

Microcultures

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Abstract: The text is an experience report that describes the author's personal perceptions on the topic of microcultures. The author observes how dominant subcultures (white, heterosexual, non-disabled people, among other more socially valued attributes), benefit from a different position in the cultural hierarchy, which seems to cause a certain imbalance in the world. The author observed how her cultural identity developed in a multifaceted way. And that her diverse experiences, combined with her values, languages, customs and traditions, will certainly help her as a therapist, as well as her future clients.

Keywords: Cultural identity. Dominant subcultures. Cultural hierarchy.

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Resumo: O texto é um relato de experiência que descreve percepções pessoais da autora sobre o tema das microculturas. Observa o quanto subculturas dominantes (pessoas brancas, heterossexuais, sem deficiência, dentre outros atributos mais valorizados socialmente), se beneficiam de uma posição diferenciada na hierarquia cultural, o que parece provocar um certo desequilíbrio no mundo. Observou o quanto a sua identidade cultural se desenvolveu de forma multifacetada. E que, suas variadas experiências, aliada aos seus valores, línguas, costumes e tradições, certamente irão ajudá-la como terapeuta, bem como a seus futuros clientes.

Palavras-chave: Identidade cultural. Subculturas dominantes. Hierarquia cultural.

Introduction

As I contemplated the subject of microcultures, I realized that I belong predominantly to the dominant subcultures. My perception is that I have benefited my entire life from my position in the cultural hierarchy without fully realizing it. I am aware that I belong to a privileged category just for being white, but I shrink when I observe how imbalanced our world really is.

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I am middle-aged, heterosexual, white, non-disabled, female, originally from São Paulo, Brazil. There is a slight confusion when it comes to what race Brazilians fit in. People from my country are not Hispanic, but we are considered to be part of the same Latin American group.

For that reason, I usually answer survey questions about race as “White” or “Caucasian.” Although I feel like this is not the right answer, there isn’t one I find more appropriate. I am not alone in my confusion: in the 2020 Census, “Brazilian was the largest detailed “Some Other Race” group excluding Hispanic responses and “Multiracial and Multiethnic” responses to the race question” (United States Census Bureau, 2023). I have never answered my race as “other,” for reasons that I cannot explain because I am unaware of them. My only guess is that I didn’t wish to be in a broad category such as “other.” My ethnic origin is mixed between Brazilian, Spaniard and Arabic. My parents were born in Brazil. My mother is Brazilian, from a Spaniard family. My father is Brazilian, from an Arabic (Lebanese) family. I am the youngest of four girls. We were all born in São Paulo, Brazil. We are very close in age (my parents had 4 children in 5 years), and we experienced a wonderful childhood together, playing and running outside. My sisters, myself and my mother immigrated to the United States. We chose to live near each other, and we share similar lifestyles. Having immediate family close by is a luxury that many immigrants cannot have. I consider myself lucky to have family living near me and to have their committed support. My journey in the U.S. would have been very different if I didn’t have my sisters around. They definitely helped me grow.

At 21 years of age, I decided to live with my older sister in the United States for one year to learn English so I would find better employment after college in Brazil. However, I ended up staying, getting married to an American from Boston, and having two children. I have lived in Miami for 24 years. I speak fluently three languages: Portuguese, English, and Spanish. This places me in a higher position than the dominant group, which is monolingual (English only).

Because I live in Miami, a multi-cultural city, I believe that speaking three languages helps me understand others from different cultures making me more culturally competent – not only personally, but as a professional therapist as well. This has given me the opportunity to learn more about South American cultures and I believe I can easily relate to people of Hispanic origin.

Today I consider myself middle class, but that was not my reality growing up. In Brazil, I was raised working class. While I was growing up until I left home as a young adult, my family struggled financially. Even though we were working class, I enjoyed a rich cultural life because my parents raised my sisters and I with extraordinary cultural and artistic values. I believe that this early experience defined and reinforced many of the cultural, political, and social perspectives that I have today. I am sensitive to financial difficulties since I have experienced it in the past. I am conscientious and I don't take my current financial situation for granted. My experiences help me to relate to people from both working and middle/upper class.

My relationship and subsequent marriage to a Jewish-American man offered me a wide glimpse into the American culture. Besides improving my English language skills, I learned about the American way of life, which included the Jewish religion. My husband did not practice the religion, but his immediate family did, so I learned about Jewish-American social traditions, cuisine, and other features. I believe marrying someone from a completely different culture contributes immensely to one's cultural identity in many ways. Often, I felt as a complete stranger lost in a foreign land, but because we had agreed to stay in the U.S. I had to find a way to adapt. I dove deeply into learning the culture, the language, and everything about my new country. Because I had married my husband and was close to his family, the American culture became second nature. At first, I would feel exhausted at the end of the day because of the effort of thinking and speaking in another language. I was aware that it was a long, painful process, so I invested all my energy in it.

When my children were toddlers, they had a hard time communicating with their father because I only spoke to them in Portuguese during their first years (which was previously agreed between us). Nevertheless, they quickly learned both languages and enjoyed a free-flowing communication with both of us (he only spoke English). For me, the experience to speak to my children who are now in their teens in English, a language other than my own native language, is still surreal.

Although multicultural marriages are enriching and can be incredibly rewarding for both partners, they are difficult in nature. The so-called "cultural shocks," are a reality and are common occurrences. Sometimes it can be disorienting and challenging for both partners to understand each other. In my case, we had an open communication from the beginning of our relationship, which helped a lot. We agreed to several aspects about how

we wanted to raise our children before they were born. Thankfully, our main values, worldviews, and expectations were similar. Since I chose to marry him, I accepted bearing and raising children in a foreign country. We were in love, and none of the cultural differences seemed to matter. We differed mainly in our cultural backgrounds – he had never visited any Latin American country, and I had just arrived in United States. I was the first Latina he had intimate contact with, and he was the first American I had contact with. The language barrier was a sore reality in the beginning of our relationship, which led to many misunderstandings. As my English improved, so did our relationship.

The 15-year journey by his side transformed me in many ways. I learned a lot about the American culture and grew to appreciate it. I was exposed to many different cultural, social, and political aspects of the United States. I became knowledgeable about American politics and institutions, business practices (he was a business owner), real estate, sports, finances, education, etc. I can say that having experienced a multicultural marriage made me a better person all around. I became better informed culturally, more worldly, and infinitely more patient and tolerant of other cultures, among many other benefits. At the same time, I must admit that diving deep into a foreign culture puts one in a constant “identity crisis,” as I have often joked. I gave up large portions of my cultural identity to assimilate a foreign one. I had to integrate cultural trends and ideologies that did not match with those from my childhood. I had to learn (still learning) about the teenage way of life, its cultural expectations and complexities in America.

Many qualities of my “Brazilian way” had to be put aside in order to make space for the “American way,” so I could successfully navigate my children’s and my own experiences in the United States. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that this major life experience provided me with many new and useful tools to make me more culturally competent personally and in my future professional career. Because of it, I will be able to relate to American clients as well as Latinx clients. Had I been involved only with South Americans and their culture for the last 23 years, I would not be as well prepared as I am to work with the American public.

Anglé & Uusiautti (2014) conclude that “in all, it is worth remembering that attempts and efforts to integrate in the new home country do not mean that one should forget his or her own culture. For balanced life and healthy cultural identity, also in marriage, one should pursue balance with one’s own and the spouse’s culture” (p. 393).

That is what I am trying to do – sometimes successfully, sometimes not. My children know a lot about my culture and speak Portuguese. I continue showing them different aspects of Brazilian culture. We visit Brazil whenever we can and I agree that “multiculturalism in a relationship can turn into an empowering richness when the suitable balance is found” (Anglé & Uusiautti, 2014, p. 393).

One strong characteristic of my family dynamics back in Brazil was living away from the city (at farms, among animals) and not being part of any specific group, church, or society. This shaped my cultural perceptions and my ways of living in a community. It taught me to assert my beliefs and my principles, but at the same time I never enjoyed the experience of being part of a circle of people with shared interests. This independent way of life taught me well how to survive and how to be self-sufficient, but as children, I believe myself and my sisters would have benefited significantly from belonging to community clubs. Especially groups in which one feels a sense of belonging. We had to learn how to entertain and nurture ourselves, which provided us with plenty of time to enrich ourselves creatively, artistically, and culturally. But as a family we were mostly isolated. I still struggle as an adult to nurture friendships and to belong to any cultural group. I am accustomed to this way of life, and changing is difficult. I hope, as I get older, to become more open and make more meaningful relationships within my community.

I live in the *City of Doral*, which is located inside greater Miami, in South Florida, about 17 miles from the Atlantic Ocean (Miami Beach). I have lived in Doral for the entire 23 years of my residence in the U.S. Currently, Doral is 85.6% Hispanic, and 81.21% of the population speaks Spanish (Doral City, 2023). Living in Doral has taught me the importance of learning to speak Spanish, how to dance salsa, how to eat tacos, how to listen to music in Spanish, how to appreciate the true Mexican cuisine (not *Tex Mex*), what’s inside a *pico de gallo* salsa, how to differentiate a Cuban accent from a Venezuelan accent, how to drink a *cortadito* and a *colada*, and how to appreciate a good *arepa*. When I moved here, for many years, I insisted on answering *no hablo Español*, to no avail. Everyone I encountered on the street talked to me in Spanish. So, I decided to give in and learn the language. It was the best decision I made. After that, I could communicate with everyone around me: my children’s teachers, the bank tellers, the grocery store workers, etc. I did not anticipate learning about the Hispanic culture in such detail, but living in Doral provided me with that amazing opportunity. It has expanded me, and I am a more knowledgeable and a



culturally aware person.

Overall, I believe my cultural identity has developed in a multifaceted way. It encompasses my varied experiences, my values, languages, my customs, and my traditions. As a future therapist, I will strive to explore how my social and cultural identity can benefit my clients.

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