

Chapter 7

Let's Talk About Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

It is not easy to accurately describe one's cultural identity. There are many factors to consider – from diversity narratives constructed over a single lifetime to those that have been accrued by greater populations. One way to engage this discussion is to provide an overview of diversity key terms that are most closely associated with culture. Important historical events should also be emphasized, as they provide context to many of the challenges faced in modern times. Such topics often cause friction among European Americans – many of whom are loath to judge the actions of those who share their skin color. To start this conversation, the chapter introduces the author, Kimberly, and the five interviewees, Lina, Darnell, Alice, Sheila, and Talia, who discuss their understanding of cultural identity as it applies to their lives.

INTRODUCTION

I identify as biracial Chinese and White, and I think that experience has provided me with a pretty unique lens regarding diversity and ethnic and racial reconciliation. Sometimes, I've felt like I can move fluidly between these two racial categories and be with Asians and feel comfortable and be with White people and feel comfortable. Other times, I've felt like my biracial identity has prevented me from really fitting in to either group, and I think that is a narrative that a lot of biracial individuals would say is common to them. ~Jessica

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How often have you thought about your cultural identity? In all likelihood, it depends on your ethnic makeup. In her video narrative, Jessica indicated that she has most likely pondered this throughout her lifetime, because as a biracial person she considers herself *both* Chinese and White and *neither* Chinese nor White. At the end of the day, she often feels as if she has no group to fall back on, creating uncertainty about her identity. This is a common theme in discussions about cultural diversity and there are historical precedents that underscore this dilemma. For example, numerous laws such as the one-drop rule were enacted to classify human beings by percentage of ethnic makeup to recognize the superiority of one group over another (Davis, 1991). This narrative persisted even as societal beliefs began to shift towards equality, and in some ways may still impact how we view racial identity today.

It is not unusual for college students to feel uncertain about their identities as they learn about cultural diversity in classrooms and through interactions with others. Black Americans are sometimes told by those from their ethnic group that they are “not Black enough.” And many Latinx Americans suffer “Go back to Mexico” taunts and may feel unfairly labeled by others of their own race if they are not fluent in Spanish. Asian Americans are often seen as perpetual foreigners and bear the brunt of stereotypes such as being overly submissive or good at math (Blackburn, 2019) and more recently, bias due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Liu & Finch, 2020). Many White Americans lament, “If I try to celebrate my culture with people from my ethnic group, I will surely be called a racist.” And individuals with disabilities frequently experience exclusion and insensitivity from others (Agarwal, Calvo, & Kumar, 2014). In short, it is not possible to categorize diversity into a quick and easy formula. The fault for this may lie in the unpredictable nature of our stories.

In this chapter, we begin a journey with five interviewees from our qualitative study who discuss the impact of cultural diversity in their lives. To orient the reader to their stories, the interviewees’ names precede their quotes. We then key in on important terms, historical precedents, and conflicting narratives that have influenced culture over time. Finally, we discuss the intersection between Whiteness and race and the narrative elements that have made it such a troubled fit. Video narratives from the diversity mosaic project are interspersed throughout to highlight the perspectives of a variety of university members, and the narrators’ names appear at the end of their quotes.

Defining our Cultural Identity

There are many overlapping and counterbalancing narratives that work together in shaping our cultural identity. It is therefore challenging to fully understand this aspect of our lived experiences. Let’s consider Jessica’s story, which opens this chapter. What must it look like for her to live with two starkly different ethnic identity narratives? And what of the accounts from Dana, Frank, and others in Chapter 1? Their stories are vast in scope and cry out for deeper exploration. Without it, we are bound to repeat the same mistakes through implicit biases and hidden judgments of others.

To understand diversity at a deeper level, let’s look at it on an individual basis. To start this discussion, I [Kimberly] will briefly discuss my culture and how it is intrinsically tied to my identity. As a third-generation Chinese American woman, my narrative begins with my initial childhood interactions and experiences. Born and raised in Los Angeles, California, a metropolitan urban setting comprised of many communities with collectivist cultures, I experienced life in a multicultural environment. Viewing my elementary school class photos, I noticed the high level of diversity of students in my school, which predominantly included peers from Hispanic, Black, and Korean ethnic backgrounds. In home life, by contrast, I was part of a homogeneous, hierarchical family structure in which intergenerational

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