Critical Reflection #1

CSP 6035

Leslie Meyer

Bowling Green State University

Who Am I?

After some reflection, I realize that there is no simple answer to the question, "Who am I?" My identity includes numerous attributes. At first glance, I think of myself as a wife, daughter, sister, friend, colleague, and graduate student. Throughout the first few weeks of this course, I have learned more about how some aspects of my identity place me in either the dominant or the subordinated group. For example, I am a 40 year-old, White, heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian. All of these parts of who I am place me in the dominant group. On the other hand, I am female, which puts me in the subordinated group.

Becoming culturally competent means being aware of one's own privileged status in relation to racism, sexism, ableism, etc. (Watt, 2007). This awareness is frequently a result of participating in emotional conversations with others. I have come to realize that I am very privileged. In fact, I am so privileged that I do not recall ever taking the time to consider or talk with others about what it actually means to be privileged. It is as though I have been "blind" to my own privilege. As a member of the dominant group according to a number of aspects, I am not accustomed to the challenges of trying to assimilate to meet the requirements of the dominant group. I was raised in a town surrounded by people just like me. I was never specifically taught about issues of diversity, nor did I participate in emotional dialogues around diversity. It was not until I attended college at Ohio State University that I even started to question how unusual it was that I attended a high school with only White students. In addition, everyone who lived in the town I grew up in was entirely White.

Our beliefs, values, and behaviors are socially constructed (Pieterse & Collins, 2007). Socialization is a process where individuals learn beliefs, values, and behaviors that are considered the norm according to their particular reference group. For example, I was raised in a

Christian home and taught that same-gender relationships are inappropriate. On another note, my mom and dad both have a strong work ethic that I have since adopted and consider important. These are just a few simple instances of why I tend to believe what I believe and why I behave in the manner that I do. What is important to understand is that one's beliefs, values, and behaviors are not *the way,* but *a way* of viewing and responding to life (Pieterse & Collins, 2007). This reinforces the idea that no one is "normal" because there is no such thing as "normal." And people that do not share my take on things are not considered "crazy" and are not deserving of the question "What is wrong with them?" I have heard these comments used repeatedly by friends, family members, and colleagues, and admittedly, I am guilty of using them, too. My awareness of my own biases, beliefs, and assumptions is sharpening as a result of exploring what it means to be privileged.

Multicultural Competence in Student Affairs

Pope and Reynolds define multicultural competence as a "necessary pre-requisite to effective, affirming, and ethical work in student affairs" (1997, p. 270). Having the knowledge and expertise to respond to multicultural issues is an important competency for all professionals (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). As a student affairs professional, it is unacceptable to consider multicultural matters someone else's responsibility. While being an expert in multicultural affairs is not a requirement, working with students, faculty, and staff from diverse backgrounds does entail having a certain level of multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. When I first read this, it frightened me because I have no formal training in working with people who are different than me. I find some comfort in knowing that it is also important to have the awareness, knowledge, and skills to work with others who are culturally similar to you, too. As an academic advisor at Owens Community College, I now work with a diverse group of students

on a daily basis. Gaining knowledge and skills in this area will be critical to building trusting

relationships with the students I advise.

As a student affairs professional, I want to play a role in making college campuses more

welcoming for all students. Pope and Reynolds (1997) identified 33 attributes of multiculturally

competent student affairs professionals. This list serves as a good self-evaluation tool to

measure how I am growing in the areas of multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills.

Increasing one's multicultural knowledge entails learning about various cultural groups, systems

of power, privilege, and oppression, and acknowledging differences between and within groups

(Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). Knowing how and when to intervene and picking up on

verbal and nonverbal messages are two examples of multicultural skills that require one to apply

their awareness and knowledge. I feel as though I have so much to learn so I was encouraged to

read that becoming multiculturally competent is a life-long process. It seems as though my

heightened awareness is making me want to increase my multicultural knowledge. As I gain

more knowledge, I think I will feel more confident in learning and developing multicultural

skills. Students and cultural issues are always changing (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). As

a result, student affairs practitioners must commit to continually developing new awareness,

knowledge, and skills about multicultural issues.

Difficult Dialogues & The Pie Model

Difficult dialogues are conversations between individuals that focus on conflicting views,

beliefs, and values about social justice issues such as racism, sexism, ableism, and

heteroseism/homophobia (Watt, 2007). Student affairs professionals are a natural fit as

facilitators for these types of discussions on college campuses. One of the goals of difficult

dialogues is for students to develop critical consciousness, the ability to evaluate social, political,

and economic components of oppression and then take action against it (Friere, 1970).

According to Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller (2004) there is no shortcut to obtaining critical

consciousness. One must be willing to participate in difficult conversations and explore what it

means to be privileged. Having no experience participating in difficult dialogues makes me lack

confidence in facilitating these types of discussions.

  Watt (2007) developed a model, called the Privileged Identity Exploration (Pie) model,

based on conducting her own research, where she discovered a pattern in how people respond

when participating in difficult dialogues. The model describes eight defensive reactions that

happen when one is being asked to reflect on their social, political, and economic position in

society. At the base of this model are the concepts of fear and entitlement, which act as

motivators for people to put up their defense. When individuals investigate what it means to be

privileged they may, without even realizing it, fear giving up power. Entitlement comes into

play when individuals view the idea of exploring their privileged identity as optional.

  Watt categorized the eight defense modes into groups based on the behaviors one

displays when *recognizing*, *contemplating*, or *addressing* his or her privileged identity.

Recognizing Privileged Identity includes the defense modes of denial, deflection, and

rationalization. *Contemplating Privileged Identity* includes intellectualization, principium, and

false envy. And *Addressing Privileged Identity* includes benevolence and minimization. As I

read through the descriptions of each of these defense modes, I was, again, reminded my lack of

experience with difficult dialogues. I thought about when I visited the homeless camps in

Columbus, Ohio with a group from my church and saw how that could be characterized as a

benevolence defense. We spent a cold, winter evening distributing food, clothing, and blankets

to the homeless and I left feeling broken-hearted for the people I met that evening. At the same

time, though, I was so thankful that I could volunteer and make a difference in some small way. I never once considered how doing a charitable act could actually help to perpetuate the dominant society structure. On the other hand, when I read about deflection, I found myself guilty of using this defense mode myself when I mentioned earlier in this paper that I was never taught about race, power, and privilege. I realize that this is no longer an acceptable excuse for someone who is planning to pursue a career in the field of student affairs.

As a future facilitator of difficult dialogues, I think the PIE model as an excellent tool to keep discussions from being derailed. In addition, I must keep a few things top of mind. One of the overarching goals of exploring one's privileged identity is to understand a person, rather than to teach him or her about their status of privilege (Pieterse & Collins, 2007). Understanding one's own privilege and exploring how the position has been constructed through the process of socialization is an approach that focuses on individual experiences. It takes time to achieve change in this area and to personally transform.

Reason (2007) reviewed findings from a study of 15 White racial justice allies that pointed to the importance of being able to rearticulate Whiteness. The study found that understanding Whiteness is a continuous interpersonal and intrapersonal process of rearticulating meaning based on new experiences that one encounters. This reiterates the whole idea that becoming multiculturally competent is a life-long process. In the study, difficult racial dialogues informed students' sense of Whiteness and allowed them to participate to a greater degree in these discussions. Reason (2006) also offered suggestions to encourage a re-articulation of Whiteness and avoid the defense responses that Watt characterized in the PIE model, including building a racially-salient critical consciousness, building upon intellectual understandings that incorporate emotions, and building upon the contribution of multiple subjectivities.

As a facilitator of difficult dialogues about issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity, it is important to be able to effectively manage oneself when triggered (Obear, 2007). Doing so allows the facilitator to model the appropriate attitudes and skills they are teaching and "do no harm" to participants. A "trigger" is an immediate response to something and it does not involve conscious thought. Triggering events can cause unexpected emotions so it is wise for facilitators to consider what triggers them. I am easily triggered by people who make derogatory comments about individuals with disabilities. I think this stems from the fact that I used to teach students with special needs, and, therefore, I have a lot of awareness, knowledge, and skills in working with this population. In addition, I do not appreciate men making comments about women not being capable of fulfilling certain roles. I have heard men comment that women are not "tough" enough to hold high-level executive positions at companies because they are too emotional. If one is aware of when they feel triggered, they can use self-management tools or a diversion activity to calm their emotions before they respond (Obear, 2007). I have caught myself using these techniques without thinking about it. For example, when I am feeling a lack of confidence in a particular situation, I will tell myself that I can handle this matter and that things happen for a reason and that I am only given what I can handle. Keeping in mind that triggers can lead to a deeper discussion is also important (Obear, 2007). Lastly, as a facilitator, it is also valuable to ask oneself, "Did I do something to trigger this person's reaction?" I think it is often easy to pass the blame and not take responsibility for the role I may have played in a particular situation. In addition, acknowledging someone's perspective that is different from mine and apologizing for something I said that may have hurt someone proves difficult, too. When I get triggered, I tend to "snap back" at someone with a flippant comment that is not very well-constructed and often carries a sarcastic tone. I realize the benefits of being able to effectively recover from a

triggering event and I look forward to growing in this area by first becoming more aware of my own triggers.

History & Its Impact Today

History is not something that comes easy to me. I am the first to admit that I tend to shut down when I start hearing details and dates from the past. I am beginning to understand how history impacts what we do and why we do what we do in the field of higher education and student affairs today. Learning, for instance, about laws that forbid African Americans from learning to read and write and gaining perspective on major landmark cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, that determined that separate schools were not equal, offer insights on the impact privilege, power, and systems of oppression have had on the lives of people in the past. Practices of educational exclusion have been in place for many years and include factors such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, ableism, and socioeconomic status (Kupo, 2011). The Civil Rights movement of the 1960's marked the beginning of colleges and universities opening their doors to a more diverse student population, especially women and people of color. These were challenging times because student from diverse background were expected to assimilate into the mainstream White culture (Shuford, 2011). Even though there were laws and policies in place to protect the rights of all U.S. citizens, invisible systems of privilege, power, and oppression still remained strong. An unwelcoming and hostile campus culture for students from diverse backgrounds led to many campuses creating multicultural student services offices. Having an awareness of some of the events that led to the creation of multicultural student services is just one example of how history informs us of past struggles of diverse population and allows us an opportunity to acknowledge those who have faced and resisted oppression.

Conclusion

As a future student affairs practitioner, growing in the area of multicultural competence is important to me. According to Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller (2004), while multicultural competence is a separate core competency for student affairs professionals, it is imperative that multicultural competencies be integrated into each of the other core competencies: administrative and management, theory and translation, helping and interpersonal, ethical and legal, teaching and training, and assessment and evaluation. Having the awareness, knowledge, and skills to develop and grow as professionals in multicultural competencies will help us become positive role models for the students we serve.

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