

Running Head: Personal Cultural Analysis & Identity Development

**PERSONAL CULTURAL ANALYSIS & IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT:**

My Cultural Heritage

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### **Abstract**

My cultural heritage is an amalgamation of my own shifting self-identity within the context of various cultural settings, dynamics and beliefs. I was an abandoned child and lived at 27 different addresses up through high school. The complexity of my cultural identity stems from life experiences that moved rapidly through multiple cultures representing a full spectrum of oppression, and in many groups of belonging. Although I experienced a fragmented, adverse childhood, I recognize how developmental trauma led to complex PTSD. Yet, several personal protective factors shaped me into a resilient individual. If resilience is the positive adaptation to adversity, I hope to develop skills to offer a broader path for others who might benefit from filtering their own perspectives, memories and narratives beneficially as they integrate the parts of themselves within their broader context. I am living proof that adversity can be met with optimism. My mission is to help others achieve their full potential as members of humanity by overcoming the forces and effects of oppression and adversity.

## Introduction

### Extent of Diversity

To what extent do I interact with members of other diverse groups different from my own? The answer to that question leads to far more questions instead of one, elegant answer. What is meant by diverse groups *different* from my own; differing in which aspect and on what scale? Groups form around so many identities - gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, ethnicity, education, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation, and spirituality - to name several (Thomas, 2016; Butler, 2015). And, by interaction, does that imply that I am aware, open-minded and receptive to that exposure as one of a diverse nature (Landemore, 2018)? Further, is this interaction based on my perceived differences *as an individual*, as a collective or something in-between? Just as I represent a complex, multi-layered amalgam of personal and cultural identities as the sum of my unique self-identity, I view others as having that same unique, complex identity (Thomas, 2017). The possible combinations of group dynamics based on individual, group and contextual identities are infinitely quantum.

Whether in the context of professional, social and/or religious interactions, I encounter diverse individuals who, in turn, identify with myriad groups each day. For me, diversity is not confined to the legally protected attributes of race, gender, and age but in favor of a broader definition that includes the entire spectrum of human differences (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004). For example, an interaction might include an evening spent with self-identified drag queens at a dinner theater. Within that group, there might be individuals representing the binary, birth-assigned sex categorization of gender, for example, or from multicultural perspectives of gender (Gender and Sexuality Galaxies, 2023). Broad membership, such as gender identity, does

not necessarily represent the fullness of diversity contained with that group. If those drag queens are also in the counseling profession, are they no longer diverse from me?

Therefore, diversity is about the differences between people, and people are different in many personal attributes. Therefore, by answering the question, “to what extent do you regularly interact with members of other diverse groups different from your own,” the answer is complex because I believe I encounter many diverse and often overlapping groups of many individuals in the context of business, social, and religion, faith & spirituality. Given the multiple attributes a person may have, the first question that researchers may need to answer is, *what differences are of interest to them* (Qin, 2014)?

There is evidence of intersectionality as a constant in my interactions with others, but my interactions are by no means exhaustive of the possibilities of being exposed to even greater diversity (Butler, 2015; Crenshaw 2016; Howard & Renfrow, 2014). For example, I travel often within the US and abroad; I move between very distinct cities and cultures during the year. In each of those contexts, I regularly experience interactions that can be categorized within a professional, social and/or religious/spiritual context. I interact with various members from distinct groups, some have overlapping membership within groups. Friends and colleagues are from myriad backgrounds with many different identities such as those presented in the GRACES model (Butler, 2015). It would be inconceivable to reduce them to one or even a few labels. I also benefit from prior diversity training, organizational psychology and change management graduate coursework to lend rich context. Through researching or recounting these experiences I might discern more or fewer groups than others at various times depending on my needs. Therefore, I believe it is reasonable to state that I regularly interact with members of diverse

groups but the extent depends upon which diverse group(s) we are naming in the context of that moment.

### **Encountering Oppression**

The first time I recall encountering oppression, it was explained to me as one based in ethnocentrism (Thomas, 2017, p 11). In this situation, I was asked by a schoolmate to play at her home after school. I was 6 years old, in 2nd grade (I skipped a grade). Together with my aunt, I walked over to their home after school - about one block away. As I approached her home, a man who appeared to be her father abruptly closed the gate! My aunt reassured me and said something about him being “*a nasty Jap(anese) who did not want to mix with others*” and we promptly left.

### **Oppression Through the Lens of Human Development Theories**

A conceptual framework guided by human cognitive developmental milestones such as Piaget’s theories of cognitive development within the sociopolitical context can be useful in determining how cognitive development influences an understanding of the events like this and the ability to develop coping mechanisms and problem-solving strategies (Thomas, 2017, p 15). At my age, I would expect to be in the preoperational stage of thought. However, I recall thoughts that might be characterized as ones suitable for the concrete operational stage: I accepted that a Japanese man might feel protective of his daughter against a new friend who is not Japanese, but I also knew that not all Japanese people reacted the same way toward me (LoBue, 2023). In this social context, I skipped grades so exposure to topics like this in school

might be one explanation for why I could rationalize that not all Japanese people might feel the same. This likely prevented me from forming prejudicial feelings toward all Japanese people.

Erickson's stages of psychosocial development offer a different perspective to this same scenario. For example, when referencing Erickson's Psychosocial Stages, that same experience strikes within the Industry versus Inferiority stage. In this theoretical context, that experience may not have felt like oppression from my perspective for any number of reasons. Perhaps I had not yet committed to my own particular identity, and/or did not yet have a moral dilemma to resolve (Thomas, 2017, p 4). Had I been older, the context of this encounter may have resulted in a psychosocial crisis of Identity vs. Role Confusion.

In any case, the development of self-concept adds a layer on top of this human developmental path (Thomas, 2017, p 18). Therefore, it is helpful to view encounters of oppression with that awareness of whether the age at which the encounter occurred might influence my ability to understand but also my ability to shape my perspective toward the encounter. It also seems important to state that as my perceptive lens changes over my life span, the attitudes and impact of this encounter become almost insignificant; the felt oppression may not have had anything to do with me, or might have been the result of an entirely different kind of prejudice. Since I will never know (his perspective), it is enough to acknowledge its impact on me, and decide to integrate it without harm to my self-identity.

Finally, child development occurs within a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, from immediate family and school settings to broad cultural values, laws and customs (Thomas, 2017, p 8). To understand how a child might view their world and oppression within it, one must look at the child, their immediate environment and the interaction of the larger environment. This ecological systems perspective

remains as we get older because the context of the nested systems can reveal individual paths toward resilience (Cukier et al, 2014; Thomas, 2017). In my case, I turned outward and toward other entities within my microsystem and beyond for support - teachers, extended family and my parent's friends. Looking for opportunities to help others find examples of their victories in overcoming adversity can invite them to reframe their experience more positively (Thomas, 2017, p 18).

### **Racial and Cultural Identity Development Theory**

As a citizen of the United States, I recall reflecting upon the news in 2012 when the Census Bureau announced that whites account for less than half of the births in the United States (Slotnik, 2012). This national tipping point - when minorities including Hispanics, blacks, Asians and those of mixed race reached 50.4 percent - now looked more like the state in which I was born (Hawai'i). For historical context, the Kingdom of Hawai'i was overthrown on January 17, 1893, after a group of 13 caucasian businessmen and lawyers staged a coup d'état against Queen Liliuokalani. My mother, therefore, was a citizen of the Hawai'ian Republic because she was born before Hawai'i was named to statehood in 1959. I was born in 1972, so I recall feeling pressure to assimilate our new national identity in those first decades. As I advanced through the first years of school, I grew to understand from various government forms that I was considered a minority (Pacific Islander). Yet, my father was European/German and Jewish. By 2012 when this tipping point occurred, I learned through genetics testing that my DNA composition (51% European) was quite different from my cultural self-identity. This confirmed that personal cultural identity is well beyond genetic belonging.

As context changes, I believe it is possible to move back and forth through the Racial/Cultural Identity Development (R/CID) model conceptual framework (Sue et al, 2013;

1990, 1999). The first reason is that as I reflect on memories related to my childhood and as I grow as a counselor, I view those interactions through a revised lens. As a young child, I was in full Conformity; I was forbidden to speak Hawai'ian and especially Pidgin, the form of Hawai'i Creole spoken throughout the Islands as a grammatically simplified means of communication between the several groups of people that did not have a language in common (Siegel, 2008).

The second reason is that I recognize I could be both an oppressed minority experiencing microaggressions and also the oppressing majority inflicting implicit and explicit bias. This compelled me to work through the Conformity and Dissonance stages, and then through Resistance and Immersion to Introspection (Sue, 2019; Sue et al 2013). Intersectionality creates a cultural dilemma in my goal of Integrative Awareness because I know there is much work to be done to support and appreciate all of the oppressed groups in Hawai'i.

Now, it is interesting to me that as I work on self-acceptance and integrate a genuine sense of wholeness, I feel that I have the open-mindedness to begin shifting into the Integrative Awareness stage. Somehow, holding space for myself to grow and change means I can hold more space for others to do the same. However, I also know that it will require ongoing work as an individual and/or collective toward the objective of broad awareness, acceptance and even advocacy on behalf of those who suffer from oppression (McCarthy, 2005). I can move into this stage by demonstrating action, which I am currently doing by establishing a charitable organization that supports victims of childhood sexual trauma.

### **Familial Influence**

Mine is a unique situation in that I was raised by multiple individuals. My mother was 15 when she got pregnant; my father left us when I was two months old. She was the youngest of eight siblings in a mixed European/Asian/Polynesian Catholic family. Just before my fifth birthday, my mother then left me in the care of abusive, negligent family members. I almost drowned in a flood; I regularly defended my younger cousins from a violent and alcoholic uncle. My mother then reclaimed me at the age of 9 in a terrifying tug-of-war incident where she dragged me aboard an airplane headed for Australia with my aunt screaming for the police. I think it is fair to say that I faced extreme adversity. However, I also echo that it is not true that “*early or severe trauma can't be undone; that adversity always damages people*” (Walsh, 1998, as cited by Thomas, 2017). Despite persistent oppression as a low-income, minority female without solid attachment or support resources, turning toward other protective factors such as a *problem-solving focus* can result in a strong self-identity (Thomas, 2017).

### **In Favor of Resilience**

After relocating to Australia, our life quickly destabilized when a year later we abruptly returned to the United States. I sought independence and self-sufficiency as a matter of survival, and those skills lead to a fearlessness in seeking help outside my family and especially toward a persistent belief in the value of education. Education was going to be my way out of the chaotic hell that was my childhood. I remember thinking that I would need to make very different choices than the people around me, which necessitated resisting cultural and familial ways of being (Thomas, 2017, p 302). As a teen, I emancipated to obtain student loans for college when I was accepted at the age of 15. My mother did not support my decision to pursue an education.

Through the process of seeking a higher education, I learned that there are expansive definitions of family, relationships, and support systems - they come in all shapes and forms. Up through this time I felt comfortable within multiple diverse groups because I made friends easily with people of so many marginalized groups. I felt I could relate and so my personality toward others was friendly, enthusiastic and open-minded. My university offered a diverse, expansive world and I knew I could never look back. This step represented a leap across a socioeconomic chasm. This leap also represented ideological freedom from my family.

Although I have since learned more about the circumstances of why I was abandoned as a child, it does not change the childhood trauma that played such a large part of my life. Finally, through competent therapy, I determined I could overcome the negative effects of complex PTSD. The hope of a better future is what kept me alive as a child. Restoring hope that I could find a path through developmental trauma as an adult made me feel even stronger in my self-identity. Today, I feel I am well-qualified to speak about resilience. I also hold much more space to accept the decisions of my mother and other family members; trauma is intergenerational and impactful to multiple generations (van der Kolk et al, 2005) and, therefore, requires self-compassion and self-awareness.

Personal cultural identity is a critical aspect of one's self-concept and worldview that develops as one absorbs, interprets, and adopts (or rejects) the beliefs, values, behaviors, and norms of the communities in one's life such as those presented in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Thomas, 2017, p 18). I rejected cultural pressure to smoke marijuana instead of studying; I resisted a surf culture that didn't place as much importance on education. In hindsight, these were not rejections of culture per se; they were rejections of clusters of

behaviors. Since then, I have encountered productive people who consume marijuana and surfers who are highly educated.

Child development occurs within a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, from immediate family and school settings to broad cultural values, laws and customs. To understand how a child might view their world and oppression within it, one must look at the child, their immediate environment and the interaction of the larger environment. This ecological systems perspective remains as we get older because the context of the nested systems can reveal individual paths toward resilience (Cukier et al, 2014; Thomas, 2017). In my case, I turned outward and toward other entities within my microsystem and beyond for support - teachers, extended family and my parent's friends. Looking for opportunities to help others find examples of their victories in overcoming adversity can invite them to reframe their experience in a beneficial manner (Thomas, 2017).

### **Growing into An Effective Counselor**

Overall, the task of helping people build resilience, defined as a “dynamic process involving displays of adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity that evolves throughout the life cycle,” is why I am committed to developing my skills as a counselor (Thomas, 2017). We each face oppression in some form or in many forms. Helping others reframe their lived experience in a way that empowers them to take stock of the adversity in their lives and to see the resources they have utilized to survive is rewarding (Thomas, 2017, p 18).

The R/CID model further helps me understand the stages of development that oppressed people experience as they try to understand themselves relative to a dominant culture. We each face a dominant culture because we are multicultural.

Through the lens of the Relational Demography approach, where diversity is contingent upon both its reference basis (i.e., the composition of the group or unit) and the members' comparison processes (the perception of difference), this insight may be useful if the degree of belonging is perceived as greater versus smaller (Goldberg, 2005). However, exposure diversity does not necessarily imply consumption of that diversity (Moe et al, 2021). This means that the job of the counselor is never completed; we must work toward helping our clients become more self-aware to the degree that they can also look for opportunities to advocate for others in their lives.

My lived experience as an oppressed, marginalized individual who has overcome significant adversity gives me a perspective that I hope will resonate with others who suffer from similar forces. This perspective, along with the benefit of all of the theories and a practice grounded in the literature and research can make me a very competent, ethical and empowered counselor.

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