Assignment 4.2:

Racial/Cultural Identity Development

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Abstract

 My cultural identity is comprised of multiple parts: my upbringing in an open, respectful household, my history of living in culturally rich places, my current residence in a place steeped in racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and religious diversity, and my proximity to injustices as a child and young adult. After moving at age five from Dallas, Texas to various locations around Mississippi, I began to understand the systemic racism that continues to disenfranchise the African American community there. My experiences within and around the African American community of Jackson, Mississippi, as well as my progressive education at Saint Andrew’s Episcopal School, led me to quickly acknowledge my role in the paradigm of majority/minority interactions. Likewise, my parents and siblings raised me with a social justice mindset that helped me to resist less, introspect more, and develop an antiracist action orientation (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). I believe that my effectiveness as a counselor depends greatly on my Racial/Cultural Identity Development because, if a counselor fails to inhabit an advanced stage of cultural development, they risk alienating their client and limiting the positive outcomes of counseling (Helms, 1984).

My Racial/Cultural Identity Development

I am a white Anglo-Saxon who was born in a protestant household. This title bears with it a nature of cultural isolation, an historic disconnect from minority cultures in the United States, and a life embedded in the privilege of American white manhood. While it is true that my demographic can be deeply insulated, I am lucky in the respect that I am able to consistently interact meaningfully with people different than myself in a pattern that began with my upbringing in an inclusive, open household and continued through my experiences in diverse educational settings and residences in culturally expansive locations.

 Living in Austin, Texas, I currently interact with numerous racial and ethnic groups on a daily basis as a result of Austin’s diverse environment. The tech industry has brought people from many distinct cultures to the city, contributing to the diversity inherent to the city’s inclusive arts community and the city’s proximity to Mexico. The regions of southern and central Texas act as a gateway for South Americans, Central Americans, and Mexicans to enter into the United States, spawning entrenched communities with myriad cultural, racial and ethnic distinctions. The cultural network of Austin consists of communities from Latin America, South America, South Asia, East Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa, among others. Food and music serve as the principal avenues of interaction between these cultures and the mostly white population of the city. As a music event producer, I interact with other groups professionally through the context of music, often working with members of the Latino/a and African American communities to produce large-scale events. These events may center around the culturally significant genres of mariachi, reggaeton, blues, and jazz. I also interact with other racial and ethnic groups in social contexts. Many restaurants in Austin are operated by families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds serving their traditional culinary stylings. Some of these communities with whom I interact regularly are the local Ethiopian, Thai, Vietnamese, Indian, Japanese, and Mexican communities. Interacting with members of these groups within the context of food has led me to cultivate an understanding of their cultural backgrounds through the ingredients and practices involved in their cooking, allowing us to bond over our collective appreciation of nourishment and the unique nature of a group’s historic culinary practices. Beyond culinary interactions, I frequently meet members of other ethnic and racial groups at concerts, festivals, and museums, sometimes in the context of celebrating a specific culture through these social avenues.

 My experience with diverse groups in Austin goes beyond interactions with different ethnic and racial groups and extends into frequent interactions with people whose gender and sexual identities are different from my own. I consider myself an ally of the LGBTQ+ community and interact with members of the community in professional and social forums regularly. Professionally, I produce and manage events for numerous individuals within the community. Since moving to Austin, I have been a sound engineer for same-sex weddings, supplied gear to transgender fashion shows, and contributed audio and light production to LGBTQ+ advocacy events. Socially, I have a number of friends who identify as gender fluid, non-binary, and transgender. Likewise, I interact daily with close friends who identify as gay, lesbian, sexually fluid, and pansexual. Such interactions occur at a number of locales: restaurants, bars, music venues, and friends’ homes, among others. Austin is also a hub for city-wide LGBTQ+ events, providing ample opportunity for one to interact with the LGBTQ+ community. I have attended the Austin Pride Parade as well as a number of events hosted by the Austin LGBTQIA Fun Force, a local group that strives to create an inclusive community comprised of LGBTQ+ individuals and allies of the community. Interactions with the various groups under the LGBTQ+ umbrella have left a permanent impression on me as I have grown to understand the unique facets of that community.

 While I am largely areligious, Austin’s religious diversity has allowed me to interact with different groups in various capacities. Austin is home to a large community of Muslims, boasting numerous Muslim community centers. The city also houses an active reform Jewish community, a number of Christian denominations comprised of migrant congregations, beautiful Hindu temples, and a large Buddhist community, among others. In truth, I have not interacted with Austin’s diverse religious communities as much as I would like. This is largely because I do not adhere to a single religious doctrine, preferring, instead, to sample aspects of multiple theologies to suit my needs. However, I plan to visit the local Tibetan Buddhist temple soon and have interacted with numerous Christian groups to provide professional sound and lighting services. Recently, my partner and I acted as the sound engineers at a local Orthodox Christian wedding composed entirely of members of the local South Indian community. While working for this community, I learned the history of their adherence to Christianity from the perspectives of both Orthodox Christian practitioners and Hindu practitioners present at the wedding. Such experiences are rare in Austin because, despite the diverse religious communities here, much of Austin’s population is secular or only casually religious. Furthermore, religion and religious diversity are rarely a conversation point as a result of Austin’s secular nature, meaning that most social interactions do not involve religious content. While I am able to interact with people of different races, ethnicities, nationalities, genders, and sexual preferences through the avenues of my professional and social lives, I have not had many opportunities to engage with people with different religious beliefs than my own. Therefore, I will take it upon myself to interact with these groups purposefully within the contexts of their beliefs in order to better understand their cultural identities.

**Observing Racism**

 I first consciously witnessed racism after my family moved from Dallas to Mississippi. In Dallas I was surrounded by an unacknowledged, systemic form of racism in which gentrification and rising property taxes kept minority populations from experiencing the high quality of life that much of Dallas’ white population had become accustomed to; however, I was completely unaware of this phenomenon due to my young age and my cultural insulation. This form of systemic racism was more apparent in Mississippi. The African American population that was never given the opportunity to recover from past transgressions against them was kept in a sinister cycle of state-supported socio-economic segregation. Still, I was unable to recognize this injustice until later in my life. My first observation of racism occurred when my family moved from McComb, Mississippi to Brookhaven, Mississippi, and I was enrolled in Brookhaven Academy.

 Brookhaven Academy is a small private school in a small Mississippi town. During my period of attendance, its student population was almost entirely white to a glaringly conspicuous degree, and within my first year of enrollment I would understand why this was the case. Despite Brookhaven having a large African American population, nobody from that community went to Brookhaven Academy, choosing instead to go to the public schools. One semester into my time at Brookhaven Academy, I noticed that the two non-white students, a brother and sister from an Indian family, were constantly confronted verbally with the fact that they were different. Then, an African American boy enrolled in the school and was given the same treatment but to a much more serious degree. He was bullied verbally and physically and departed Brookhaven Academy within a month of enrolling in the school. This was my first encounter with harsh, obvious racist behavior and discrimination, with the worst part being that children were the culprits. Children were responsible for traumatizing a child to the extent that he could not stay in the school in which his parents had placed him. Soon after this occurrence, my parents and the parents of my close friends pulled all of us out of Brookhaven Academy and enrolled us in the local public school system, an integrated system comprised of historically black schools and historically white schools in which one could still hear the echoes of segregation. I later found out that Brookhaven Academy was a “white flight” school, founded by the Ku Klux Klan as a continuance of segregation during the era of desegregation. As a child, the events and general nature of Brookhaven Academy seemed wrong to me; now as an adult, I find them deeply disturbing.

 My time in Brookhaven also included my first brush with sexism, viewed through the lens of my parents’ failing marriage and those of my friends’ parents. Around 2005 and 2006, my parents and the parents of my two closest friends, Sam S. and Jesse B., were all beginning the process of dissolving their marriages. This was a harsh coincidence, and my friends and I felt lucky to have one another. While my parents waited to officially separate and divorce until after we moved to the capital, Jackson, Jesse and Sam’s parents began the process, revealing the sexism implicit to the rumor mill of a small town. Jesse’s mother was the first victim. After her complicated divorce from Jesse’s father, a decision she was forced into by his erratic, occasionally violent behavior, the town rumor mill labeled her, a Ph.d-level professor of psychology, crazy rather than placing any blame on her ex-husband. Sam’s mother was then labelled unfaithful, a title which carries numerous hurtful synonyms in the rhetoric of a judgmental small town. Her ex-husband was also exonerated of all wrongdoing in the court of public opinion. This event served as an introduction into the patriarchal nature of the Deep South and society at large.

 These events, rooted in hate, spite, and ignorance, taught me the intolerable nature of discrimination, racism, and sexism and contributed substantially to my racial/cultural identity development with one final story pushing me toward my current position on the continuum of the white racial identity development model: the story of the murder of Craig Anderson (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). From the spring of 2011 to the spring of 2012, when I was a junior and senior in high school, a group of white teenagers from the area been committing a series of hate crimes, terrorizing Jackson’s African American population through acts of violence and threats of violence. After months of throwing bottles at black pedestrians, beating unsuspecting Jacksonians, and threatening to run over black citizens in search of some sick version of a good time, the group viciously beat Craig Anderson before murdering him by running him over with a truck in a frenzy of hate speech. These kids were my age and they grew up in close proximity to where I grew up. Their actions, reported nationwide as an example of hate from a thought-to-be bygone era, rippled through my hometown like a virus. They still make me sick to this day.

This event solidified my position of integrative awareness on the white racial development model and led me to the position of commitment to antiracist action (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). On Helms’ scale of white racial identity, I would place myself in the category of autonomy, having been activated by the events of adolescence toward a social justice orientation (Helms, 1984). While I certainly have a long way to go in terms of developing a consistent stream of antiracist action, I am committed to help in any way I can and will continue to grow personally in order to help those affected by personal and systemic racism.

**Family Influence**

 As with many people, my family has made an enormous impact on my racial/cultural identity development. When I was a child in Mississippi, my parents demonstrated a constant stream of antiracist sentiment, behaving in opposition to the consistent incursions on tolerance and respect that were inherent to small town Mississippi. I believe that my parents are currently pseudo-independent with my mother bordering on autonomy. When I was growing up, they embodied the pseudo-independent position through their obvious understanding of racial injustice and their efforts to teach me to respect others regardless of their cultural backgrounds while also appreciating the diverse backgrounds from which people came (Helms, 1984). This is evident in a story of my own racial naiveté from my childhood. When I was about seven years old, at the outset of my experience at Brookhaven Academy, I came to my father and asked him what a certain racial slur meant, saying the word in the process of asking the question. My father was immediately upset that I had even used the word, telling me to never say that word again and informing me that that word was extremely hurtful to a large group of people and was used to spread hate. He then told me a story in which he said that word to his grandfather, resulting in a serious spanking from his own father. With this story, I was made aware that my family did not tolerate racial injustices and had not tolerated them for generations. This was evident in my parents’ decision to pull me out of Brookhaven Academy following their discovery of its racist origins and continuing support of racial intolerance. After moving from Brookhaven to Jackson, my parents made a point to enroll me in a school that focused on respecting and appreciating other cultures rather than simply tolerating them. Despite the difficulty my parents had with paying the high tuition fees at Saint Andrew’s Episcopal School, they were adamant that I received the best education possible in a setting that celebrated diversity in all its forms. Saint Andrew’s has since received national acclaim for its global studies initiatives oriented around expanding its students’ and the surrounding community’s understanding of other cultures.

 Similarly, when the events of September 11, 2001 sent the United States into a pervasive anti-Muslim and anti-Arab hysteria, my parents were steadfast in communicating their disapproval of this sentiment. This exemplified their respect and appreciation for other religious and ethnic groups, while also demonstrating an ideological disconnect from other members of my extended family. While my paternal extended family was typically very respectful of other religious, racial, and ethnic groups, a portion of my mother’s family began to express anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiments as a result of their evangelical Christian beliefs. Likewise, this portion of my family disapproved of people with sexual and gender identities outside of their heteronormative standards. My mother and I even attended a Church of Christ service with my grandmother during this time in which the preacher espoused hatred against both Muslims and same-sex couples. My mother and I would not return to that church until my grandmother’s funeral at which the same preacher used my grandmother’s passing as an opportunity to grandstand once more against such “blasphemers”. My whole maternal family was not so ignorant as to believe everything said during these services, but some members of the family fell prey to the vitriol. These instances of intolerance within her family bolstered my mother’s respect for those different than herself and would gradually lead her to serve the disenfranchised populations in Mississippi. For this reason, I believe that she has moved toward the autonomy stage of racial/cultural identity development (Helms, 1984).

 During my childhood and adolescence, I was deeply affected by my parents’ stance on intolerance. While I am not sure exactly what their white racial identity development looked like, they always seemed to accept their privilege as white people in the United States and understood the responsibility inherent to that racial identity. They taught me that injustices could not be ignored and that it was our duty to suspend our comfort, psychologically and physically, in order to help those ignored or targeted by the system. As a result of this upbringing, I do not recall experiencing a significant disintegration or reintegration period in the development of my cultural identity (Helms, 1984). I am sure that I was upset at the thought of being part of an oppressive system, possibly even denying the part that I played in that system, but, between my parents’ beliefs and my observations while living in Mississippi, I learned quickly that the white patriarchal system of which I was implicitly a member was responsible for significant pain and suffering.

 Coming to such an understanding in adolescence has led me to identify with the autonomy stage of racial identity development; although, sometimes I may fail to act when I have the ability and move back toward the pseudo-independent stage (Helms, 1984). Likewise, my family’s beliefs continue to support my cultural identity development in multiple ways. First, my mother’s appreciation for those different than herself and attempts to help ease the burden that society places on these demographics reinforces the advancement of my cultural identity. Second, my parents’ differing responses to the cultural revolutions surrounding gender and sexuality has further bolsters my orientation to action. For example, while my mother has difficulty understanding the cultural shifts surrounding gender and sexuality, she accepts people for who they are, values their experiences, and seeks to know more in order to better interact with gender-diverse groups. Conversely, while my father is happy to support people in their lived experiences, he does not understand the evolving paradigm of gender and has not attempted to learn more about it, possibly due to internal and external factors such as his age and society, respectively (Helms, 1984). As a result, I am able to help him understand and, in the process, further solidify my commitment to anti-discriminatory action (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014).

**Counseling Effectiveness and Racial/Cultural Identity Development**

Multicultural competency is an imperative within the modern counseling field, yielding better results among clients of a different cultural background than a specific counselor (Zhang & Dixon, 2001). The relationship between counselor effectiveness and counselors’ racial/cultural identity development lies in the multiculturally competent counselor’s ability to reduce therapeutic attrition among diverse client populations, maintain their commitment to nonmaleficence, and provide appropriate services to those different than oneself. I believe that I will be able to provide that degree of service to my clients as I strive toward a consistent state of autonomy in my racial identity development (Helms, 1984).

 As an autonomous counselor, one of my strengths will be to reduce attrition through the use of empathy and developing an understanding of how mine and the client’s cultural identities play into our collective and individual experiences (Helms, 1984). If I am able to respect my client’s cultural differences and experiences via my own multicultural competency, I will be much more likely to retain the client in the therapeutic relationship until the point that the client has experienced a benefit from the therapeutic context (Sue, 2001). One’s ability to retain a client in the therapeutic context is an obvious boon to the outcome of therapy, considering that therapy should conclude when the client’s presenting concerns are quelled rather than as a consequence of a client’s discomfort with a culturally incompetent counselor. Therefore, with an autonomous racial/cultural identity I will be a more effective counselor by virtue of my ability to retain a client in the therapeutic relationship (Helms, 1984).

 Similarly, my commitment to nonmaleficence within the counseling relationship will be more conscious and effective as an autonomous counselor. With a developed understanding of the hurdles a counselor may face when working with a client with a culturally different background than oneself, I am less likely to cause harm to the client during the course of our therapeutic relationship. This improved nonmaleficence toward culturally diverse clients is especially true with regard to the multiculturally competent counselor’s knowledge of microaggressions, their origins, and how to manage them within one’s own practice (Sue et al., 2007). As an autonomous counselor, I will be able to avoid committing microaggressions due to my drive to view my client’s circumstances through the lens of my client’s experience. Through an understanding of the racial systems at play in our society and acknowledgement of my own privilege I will be able to avoid accidental microaggressions and own up to the use of any accidental microaggressions. Likewise, I will seek to understand my client’s viewpoint rather than react defensively if they ever feel that I have microaggressed against them (Sue et al., 2007).

 Finally, I will be able to use my autonomous status to provide appropriate services to my client as an advocate for their well-being (Helms, 1984). I will be able to acknowledge the individual and group differences and similarities between us as well as the universal qualities that we share as human beings, using each facet of experience in a way that does not diminish the client’s experience but, instead, empowers the client (Sue, 2001). While I may not lie firmly in the autonomous stage at this point in my training as a counselor, my goal is that, by increasing my role as an advocate for diverse populations and improving my understanding of the lived experiences of the people within those populations, I will be able to solidify my autonomous racial/cultural identity to the furthest extent possible (Helms, 1984).

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