Cultural Autobiography

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AGSC Nyack College

GCN 615.OA: Social and Cultural Foundations of Counseling

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Oct. 16, 2020

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Cultural Identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to a specific group. It's part of one's self-perception and relationship to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generations and locality. Cultural Identity is also identified as any social group that has its own distinct culture. The distinction of my cultural identity can be seen as an African American can be seen in foods, literature, languages, the community, family structure, individuality, music dancing and art.

Symbolic level of my culture is m y faith in God as my Savior. My faith plays a tremendous part in m y life on a daily basis through prayer, mediation, music, praise and worship. It was not until my latter years, when I realized how important a relationship with God by faith in his son, Jesus Christ. My faith in Jesus, no matter if I'm happy or sad, assures me that everything will be alright.

In this paper I will discuss my background, family structure, ethnicity, religion and events in my life that made me the woman that I am today in-spite of racial prejudices.

My name is Gertrude Nelson and I was born March 23, 1950 in Los Angeles, California into a two-parent family of African descendants. I have one biological brother and one biological sister by the same parents. At the age of thirteen, another sister was born breached at six months and lived for twenty-four hours. We are called "stepchildren" because of the receptive nature of our birth. There is a one to two-year difference in our ages because we were all born in the same month, during the same week, one year after another. In fact, my brother and I are the same age for one week. I am the youngest of the three siblings from this union. I do have a sister younger

than me, outside of my parents' union. My father was born on September 2, 1909 and transitioned on September 28, 1989. My mother does not like the year of her birth acknowledged, so I will just mention that she was born on September 28 and transitioned on November 9, 2000. Since my father wanted us to remember his transition from earth to heaven, he transitioned on my mother's birthday. Only God could arrange that event.

My Family

The majority of my life, I lived in the northern region of the United States. As far as I can remember, I grew up in a middle-class family. Both of my parents had steady jobs as professional pressers in the cleaners to provide a roof over our heads, and we never went naked or hungry. If we were living below the poverty level, we did not know it. My father was patriarchal as far as discipline was concerned. My mother was matriarchal who set the main guidelines for my siblings and me (Proverbs 22:6). My father was an abusive parent, verbally and physically to my mother and myself. I was the one out of all the siblings to always be disciplined. Our relationship was strained throughout my childhood into adulthood. It was not until a year before his death, I was able to forgive him and be there when he needed support.

My 21st century family today consists of myself and five children. At the age of fifteen, I became a teenage mother to a son while in high school. At the age of eighteen, I married an entertainer, who later engaged in substance abuse. At the age of nineteen, a daughter was born from that union and seven years later I was divorced. Some years later, I thought the man I was dating was going to be my future husband, we had three sons (that included a set of twins) together, but never married.

I was no stranger to work as a single mother, but in the 60's-70's as a teen mother, and even working as a nurse in the 80's-90's, I had to apply for public assistance at times to meet the

needs of my family, which had a stigma attached to it. While working as a nurse, my shift influenced my salary. I always made it a priority to obtain a higher education to provide a better life for my family. In earning multiple degrees, even when it is applied in one's life, it is not always the means to acquire more financial wealth.

As a single mother and living on my own, I was the authoritative figure in my home. Today, my grown children still offer their support as needed. I do not let my economic status predict my direction in life. My gender, age and color do not define my worth or character as a person, only God's Word does.

Ethnicity

During my lifetime, I have been able to experience my portion of different cultures, mostly in my everyday living and some traveling outside the United states. I remember at about the age of five or so, we came to New York and settled down in a predominately black community with few whites and Jewish neighbors. During the 60's-80's, certain areas were called "Jew Hill." There were more white business owners than blacks. My parents never taught us to be prejudiced, even though prejudice was all around us. As my siblings and I became older, My mother always encouraged us to travel and see as much of the world as possible. I did not use this opportunity to the best of my advantage as I became an adult. I have met some interesting people throughout my lifetime even in my community, either in school or working as a nurse.

My family was born in the United States of America. From my understanding, my grandmother was part Cherokee Indian and her husband was Jamaican. She and my great grandmother who I never knew both lived to be 100 years old. I never knew my great grandfathers on either side of my parents' family. Apparently, there must be some Irish descent

in my family because my maiden name “Pugh” which is Irish and pronounced “Pug” at times. My father was so light skinned with blue eyes, when he went into the Navy, they listed his race as “white.” My father and my uncle on my mother’s side of the family had green eyes and light skin. Maybe he fell in that “one drop rule” (Hays & Erford, 2018).

I grew up knowing that I was an African American and there were things that we experienced based on other cultural guidelines. As a child my parents were not combative about racial prejudice. I’m proud of my ethnicity and the many contributions my ancestors contributed to society and the African American culture. I am also proud of doing my part also in bringing peace and joy to someone in despair no matter what their cultural background is. My gender, age and skin color as an African American female could have a negative impact on my life if I had kept letting society predict my future based on my culture.

Religion

Even though my father was catholic and my mother Baptist, she respected the discipline the institution of Catholicism offered, so my siblings and I attended catholic school for a short time in the south. Growing up, I loved going to church and enjoyed school. I practiced Catholicism until I was about 31 years of age. I knew there was a God but did not have an understanding of His totality as the Creator of heaven and earth until I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior.

Although I had a tumultuous childhood as a result of my personal experiences, my present relationship with God has changed my life, allowing me to understand the purpose of my past (Proverbs 3:5,6). I had to let go of a lot of emotional, spiritual and cultural baggage that I carried for years (Hebrews 12:1).

My faith in God is a very important part of my life to help me live not just like an African American but a child of God.

Cultural Identity

In the 60's -70's there was discrimination, but it was not as evident as it is today. As mentioned, prior, if we were living below the poverty level, we were not aware of it. All our needs were met, and we did not lack anything. Like I mentioned, my mother would tell us to travel as much as you can to learn all we could and when you go to a restaurant, do not order what you can cook at home and try different things. She taught us good work ethics so that we would be able to take care of ourselves. Name brand items were not an important need. We did not have the need to "keep up with the Jones."

My mother instilled in us that our family comes first and what happens in the family stays in the family. Both parents worked to provide for our family and when my mother became a single parent after separation from my father, she continued to provide for her children with an honest job. She took on ironing and domestic work, and at times I assisted her. To my recall, I do not think that my mother ever received any source of public assistance.

Since I was a teenage mother at the age of fifteen, I was no stranger to work. In my earlier adulthood, I received public assistance for a period of time over the years. Yes, even during the 60's-70's, there was a stigma if you were receiving any form of public assistance and it has not changed to this day. During those days, the scene from the movie "Claudine" portrayed our household. Household products such as televisions, radios or electrical appliances had to be hidden prior to a house visit from a Social Worker. If these items were noticed it would affect your public assistance status. I continued my education because I made a promise to myself and my mother that I would.

Even though I lived in the south for a short period of time, in comparison I find that the south is much more friendly than the north even to this day. As a young adult, I moved with my children to the Midwest for a year and half in the 70's. I experienced prejudice and racial microaggressions firsthand. While tending to a white Jewish bedbound patient, during her care she commented that she pays my salary. I still can remember one day I received a ride from this white family, and when I entered the truck, their son said, "a Nigger." His parents did not know how to respond, and even though I was not born again, I knew it was by the grace of God that I kept my mouth closed.

I have seen and read about a lot of injustice/prejudice in my lifetime, from "white only" verses, "colored only" bathrooms, instruction to go to the back of the bus, hangings, KKK activities to verbal abuse, denied adequate education and so forth. From childhood to adulthood, I knew people of color were different and treated differently from whites, but it was overlooked. Maybe we were living in blindness or ignorance to keep peace in our community or the home. The discord, hatred, prejudice and white supremacy today is similar to what I experienced as a child, but it is elevated at a greater magnitude.

All the underlying suppressed feelings of generational prejudices are now coming to the surface by white supremacists, haters and cultural groups who have a distaste for anyone different from them. They have always labelled people of color and how they are supposed to act in any given situation. Some people in society are very insensitive to other cultures and rather not be part of the solution. I have seen these incidents on television and read about them as a child, but never in my life did I think that I would be experiencing them in the 21st century.

Some of the customs my parents required of their children was to say yes or no ma'am, children are seen and not heard in the presence of adults, eat all your food, etc. We had age

appropriate household chores, for instance on Saturdays, we had to kill the chicken and skin it in preparation for Sunday's dinner. We were not to shame our parents in public. Hold the door for others, especially the elders.

On Christmas Eve, we attended church services and opened our presents at midnight while eating homemade fruit cake and eggnog. My mother would bake the cake in June or July and start drowning it in different kinds of alcohol. By the time Christmas came it was a drunk cake instead of a fruit cake. I liked eating around the rim of the cake because it was saturated with alcohol. Even the eggnog was spiked with liquor. On New Year's Day we drank apple cider and ate ethnic foods such as chitterlings, black eye peas for good luck, collard greens, mac and cheese, cornbread and rice. Throughout the summer at Rockland Lake or Anthony Wayne Park we had family picnics and barbeques with extended families from New York City.

It might sound like I had blinders on, but during my childhood the culture of LGBTQ and disabilities were not that prevalent in society. We had no prejudices against these cultures. LGBTQ was not visible and those that I did come across with disabilities were treated with respect. It was not until the last several years that I noticed people of various sexual orientations starting to come out. Based on my relationship with God and what the word says, I have a challenge with this altered lifestyle. God calls these lifestyles an abomination. The Book of Revelation also speaks about the end result of this type of lifestyle. Like God, I love the sinner, but hate the sin. I am not saying I'm perfect because we all have something hidden in our closets that have not been exposed yet. To understand this culture better, it is my immersion project.

I do not look at people with disabilities any differently as human beings but do acknowledge they are experiencing physical challenges. Society has a habit of placing stigmas

on people because they are different from them. Cultures have to learn to embrace other cultures so that we can live peacefully among each other, even with our differences.

Conclusion

Today, as an African American female living in the north, as I reflect on the mistreatment of people of color in the past and try to grasp what is happening in today's society, it is heartbreaking. In the past, African Americans accepted anything that was handed to them out of fear. They were and still are considered the minority based on the white culture's opinions. The recent incidents of brutality especially to people of color by those in authority is very sickening. The problem in our society today is that not only are our communities divided, but the world is. Some of our white associates and leaders do not see a problem in our society, in denial and this behavior just adds more fuel to the fire of all forms of prejudice (Hays & Erford, 2018).

Demographics still show that people of color are still experiencing many disparities with a cost to their well-being; by living in subpar living conditions, homelessness, poor health care for those in impoverished areas, inadequate education and health care services for adults and children of color, poor wages and children going to bed hungry (Hays & Erford, 2018). These conditions affect African Americans, Latino's and Hispanics as compared to our white counterpart citizens who feel entitled to better living conditions and adequate services. They do not experience institutionalized racism.

The spirit of Covid19 has brought out the worst in people, including our leaders against other cultures. Leaders have the power to make a positive change in our culture but do not exercise that power on behalf of others and benefit from another's hardship. (Hays & Erford, 2018). The cries of the unfortunate are being ignored. It's just that it has not been acknowledged by society.

Jane Pittman, Martin L. King, Rosa Parks, the Kennedys and so forth were all people trying to make a difference not only for people of color, but for all mankind. The African culture is finding their voice and saying Black Lives Matter (BLM) and it's time for change for all mankind (Hays & Erford, 2018.). Yes BLM, but in God sight all lives matter. Society from all levels has to recognize and embrace the truth. Change of any kind can be frightening, especially when things have always been done one way out of ignorance.

I do not regret my upbringing, even though personally there was some trauma that could have a lasting effect in one's life. I grew up knowing that I was an African American and there were things that we experienced based on white man's guidelines (Hays & Erford, 2018). I'm proud of my ethnicity and the many contributions my ancestors made to society or the African American culture. My present and future goals are to make contributions to all cultures, including mine, for the better, this includes bringing peace and joy to someone in despair. The talents God has given us as a black culture has blessed many, especially those of a different culture (Hays & Erford, 2018).

There's a saying, "I'm black and I'm proud." I have a part to play in my success as an African American female to make a difference. Social justice can be obtained to eradicate inequality if each culture examines their own cultural values and biases. Competent cultural counselors provide client services where they will be empowered to make a change, and the communities work together towards social change for the good of all and disparities/inequality can come to an end. No culture has to be threatened by another culture (Hays & Erford, 2018).

My educational status as a professional and life experiences have allowed me to seek out the best care for my family. There is a slogan that say, "a mind is a terrible thing to waste." Education is powerful and knowledge is even more powerful. But if one has knowledge and do

not know what to do with it, they will never go beyond their limitations psychologically. My education has afford me to provide my children with the best education possible, better employment as a parent with an occupation that allows me to be an asset to others. I can decide where I want to live and do not have to accept just any old dwelling or neighborhood, because society 'think' I should. Hosea 4:6a say "my people are being destroyed because they do not know me." Knowing who I am in Christ Jesus, I do not have to let my color, gender, age or society to define me. My knowledge and contribution to society as an African American woman of God will speak for me.

References

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