

Personal Development Reflection #2

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The spring 2015 semester at Florida State University has been one for the history books. The amount of growth and development I experienced as a first-generation college student at The University of Texas empowered me to take a leap of faith and pursue a master's in higher education at Florida State University – one of the premiere institutions for higher learning for student affairs. I knew this would be a special semester with the course load we had assigned to us: Student Development Theories, Outcomes of Undergraduate Education, and Diversity. At last – we would have the opportunity to dig deeper as a cohort, read literature that will provide my classmates and I greater insight, and challenge each other to be vulnerable so we can truly gain a better understanding of one another. I looked forward to what the semester would hold.

In my initial personal development reflection paper, I spoke about the intersecting identities I carried – a topic area we spent a lot of time addressing this semester. Which identities become salient and take more space given the context of the environment? How do the identities I carry show up at different times? I talked about how I am a heterosexual, temporarily abled-bodied 24-year-old Pakistani male who grew up in a poor working class family. I mentioned that the first time I really thought about race, ethnicity, and religion would immediately coincide and follow the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. I spoke of the growth I experienced attending The University of Texas at Austin – where I became exposed to people with different thoughts, ideas, identities, and upbringings. This was an opportunity for me to become aware of my own identity and understand the level of privilege I had attending an institution of higher learning, despite holding marginalized identities and being a first-generation college student. Throughout the semester, we addressed topics ranging from social justice, building a framework for diversity, power, privilege, and oppression, and then went into the various topic areas and –isms: sexism,

racism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, religious oppression, nationalism, and access and equity.

Social justice is described as a process and a goal where “full and equal participation of all groups is required in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (Bell, 2007). As the semester progressed, I recall our classmates referring back to this definition. The process aspect was articulated and was fairly understood within our class; the goal, however, was a point of contention. Is there a goal and how do we get there? I recall the healthy dialogue our class engaged early in the semester – unfortunately, I do not believe we sufficiently addressed the topic again later and in the conclusion of the semester. In one of our earlier assignments we were tasked with reading the book “Why Aren’t We There Yet?” where the notion of self-awareness was introduced. The first step in being able to do the work we do in our field and understanding others is to first understand ourselves and our own identities. The basis of self-awareness stems from the fact that developing self-awareness yields to “balancing confidence so we can carry our difficult work that may challenge our core sense of self with the humility of knowing there is always more to learn” and improve in different ways (Ortiz & Patton, 2012). I will say that my own awareness about the identities I hold increased as the semester progressed. Seeing within myself empowered me to become vulnerable with my own experiences, recognize my flaws, and welcome the healthy conversations that transpired in and outside of the classroom in order to be exposed to different identities, cultures, and histories. One such experience I want to highlight is the intersectionality of the material we were learning in Diversity and Student Development Theories. After talking about racism, nationalism, and religious oppression – specifically the segment in class where one of the presenting groups challenged how challenging the lifestyle of

a Muslim student in college and reading about racial and ethnic identity development theories in our other class, I began to question my own development and ethnic awareness.

Kim's Asian American Identity Development Model is one that I will spend much of the reflection on. Although the basis of the research findings stem from experiences of Japanese-American women, I believe this model serves as the closest racial identity development model based on my racial and ethnic backgrounds. Evans et al. (2010) describe Kim's (2001) model as having "five conceptually distinct, sequential, and progressive stages" (p. 265). The text goes on to describe the stages as: ethnic awareness, white identification, awakening to social political consciousness, redirection to Asian American consciousness, and incorporation. Since I was born in Pakistan and immigrated to the United States when I was two years old, I did not have a strong identification with my racial or ethnic background – especially since I moved so frequently growing up. My immediate family unit was stronger when I was pre-teen and as such, I only knew that I was Pakistani living in the United States. As Kim would suggest, this is the point where I identified with how my family identified (p. 265). Once I started attending school and becoming exposed to other students and identities, I became less comfortable and confident with my Asian American identity – whether I realized it or not. It became evident to me I was different because of the color of my skin, the food I would bring for lunch, and the clothes I would wear early on. After going through a period of social struggles, I began to reject my Asian American identity. In fact, I began to normalize myself with my peers and the institution in order to feel accepted. This falls in line with Kim's second stage where the "desire to be accepted leads to the rejection of their Asian identity and internalization of white standards" (p. 266). I teetered between the second stage and third stage for much of my pre-college years, especially after experiencing September 11, 2001. This was a day that I became most aware of my identity as

being South Asian and realized the attitudinal and behavioral shifts from some of my classmates, instructors, members of the community, and especially the media. I started to have social political awareness and realized that my life would never be the same because of the color of my skin and the racial and ethnic background I embodied. And yet, I continued to tolerate the racist messages, laugh at jokes, and even join in on the “poking fun” because I wanted to fit in and feel included. I did not realize the extent of the system and racist social structure in place, but I knew if I wanted to be a part of the ‘in-group’ and feel safe, I would have to conform the norm.

Reflecting back on the years from my childhood until I graduated high school, I can definitively say that I did not reach Kim’s fourth stage of redirection to Asian American consciousness. Rather than having a sense of pride and affirming my racial and ethnic identity, I essentially rejected it and assimilated into the culture of the folks around me. I became involved and excelled in high school, having friends from all backgrounds. I would join in on the jokes and microaggress people with different identities and perpetuated stereotypes of people from South Asia. I did not re-realize my identity as a South Asian American until graduation my senior year. This realization fueled me into thinking about my racial and ethnic identity and propelled me into the fourth stage: redirection to Asian American consciousness. My time at The University of Texas at Austin definitely assisted in my exploration and re-acclimation to my identifying as an Asian American. As Evans et al. (2010) noted through Kim, this is when individuals “move beyond the oppressed group designation” and begin to “establish a sense of pride in whom they are” (p. 266). I surrounded myself with people who identified as South Asian for the first time in my life, joined the Pakistani Student Association, and embraced different cultures. Despite the experiences I had at UT-Austin, I have never reached the final stage of

Kim's model: incorporation. I am still learning about my racial and ethnic identity and will require more time and persistence for incorporation to truly be achieved.

The culminating project I spent a lot of time on this semester was related to nationalism – more specifically, my group and I focused on how people define being American. I read literature ranging from the internationalization of higher education (Ping, 1999) to recognizing that the American college student is ever-evolving, becoming increasingly non-White, and more complex (Munsch, 2011). I became empowered as I learned more about Jose Antonio Vargas' story, learned about the DACA and the DREAM Act as pieces of legislation that have a huge impact on undocumented people, and challenged my way of thinking based on preconceived notions I had on the role undocumented people have in the United States. What really alarmed me the most, however, was just how difficult it is for undocumented students to be able to graduate high school and go to college. Once they get to college, their challenges are far from complete. Depending on the institution type, the geographical location, and state-mandated policies, an undocumented student may not even have the opportunity of applying for college, receive financial aid, or have access to the resources and services that the common college student receives. In doing the citizenship test activity and providing context for our peers as to how difficult the process is for undocumented students, I hope we increased the base of knowledge and shifted any misconceptions folks had before our presentation. While immensely challenging to define nationalism and how to relate it back to the work we do as student affairs professionals, I believe folks left the class having a great dialogue and energized after engaging in the facilitation aspects of our presentation.

Reflecting back on the learning that took place this semester, I would be remiss to not mention the trip to the Black Archives at Florida A&M University and the conversations we had

with each full-time professional from FAMU as well. These were two highlights of the semester as I believe both instances provided key insight and real-world connection to what we had been reading and discussing in class all along. Furthermore, I thoroughly enjoyed the step-in, step-out activity that was facilitated at FAMU. There was a sense of cohesion and a level of vulnerability amongst the entire class that I had not previously seen. I only wish we had done an activity like that at the beginning of the semester so that we would have had to chance to engage in deeper conversation and build on the relationships we had just begun to form. After it is all said and done, I do believe people in our cohort are leaving the semester learning new knowledge and gaining a better perspective. If I am being honest, my fear is that there are folks in our program who merely are taking Diversity because it is a required course and really do not have any interest in engaging in the conversation or delving into the work that is to be done. If folks view this course and the literature, especially, as a mere requirement rather than a way of life, then I believe we will continue to have issues in institutions of higher learning for many years to come. It truly takes people who are willing to dig deeper, delve into the work, recognize their privileges and identities, and empathize in order to truly meet the students where they are at and create a positive change in our society. Whether or not we will ever get there is a rather moot point; the real question is what is going to happen over the next year in our program and how are people going to utilize the knowledge we have gained and shared and connect it to real life issues? As I lie here typing away this final reflection for the semester, I cannot help but think about the turmoil and destruction that is going on in Baltimore, Maryland. I cannot help but think about the police brutality and systematic and institutionalized racism deeply embedded within our society. I only pray one day people will begin to gain a better understanding of the struggles others face in our society, why people may act a certain way, and be able to tackle the real issues in society.

## References

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