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Shocking the Cultureless: The Crucial Role of Culture Shock in Racial Identity Transformation

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Abstract

Through a new perspective on culture shock that includes issues of dominance and identity, a broader theoretical framework for identity transformation is discussed. It is argued that the experience of culture shock, through either a cognitive or physical separation from the dominant culture is crucial to the abandonment of a dominant racial identity and transformation to a new non-dominant racial identity. By connecting theories on racial identity formation, social-dominance and culture shock, a wider ranging framework for racial identity transformation is created. The article concludes with a personal narrative of the author's personal experiences that exemplify the perspectives.

Introduction

As a white, American male, discovering my culture was like a fish discovering water. (Howard, 1999) Unfortunately, the cultural "water" of white America is obscured by the murk of privilege and dominance so thick it is undetectable and is perceived as normal. The discovery of my culture was due to my experiences living in other cultural "waters" which forced me to live outside of the "normality" of privilege and dominance which I had unknowingly existed in before. The shock of this experience forced me to see my culture from the outside and allowed me to transform my perspective on socio-cultural and racial issues.

In this article I hope to advance on scholarship in multicultural education, identity formation and intercultural sociology. I argue that for members of dominant groups,

in order to abandon a “dominant identity” one must experience a form of culture shock through either cognitive or physical separation from the dominant group’s constructed reality. This separation forces one to redefine who they are through a completely new perspective which eventually leads to the formation of a new “non-dominant” identity that perceives their own culture through empathetic eyes that recognize the negative effect privilege and domination, in all their forms, have on marginalized groups. I will conclude with a personal narrative of my own transformation that I feel exemplifies my perspectives.

Theoretical Basis

I will begin by broadening theory on culture shock to include issues of dominance and cultural invisibility. I will then discuss culture shock’s effect on each dimension of identity. I then will go on to relate Tajfel’s (1970) “in-group” and “out-group” distinctions in his minimal group paradigm to racial identity formation theories in order to broaden them to include all applicable groups. By using the above mentioned theories as a framework I will then detail what I believe to be a path to racial identity transformation. I will begin by listing the formative stages of “dominant in-group identity” and then discuss how the experiential influence of culture shock forces members of a dominant group to formulate a new identity and navigate its formative stages outside of their own group as part of the transformative process to a “non-dominant in-group identity”. Finally I will detail the analogous relationship between the formative stages of “non-dominant in-group” and “out-group” identity.

Culture Shock

Frankenburg (1993) put it best when she coined the term “invisible” to describe dominant cultures due to them being constructed as “normal”. Gary Howard (1999) refers to this constructed normality as the “assumption of rightness”, that dominant groups don’t see their practices and beliefs as one of many possible ways of doing things, they view them simply as the normal and/or right way of doing things. It is this assumption that obscures dominant culture as normal and renders it invisible to its members. Building on Pederson’s (1995) definition, I believe culture shock describes the process of the creation of a new identity as an adjustment one must make upon separation from the dominant culture’s constructed reality of normality. I believe this separation occurs through either a physical escape or a new cognitive perspective that discredits one’s former perceptions of normality constructed in the dominant culture

Culture Shock’s Affect on Identity

Summarized by Sachs (2003), Wenger (1998) sees identity as having five specific

dimensions.

1. Negotiated experiences: where we define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation as well as the way we and others reify ourselves.
2. Community membership: where we define who we are by the familiar and unfamiliar.
3. Learning trajectory: where we define who we are by where we have been and where we are going;
4. Nexus of multi membership: where we define who we are by the ways we reconcile our various forms of identity into one identity.
5. Local vs. Global relation: where we define who we are by negotiating local ways of belonging to broader constellations and manifesting broader styles and discourses.

A new identity formed due to a separation from “normality” experienced during culture shock greatly affects ones perceptions of who they are. Below I list how I believe each dimension of identity is affected.

1. Previously negotiated experiences come into question due to the different ways of participating in, or perceiving activities in a culture. This new cultural perspective changes the ways in which one reifies them self.
2. Previous ideas of community membership are questioned due to a disproportionate amount of unfamiliarity.
3. Learning trajectory’s regarding where one has been and is going, are usurped by a need to better understand the present environment.
4. The nexus of multi-membership grows extremely volatile as attempts to reconcile various forms of identity conflict with the addition of a completely new identity.
5. Local and Global relations become opposite as one must negotiate Global ways of belonging to more narrow constellations and manifest local styles and discourses.

Minimal Group Paradigm

Tajfel’s (1970) “minimal group paradigm” suggests that all human societies construct negative “in-group” and “out-group” distinctions. The distinctions drawn are used to ascribe values of superiority and inferiority to the constructed groups. The distinctions used to construct groups are wide-ranging, however, the “visible marker” of race is one distinction that is permanent and therefore extremely resistant to change (Rothbart and John, 1993).

I believe the most affective scholarship regarding identity formation for “in-groups” and “out-groups” are related to specific ethnicities; Helms stages of White racial identity formation (1990) and Cross’s stages of Black racial identity formation (1971, 1978). I feel that due to the elusive nature of identity and the above theory’s applicability to a wider range of dominant and marginalized peoples, of whom race is not always a factor, I will not distinguish groups with racial absolutes, but rather, distinguish groups in terms of either their dominant “in-group” or marginalized “out-group” status. As well, in order to indicate wider socio-cultural applicability, I replace Helms terminology of “racist identity” with “dominant identity”.

In-Group Identity Formation Phase I: Abandonment of a Dominant Identity

I feel that Helms (1990) stages of white racial identity development best describe the experience of traversing the arduous road of identity transformation for members of a dominant group. However, I believe these stages are applicable to any dominant group, not merely whites. Therefore from here out I will refer to white racial identity as “in-group” identity. (Tajfel, 1970) Helms divides Phase I into three stages:

1. Contact: The first contact with people outside the dominant group. This stage is marked by curiosity and ignorant attitudes based on stereotypes. Dominant groups at this stage are also ignorant of their own culture and privilege.
2. Disintegration: This stage represents a beginning of awareness of one’s own privilege. Through recognition of privilege, feelings of guilt and shame regarding past and present inequities begin to arise. This stage is marked by great confusion which manifests itself in the individual taking one of two divergent paths. Either they will choose to withdraw from contact with out-group peoples or begin a transformation to a non-dominant identity through education or physical separation from the dominant culture.
3. Reintegration: For many members of dominant groups, being made aware that their inborn privilege has come at the expense of other groups causes feelings of guilt and shame to become repressed and manifest as fear and anger. This results in a regression to a previously held beliefs and oftentimes active discrimination. During this stage the constructed realities of the dominant culture are actively defended as “logical” or “common sense”. This stage is dangerous because individuals who become fixated in this stage can remain for life.

According to Helms (1990), oftentimes in order for one to exit the Disintegration or Reintegration stages of in-group identity “powerful experiential influences” are necessary. Although there are a wide variety of experiences which can force one to recognize their privilege or dominance, in order for one to overcome ideologies of superiority and abandon their dominant identity, I believe their experience must evoke a deep and lasting sense of empathy for marginalized peoples. As Gary Howard (1999) states, “empathy is the antithesis of dominance”.

Unfortunately, for members of a dominant group the road to empathy is not wrought with many obstacles. Considering how dominant societies constantly reinforce their own ideologies of supremacy by constructing reality in ways which legitimize their dominance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993), in order to fully abandon a dominant identity I believe one must experience physical and/or cognitive separation from the dominant group's constructed reality. In other words, I believe the experience of culture shock is the key to abandoning a dominant in-group identity.

In-Group Identity Formation Phase II: Transformation to a Non-Dominant Identity

The continuation of the transformation process to a non-dominant identity requires one reify them self as an outsider to the constructed reality of the dominant group. However, the path one takes to becoming an outsider greatly affects the transformative process. For some, due to a multi-cultural upbringing and/or education, they are able to cognitively separate them self from the dominant group's constructed reality. Acceptance of the insidious facts regarding their privilege and domination transform feelings of shame and guilt into an empathetic connection to other groups. These individuals transcend the dubious third stage of in-group identity formation and begin the second phase without the need for further "power experiential influences" (Helms, 1990) to unhinge their adherence to dominant ideologies. They continue the navigation of the stages of in-group identity at an advanced and distinctly analogous stage to out-group identity formation.

For many, including myself, the emotions of shame and guilt manifested during the "disintegration" stage come at a time when one's identity is already quite fragile. This leads to fear and anger towards out-group peoples as well as acceptance of the dominant group's self legitimizing myths of superiority. (Howard, 1999) For me, it was the physical separation from my own group's constructed reality of normality that was the "powerful experiential influence" which forced me to formulate a new identity in order to continue transformation to a non-dominant identity. In this case individuals continue the transformative process through distinctly analogous stages to out-group identity from the very beginning.

Out-Group Identity Formation

Out-group identity formation is a broadening of Cross's (1971, 1978) theories on Black racial identity formation to include any negative reference out-group. This includes Winkelman's (1994) analogous stages of identity formation for individuals outside their primary culture, commonly referred to as the five stages of culture shock. In addition, it is my belief that individuals who have cognitively separated themselves from the dominant culture experience the final three stages of non-dominant in-group identity formation alongside their analogous stages to out-group identity formation. The

accompanying illustration following the explanation of the stages below may help to explain my perspective.

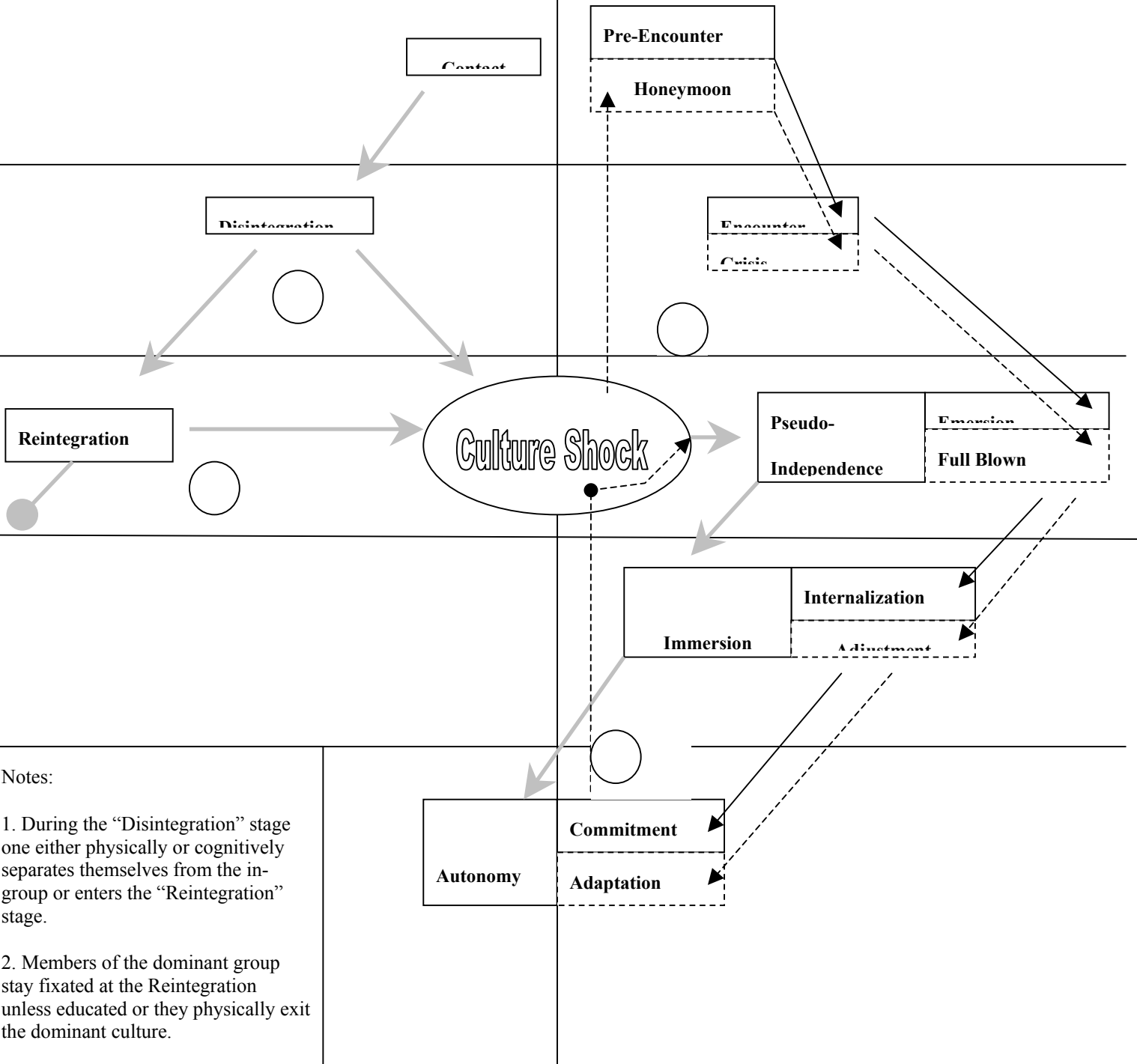
1. **Pre-encounter:** Members of an out-group distance themselves from their native racial or cultural identity in favor for one more inline with that of the dominant in-group.
 - i. **Honeymoon:** (Pederson, 1995) In this stage, individuals physically separated from their culture embrace the new culture and are enamored by its novelty. They tend to distance themselves from their native cultural identity and embrace the customs of their host-culture. For members of a dominant group, re-entry into their native culture at this stage simply manifests an idealized image of the host-culture and they re-enter their previous stage of in-group identity development.
2. **Encounter:** Transition to this stage is usually due to experiences which remind the out-group individual of the limitations of their acceptance in the in-group usually due to their racial and/or cultural differences.
 - 2.i. **Crisis:** In this stage individuals physically separated from their native culture begin to form negative feelings towards the host culture as incidents occur which make one aware of their differences. These incidents can be as wide-ranging as simple differences in greetings to overt discrimination. For members of a dominant group, re-entry into their native culture at this stage, depending on the person, can manifest resentment for the host culture and/or feelings of empathy for out-group peoples in their native culture due to analogous experiences.
3. **Emersion:** This stage is characterized by overt anger at the dominant in-group and a complete embracing of their native identity. Individuals at this stage limit contact with the dominant culture as much as possible and retreat to their communities.
 - 2.i **Full Blown:** At this stage individuals physically separated from their culture become angry at their host culture and often retreat to the company of members of their own culture experiencing in this phase. For members of a dominant group, re-entry into their native culture at this stage can either validate ideologies of superiority or create empathy through an analogous experience to out-groups in their native culture.
 - 2.ii **In-Group Identity Phase II, Stage 4: Pseudo-Independence:** For members of the in-group, this stage represents a rejection of ones own privilege and dominance. Although feelings of guilt and shame may remain, individuals in this stage compensate by exiling themselves from their own culture and developing their new identity as an outsider.

4. **Internalization:** This stage is characterized by an individual becoming more open and less defensive towards others. Interaction with different out-group, as well as in-group members begins.
 - 4.i. **Adjustment:** For individuals physically separated from their culture this stage represents a gradual coming to terms with the realities of their new environment and a more positive attitude towards interactions with the natives. For members of a dominant group, re-entry into their native culture at this stage can allow them to see their culture as an outsider. This can manifest empathy and aid the navigation of non-dominant in-group identity.
 - 4.ii. **In-Group Identity Phase II, Stage 5: Immersion:** This stage represents an internal restructuring of ones own negative ideas and opinions regarding their own culture. In-group members in this stage begin to seek images and role models in their own race and culture that are unrelated to dominance. The majority of the work done at this stage is an internal struggle to come to terms with the guilt and shame manifested in the previous stages.
5. **Commitment:** This is the final stage where an individual is strongly in-touch with their out-group identity but is able to participate within any multi-cultural context.
 - 5.i. **Adaptation:** For individuals physically separated from their culture, this stage represents a new identity that is in touch with their native culture while at the same time being able to successfully participate in the host-culture. Upon re-entry to their own culture, members of a dominant group can see the analogous connections between their experiences and those of marginalized peoples in their own culture.
 - 5.ii. **In-Group Identity Phase II, Stage 6: Autonomy:** This stage represents one's in-group identity coming full-circle. One's own culture is seen as an integral part of their identity, yet they are not threatened by others from different backgrounds. At this stage, the transformed in-group members are cognizant of their group's vast inequities, yet feelings of shame and guilt manifest into motivation to transform others.

Active ← Acceptance of Others → Complete Avoidance

In-Group

Out-Group



Notes:

1. During the “Disintegration” stage one either physically or cognitively separates themselves from the in-group or enters the “Reintegration” stage.
2. Members of the dominant group stay fixated at the Reintegration unless educated or they physically exit the dominant culture.
3. Those who physically exit the dominant culture develop a brand new identity with analogous stages to out

Personal Narrative

A Cultureless Being

As a member of the most privileged social, national, racial and cultural group the world has ever known, I questioned my culture for the first time during a taxi ride in China. While chatting with the driver I commented on the rich culture all around me. With a deep breath of pride the driver agreed and replied, “Dan shi ni mei you wen hua”, (But you have no culture). This comment left me humiliated and confused. I thought to myself “how dare he insult my culture!” Although incredibly upset, I could not even begin to think of a proper retort. Upon discussion with other foreign students I learned that what he said is a well-known, almost poetic idiom amongst the Chinese with regards to all outsiders. I spent many nights construing clever retorts which would prove my culture’s superiority to anyone who dared speak that idiom to me again. However, the more I thought about what he said, the more I felt he was right. In fact, I had always felt cultureless.

All through my schooling I had celebrated the superficial aspects of other cultures but had no real concept of what my own culture was. My participation as the lone “white boy” in the international club at my high school, while enjoyable, left me feeling empty and out of place. I secretly admired all the international and ethnic students because they had pride in something I felt I didn’t have, a culture. When asked about my heritage, I often referred to myself as “white bread”, the utterly common yet bland product on a shelf amongst an infinite variety of exciting flavors. In retrospect, it was my desire to escape my perceived cultural normality that motivated me to live and study abroad. Ironically, it was this escape which allowed to me raise my own culture’s veil of normality and see how insidiously abnormal it actually is.

As the first foreigner to ever have lived in the dilapidated native student dormitories at Sichuan University, I often wallowed in resentment of my host culture. One night, while fumbling with chopsticks my empathetic roommates laughed and commented on how forks are indeed much easier to use. This led to me rationalize the fact that my lack of culture was, in fact, due my societies advancement beyond culture. In truth, I was simply justifying my perceived lack of culture as a measure of superiority. Perry (2001) addresses this by noting that whites, as the dominant group, perceive themselves as either “normal” or “postcultural”. Those who see themselves as “normal” rationalize their superiority by claiming to be the standard by which all others should strive to become. Those who are “postcultural” instead, claim to be more developmentally advanced due to their overcoming of culture altogether. My roommate’s comments regarding forks led me to such a postcultural rationale.

For the foreign university students, every accommodation was made to ensure that we had little contact with the dark underbelly of widespread poverty and oppression of

ethnic minorities within China. It was not until excursions to Tibet and the Islamic region of Xinjiang that I bore witness to it. Witnessing impoverished children without shoes to wear, beautiful temples marred by Maoist slogans and so many indescribable looks of hopelessness, I awoke to the amazing privilege I had always lived in. Yet, instead of recognizing that my life of privilege came at a cost to others, I used the above examples to legitimize my cultures superiority and further demonize Chinese culture. However, the shock of seeing such things for the first time planted a seed deep in my conscious.

Soon, I began to regularly vocalize how I felt everything in China as inferior to my own culture. On a bus ride back from a tour I made a comment regarding how living in China made me more proud to be an American because we would never allow such inhumanities and to exist like they do. In the seat across from me a previously quiet, Chinese MIT grad-student engaged me. Due to the intensity of the argument, I honestly can't recall everything she said, however, she articulately listed the numerous acts of genocide, deculturation, slavery, imperialism and other forms of domination committed by those who shared my ethnic and national characteristics. I could only respond with knee-jerk examples American military interventions, which she quickly and easily disseminated as further examples of imperialism. I blew off everything as "liberal rhetoric", however, the last thing she said haunted me deeply on my plane ride home. "I know you don't care about what I say because soon you will just go back to your little white American dream and live in a safe bubble of bullshit." Yet another seed was planted.

My Little White American Dream

Upon my arrival back in the U.S I felt elation. I no longer had to deal with being a visible ethnic minority, negative stereotypes, proving I speak the language to each and every new person I meet, questioning the role my foreignness plays in every positive or negative situation, being able to enter any store and not worrying about being cheated, being stared at in an unwelcome manner everywhere I go, having children touch my hair or comment on my big nose, etc.

The comfort I felt upon my arrival in the back in the U.S was a return to what Howard (1999) refers to as the "luxury of ignorance". I was able to simply exist without having to cater to another culture or have any visible markers to influence opinions about me. For the first two months I basked in my newfound appreciation of anonymity and privilege. I created a new identity as the cultured yet unapologetic conservative and made a new peer group consisting of similar minded people. I shut myself into a "safe white American bubble of bullshit" where I would never again have to deal with critique of my culture, nationality or race.

Although I would not admit it at the time, the seeds implanted in my conscious while in China began to manifest themselves. Amongst my peer group, racist comments were commonplace. Upon hearing such comments I could not help but make

connections to what locals said to me while in China. In fact, many comments would be exact translations. I would never have protested such comments in front of my peer group, however when alone, I felt a deep sense of guilt and confusion. As time went on the seeds in my conscious began to overwhelm me. The truth of the Chinese woman's words to me on the bus in Tibet deeply unsettled me. Through countless sleepless nights many questions regarding everything I had been brought up to believe assaulted my conscious. Soon, I could no longer convince myself of the self legitimizing myths of supremacy I had believed in before. (Howard, 1999) Feelings of guilt and shame manifested as I began to relate everything I had experienced in China to similar things in the U.S.

The guilt I harbored soon forced me to abandon the peer group and white identity I had adopted earlier that year. I began to feel out of place in my own culture, nothing seemed normal anymore. I felt torn. The past seeds implanted in my conscious were bearing the fruit of new identity. I felt that I needed to leave my "little white American dream" in order to confront this identity in a completely new environment. After a lot of thought, I chose to escape to Brazil due to its mixture of vibrant culture yet minimal privilege.

My Little White American Nightmare

I arrived in Rio de Janeiro on September, 16th 2001. Had the events of 5 days earlier not occurred, I imagine my experience would have been much different. The terrorist attacks on New York evoked a deep sense of nationality in me. That day I realized that the U.S was not only the monolithic hegemony I had denounced it as only days before, but it also represented my family, friends and childhood experiences. Thus I began my Brazilian experience with a new-found pride in my nationality. For the first months, however, it was not an issue as the Brazilian people were incredibly empathetic towards me. I was brought to tears by a large poster board in downtown Rio which depicted an image of the famous statue, Cristo Redentor, arms outstretched over an image of New York with a caption saying "Rio Embraces the American People".

Unfortunately, the outpouring of support soon faded as the US military mobilized to fight the "War on Terror". Seemingly immediately, Brazil's previously reserved resentment of all things American began to appear. Anti-American T-shirts became the newest fashion trend, politician's television ads depicted grotesque images of war with the American dollar and flag in the background, drunken groups of young Brazilians would confront me demanding to know my nationality in order to vent their opinions. Everyday I had to deal with overt hostility and discrimination due to my nationality which because of my ethnicity I could not hide.

Despite the hostility towards my nationality, reminders of the full effect of my "legacy of privilege" constantly surrounded me. My Brazilian roommates referred to my ability to go in only to use the bathroom at any high-class restaurant, hotel or club, as my "gringo powers". Unfortunately, my inborn privilege was also recognized by those

residing at the other end of the social spectrum. The sight of a desperate, young Brazilian's dilated pupils, flaring nostrils and a cold .38 caliber pistol pressed against my head, served as a staunch reminder that my racial privileges are not universally shared nor appreciated.

I immediately decided that although I still had a great affinity for the Brazilian people and culture, due to my ethnicity and nationality, I was a beacon of privilege and therefore a target. However, I was not yet ready to return to my "little white American dream". I wanted to go somewhere safe and less overtly hostile to Americans while still confronting my identity. Being that my minor was in Japanese studies, Japan was the obvious choice. I soon found a job teaching English and was on my way.

Going Native

In my previous experiences as a white American in China and Brazil, there was one constant: the affluence implied by my nationality and ethnicity provided me access to higher ranks of the social hierarchy than the majority of natives. In Japan, however, this was not the case. The Japanese national identity is strongly tied to their ethnicity and due to several generations of nationwide economic prosperity, the divide between socio-economic classes remains obscured. Therefore any individual without the ethnic markers of Japanese nationality is immediately relegated to the lower social caste of "foreigner". For the first time in my life my ingrained sense of dominance was not reinforced by the culture I lived in. I was completely part of a societies "out-group". (Tajfel, 1970)

Within the foreigner caste of Japanese society, I felt out of place. Due to continued American militarism at the time, I was often the recipient of unprovoked personal attacks simply due to my national origin. With the shadow of the 9/11 inspired national pride still looming over me, undealt with and galvanized by the constant abuse received, I chose to completely exile myself from all contact with other foreigners.

Foreigners who do not interact with their fellow out-group members are said to "go native". Because the widespread distain for my nationality, I decided to do just that. I surrounded myself with Japanese culture, language and peers. I became fascinated with every aspect of their society and tried my best to ameliorate any vestige of foreignness. I was often complimented on being "more Japanese than the Japanese". As my language ability became stronger, I would often lie to strangers telling them I could not speak English.

Soon I began to realize that no amount of effort to learn the language or act culturally appropriate would ensure acceptance. On one occasion I went to meet my friends in a "hostess bar", a very common kind of bar where women, known as hostesses, are paid to accompany men for conversation. As I attempted to enter, the owner stepped in front of me and said "No!" in English. I politely explained to him that I was merely

coming to meet my friends. Again he said “No!” and rudely asked me to leave. I had to call my friends on a cell phone and have them deal with the situation. Immediately the group I had come to meet exited and suggested that we go to another bar because the owner insisted that foreigners scare the women.

As time went on, I began to recognize even the most minuet examples of how my ethnicity limited my acceptance. One example is the words used for “foreigner”, *gaijin* (外人) versus *gaigokujin* (外国人). The term *gaijin* consists of two characters meaning “outside” (外) and “person” (人), while the term *gaigokujin* consists of the above two but with the character for “nation” (国) in the middle. The term *gaijin* implies a Japan-centric view of anyone not ethnically Japanese as an outsider. The term *gaigokujin* is a more respectful term recognizing that being foreign is simply being from another nation. I began to resent the term *gaijin* around me as I felt it was disrespectful. One discussion I had with an older man over my apparent over-sensitivity with regards to this word reminded me of discussions I participated in class regarding African-Americans not wanting to be called simply “American”.

My growing cognizance of the discrimination in Japan against out-groups in society, despite my best efforts to conform, gnawed at me. I began to resent the narrow definition of what “Japanese” is. Despite my dedication to the language and culture, I felt as if I was unfairly denied broad acceptance merely on the basis of how I looked. Ironically, I had not yet made connections between the similarity of what I was experiencing and what many in my own culture experience. However, that changed when a wise, well-traveled, African-American woman named Alisha came to work at my school. I felt an immediate connection with her as an American citizen, as a foreigner in Japan, as well as something else I did not fully grasp at the time.

My Little White American Awakening

One night, Alisha and I were chatting over dinner. I was relaying my various experiences with discrimination and how it affected me. She chuckled and replied sarcastically, “You poor, poor white people. You know for me, unlike you, there is no ‘home’ I can go to escape it”. At that moment I awoke from a long slumber of ignorance. Connections to my experiences and those of oppressed peoples in my own culture became clear. Through further discussion about Alisha’s experiences as an African-American, I saw reflections of my own. Yet, for her it was me, my people, my race, and my culture that were responsible for the racism she had experienced. This simple realization evoked a deep sense of empathy in me. Through my analogous experiences, realizing what ethnic minorities in my own culture must endure weighed on me. The seeds of perception planted in my conscious long ago, bloomed again, replacing latent feelings of guilt with a deep sense of empathy for all people, including the Japanese, because I was also able to see reflections of myself in them. This made my last few months in Japan quite enlightening. I had formed a new identity that allowed me to transform experiences of discrimination and ignorance into greater empathy for others. Although not religious, the saying; “Forgive them, for they know

not what they do” became my mantra.

My arrival back to the U.S was like entering a foreign culture to me. Although I no longer had to deal with the issues of being a visible minority or part of an out-group, I could not bask in the “luxury of ignorance” as I had done upon my arrival back from China. I could clearly see dominance all around me. I was sickened by my people’s indulgence in excess and privilege that was even apparent in their physical appearances. I felt I could see part of myself in the eyes of every ethnic minority struggling to deal with the effects of a lifetime of discrimination. Despite my empathy, a skeleton in the closet of my dominant identity still remained undealt with and served as a major source of internal conflict.

For me, the last remaining link to my former ideologies of superiority was in buried deep under the veil of national pride. This was dealt with through a direct confrontation of the facts regarding the negative impact of white American dominance in a multicultural education course. This course, taught by a charismatic woman of Burundi descent, was very emotionally difficult. The confrontation of the inequities committed by my race and nationality echoed the abuse I had received while living abroad. This prodding of my bruised insecurities forced me to routinely come to the defense of white privilege with logic I knew to be flawed. Any argument I attempted to construe would be nullified by my new sense of identity that would force me to see the truth of the issue as an outsider sans any personal attachment.

The process of coming to terms with the facts of white domination, institutionalized racism, and widespread disenfranchisement of minority peoples, resulted in the erosion of my national pride. Unfortunately, the confrontation of my insecurities resulted in my ultimate failure of the class due to an inability to coherently explain my internal conflict on paper. The class, however, did plant a final seed in my conscious that allowed a new, empathic identity to fully manifest itself and accept the facts regarding my cultures legacy of privilege, dominance and racism. Surprisingly, the acceptance of my new identity and all the above mentioned facts did not create feelings of guilt or shame as it had done in the past. Through my ability to adopt other perspectives, these facts became liberating truths and created nothing but a sense of responsibility to aid in the healing of process through the amelioration of ignorance.

This brings me to the present. Although I have a very long road ahead of me, I have come to terms with my culture, embracing it as a large part of what I am, but only a small fraction of who I am. I feel I have transcended the tradition of dominance passed down in my blood for many generations, replacing it with a tradition of advocacy. Before my transformation, I was a leech, sucking on the foot of dominance while it used the weight of privilege to hold others down. Now, I am virus, dedicated to infecting dominance with empathy, from the inside, as an insider.

Conclusion

My perspectives and beliefs discussed in this article derive from both my experiences living in other cultures as well as my studies in multi-cultural education. While reading many narratives regarding other's experiences, no matter which race or culture, I could not help but relate all the emotions and feelings they described to my own. Despite volumes of excellent scholarship on identity formation, I felt un-satisfied by theoretical frameworks on the subject because none accounted for what I felt to be my distinctly analogous experience to both whites that overcame dominant identities as well as ethnic minority's struggle to define themselves in an oppressive society.

I believe experience of identity formation is different for all people. No identity is completely static or uniform; oftentimes they are multiple and even contradictory depending on the situation (Perry, 2001). Despite the elusive nature of identity, I felt the need to integrate my belief in culture shock's role in identity formation into a more elegant framework with a wider range of applicability. I present my perspectives on identity formation not as an attempt to challenge or usurp any previous theories, but rather, simply as a way to connect my own unique experiences to those of many others.

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