WAYS OF SEEING CULTURE, EQUITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE COMPARATIVELY THROUGH CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE TINNEAH, NORWEGIAN, AND HISPANIC CULTURES.

By Christina Sierra

In this Essay Christina Sierra explores the different perspectives and experiences of the peoples of different ethnic backgrounds living in the US. The paper is a powerful reference to the profound similitude and relevant differences of the experience of immigrants form different backgrounds as they integrate in their new society.

Introduction

Culture has many interpretations, offered by many individuals through time. The idea of culture was coined in the second half of the eighteenth century, to separate human accomplishments from facts of nature (Bauman, 1999). This era was marked by Charles Darwin’s, *Origin Of Species*, which ordered the natural world. Although this was an attempt to connect all living things, the interpretation sparked more division. It was Emile Durkheim’s ‘social facts’ that culminated the concept of naturalizing culture, in that cultural facts are a natural product of humans (Bauman, 1999). Now in the second part of the twentieth century, the concept of culture is being deconstructed through the post-modern paradigm. Post modern approaches dispute mainstream social science, rejects epistemological assumptions, refutes methodology, contemplates and deconstructs modern views (Rosenau, 1992). This impacts culture because it impacts the sciences, which study culture. Before culture can be deconstructed, it first must be constructed.

A broad view of what culture in the modern view represents can be found in most literature. Professors Robins, Lindsey, and Terrell, in their book *Culturally Proficient Instruction: A guide for people who teach*, state that “Culture is everything you believe and everything you do that identifies you as a member of a group. Cultures reflect the belief systems and behaviors informed by ethnicity, as well as their sociological factors, such as gender, age, sexual orientation, and physical ability” (2002). They go on to state that, often when culture is used, the reader or listener visualizes an ethnic culture.

Ethnic cultures are groups of people who are united by ancestry, language, physiology, and history, as well as by their beliefs and practices (2002). The authors distinguish between culture and ethnic culture, which is important in the process of deconstruction. A post modernist author, Rosenau, cites Paul Rainbow, author of, *The Foucault Reader*, that the post-modern problem the anthropologist, or any person with an interest in culture, must keep in mind is if it is even possible to represent other cultures and formulate theories about them.

Margaret Mead refutes the generalization of what culture is perceived to be in her book, *Continuities in Cultural Evolution*.
The familiar concept of culture that is based on the criterion of commonality of content leads the anthropologist to homogenize the cultures that he studies and to ignore or exclude much that is both different in kind or significance from that which he does study except that its distribution among the members of a society’s heterogeneous. Our concept of culture must take into account the distribution of the contents of a culture among the members of a society or sub-societal group… A culture contains a highly complex structure of commonality and not a unitary body of common content (1964).

Anthropology is the means by which information is gathered in the study of humans in relation to their complex relationships with their environment and each other. Anthropology seeks to observe humans in an effort to classify, explain, and theorize origins (Merriam-Webster, 1988). An Odawa Indian shares his account of anthropologists attempting to classify, explain and theorize about his culture.

We have been observed, noted, taped, and videoed. Our behaviors have been recorded in every possible way known to western science, and I suppose we could learn to live with this if we had not become imprisoned in the anthropologist’s words. The language that anthropologists use to explain us traps us in linguistic cages because we must explain our ways through alien hypothetical constructs and theoretical frameworks. Our ezhibemahdzizowin must be described as material culture, economics, politics, or religion. We must segment, fracture, and pigeonhole that which we hold sacred. The pipe, d’opwahganinan, becomes a sacred artifact, a religious symbol, a political instrument, a mnemonic device, icon…I am Odawa. I speak Odawa, but anthropologists have preferred to say I speak Ojibwe. My language is an Algonquin language, or so I am told.

While some indigenous people fought to keep the anthropologists out, some were equally adamant about the role they played in preserving culture. To some, the anthropologist had demonstrated usefulness and some skills and knowledge that had benefited the indigenous community. Many had not had the opportunity to learn their native language and traditions and argue a wealth of Native American heritage would have been lost if it had not been for the ethnographic descriptions of their culture (Deloria, 1997).

Cultural identity

Cultural identity is the sum of stories we tell ourselves about who we are and want to be, individually and collectively (Maxwell, 2001). We all have a cultural identity, even those who think they do not. Cultural identity is so oft confused with ethnic culture identity, that many believe their whiteness, or blackness, or American-ness does not represent a cultural identity. For many it’s easy to feel like a cultural orphan. But if cultural identity is the stories we tell ourselves about who are and want to be, then we can be whatever and whomever we want. In a post-modern view we are liberated from the hierarchy, and authority, there is no right or wrong, only the stipulation to provide a basis for people to decide for themselves on standards, criteria, and evaluation, because the truth outside the individual is impossible (Rosenau, 1992, {Jacquard, 1982}).

Culture identity is learned, and it is learned within the family. The study “Child Development and Personal Social Networks” suggested that linkages among a specific set of people being kin or non-kin, in a defined set of persons in a child’s life, and the characteristics of these linkages as a whole may be used to interpret the social behavior of the persons involved (Cochran, Larner, Riley, Gunnarsson, and Henderson, 1990). Parents and others dominant in a child’s life teach, beliefs,
practices, and language. Parents and of the dominate persons, possess an integral role in the continuation of culture and cultural identity as a child’s first and most important teacher.

In terms of my own culture as defined in this essay, allow me a few moments to discuss my heritage. I was raised by my father’s mother; in the countryside of Pleasant Valley, California. My Grandma, Lola Sierra, was born on Fort Apache Reservation (Arizona) in 1925. My grandmother raised me on healthy diet of rigorous outdoor play, chores we shared together, and stories she told me of her childhood experiences on the reservation. My grandmother was an Apache Indian. So I guess I’m part white.

We did not have a car, nor was there really a need for one, in the small village-like town in which we lived. Many roads were country dirt roads and sidewalks were not built until I was in high school. In keeping with her Western Apache ways, we lived in a “rough place, near a hill” (Haley, 1981). The only link we had to extended family was in the many nameless photographs my grandma kept piled in an old Samsonite overnight case. The miles and the years separated my Grandma Lola from her homeland and family, but the ways lived on in her and she passed them on to me.

My Grandma Lola told me to rise early in the morning and greet the sun each day and I would always prosper. She taught me live by the light of the sun. To this day I do not use an alarm clock to wake in the morning. People often ask, “What if you oversleep?” And like my grandma told me then, I say to them now, then my body needed more rest and yes I will be late to those who keep others time instead of their own.

In contrast to the cultural heritage of Grandma Lola, my Norwegian grandmother, Mabel Henrietta (Helegeson) Sanders, kept a watchful on the time and has our family history documented over a few hundred years. A small island culture where the phone book uses first names, with lineages tracked liked pedigree horses. My great-great-grandfather brought the entire family, to America in the early 1800’s. These new immigrants made there way to a large Scandinavian settlement in North Dakota, that other friends and family had already written home about and enticed them to join. This Scandinavian settlement was so prominent that today the largest Scandinavian festival in the world is held in North Dakota (Rasmussen, 1993).

Mabel and her husband, Paul, followed the oil field work from North Dakota to Wyoming and finally to Coalinga, a larger town in Pleasant Valley, California. Work in the oil fields was sporadic. Paul was offered a permanent position with the city working on the garbage pick-up truck. He really was not interested in this type of work, but they had a child now and felt that traveling to follow the work would not be good for a child. So in Coalinga they stayed. Like my Grandma Lola, distance separated them from their family in North Dakota. Family ties were kept by visiting family and family that followed them to Coalinga.

Family ties were better kept on the Norwegian side of my family than the Apache side. This is evident in the historical records that Mabel has which show her grandfather bringing his wife and several children to America when they boarded the boat for America. On the Indian side of my heritage, ties were lost once individuals left the reservation. This in contrast to many of Hispanic culture, who when migrating to a new land will send
one family member to get established, then send for the rest of the family.

Family ties were valued in the role of child rearing by the Norwegians and the Apache people. In both cultures, more than the just the mother reared the child. From speaking to my Apache grandmother I have learned that the title “grandmother” was taken far more literally than as in modern culture today. Grandmother means just that, Grand Mother, and therefore considered better experienced and better suited to handle the responsibilities of raising children. For the Norwegians it is closer to what is seen in the Hispanic culture in the multi-generational households, where the role of grandmother is revered and respected, but the grandmother’s roles is not necessarily the primary in assuming responsibility.

In the keeping of time, I see the greatest disparity. My Grandma Lola, never wore a watch, and we had a single large face clock, somewhat out of view in the bedroom. Grandma Mabel always had a ‘time-piece’, as she called it, and would wind her watch and check to be sure it was running right on time. What’s more she had a large grandfather clock that bel- lowed the time at every half hour. A single gong on the half hour and the long gongs on the hour, a strike for every hour, gong, gong, gong. At Mabel’s you did not have to look at the clock to know the hour, time was a constant reminder as it rung out regularly. How time is kept in the culture of people in Mexico is not found in books, it is one of those social facts that are taken for granted and that only ethnography would reveal.

Culture is not just what we have in common it is also our differences. Margaret Mead based the concept of culture on the quality of groups consisting of dissimilar or mixed beliefs and practices rather than uniformity to arrive at a more complex model for the structure of common attributes found within the heterogeneity of culture. She affirmed this further by saying “What any group has in common makes the intersect. The great number of different intersects to be found among the idioverses of the individuals of a society may be ordered into levels of commonality. This structure of commonality formed by all idioversal intersects exists within a culture and is not itself to be defined as the culture.” (1964).

Culture is about groupness. Cultural identity is what enables people to recognize where they belong. Across continents and across time, people have made fundamental distinctions between us and them. Even in the 21st century, we have retained this human tendency to want to distinguish us from their tribe from theirs (Robins, Lindsey, Terrell, 2002). Many cultures are experiencing meshing with other cultures at some level. With marriages between people of different cultures and ethnicity, children now have two or more ethnic backgrounds. Neither ethnic culture is lost, however, most individuals identify with one or two groups very strongly; this is their dominant culture. They may also identify in a lesser way with other cultural groups. Cultural beliefs and practices that become dominant help identify a person as a part of a particular cultural group(s), and help other group members to recognize that person as one of them. All these groups and sub-groups have much in common, but in many ways these groups and their members show significant distinctions (Robins, Lindsey, Terrell, 2002).

Today when I think of myself, I feel that I am a culmination of several cultures that live in me from the stories of my grandmothers. I check more than one box on the census when I am asked.
Power Relations, Equity, and Social Justice

Before I can define power relations we must define power. One definition of Power is as the capacity to achieve one’s will against the will of another (Schmookler, 1995). Relations are concerned with some form of interaction, communication, or exchange. In Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence and cultural capital, he says “every exchange contains a more or less dissimulated challenge, and the logic of challenge and riposte is but the limit toward with every act of communication tends” (Collins and Makowsky, 1998). Collins and Makowsky explain that the context in reference to cultural classes, and the content of the schooling of the dominant cultural class corresponds to the interests of the dominant classes. Therefore they have cultural capital, the chief instrument of transforming power relations into legitimate authority. Thus, power relations are defined as interpersonal or inter-group exchanges mediated by control and access to resources. Equity is more difficult to define but should be understood in relationship to a discussion on social justice. Power refers to who has access to resources and means, who distributes it, and how one gets it back.

Historical events that affected the Tinneah people, and Scandinavian Immigrants in the United States was the ‘Great Depression’ of the 1930’s. A look at personal and institutional strategies and processes that these cultures employed to create equity and social justice in wide scale economic depression will be examined. Through the personal accounts of my grandmothers we will gain insight on how they have experienced cultural discrimination, inequity, and social injustice and how these ethnic cultures created equity or justice for themselves.

During the ‘Great Depression’ of the 1930’s both of my grandmothers were young children at an impressionable age. This was a time when the United States was at an all time economic low. Many suffered, starved and even committed suicide. Both of my grandparents had different yet similar experiences that were quite different than the majority of American’s experiences during the depression. Both of my grandmothers lived in communities that were not dependent on the economic status of America.

Lola scarcely felt the impacts of the depression, as her situation felt little to no change on the reservation. The very presence of the Tinneah people being forced to live on the reservation is evidence of how they experienced discrimination, inequity, and social injustice. Furthermore, their government commodities did decrease. The Tinneah people created equity and justice for themselves by growing their own crops. A major way the Tinneah people found to create social justice was how they helped the Japanese and themselves. My grandmother remembers the reservation becoming a refuge for Japanese fleeing concentration camps in the 1940’s. The Japanese share-cropped on the Tinneah land. The Tinneah people were able to collect a share of the Japanese crops. Food was more valuable, and more useful than currency. The Tinneah people created social justice for themselves and the Japanese while creating valuable revenue for themselves.

Mabel also lived in a self-sufficient manner that enabled her family to live well during the depression. Mabel’s family owned their own farm. Her family had a few hired hands which enabled the five children to attend school. My grandmother and her siblings, like many other Scandinavian immigrants experienced inequity of the depression by having to sacrifice their
education for survival. Mabel recounts that times got hard, and then they got harder. Finally with great regret her father had to fire the hired hands, stop sending the children to school and have the children help on the farm. These farming Scandinavian immigrants experienced social injustice when they eventually lost the farm. Along with most everyone they knew, they moved into the cities and further west, mostly into Washington state, to find work. The greatest injustice my Grandma Mabel experienced due to the consequences of the depression, was not the loss of her education, though not having more than a forth grade education surely kept her from achieving more in this life. It was not the loss of the family farm, even though my Grandma misses it, and keeps it framed black and white photo of her childhood home by her bedside to this day. It was the loss of her father, who died a tragic untimely death due to their forced entry into city life.

The whole family had migrated to work outside Spokane, Washington, and were no longer together. Each of the five children, though still children, earned their own “keep”, as my grandma put it. They worked in the homes of wealthier families doing chores and farm work. My grandmother recalls this as a particular unpleasant time, made worse by working for a particularly unkind woman. The whole family had “skrimped and saved” to buy back their farm and be reunited. They finally had their dream in their grasp. Mabel’s father had put in his notice, as they all had, at their jobs. At his last day of work in the coal mine, there was a tragic cave-in, that snuffed the breath from him as quickly as it covered the black gold they sought. The family, in shock and grief, did not go forth with reclaiming their farm. This was the greatest injustice my grandmother experienced due to the depression. An education, one can get from life. The farm, though sentimental, can be replaced. But a father, the core of their family, head of house hold, provider, loving father and husband, could not be truly replaced. This is not just Mabel’s story, this is the story of many Scandinavian Immigrants. Land lost. Family separated.

But the Scandinavian immigrants valued family. They created equity and justice for themselves by maintaining their culture and family bonds. Mabel’s uncle stepped into the role of father. Her father’s brother married her mother and reunited the family at Grandma Gunwall’s farm in North Dakota, also at risk of being lost. The family was saved from separation, desolation, and alienation, by strong Scandinavian family values. The family saved and still has possession of Grandma Gunwall’s farm and until recently has been occupied by the Helgeson family.

The culture of the Tinneah people, and Scandinavian immigrants enabled them to bear the hardships of inequity and made it possible for them both to pursue social justice in their own ways. Cultures are interrelated systems of constructs, which comprise supra-individual institutional patterns (Mead, 1964). This portion of the essay revealed how the to create social justice. In this next portion of the essay I will share the individual patterns I engage in to create social justice.

First of all I vote. I am a minority vote no matter how you look at it, a Nortina, a woman, unmarried, mother of three. So nobody cares about my vote, anyway it didn’t work in recent elections. I believe the only way voting will work is if people participate on a large scale. I will still be involved and encourage others to vote. My career, is the way I actively promote social justice and feel that it is im-
important to choose a career or even a temporary job that promotes a better society for yourself and others. I do this by working for an institution that is culturally proficient. Cultural proficiency in an institution is how the policies and practices of an organization enable the organization to interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment: reflected in the way an organization treats its employees, clients and community: an inside-out approach to issues arising from diversity (Robins, Lindsey, Terrell, 2002). I am enabled to be culturally proficient in my position for Early Head Start as a home-visitor to families of infants, toddlers and pregnant women, to serve the under represented, under served, and even un-documented populations in Seaside, Marina and Castroville. It is essentially my job to help these families to improve their quality of life on a micro-scale and work with community partners to connect families with agencies that help improve their lives on a macro-scale.

On a more micro or personal scale, I seek to support issues that interest me. My culture socialized me to take action on my own. When I see a societal or even environmental need, I do not wait for a group of concerned citizens to coordinate action. I often emulate what larger programs are doing on my own without claiming membership to their program. In my experience, that the act of coordination wastes more time and energy than is actually exerted into real action. Also, I want the freedom to advocate with out being micro managed. For this reason I often take action on my own. For example, in the recent election, I signed up to a volunteer for the Kerry campaign. I was given some tasks to choose from. I choose calling people. I did this because I felt the cost was immense and the staff limited and therefore heavily reliant on volunteers.

However, I was then e-mailed a dialogue to say and a link to access peoples phone numbers on the web. I found the dialogue to be dry. I personally hate cold calls. No one likes a telemarketer. So I called people I knew to insure they were going to vote and understood the important issues. I used the “walk pieces”, which explained the candidates, George W. Bush and John Kerry’s positions on healthcare, the war, stem-cell research, etc… This amounts to social justice, because I took action that I felt affected justice of those in the general public. My action created equity by balancing the media hype with some real facts. I was rewarded, even in our Democratic loss in the election, because people I called, told me my call convinced them to vote and helped them better understand issues so they could make an informed vote.

Beyond political activism, I act in facilitating social justice and creating equity on a micro-scale everyday in my work with parents and their children. Anyway, I’m a mom. I have the responsibility of rearing members of our society. I make a difference everyday by teaching my own children to be successful members of this society we share.

Conclusion

Ethnically, I would say I’m a mongrel - an ethnic mix of European, Mexican and Native American. The dominant culture I was raised around would say I should be Hispanic. My father looks Hispanic, he speaks Spanish, I should be Mexican. Yet Mexican, a mix, should be what I say I am, what many have classified me as, because of my father or not because of my white mother. I don’t think I am quite Mexican. Nor do I think a lot of my friends who are more ethnically Mexican than me are either. Nevertheless, I do like Mexican food, Mexican comedians, and Mexican music.
If nothing else, I hope this essay will enable individuals to take with them idea of culture as having multiple meanings, to differentiate between ethnicity and culture. To recognize that learning about culture is a focus on learning about oneself and recognizing how one’s culture and one’s identity may affect others, not on learning about others (Robins, Lindsey, Terrell, 2002). To understand the view of culture is dependent on what describing culture is (Geertz, 1973). So how one sees culture is imperative in describing it. That there are many intersects of the differences within culture (Mead, 1964). So a way of seeing culture is not a neatly organized, set of commonalities but rather an intertwined web of differences with threads of commonalities that binds us.

As the revered cultural anthropologist and theorist Clifford Geertz wrote, "The concept of culture I espouse . . . is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after…" (1973).

References


