

Cultural Identity Paper

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I was born in South Korea, and then I moved to the United States of America just before turning three years old. I came to the U.S. with my grandparents, and I stayed with them for two months without my parents. My parents had a business in Korea that they needed to sell before starting their life in America. During this hectic time, there were many issues with sleep arrangements and transportation; therefore, my parents decided to send me to America first with my grandparents no matter how much it pained them to leave me. My parents came to America with a Visitor Visa that restricts travelers from extending their stay in another country. When my parents overstayed they became illegal immigrants; this has affected each one of my family members' lives including myself.

I received my DACA status in 2013. Since then, I have been able to work legally; however, many of the rights given to permanent residents and citizens are not given to DACA recipients. I still do not qualify for federal aid, many scholarships, certain job or academic opportunities, and travel outside the United States. Ever since I received my DACA status, I have had to include this as one of my main identities. Furthermore, I am a 25-year-old single heterosexual female working as a part-time applied behavioral analysis therapist in New York. I am an only child, a Christian, and I am currently on track to earn a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling at Nyack College which makes me the first generation in my family in the United States as well as the first one to graduate from both undergraduate and graduate schools; these are privileges I have been blessed with.

Another one of my identities is being biracial. I consider myself Asian-American because the values and traditions I grew up with are very much rooted in South Korean culture whereas most of my academic life has revolved around American culture. I am an equal member of both

groups today; however, it was difficult to internalize this belief as a child because these two cultures conflicted with each other during most of my childhood. Since my parents were born and raised in Korea, they taught me everything they knew through their cultural lens. This meant we celebrated Korean holidays, ate Korean food, listened to Korean music, and socialized with mostly Korean people. On the other hand, I had to attend American schools and programs, make American friends, eat American food, and learn about American culture with the other half of my time. This was difficult to process and comfortably do without experiencing dissonance. For example, I was embarrassed by the meals my mom packed me for school because they had a look and smell that was obviously different from the cafeteria food or the lunches other students brought. My peers would ask me questions such as “Does that actually taste good?” and “Why does it smell like that?” Because other kids were not being asked this, I interpreted these questions to mean “That looks gross. It doesn’t even look like food. Why do you eat that?” Today, I have come to embrace many aspects of South Korean culture, especially the parts I used to hide while growing up. However, I am also aware that South Korean culture has made international headlines over the years with its music, food, clothing, and skin-care products. The boom in Korean culture has definitely made the transition from rejecting my culture to embracing it a lot easier; this is a privilege many other people do not have. I also had the privilege of meeting friends who helped me develop a sense of cultural pride.

There are also private events within my family that have impacted my identity development such as my grandfather’s death, my uncle’s ongoing financial conflict, and my period of depression. For example, my grandfather’s death was the first death in the immediate family that my family and I experienced together. He passed away from a heart attack or a stroke right after an explosive argument with my aunt’s husband. My mom spent many years blaming

my aunt's husband for her father's death, and inevitably, I did as well after seeing what this did to my mom. My mom's relationship with her sister and mother was unstable for a while because my mom was against how they handled the situation right after my grandfather collapsed (i.e., they did not immediately call the ambulance). Coping with death for the first time, harboring feelings of anger and hatred towards my aunt's husband, and interacting with my mom during this vulnerable time have definitely impacted my identity development. I am still resolving many negative feelings I have towards my aunt's husband; however, this process has allowed me to imagine the situation from my aunt's husband's perspective, something I never thought I would be able to do. Rather than only allowing myself to blame him, I was also able to empathize with the difficulties of being outcasted from the family over an event out of his control.

My ethnic culture is influenced by both South Korean and American customs and values. As mentioned before, I am surrounded by Korean culture in my home and church and by American culture at school. I celebrate New Year twice a year: once on January first and another around the end of January or the beginning of February. I grew up only celebrating Korean New Year by eating tteokguk (i.e., rice cake soup) and visiting family while wearing hanbok (i.e., traditional Korean clothing) to wish them blessings in the new year. It was not until high school was almost over that I started to celebrate New Year's Day New York style. I was extremely confused when someone told me Americans watched a ball drop in the freezing cold at midnight to celebrate. Now, I can say I have tried it, and the best part was experiencing it with friends; my friends and I huddled together for hours waiting for a ball that we could not even see. A Korean tradition I recently learned about is the consumption of meyukguk (i.e., seaweed soup) and pumpkin soup by mothers after giving birth. Meyukguk helps with milk production and pumpkin soup reduces inflammation and increases the speed of recovery after birth. Korean culture also

believes that the child's first birthday is an incredibly important time that could help determine the child's future. We celebrate by holding a party for close relatives, and we play games where the child has to choose among different presents that represent different paths in life (e.g., bills symbolize wealth, thread symbolizes long life).

In addition to the celebrations and staple dishes that characterize Korean culture, my parents also taught me values that were different from American values. American schools usually foster independence, autonomy, and passion for following dreams whereas Korean schools and family systems stress collectivism, obedience to family, and filial piety. I have also been taught to never speak against my elders; however, at school, my teachers taught me to speak up in a respectful manner no matter who it is. Although now I have developed discernment through experience, as a child, it was difficult to gauge which actions were appropriate at what times. I remember contemplating which choice was moral because I learned that speaking against the elderly is perceived as poor parenting by others. As for work values, my dad emphasized the importance of earning a stable income from a 9 to 5 job. I spent many years convincing my dad psychology and sociology was worthwhile degree because, from his experience, financial and medical occupations were the most stable. Simultaneously, my friends who were born and raised in America tried to convince me to follow my passion. I decided to follow my calling, and that is also a privilege that many people do not experience. Similar to my parents, many people do not have the opportunity to financially support themselves and their loved ones with their dream jobs. Although I am currently not financially independent, simply being able to pursue education towards a calling as a single person without children or major financial responsibilities gives me opportunities that are denied to many other people.

Being Christian is also a privilege that I have been blessed with. I grew up in a Christian house with Christian relatives; I spent most of my weekends at church, weekdays at home catching up on church work, and summers at church camps. Christian values and Bible stories were all very real in my family while growing up. I never had a reason to question my faith until undergraduate college. I strayed from God several times during my teenage years, but I never questioned His existence. I struggled with depression, anxiety, suicidal ideations, and addiction every day for several months in my sophomore year of college. I felt like my life was more difficult because God was *in* my life. I wondered if God was actually real, and if believing so only made my life harder. Back then, I understood my experience with God as one that was gently forced upon me by my family from birth. Now, I know the Christian stories, values, and customs my church and family have instilled in me were protective barriers.

Additional protective factors such as parental resilience, community support, economic opportunities, safe schools and neighborhoods, and consistent access to clean food and water have also been granted to me for most of my life. Because I had most, if not all of my basic needs met, I had the opportunity to take classes and engage in hobbies that cultivated self-awareness, multicultural curiosity, and empathy. I developed deep care about cultural issues during my undergraduate years after taking numerous anthropology, psychology, and sociology courses. During this time, I was fortunate enough to learn that my Asian heritage is something to be immensely proud of rather than embarrassed or conflicted about.

While I am pulled towards advocacy and multiculturalism today, I have not always been so passionate or even curious about diversity. My family and church have taught me to love and accept everyone. As I grew older, I learned that many people, including myself, are taught to love and accept people with exceptions. The LGBTQ+ population was one group that was

always excluded from the conversation until I met people who identified as LGBTQ+ and I started attending Nyack College. My family has come a long way since the days they used to frequently and impulsively act on their biases. However, like everyone else, we still have prejudices against certain groups of people. It can be difficult to resolve biases if we have been taught to believe them from a young age or if we had any negative experiences with certain populations. For example, three years ago, when I lived in Manhattan, my dad and I would pass many homeless people holding signs and asking for change during our car rides. My dad took almost every opportunity to comment on their lack of motivation and laziness. I spent most of my life never saying anything back to comments such as these because I also started to believe that if someone worked hard enough, they could achieve anything. For my dad, this belief came from his own experience of relentlessly working to support his family. For me, this belief came from a place of privilege (e.g., growing up with parents who both worked and moved to America to start a new life). I was blessed with some amazing people, classes, and lessons during my undergraduate years, and these experiences helped me no longer live in silence. I spent two years addressing each one of my dad's comments. I still instinctively hold my breath with anxiety and prepare to "argue" when we pass any homeless individuals; however, my dad says nothing each time. I am extremely proud of him; he must have had to work through a lot of his biases to not only stop his behavior but also to understand the potential consequences of his behavior.

My parents also hold biases against the Japanese; my parents are still coping with war crimes committed by the Japanese government in 1937 against South Koreans, and the ongoing fight over Dokdo Island. A cultural group I recently developed a bias against is Trump supporters, specifically, very outright and disrespectful Trump supporters. I remember sitting huddled in my college dorm room with my best friend, who is also an immigrant, listening to the

news with anxiety and fear in our chests as each state voted. The streets of Manhattan and the hallways of Baruch College were filled with people wearing black to symbolize the fear and sadness that everyone carried with them while the rest proudly put on their MAGA (i.e., Make America Great Again, a phrase associated with Trump's presidency) hats and t-shirts. This was the first time I felt scared to look like myself. Then, the Covid-19 pandemic happened, and suddenly, Asian Americans were being targeted for "bringing the virus". The stereotype went from "model-minority" to "yellow peril". First, neither stereotypes are respectful or appropriate, and ever since the emergence of the new stereotype, there have been frequent and heinous acts of violence against Asians. During the peak of the pandemic, I avoided all public transportation in fear that I will be one of the many Asians stabbed or pushed onto the train tracks.

Although I have countless identities, society makes certain ones more salient than others. I am on a journey to understanding these identities that society deems as important as well as many others that I am discovering are just as or even more important. Having knowledge about my family history, reflecting on my identity development journey, and writing about my experience are privileges. Being able to share all this with my classmates and professors who care is a privilege. Throughout this self-reflecting experience, I have learned that being able to perceive past experiences as positive ones that I can learn from is a privilege.