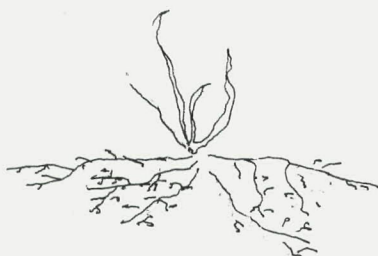


ENHANCING SELF-ESTEEM BY EXPLORING DIVERSITY: A Personal Experience

The integration of ethnic diversity content into social work curricula is a major focus of social work education. This narrative tells of how my experience in seeking to make "meaningful connection with my ancestors" in Africa influenced my teaching and enhanced students' appreciation of ethnic diversity and practice with their own and other cultural groups.

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The Search for Roots

A recent trip to Africa for the purpose of experiencing a "meaningful connection with my ancestors," heightened my self-esteem and unexpectedly provided an opportunity to enhance the learning experiences of students. The two West African countries we planned to visit, Senegal and Guinea Bissau, were selected because each were points of departure for many Africans brought to America. Once the tour sites had been determined, less deliberate events had a major impact on the trip's outcome.

About a month prior to departure, a mutual friend who had recently visited West Africa introduced us to a family from the Bargny fishing village of Senegal that were living in America. A bond quickly formed and they invited us to visit their family in Senegal. Gratefully accepting the invitation, they contacted their family in Senegal and I was on the way to becoming an extended family member.

Perhaps a catalyst to the bond that so rapidly formed, was that Senegal is a French speaking county and I grew up

in a French-settled area of America. Many of the customs the American Senegalese family described were like those I remembered as a child. Weeks later in Senegal, I experienced the cultural similarities, accurately interpreting the nuances that exist between the social customs of Senegalese and traditional African American families. These extended to styles of food preparation and use of spices especially ginger and hot red pepper; ways of accepting others into one's family, respecting elders, means of providing hospitality, balancing pride and humility, and a sensitivity to those less fortunate than one's own family.

The similarity between Senegalese and traditional African American styles of cooking was obvious. I developed an instant affinity to "yassa poulet". "Poulet" is the French word for chicken and "Yassa Poulet" is grilled chicken sauteed in onions. The dish awakened long forgotten mouth watering flavors from the past. I recalled my grandmother's "smothered chicken", browned chicken cooked in a heavy skillet and sauteed in a generous amount of onions. Another dish

common to both cultures is New Orleans "gumbo," a thick, deep brown soup abundant with seafood and meat.

The concept of extended family, influenced by West African culture, has more significance and meaning for African Americans (Billingsley, 1992) than when understood in an American contextual framework. Among African Americans, extended family members include not only blood relatives but neighbors, godparents, church members and other persons who have contributed in a significant way to the family's welfare.

By virtue of my relationship with the Senegalese family in America, I was readily accepted by those in Africa. I was expected to contact "my family" when I arrived in Senegal and receive the hospitality that they had taken time and expense to provide. I was expected to dine, dance, share warm embraces, meet the mother of the family, tour her home, look at pictures of her deceased husband, and revere her as much as did her biological children. In that Senegalese cultures are matrilineal, I was obliged to meet the "elder" of the family, the brother of the widow, and have him pray his blessings upon me. It was a surprise and great honor when the elder advised my spouse and me (after an extended period of time in his home) that we were selected to serve as parents to his daughters in America. Another memorable event was a daughter's removal of her expensive jewelry before entering her

family's village. This gesture considered a "sign of respect" for the meager economic status of many villagers, was a striking demonstration of humility.

Although I had studied West African history for many years, and had been told that "a change" occurs in African Americans who visit Africa, I was unprepared for the transformation. By the third day of the tour, I experienced euphoria, a calmness, and general feeling of well-being. Fond childhood memories flashed before me. Although I had never lived where French was the prominent language, my high school and college French was surprisingly effective. The significance of family and other relationships, the intrinsic values and the high moral standards that I learned as a child were reinforced in Africa.

My trip to Africa was a rebirth. It is symbolic that the visit to the home of our African family occurred on New Year's Day. By the end of the tour, I felt elated, personally rewarded, more proud of my African heritage, and grateful that I now had a special connection to West Africa. I hoped others could share the same experience.

The Personal Influences the Professional

My own personal transformation guided my decisions to develop an instructional goal, and assignment for the next semester which might help students experience similar growth. Specifically, I designed a project to expand their skills in

cultural diversity and strengthen their self-esteem by actively involving each student in a series of knowledge and skill building exercises. The instructional approach was unique in that students explored their own culture and that of their classmates.

The students involved in the project were social work majors at a large university in the Southwest enrolled in undergraduate direct practice courses.

At the third class meeting of the semester, I presented slides of my West African trip and talked about my thoughts, feelings and the behaviors generated by the experience. There were slides of familial activities, details of the slave house on Goree Island, the architecture of both countries contrasting Guinea Bissau (a newly developing country) and Senegal (a nation with extensive tourism), a typical African market, an African ballet, and a reunion with a classmate that I had not seen in over twenty years.

The students first asked questions about Africa's topography. They were surprised to see the lush countryside, and most were fascinated by the similarities between the capital city of Dakar and New York City. Visibly excited by the brilliant clothing worn by the African family we visited, they wondered whether such traditional clothing was routinely worn. Slides of family members dancing to celebrate our arrival were the most popular. I am uncertain as to whether this

was because of the vibrant colors, smiles, laughter, and warmth, or because, I joined the dancing. The African ballet with brightly dressed drummers and traditional dancers was a startling contrast to European ballet which the students were accustomed.

The role of females in a matrilineal cultures, a discussion stimulated by a picture of a market, became more than just a concept discussed in prior courses. The last slide, a chance meeting with an American classmate (a Guinean government official) I had not seen since college, confirmed how acknowledging one's heritage brings African Americans together in unique ways.

Modelling self disclosure during our dialogue was important to creating an atmosphere of trust. The establishment of trust among us was crucial to the success of student presentations scheduled later in the semester.

Based on the slide presentation and dialogue, each student was asked to identify and investigate the cultural group with which he/she most closely identified. They were expected to do an in-depth exploration of their cultural group over a two month period. The method for the exploration was discretionary; we talked about traveling to their ancestors birth place, conducting interviews and other forms of communication with elderly family members, and reviewing albums, journals and family documents.

At the end of two

months, each student selected a class period to make an oral presentation, that took into account the cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects of their exploration. Students were to report the source(s) of their information, why the source was selected, and their initial and current response to the assignment. Because it was likely they would uncover personal information, the students were advised to present only information they were comfortable sharing in the classroom. Confidentiality was stressed as was the fact that ours was a classroom rather than a therapeutic environment.

My expectations for the students were personal and professional. On a personal level, I hoped that my excitement about Africa was contagious and that students would gain the same sense of history and on-going connectedness with their culture that I had. I wanted them to appreciate the uniqueness of my culture and their own to the point of wanting to share their experiences with others. From a professional standpoint, I wanted the students to more fully understand and respect diversity, demonstrate awareness of cultural nuances when working with clients, and further develop skills in oral and written communication.

"Tell Me, I Forget; Show Me, I Remember; Involve Me, I Understand"

Although students enthusiastically accepted my modelled presentation, many

were anxious about the assignment. They had reservations about the geographical distances between themselves and their elders, confusion as to whether maternal or paternal grandparents should be interviewed, or whether biological or adoptive parents were more appropriate. Unlike other class members, Jewish, Mormon, and Native American students appeared less threatened by the assignment. As they were growing up, these students regularly participated in traditional family events and continued to engage in rituals such as religious ceremonies and genealogy.

The students subsequently reported that the benefits of the assignment far outweighed their anxieties. For example, several students gained a new understanding of their cultural heritage. They claimed this new insight helped them to better understand their parents and become closer to them. Many students mirrored their grandparents' joy and pride when they shared their family history with classmates. Several told of their pleasure at bringing delight to their grandparents by interviewing them and viewing family treasures together. They boasted about ancestors who engaged in the same careers or activities as themselves, e.g., helping professions, and athletics. As a result of the pride they felt, some students planned to do more extensive research into their family history and visit other countries to meet relatives. Consistently, students identified with "famous" in-

dividuals among their cultural groups whether or not the celebrities were members of their families.

In their presentations the students used historical documents such as fifty year old photographs; slides of family members in other countries; crafts, antique jewelry and other heirlooms; christening certificates, diaries and journals of their ancestors; citizenship papers; marriage licenses; newspaper articles written decades ago; family albums; family trees; and maps. Many students brought ethnic foods for all of us to eat.

An unexpected occurrence was that rather than identifying themselves as a homogeneous group, Caucasian students discovered their own diversity. Initially surprised to learn of their heterogenous ancestry, e.g., Scottish, Dutch and German, a sizeable number of Caucasian students expressed their pride and vowed to incorporate the newly discovered values and customs of their cultural history into their lives and those of their children.

As I had anticipated, students repeatedly said that doing the assignment resulted in greater respect for their elders, pride in their ethnic group, and heightened self-esteem. Their questions and comments demonstrated new awareness and genuine curiosity about the cultural groups of others as well.

The assignment was a forum for knowledge exchange, and a safe place for practicing new skills. Students took responsibility for their own

learning rather than responding to stimuli (readings, contrived role play exercises) provided by others. They became acutely aware of their ethnic and family history. This greater awareness may lead to deeper appreciation of their ethnic group and ultimately of themselves (Bowles, 1993).

The students and my own disclosure offered other advantages. Because each participant told their own story, there was less likelihood of simplifying or stereotyping her/his own group. For example, in contrived scenarios, it is common to use stereotypical last names (i.e., Sanchez to denote Hispanic or White Horse to suggest Native American). Students within these ethnic groups frequently find this offensive. A related benefit of a student telling her/his own story demonstrated how several individuals within a given ethnic group can have widely varying experiences, reflecting the rich heterogeneity within the same ethnic groups.

To successfully complete the assignment, students had to examine their own thoughts and behaviors, confront value-laden ethnic content and to synthesize and articulate the results to others. These tasks challenged their creative, analytical, verbal and writing skills and perhaps helped them to resolve cultural value-dilemmas (Davis and Proctor, 1989; Hepworth and Larsen, 1993). Exploring the cultures of others, and benefiting from an exploration of one's own culture may have enhanced their

capacity for empathy, and afforded them a larger global world view. Hopefully it may lead to more ethnic sensitive practice (Devore and Schlesinger, 1987).

This narrative demonstrates that exploring one's heritage can be an affirming experience; events which seem unrelated to academic settings can positively influence instructional methods; and the exuberance of an instructor can be a catalyst for fascinating classroom activities. □

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