Culture, Identity, and Education

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Author Note

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As a member of the Asian community, I was very concerned and often felt guilty and frustrated about my lack of knowledge about the different multicultural minorities that were living around me, in spite of the fact that I too belonged to a minority ethnic group in a predominantly white Auburn in Washington. However, as I entered college, my curiosity with regards to members of other ethnic groups helped me appreciate the differences and helped me look into my personal biases that often subtly came into play while I was around members of other ethnic groups, often without me being aware of them. Living in America as an Asian, I often had conflicting thoughts, with feelings varying between pride and shame. However, when I entered college, it allowed me a chance to meet people from different racial, ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds from all walks of life. Despite developing a greater tolerance for other groups in the diverse environment I was in, there were still subtle biases within me that I only recognized within myself when I took up ethnic and minority studies course.

In my opinion, the U.S. today is rightly recognized as a cultural melting pot, in which generations of immigrants have integrated together and developed communities. Nevertheless, I have also noticed that traditional cultures and values among ethnic minorities are gradually compromised until only a version remains that is commercially acceptable. It is perhaps, a strong pressure to be recognized ‘American’ that produces such a change. Mass media is a powerful proselytizing tool that has had an immense impact in this regard and continues to influence young people into embracing ‘American’ ideals in place of their traditional cultural ideals. In my observation, generations have risen under the influence of mass media that has led them to seek identity and meaning in often sub-cultures or countercultures. At times some of these cultures borrow a few aspects from various ethnic or cultural groups but usually with no appreciation or understanding of its historical context.

The issue of cultural clashes and identity among minority generations can be understood from the observations Hall (1989) makes. According to Hall (1989), the issue of identity in ethnic minorities is a complex construct that is affected by a variety of different life factors such as race, gender, class, and nation. Examining the relationship between ethnicity and personal identity, Hall (1989) politics play a significant role in personality development. The phase of growing up and be accepting of one’s identity in a multicultural society is described by Hall as a cultural recovery. One’s thoughts, ideas, practices, and ideas are significantly affected by societal pressures and politics, driven by the need for acceptance and to fit in. Thus, in my view, even the way minorities react to a particular situation is affected by how they individually see themselves as and affected by their bad or good past experiences.

In this context, the significance of ethnic and minority studies can be understood for not only its academic importance but to develop a critical understanding among students of institutionalized racism, intolerance, and oppression. The understanding of historical and contemporary relationships between minority groups and the white population as well as the lifestyles, contributions, and ambitions of different racial and ethnic minority groups helps create respect and appreciation as well as enhances democratic awareness. In this regard, Hu-DeHart (2004) provides a comprehensive discussion of the current status as well as history of the subject of American ethnic studies. However she laments the fact that multicultural education and ethnic studies are often only accepted for the purpose of ‘celebrating diversity or ‘sensitivity training’, however, as soon as ethnic studies start to fulfill their aim to empower and liberate, then it starts to unsettle the status quo. For me, this is what makes the ethnic and minority studies course to be powerful and exciting, as it helps people such as me understand their identity and place in modern America, as well as develop a deep appreciation of the contribution of other members.

For instance, I had not heard about the term ‘intersectionality’ and saw class, race, and gender to be separate entities when it came to institutionalized oppression. For me, exploring the ways in which gender and race together interact to shape different aspects of our experiences was an enlightening idea that helped me gain an appreciation of my own identity shaped by different experiences. I was able to recognize stereotypes and unintentional biases in a more clear manner, which not only increased my cultural competency and sensitivity but vigilance against different biases.

Overall, the awareness I gained from my recognition of the value diversity brings is the key takeaway from the course readings, that have helped me on a personal level.

# References

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Hu-DeHart, E. (2004). Ethnic Studies in U.S. Higher Education: History, Development, and Goals. In J. A. Banks, & C. A. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (2nd ed., pp. 869-881). San Francisco: Jossey­Bass.