized version of a gang, offering a sense of community for these minority IB students. Come to find out, IBT stood for “IB Tyranny,” more proof of the innate nerd tendencies of all IB students.
Within this social sphere of advanced classes, the most prominent minority were the Asians. Specifically, most of the Asian students were either of Filipino or Vietnamese origin. My good Asian friends often were the ones who worked the hardest, pulling more all-nighters than other students, and who reported the most pressure from their parents. While all of us had parental support, since it would be almost impossible to complete the rigorous program without it, myself and my friends who were not of Asian descent did not really discuss pressure from our parents, whereas my Asian friends talked almost constantly about parental pressure. The sociological literature suggests that different minorities receive different types of pressures. While African-Americans and Hispanics have to fight general stereotypes of failure, Asians face the added pressure of exceeding high expectations (Kao 2000). It was not enough for them to be accepted into the program and try their best, but they must also have the highest GPAs and SATs. An added dimension to this pressure came from the fact that many of my Asian friends were second or third-generation; my good friend, Taylor, would often tell me that her parents would lecture her for hours about the importance of her achieving because they had worked so hard coming from the Philippines. Unlike other minorities who have been more acclimated to the United States Taylor’s parents still believed in the “American dream” of hard work as the tool for success. Taylor would have to work harder than anyone else to help justify her parents’ move from the Philippines.

Along with these studies about racial segregation in schools, there have also been studies about the relative incidents of deviance and misbehavior of different races. Delinquency in school settings can be described as “acts against persons or property in school that disrupt the educational process of teaching and learning.” In this particular study, school commitment is the single most important factor in deterring school delinquency (Jenkins 1995). In another study, which focused on racial dimensions, found that Asian students commit less acts of deviance in school than African-American, Hispanic, or white students (Jang 2002). While other factors must be accounted for, it seems that the strong commitment to school aids in the fewer numbers of deviance in Asian students. This small number may help to contribute to myth of Asians as the model minority; they succeed academically and do not commit deviant acts. However, what often goes unnoticed is the extreme pressure put on these students.

Conversely, there also exist certain conditions that seem to increase the incidence of school deviance. In addition to levels of school commitment, these include race, with African-American males disproportionately suspended, gender, with females less delinquent than males, and family size, with larger family structures providing less individual attention to each child (Jenkins 1995). Again, the largest proportion of deviant acts committed at CHS was committed by racially minority males who were in regulars classes. Specific high profile incidents during my tenure include a string of attacks on teachers’ cars in the school parking lots, perpetrated by a group of Hispanic males. The most obvious example of deviance, however, came from a gang fight between a Hispanic group from CHS and another Hispanic group from our rival high school, South Central High School. This off-campus fight was actually filmed, and it was shown on local and national news channels, including CNN. The school had to go into lock-down, a drill meant for use in case of an intruder or gunman, in order to allow the police to arrest all of those involved. In both cases, the perpetrators were racial minorities, mostly male (a few females were involved in the street fight incident), and with seemingly low school commitment. All of these acts disrupted the educational experiences of all CHS students, even those like myself, who had little to no direct contact with these students.
Within the IB community, race did not matter as much as educational tracking. We were all intellectual equals, and we all collectively viewed ourselves as a single unit. This mirrors the role that race played in the larger community of CHS. Since my previous schooling experiences were so homogenous, the role that race played within the social structure of CHS was not obvious to me until I was enrolled in a regular class. To graduate, everyone in Central ISD had to take certain credit classes, like computer technology, physical education, and speech classes. It was truly not until I took these classes during my sophomore year that I realized how segregated the school really was. If there was a class where I was the only IB student, I was automatically adopted by the other white students, most of whom were in regular classes, even though I had nothing to contribute to the discussions about their pigs (as one of the assignments for the agriculture students was raising their own farm animals) or skateboards. In my computer class one year, I was assigned a seat next to a group of Hispanic students. Before I even tried to speak to them, they turned away and started talking in Spanish. Because of my skin color, which is extremely pale white, and educational track, we had no obvious similarities, and I was not a desirable companion to them. To be fair, had there been another IB student in the class, I am sure I would not even tried to be friendly with this group of students; we all cling to those who we deem most similar to ourselves.

My experiences at CHS were markedly different from those at the Christian school I had attended previously. At the private, Christian school, there was literally no racial diversity, and, with it, little controversy or conflict other than on an inter-personal level. After transferring to racially mixed, inner-city Central High School, I became much more aware of race relations. Of course, being segregated from the population at large through the advanced IB program lent me a different perspective to the issues. Most of my experiences with race dealt with issues of friends’ covering or expectations placed upon the model minority. Importantly, I talked very little about my own experiences of how race impacted me personally. In my reflection, I came to the conclusion that, in my experiences, white was the norm. Though my classes were racially mixed, white was still seen as the normative race and, with it, actions and values of the white majority were seen as ordinary. I never had to cover or change to fit a larger ideal. The only memorable incident where my whiteness became an obvious problem came late senior year and in a rather insignificant way. As a treat, my senior English teacher instituted a cultural day where everyone was to bring food from his or her respective culture to share with the class. Everyone got to eat instead of having a normal class. Though a seemingly inane and pointless activity meant to pass time between IB exams and graduation, this was one of the most poignant and eye-opening assignments of my high school years. Asian friends all had fantastic homemade dishes of spring roles and rice. The Hispanic students brought equally fantastic dishes like homemade tamales and enchiladas; even the African-American students brought “soul food”, like cornbread and collard greens. The only people who had real issues with this assignment were the white students, like myself. Coming from the majority, there exists a feeling that there is no shared, white culture. Some people stretched back to European roots, making Black Forest cake or Shepherds pie, while another white student brought oatmeal because his grandmother ate it when growing up in rural Arkansas. So, despite an existing white privilege, there also is a sense of a lack of shared culture within the white community. Every racial group faces different issues within the school atmosphere.
About the author

I am a history major from Dallas, TX. This essay was written in 2008 during my senior year of college at Trinity University in San Antonio, TX. As the only child of two inner-city public school teachers, issues of schooling and socio-economic stratification have always concerned me. Other interests of mine include modern United States history, Broadway musicals, and travel. I will be attending law school beginning in fall 2009.

References


Language and Group Membership across Generations

Anonymous

This Trinity student, who wishes to remain anonymous, discusses her feelings about her Mexican American mother’s decision not to teach her Spanish, in spite of growing up in a community located on the border where Spanish was widely spoken. Not speaking Spanish has created considerable conflict in the life of this young woman, especially when she sought leadership positions in several Latina/o student organizations in high school and college. She comments on the difficulties she has faced as an advocate for Latino rights while at times being discriminated against by some of her peers for “not counting as Latino enough.”

The effects of socially constructed racial ideas on a person can last through a lifetime and affect the lives of future generations. My grandfather’s life experiences shaped him as a person and influenced the decisions he made while raising my mother. Similarly, my mother’s experiences with schooling, friends, and employment influenced her decision to not teach me Spanish. This decision has repeatedly manifested itself in my life, in assorted ways. My childhood was as average as can be expected, but during my junior year in high school, I went to a Latino leadership conference and experienced purposeful exclusion for the first time. Continuing on to Trinity, I encountered the notion that there is a difference between American Latinos and International Latinos. Several experiences echo through my mom’s life and through mine, which speaks to the difficulty of overcoming these societal ideas.

My grandparents’ house was a dual language house in the sense that my grandmother did not speak English and my grandfather would not speak Spanish. From the early days of his childhood in the Segundo Barrio, my grandfather was punished for speaking Spanish, including being hit in school. This experience led to his decision to never speak Spanish to my mother. My grandmother, on the other hand, was an immigrant from Guadalajara and was never able to fully grasp English, even though she took English classes religiously until a few years before her death. The first language my mother spoke was Spanish. American school was not, and still isn’t, a place that fosters language learning. In Mom’s first grade class with Mrs. Park, she was not allowed to go to the restroom until she could ask properly in English. This rule made for an embarrassing moment when my mother could not find the words in time to prevent herself from peeing in her pants in front of the class. This was my mom’s first experience with the discrimination that can come with not speaking English. Mrs. Park played another huge role in my mother’s life when she told my grandparents that my mom needed speech therapy to get rid of her accent. From first
grade through fourth grade, my mother went to daily speech therapy sessions because her accent made her be perceived as unintelligent. Her accent also influenced her placement in school; my mother was classified as special-ed not because she lacked ability but because her accent gave the impression of lacking. An example of this involves reading groups. The better one could read, the better the group they were put in. So, top readers would be in the eagle group, the next down would be in the blue jay group, etc. Because of my mom’s accent, it was assumed that she could not read English, so she was put in the buzzard group. The books the teacher gave her to read had only three words per sentence—“see Jane run” and the likes. When my mom reached middle school and got the opportunity to take an elective, she chose a reading class. On the first day of this class, everyone had to take an exam to see what their reading level was. My mother was a 12+ reading level. Finally, here was something that looked at her actual ability rather than assuming that because she speaks Spanish, is Mexican, and has an accent on her English, she must not be intelligent.1

My mother was very fair-skinned and, without an accent, had to prove her “Mexican-ness.” Sometimes these proving sessions were funny, like the time my mom was in Cancún with her cousin, Francisco, and one of his co-workers saw them and proceeded to tell Francisco in Spanish (assuming my mother didn’t speak it) that if he needed a prostitute, he didn’t have to pick up some gringa (implying my mother). My mother let this conversation go on for a while, pretending that she couldn’t understand. Finally, the evening came to a close and my mother politely in Spanish thanked the co-worker for a good evening and wished the best for him and his family. Some of these proving stories, however, were quite harmful. My mother’s career decision was to be a Spanish teacher, both ESL and Spanish as a foreign language. When she was applying for a job in the Ysleta Independent School District, one of the school districts in El Paso, she had an interview with a human resource person. The interview was conducted mostly in English and it went very well until the end of the interview when the HR person asked to have a portion of the interview in Spanish since the job was a Spanish-speaking job. They conversed in Spanish and then as my mom was leaving the HR person said, for not being a native speaker, she spoke Spanish very well and without an accent, assuming that because my mom had white skin and didn’t speak English with an accent that she must not be Mexican. My mother replied, “What? Just because I don’t sound like a bato and say that I come from el Segundo Barrio then I must not be Mexican?”2

These experiences, along with many others, influenced her decision to not teach me and my brother Spanish. She didn’t refuse to speak it to us like my grandfather decided for her, but there was no active learning of Spanish. In elementary school, I was put in a dual-lingual class so that I might pick up a little of the language, but because American society has such a ‘learn English’ mentality, the whole class was taught in English. This was the class the primary Spanish speakers

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1(Cobas and Feagin. 2008; Vila 2001) Language serves as a symbol to the importance of culture. For whites, English represents the development of civilization in peoples thought to be uncivilized. It is also the way that whites wield their power. All other languages, especially those of colonized people, are seen as a threat not only to ‘civilization’ but to the power that whites have white privilege. Schools are the main places for ideas, especially pressuring the ideas of the majority onto the minority. As seen in both my mothers and my schooling, this is nothing new. The majority want to make sure to stamp out the minority’s language (if it is not English) as a way to ensure that they are conforming to the majority’s culture. This language genocide is actually quite successful in that by the third generation, Latinos in the US speak only English.2(Campbell and Rogalin 2006); (Telles and Ortiz. 2008.) The category ‘Latino’ is a very broad and hard to define. It includes both ethnicity and race; commonalities include culture, ancestry, language, and general appearances. Many people confuse/see no difference in Latino as a race and as an ethnicity and often use Latino to mean both. Because this category is so large, Latinos, especially those that are a passion for political justice, often look to find one common factor that binds the group together. In my life, this binder has been Spanish. The way to tell if you count as Latino or not has often not been about skin color or family lines, but about my proficiency in Spanish. It seems that this is almost to counter the pressure to lose the language.
were put in so that they could learn English which also meant that it was taught at a slower pace. I had to stop taking the bilingual classes because if I wanted to be in the accelerated level classes, called Gifted and Talented (GT) or Advanced Placement (AP) I had to be on the advanced track and that track did not include Spanish. My lack of mastery of Spanish was never really a problem. El Paso is such a unique place, especially because of our connection with the border and Mexico, that I was never challenged when I said I was Mexican. To be Mexican is to be part of the majority. Society was also pushing so hard for people to master English and lose Spanish that I was not thought of as lacking because I had accomplished just that. I spoke more Spanglish and basic conversational Spanish than any formal type of Spanish and I got along fine.

Then, one week when I was a junior in high school with my eyes set on admittance and scholarship to any college of my choice, an opportunity was posed to me: A leadership camp with a non-profit Latino youth organization. This conference was sold as a golden ticket into a large list of schools that recognized the stature of this conference, Trinity University being among those schools. I had participated in several conferences before and thought this would be just like the others but with a special edge since they had that list of schools. So, I apply, am accepted and then have to send them money for the privilege of participating. I attended the summer session held at a major University in the southwestern United States. The overall goal of this conference was to teach us Robert’s Rules of Order and the U.S. legislative process so that we could use this knowledge of the system to be leaders in our Latino communities and have success at it.

The program starts with some general discussion about what it means to be a leader. The whole group is gathered in a circle and a leader from the organization targets a few students to make a point that beyond personal and professional ambitions, there is a higher calling of leadership service. The organization wants to show that people nowadays focus on what they need to do to make money and that there is more to life than just making money. So, I am eventually called on. I go to the center of the circle and he asks what I want to do with my future, and I say “I want to be a therapist.” The leader turns away from me and says, “see, she only mentioned a career.” He didn’t ask me to explain how I know that my education in this area will be one of the biggest helps to the machismo influenced community I grew up in, helping women gain self-confidence and so much more. My need for helping people would be fulfilled in this area and that I have to have professional training and education before I can take on this endeavor. After the leader used me to make a point without allowing me my own say, he told me to go back to the circle. At the end of the meeting, I approached this leader to tell him that so many careers have service and care for people in a community at the head of it, teaching, counseling, being a doctor, and so many more. I told him that a job isn’t only about money. He replied “I agree with you and I’m glad that you were able to get that from my lecture.” He turned the point I had, a lesson that my parents (both teachers) had taught me long ago, into some gift of enlightenment that he had supposedly given to me. This set the week off on a bad start, and it only got worse after that.

The next day, we were broken into smaller groups where we discussed what it means to be a leader and traits that are required. Through these group lists, it was decided that, in order to be a Latino leader, you must speak Spanish. A leader has to be able to communicate directly with the community that she is trying to lead, which is why she must speak Spanish. There was no mention about the need to speak English. The next part of this conference was to choose an office to run for and have a mini campaign. The unexpected part was that everyone that gave their

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3See note 1
4See note 1
election speech in English was questioned in Spanish and everyone that gave their election speech in Spanish was questioned in Spanish. So of our two presidential candidates, one could speak English with choppy Spanish, and the other candidate could speak Spanish with choppy English. The second candidate won because he had such a beautiful control of Spanish and his English skills were never challenged. Speeches went on for a whole day and since the majority of the speaking was happening in Spanish, a very formal Spanish that I am not used to, I had no idea what was going on or what the candidates’ ideas were. So, I sat for the day and played word search, to which several people felt compelled to approach me and tell me how rude it was to not give my attention to those speaking. Nobody had bothered to make sure that I could understand what was going on, so I politely ignored them.

After speeches came ballots and the preferred candidates for president and vice-president, Supreme Court justices, and senators were selected. The remainder of the participants (including me) were sent to the House of Representatives. The House and Senate were to draft bills that reflected our understanding of ways to essentially give the Latino community a better reputation. At the beginning of this conference, people were standing up and expressing their hopes that the world could share its many cultures and that by sharing everyone’s culture, prejudice and ignorance would subside for a new sense of world community. Leaders in the organization expressed their belief that to do these things was to only find worth in our culture by having it be approved by others. They pushed for a sense of belonging to the Latino community without belonging to a wider U.S. community or a world community. So, as the House and Senate are presenting their ideas, there is a progression from inclusiveness to exclusiveness where the only way for us to get better is to be superior. After the various bills have been read and voted on, the ones that passed both the senate and the house were sent to the president and his cabinet for consideration to be signed into law. None of the bills at this conference were signed into law. On the last day of the conference, everyone voted for whom they thought was the most distinguished member of the various groups (Supreme Court, Senate, House). Interestingly, even though by the standards that were championed I was in no way a Latino leader, I won the most distinguished member of the House of Representatives award. So, in some weird paradox, I cannot be included as a leader for my ethnicity yet am still regarded as an exceptional leader by the same people that didn’t want to see me as a leader of the Latino community.

That was my first experience with not counting as Latino enough. In El Paso, it was always assumed that one is Mexican simply because the majority of people there are Mexican. So much of the goal of schooling in El Paso is to master English and not foster Spanish that I was not seen as lacking but as having a foot up because of my English language skills. Then, I came to Trinity. College in itself is a force to reckon with, especially with all of the new experiences that come with college, living with a stranger, difficult classes with a different structure than I was used to, et cetera. But, for me, one of the biggest new things that I encountered was the international Latino. I joined an organization at Trinity that included both U.S.-born and international Latinos. As a new college

\[\text{5}^{(Lee and Ottati. 2002.)} \text{ In-group out-group bias plays a large role in social categorizations. The people that are in the in-group view people from the out-group more negatively. This allows for instances of differential treatment where one group justifiable gets more because the out-group does not deserve things because of some out-group flaw. Broadly, the in-group is the white-American majority and the out-group is the Latino, especially immigrant. One study found that these in-group/out-group biases influence the policies made in the US, to favor the in-group whites over the out-group Latinos. In my life, certain Latino groups seemed to be trying to fight these in-group/out-group prejudices. When students tried to talk about unity as the way to achieve status, an organization pushed for in-group/out-group biases but in favor of the Latinos rather than the whites. The power that whites have because of the in-group mentality is strong and I think that this organization was hoping to instill a strong sense of in-group for the Latinos so that the Latino “identity” could achieve a stronger level of influence in American politics.}\]
student, I was looking for a place away from home where I could feel at home with people who had similar backgrounds, experiences, and understandings. What I found was that being Mexican and American made me somehow not count again. I naively used “American” in a context that meant a person from the United States. This remark was met with a fierce reprimand and people calling to my attention that “America” includes people from the top of North America through Central America and to the tip of South America and that I should not be so quick to speak for the entirety of two continents. I had never been aware that this usage had such a negative connotation. So, I learned quickly to watch how I reference the United States in conversations with people that might find the use of “America” offensive. One girl actually tried to convince me to say “United Statesian” as opposed to American.

I worked with this organization for two years. At the end of my sophomore year, I was attending a meeting of the organization in which we were discussing how to reach out to Latino first-year students. One of the main issues we had to decide was how many door signs needed to be made for the in-coming first years. We were having difficulty deciding because the Admissions office was late in giving us the list of all first years that self-reported as Latino. One of the “international Latino” students in a leadership position in the organization said, “Well, let’s just do the international Latinos because they are the only ones that really count as Latino. American Latinos don’t count because some of them don’t even consider themselves Latino and some don’t even speak Spanish.” After no one commented about this extremely rude and offensive comment and I got over my shock that someone would actually say that, I informed the others at the meeting that if that is the mentality that they had, I would never have joined. Had the organization not reached out to me with their letter writing campaign and the door sign, I would not have joined and the organization would have lost a hard-working and dedicated member. I told them that to exclude American Latinos was to discount an entire population of people at this school, located in the United States, where there are numerous American Latinos and would be disregarding the future of the organization and potential leaders. I tried very hard not to express my personal offense to the comments. It surprised me that no one realized that these comments were offensive, especially in light of the quickness of people to jump on me for using a common term to refer to people from the United States as American.

These stories are a few of the many that my family and I have encountered. El Paso is such a unique place that I was not prepared for these encounters. I still have difficulty understanding some of the things people say and have not quite been able to find the best way to approach people that make comments like the one I have related here. My personal experiences with race and group identity are still forming and I have a strong understanding of the effects these events can have on my life. The Trinity community has brought the most racism I have ever experienced, echoing experiences that my family has had going back generations. I hope that the generations to come don’t have to deal with as many of these experiences as my mother and I have.
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Best of Both Worlds

Anonymous

This Trinity student, who wishes to remain anonymous, describes her experiences as an Indian immigrant to the United States. The daughter of highly trained professionals, this young woman has had to struggle with her racial and cultural difference in a variety of contexts growing up here, ranging from attending a Black and Latino majority public school as a child in Galveston to attending a white-majority private college as a young adult in San Antonio. In spite of the discrimination she experienced at times, she has followed her parents’ lead in working hard to achieve a level of economic well-being that will allow her to be respected and treated well as a foreigner in America.

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My life has been simple yet full of complex interactions. It has been simple because my family and I have not moved locations often or had any major changes in structure. However, the few places I have lived played important roles in forming my identity. I was born in India and lived there for six months until we moved to England, where my dad did his medical residency and where my brother was born. We lived in a predominantly Indian area of London, so it was an easy transition for my parents, who had never been to the United Kingdom before.

Typically, Indian immigrants are seen as the “quintessential immigrants” (Pawan 2003:206). Indian immigrants come to America to follow the American Dream, and they do not have as many stigmas attached to them in comparison to other minority groups. Most Indian immigrants are professionals and technical workers, not the poor, unwanted, unsuccessful members of their own country. Instead, they have economic and social security in their country and migrate to America to find better and bigger opportunities. Many call the phenomenon ‘brain drain’ because most Indians leaving their home country are the smartest and more successful members of society.

Results from Census 2000 show that there are one million foreign born persons from India in the United States. The foreign born from India represent 3.3 percent of the United States’ total foreign-born population of 31.1 million and .4 percent foreign born from India of the total population. Disaggregated by region of origin, the majority of temporary visas was issued in 2006 to foreigners from Asia, which shows that most of the Indian immigrants are legal and documented meaning they exercise more rights and privileges than other immigrants in the country (Migration Policy Institute 2003).

My family and I follow the typical pattern of segmented assimilation of many other Indian immigrants. Segmented assimilation deals with “the experiences of the new first and second generation immigrants that are shaped by the back and forth movement between multiple homes and
societies, communication between the sending and receiving societies, racial encounters and discrimination in the host society” (Bhatia 2007:22). The impact of the elements of the dominant majority culture on ethnic minorities may vary in intensity depending on a number of factors, such as “how recently they have settled in the United States, the ethnicity and social organization of the community in which they settle, their preparation for resettlement and pre-immigration experiences, and their personal adjustment prior to the full impact of the acculturation process” (Vargas and Chioino 1992:11). Since my parents moved to the country at a later point in their lives than my brother and I did, our experiences of adaptation are very different. My parents communicate more with the sending society, while my brother and I interact more with the receiving society by attending school, extra-curricular activities, and social gatherings. However, my whole family encounters discrimination in various forms.

Fortunately, it is a little easier for Indians to adapt because, according to the stereotype content model applied to immigrants, Indians are right in the middle of the warmth and competence spectrum, unlike other immigrants who are placed somewhat low in either of these spectrums (Massey 2007:PAGE). Also, according to the 1999 Census data, more than 35 percent of Asian males and females over the age of 25 have a Bachelor’s degree or more, compared to less than 30 percent of non-Hispanic whites. Also, the 1999 Census data shows that significantly more Asians have managerial and professional specialty positions over the age of fifteen, compared to non-Hispanic whites. The most despised immigrant group of all is the undocumented migrants, and since most Indians are legal and documented, they are very favored in U.S. society (Massey 157).

Sometimes, the high status works against Indian Americans because many believe that Asians do not face the problems that most other minorities do when it comes to academics, language and behavior. I had trouble in school during second and third grade, but, instead of getting help, I was sitting in the exams with students attempting to skip a grade, which, in turn, just put me behind in my class work. The teachers assumed that since I was Indian, I could automatically be placed in the gifted and talented programs, but this actually hurt me because of the fast pace and a lack of a strong foundation early on in my education. The news media very rarely covers problematic aspects of Asian American communities, such as poverty, depression, and other mental problems for kids. These issues need to be addressed by society and the media.

Also, the Indian immigrant community differs because “economic standing grants its members the freedom to establish cultural centers, interact primarily with other Indians and afford the requisite travel to India” (Kramer 2003:210). According to the 2002 Census data, 44.2 percent of Asian married couples have family incomes over $75,000 (Census Bureau 2002). Higher economic stability leads to the formation of communities referred to as diasporas, “immigrant communities that make a shared, active attempt to resist nameless homogenization and strive to keep alive a sense of home outside the geographical boundaries of their culture” (Bhatia 2007:34). According to the 2000 Census, the five states with the largest populations of foreign born from India, California, New Jersey, New York, Illinois and Texas, constitute 58.4 percent of the total foreign-born population from India in the U.S, which shows that these groups are focused in similar areas to encourage community building (Census Bureau 2000).

A strong tie to Indian culture in the United States leads family negotiation of rules regarding food habits, clothing, hair, friends, dating, marriage, respect for elders, attitudes toward gender, and treatment of family members. Sometimes, there are clashes and contradictions between Indian culture and American culture. Also, many Indian American youth have a strong sense of connection to other communities of color and strive to build coalitions across community lines, but this
is made harder by an effort to also preserve our Indian culture and heritage. Sunil Bhatia (2007) explains how diasporas lead to a strong sense of in-group mentality, and how this often leads to Indian Americans segregating themselves. However, similar bonding occurs with other groups too because it is natural for people to interact with others who are culturally and ethnically similar. Diasporas are also necessary for minorities to feel at home and have an outlet to share feelings and concerns about the majority culture with which they may have had racial encounters.

I experienced racism at an early age during the four years that my family lived in Galveston, which was our first place of residence in the U.S. Racism can be felt early on; “kids learn their subordinate place in society’s racial hierarchy and that white children exercise power from the top” (Chou and Feagin 2008:56). I attended a private Catholic school for first grade. For second grade through fourth grade, I went to a public school that was ninety percent black and ten percent Hispanic. For someone who barely knew English at the time, it was shocking to see kids dancing to hip hop during physical education class time, walking around half-dressed, and talking in ghetto slang. Since this was my first experience with other kids my age in the States, I did not know what to compare the black culture to since I was not aware of the normative culture. Therefore, at that time, although I did not fit in with the group, I did not judge my classmates or treat them as inferior.

I was not invited to the black communities at school because there was some hostility toward the few Asian students at my school. Although I was quiet and reserved because I did not know much English and was shy, the black students felt that I was too good for them because of my quiet, reserved, and studious nature. Typically, “African Americans have been the targets of oppression at the hands of whites for fifteen generations, and the model minority success of Asians so exaggerated and stereotypically framed by many whites, may incline some African Americans to categorize Asians as allies of whites” (Chou and Feagin 2008:49). I later realized that is why the other students treated the Asians at my school differently because it was apparent that the students performing poorly and getting in trouble more often were usually the black students. Other groups also think of Asians as nerdy and socially inept. For example, I faced hostility from my female classmates when I got crowned Valentine’s Day Princess in third grade. They were shocked and confused and actually confronted the teacher on how I could have possibly won. Growing up with these experiences has led me to believe that I do not have the ability to win popularity contests and that I should only focus on school work.

Also, early on in my life, I have had to deal with learning and portraying my race to others. Murali Balaji explains that “people in California have sued to protect their children from slanted textbooks but it is not that young American Indians’ ignorance or confusion about their culture and religion has to do with institutional media basis.” (Hinduism Today 2008). The pressure has been on parents and their children to ignore media’s portrayal of their race and instead learn on their own and later educate others. For example, the movie Love Guru, which came out recently, does not deal much with actual elements of Hindu culture and religion, yet cinema is a powerful medium capable of promoting negative stereotypes and misinforming the uneducated. Therefore, the Indian American youths like me must ignore the media mockery of our culture while pushing ourselves to learn and educate others. Throughout my elementary and middle school years, classmates would ask me why Indian Hindus worship cows. At first, I found this question degrading and embarrassing, but I later found the answer on my own and explained to others that cows are “respected in India since farming is a common job in which cows play a big role, even cow dung is used” (Hinduism Today 2007). Questions like this used to catch me off guard, but the pressure is put on Indian American Hindus to do more than “simply wearing OM shirts and dropping a
couple of dollars at the Hindu temple and lighting candles for Diwali” (Hinduism Today 2008). We cannot simply participate in cultural aspects; we have to know their significance in order to preserve our identity.

In middle school and high school, I felt that I had to conform to the majority population to compete and protect myself from discrimination. W.E.B. DuBois called it double consciousness, which involves “the internalization of the ‘other’s’ point of view” (Kramer 2003:4). Double consciousness does not make one happy. Instead, it makes one more functionally fit within the dominant society. The author explains that assimilation is not a psychological process so much as a sociological process of symbiotic relationships between people and with their environment. I also felt that it was not an individual’s choice to decide whether or not she or he had been accepted; it was the group’s decision. Throughout elementary school and middle school, I tried fitting in with the majority group, but I was not quite included in the inner circle of the white children. Usually, in extra-curricular activities and on field trips, when we were not in the classroom setting, I felt most excluded. The white children seemed to have an interconnection that I could not obtain without seeming to try too hard. I had this understanding that I was just not meant to fit and that there was not much I could do about it.

Kramer explains, “[a]n outsider can be rejected for acting or talking too much like the locals” (Kramer 2003:5). Sometimes, this may mean that the dominant culture does not want others to act like them, which is how I felt in Galveston with the black kids. Also, it was hard for me to determine what you needed to fit in with the various groups I observed throughout my early years. For example, beauty plays a big role in determining one’s popularity in school. However, “beauty is culturally determined and societies differ radically in their definitions of what constitutes beauty” (Kramer 2003:69). Since there were very few Indian Americans in my schools, my appearance could not compare to the beauty standards of the white, black, and Hispanic groups because it did not culturally apply to me. Therefore, outward appearance was a major personal insecurity of me since I felt that I was not as good-looking and in style as everyone else since I could not wear skimpy clothing, highlight my hair, get piercings, or wear excessive jewelry and makeup. Research has also found that oftentimes “teachers equate whiteness with attractiveness” (Kramer 2003:144). My young, modern, and attractive fifth-grade teacher would have get-togethers at her house and led our all-girls peer group after school, and I often felt excluded from her hugs, giggles, secrets, and play fights. Exclusion made me feel very socially inept and left out.

An issue I have felt more recently has been racial profiling, especially after 9/11. For example, certain families that I had baby-sat no longer thought of my family as trustworthy. Although they did not cut me off directly after the 9/11 attacks, they seemed more hesitant. I have also noticed that families are more curious about my family background when deciding to hire me. Racial profiling has a deeper impact on me because it not only relates to me but to my whole family. It is hurtful and shameful to see my dad wear professional attire when we travel so that we do not get pulled over for extra questioning at security lines at the airport.

Today, race plays a big part in my life because I feel that I am caught between two worlds. I feel oppression from both sides and face a constant struggle to decide in which society I fit or how to combine both. Successive generations of Indian Americans after the first are more likely to feel caught between the two social worlds because we are adapting to both at the same time, while the earlier generations adapted to Indian culture first and then to the American culture. The successive generations may feel fewer ties to their parents and grandparents but still have the physical traits associated with Indian immigrants.
This struggle of juggling two cultures also poses some difficulties in the next two stages of my life, finding a job and a husband. Asian women “feel they will be treated better by white men and will be granted more freedom” (Chou and Feagin 2008:159). Most traditional Indian men still expect their wives to be in charge of cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children. Inter-racial dating has been completely avoided in our family discussions because it is seen as a taboo situation. Also, within Indian diasporas, gender is rarely paid much attention in theorization about the acculturation process. Many still uniformly believe that women bear the extra burden of housework along with having professional careers. Also, mothers fear that “the loss of the shared cultural elements from their kids marrying non-Indians will make it awkward” (Bhatia 2007:125). All of these elements cause Indian parents to avoid the topic of inter-racial dating with their kids, which leads to missed relationship opportunities with other ethnic groups.

Acculturation leads to having to balance two cultures, but “nostalgia in the Indian community now does not build up a collection of memories that were left behind decades ago” (Bhatia 2007:221). Instead, for contemporary Indian migrants, the concept of home is represented through routine visits to India, Bollywood films playing at local theaters, the internet, and the existence of ‘little Indias’ all across the cities of the United States. Cultural landmarks make it easier to keep our culture while taking advantage of all the unique opportunities in America. It becomes difficult during my routine visits to India every year or every other year when my elders judge me on how I conduct myself in the home in terms of chores, customs, and rituals. My elders in India focus on different elements and value them higher while my peer leaders, professors and advisors in America guide me toward a different path focused on academics and career. Indian American youth are held to higher standards because everyone including their parents, friends, teachers, and relatives believes that they are incapable of making mistakes. This intense pressure on the youth is not healthy, and, in many situations, can backfire. Many times, I feel myself trying to please too many people. This causes me to try to be perfect, and when, I make mistakes or fail, I go really hard on myself.

The acculturation process is by no means effortless. The developmental process is marked by incompatibilities, conflicts, and asymmetries and requires extreme effort to preserve and pass down cultural traits. The pressure is on my generation to carry on the traditions. It was easier for our immigrant parents who grew up in India, but many attributes of Indian culture are lost growing up in America. For example, by “adopting a margins-in-the-mainstream perspective, second-generation immigrants have multiple identities that they define as both in tension and as in dialogue. Similarly, they act on their multiple lifestyles by at times embracing one over another but at other times, bringing them together even when they feel as if they contradict” (Dhingra 2007:9). Also, with attempts to instill pride in our homeland, only certain factors of ethnicity receive attention such as major holidays and wedding ceremonies. There are other elements that our parents and the Indian community do not focus on such as homosexuality, abuse of women, poverty in India, and child labor. These topics are all placed aside and ignored in our Diaspora communities in America.

Indian American families have to do what is required of them to have the best of both worlds. For example, “immigrant parents usually advocate educational attainment for their children as a means for them to adjust to the new country. Parents often emphasize choosing college majors that lead to well-paying careers” (Dhingra: 2007:50). My parents pushed my brother and me to study law or medicine and did not give us much of a choice; we finally convinced our parents to let us settle on business. Art, film, dance, communications, and sociology would not even be choices for us, which restricts our freedom in living our lives how we want. Our parents feel that economic
well-being is necessary to be respected and treated well as foreigners in America.

The author explains, “Not all cultural elements could or should be hidden, according to immigrants. Yet even when they shared cultural differences, they strategically communicated them as supportive of dominant values and institutions” (Dhingra 2007:53). Indian American youth not only have to please their immigrant parents to confide with their native culture but also have to adhere to dominant culture to get ahead in society. I have had to balance college life while making frequent visits to India for family gatherings and Indian functions. Although I feel very lucky to have both cultural aspects in my life, it is a hard balancing act and confusing to figure out which society you fit in. I have learned through all my racial encounters and life experiences that you just have to take the best from both worlds.

References


