

Effect of cultural upbringing on identity



Indian. Dravidian. Andhrite. Hyderabad.

Hindu. Brahmin. Nandavareeka.

Citizen of a developing country. Middle socio-economic strata.

Guntupalli. Kotike. Me.

If I were asked to describe myself using just a few terms, these come to my mind. It is undeniable that all the above factors contribute to my identity. My culture, which is woven together by my nationality, geography, religion, social class and very importantly, my family, has been a significant force in shaping my thoughts, feelings and actions. Irrespective of its attribution to conditioning or internalization, the truth is that I am who I am because of my culture. My family has played a major role in preserving its cultural heritage and passing it down to me.

There exist a lot of traditions which complement the culture which I have imbibed. Having come from a fairly liberal, yet orthodox-in-some-aspects family, now that I think of it, some of my thoughts, feelings and actions, for better or worse, can be traced back to my cultural roots. For example, in my culture, it is not okay for our people to eat non-vegetarian food or drink or smoke. While I accept that there exist a lot of people from my very own culture who indeed partake in such activities, the reason behind me being a vegetarian teetotaler, although admittedly by 'choice', it is clear to me that my culture has had a significant influence. I must confess that coming to TISS was a culture-shock to me, to see people smoking right outside the campus gate and sometimes even inside it. If I have to be even more honest,

I was flabbergasted at the ready availability of addictive substances and their voracious use. My culture and my upbringing kept pecking at the back of my head so as to why people are the way they are. I must admit that I felt a tinge of self-righteousness at first. But, four months at TISS has begun to desensitize me to the rude awakening of the cultural gap between my fellow students and me.

I realized that many traits of mine - the way I dress, the way I speak etc. are all heavily influenced by my culture. While I understand that over-sized t-shirts and loungewear are in no way close to my culture, my discomfort with wearing sleeveless dresses, even when I was thin, or not wearing any makeup is something that is definitely based in my cultural upbringing, the latter, mostly due to my mother's 'simplicity', which I have inherited and internalized. My culture also affects my communication, both verbal and non-verbal. Greeting people with *Namaste* with my palms pressed together and touching the feet of elders is something that comes naturally, most often without a thought. And it is because of my culture that I speak three languages, sometimes even mixing them up. My culture has influenced my taste in music too. Thyagaraja Kritis and other Carnatic music I've heard growing up are what I find solace in. M. S. Subbulakshmi's Suprabhatam and Bhajagovindam mark the start and the end of my day, respectively.

My culture is deeply rooted within me, and I take pride in that. It is my belief that all cultures which exist in the world are beautiful in their own right. While it takes some time to get used to their confluence, I am of the firm opinion that each person ought to preserve and protect their own culture and pass on its merits onto their next generation while allowing the regressive

aspects to fade away and also respecting the culture of another. In this specific aspect of culture, I think I lean towards the ethno-pluralistic theory of multiculturalism, although I disagree with the perspective of cultural differentialism which views cultures as geographically bound entities. I am of the belief that geography is only a contributing factor to culture, not it's determinant. With innumerable cultures across the world and the dying of some owing to globalization and other factors, I believe that it is up to each person to preserve his/her culture and not simply lose their cultural identity in the rapidly changing world; having said that, I am not blind to the potential negative undertones that culture has.

As with almost everything in this universe, my culture and its influence on me has its flipside too. I've observed myself to be narrow-minded sometimes, although I am able to quickly step out of my cultural prejudices and objectively comprehend the situation. It is from similar experiences that I have learnt to let things be. Elucidating, in the scenario mentioned above - pertaining to the culture-shock in Mumbai and especially TISS, after the overwhelming emotions had subsided, I was able to accept that each person has a right to live their life as they see fit. Just as I wouldn't expect or tolerate being judged for living my life as per my culture, it isn't very much different for them to expect the same.

Another very important aspect of my culture is my economic standing. Having been brought up in a comfortable home with parents who taught me early on what things we could afford and what we couldn't, and who, like most middle-class individuals, believed that securing the future of their child is of utmost importance, investing in property and insurance policies, I led a

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content life. This affects my lifestyle as in I'd rather spend money on buying something for the house - a fancy pie dish or some potted plants than spend it on clubbing.

Culture works in ways innumerable in my day-to-day existence. Some are for the good. Some, I'd like to change. But I'm aware of the fact that with all its shortcomings, my culture has been instrumental in shaping me. And I only hope that I would be able to pass it on to my children, leaving out its judgmental undertones and sometimes regressive ideologies, the same way my parents tried to - they've passed on to me the improvised version of the culture they knew, for me to ameliorate and filter it further before passing on, reinstating the view of culture being dynamic.

Working with clients from different backgrounds, for me currently, is intimidating, partly because I have not, in practice, dealt with them. However, my interactions with a child who belonged to a different culture, who I was assigned to in fieldwork, helped quell my fears and anxiety. I observed that I was able to form a good rapport with her in spite of the fact that we belonged to completely different cultures. Although this can be attributed to many different reasons given that it was not primarily a counseling relationship, it reaffirmed my faith in myself.

I am aware that clients come from varied cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and that an ideal counselor ought to be unprejudiced in providing their services. I am of the opinion that leaving home and everything I've known behind me, coming to a metropolitan city like Mumbai which is an amalgamation of many cultures has been an immensely

educating experience. From my brief interactions in fieldwork with clients from a different culture, I found myself to be enthusiastic to learn and understand the nuances to different cultures. Preparedness to understand and work with clients from different cultural backgrounds, I believe, is extremely important to my growth as an individual studying to become a psychologist. Especially, in this era where the world has shrunk into a global village and a lot of cultural exchange taking place, one cannot expect to resist the influx of cultural diversity.

Coming to me being more or less comfortable working with particular groups, I'd like to admit that I find myself being uncomfortable when working with individuals who are from a completely different culture than I am or lead a different lifestyle, for the sole reason of the fear of not being able to empathize with them. It scares me to no extent that a situation would occur wherein I wouldn't be able to understand the gravity of the situation because of the cultural gap that exists between my client and me. For example, if I were to work in a de-addiction centre, as much as I am aware of my prejudices and want to sincerely help them, the fear of not being able to do so and my cultural beliefs cropping up whilst dealing with them is very disturbing to me.

I believe that all change comes with resistance of some magnitude. Thus, to change my lifetime's worth of conditioning would take an immense effort on my part. If I were to work with a group I was particularly uncomfortable with and do so just because I *have* to, I would be doing great injustice to the client as well as my profession. It would lack sincerity and genuine empathy. To prevent that from happening, I would have to expose myself to a plethora

of situations I'd probably be uncomfortable with. I would have to be completely aware of my own prejudices and not just accept them and leave it at that, but work on eliminating them to as much of an extent as possible. I need to constantly introspect so as to why I think in a particular way. I am aware that it is a journey that spans a lifetime, and that my prejudices may probably never completely be washed away, but that is not going to stop me from working on them.

I understand that unless I put my apprehensions aside and actually work with those populations, I would always have misconceptions about them. Hence, I plan to embrace with open arms the challenging situations I am likely to come across, especially in field training at TISS and modify myself. In that respect, I must say that my academic program is exceptionally well structured to suit the necessary requirements needed for the effective counseling of diverse populations. Firstly, a place like TISS, with its vast diversity and mixing of cultures is a learning experience in itself. I got to meet a lot of people from cultures very different than mine, interacting with who changed my perception of their culture. It is immensely humbling to be a part of this institution and getting the opportunity to listen to several different perspectives and interacting with people with radically different views has helped me in mitigating my prejudices and developing tolerance. Secondly, the courses in the program are extremely socially relevant. Socio-cultural Context of Counseling opened new avenues and ideas, and was thought-provoking about the influence culture has on an individual and addressed the pressing need for professionals well-versed in multi-cultural counseling.

Other courses such as Personal and Interpersonal Development of the Counselor and Counseling Process and Micro-skills are also extremely helpful in getting us to introspect and become better professionals, and human beings. In all, I've observed that TISS has helped me become more aware of my thought and emotional processes. While it was difficult at first, owing to the clash of cultures, I have been observing a transformation slowly taking place for the better. I'm beginning to become less prejudiced and more accepting and tolerant of views polarly opposite of mine and while I admit that it is not easy, this continuous process which will ultimately result in constant betterment by my own standards would enable me to be a good professional and a better human being.