**Cultural Identity - Part I**

**Introduction**

Adeyanju: Welcome all for another episode of Byte-Sized Brain. This is Dr. Ola Adeyanju, one of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry fellows at the University of Iowa, and I’m joined today by adult psychiatry resident Dr. Kevo Rivera. Culture is such a vital part of identity in terms of how we frame ourselves in relation to the world around us. Much could be said about culture. We will just be exploring a few core topics relating to cultural identity in two parts. We will talk about the basics of what culture means, challenges people face when they enter a new culture different from their own, and how having awareness of your cultural identity can be protective. Kevo, as we begin to explore this topic, can you start by explaining what we mean when we talk about “culture?”

**Defining Culture**

Rivera: Sure! And let me say first that it is wonderful to join you on the podcast today. This is such an important topic, and I am glad to discuss it with you today. Culture is one of those things that we all might be aware of, but we might not always recognize it or know how to describe it. It is like the air around us. For a long time, I thought of culture like it was an external force acting on me and influencing my worldview and the decisions I made. But some experts in psychiatry who are especially interested in understanding how mental health relates to culture define it more like a “process.”

So first we must acknowledge that we all exist as individuals but also as parts of a whole, whether that be our family, our neighborhood, our congregation, or our nation. The list goes on. Culture, then, is the process through which we as individuals assign meaning to our own experience. We draw from the knowledge, the values, and the practices of all the social groups we are a part of. We also take into account our backgrounds, our past experiences, our assumptions, and our ideals. All these things are shaped by our social context which ultimately influence our perspective. So, with this definition, culture ends up looking less like a single external force that shapes us. Instead, culture ends up being the whole sum of a number of different and dynamic influences that help us make meaning of our experiences as we live through them.

This is universal. Culture does not just apply to those who come from a different background from us. For example, here in Iowa City, someone who grew up in Maquoketa can be carrying as many cultural influences as someone who moved here from, say, Buenos Aires. Those two people might encounter a similar major life event like a graduation, or a wedding, or an illness. Perhaps because of their different sets of cultural influences, they might have very different experiences of those events. Those events then might end up meaning slightly different things to each of them. And it is not just birthplace that brings that process of meaning-making along. It is family makeup, it is childhood friends and activities, it is religious beliefs, it is sexual orientation and gender identity, and it is profession.

As you can see, there are many different ideas to consider when we talk about “culture.” As individuals, our own cultural processes can evolve as we progress through life. For example, when my parents immigrated here from the Philippines and as they grew roots and a family here, they had to adapt to a whole set of new cultural influences. Ola, I know you’re pretty interested in this stuff. Could you say more?

**Acculturation**

Adeyanju: Of course. What you are describing is called “acculturation.” Simply put, it is how individuals adjust to a new cultural landscape. People make sense of the process of acculturation in different ways. One way to view that process, as described by psychologist John Berry, is that there are four strategies to adapt to a new culture: assimilation, separation, marginalization, or integration.

An individual coming from a different community can conform to the community they are stepping into or assimilate. However, there are other approaches to this dilemma. An individual can hold on dear to their own culture and step back from the majority culture, this is called separation. An individual can lose sense of their connection with both their home culture and the majority culture or marginalization. Research suggests that marginalization rarely occurs. The last strategy is integration which is the coming together of both an individual’s home culture and the surrounding majority culture. It sounds simple but it is complex and challenging partly because as individuals we are going through this in the context of a changing environment with others who are going through their own experience. While it may sound as if people can pick their own response, there are often external pressures that can shape this process.

This process can be different for children who are multiracial and can be felt in different ways across different generations. You mentioned your parents immigrated from the Philippines; my family immigrated from Nigeria. As immigrants, there are certain things that we may have in common but there are also differences. My experience as a Nigerian American may be different even from the experience of my brothers. A 1995 study of Mexican-origin youths found that children even in the same family may reach a different understanding of their cultural identity.

It is also possible for there to be differences across generations between parents and their children. Parents likely have a sense of their own identity prior to moving to a new country and may face unique challenges in adapting to their host country. They may have challenges with language, understanding their host customs, or have to take on different jobs from what they were trained in their native country. My mother once told me that when she was pregnant with me in October a group of kids came to our apartment with a bag of candy. When she opened the door, she was surprised but she took a piece of candy and thanked them. My mom has of course since learned about the American traditions surrounding Halloween and other American customs and in turn tried to educate my brothers and I regarding Nigerian customs. Everyone has a different experience and different challenges when it comes to adapting to a new culture.

When we talk about identity in general, it may help to also think of Erik Erikson and his stages of development. An interesting fact is that his experiences as a German American and observations of immigrants and the process of becoming an American informed his views on development. He noted that teens go through a period of identity and role confusion. They may separate themselves from their parents and try to form closer bonds with their peers. Teenagers may express embarrassment for their families’ cultural traditions which can be hard for parents.

Rivera:That is interesting to note. One thing that I see quite often is that people from minority communities express both positive and negative aspects of having a distinct cultural background. Would you be able to give some examples for how cultural influences can impact young people in particular?

**How culture can be protective and a challenge**

Adeyanju: It is hard to have these conversations about how things are currently without an understanding of history. Most of our modern Western society is built on the history of colonialism with the belief that certain races or cultural groups were less than and Western Christian beliefs and values were superior. Because of those beliefs, generations of people became separated from key aspects of their culture including language, religious beliefs, and cultural practices. There was this false belief that the only way a person could be successful would be to fully adapt to what was valued by Western society at large.

Historically in the US, professionals encouraged immigrant parents against using their native language with their children. Now we know that it is important to maintain use of a native language so that children may have access to family and community resources that may serve as protective factors for them.

There is also this lingering belief that bi-racial children are less well adjusted. However, research studies that adjusted for factors such as racial discrimination have found there is no difference for biracial or multiracial children in terms of self-esteem. It can serve as a strength for some to identify with their minority culture in relation to the majority culture. This may be a way to cope with the stress of systemic racism and discrimination.

Adolescents may find it confusing as they develop and explore their identity in relation to their peers and society at large. It is a natural process and there are many different paths individuals can take but those who have realistic exposures to their cultural background are less influenced by negative stereotypes.

Adeyanju:Kevo, you mentioned earlier that each of us may have a number of cultural influences. It seems important that people value those cultural inputs especially if they are a part of a number of minoritized communities.

**Intersectionality**

Rivera: Oh absolutely! You mentioned the word “stress” earlier regarding systemic inequities. One way to understand psychological stress is any experience during which someone feels detached or separated from what helps them feel secure and protected. Many minoritized or underrepresented people find solace and comfort in being surrounded by people who either look like them or share the same cultural influences. This helps to foster what’s known as a safe space. Now what happens when you take someone who doesn’t fit into our American society, which as you mentioned, has been designed to uphold a certain cultural standard? They might not find that sense of being in a safe space. So for example, a Latinx person in a majority white community might feel a lack of belonging or commonality, which could induce a certain amount of stress. Depending on a number of factors, that stress might be tolerable or intolerable, but that stress of being separated from what’s familiar exists. Now consider what happens when that person comes from an intersection of multiple disadvantaged cultural variables? Say it’s a Latina woman, or a disabled Latina woman, or a disabled Latina transgender woman. You and I would agree, I’m sure, that this person should have every right to thrive in our society, but we also know that, by nature of this person’s cultural identity, [it would be hard] for her to find a community that can really provide that opportunity to feel connected and to flourish.

This all hints at the concept of intersectionality, where certain groups and individuals who represent multiple disadvantaged social categorizations, experience layers of stress. It’s important for us to discuss intersectionality when we talk about culture, because for the minoritized or marginalized person, this type of experience is more likely to be the rule than the exception. On the other hand, we can also see the potential that a person with numerous minority cultural influences can confer multiple layers of strength as well, so long as that person is given the opportunity to thrive.

Adeyanju: Those are all important points. I wish our society today could see all those different aspects of a person as unique traits. Links and intersections should be areas of strength and not looked at as a weakness.

Let us take a break before we talk more about how we can apply some of these concepts to help ourselves and our kids. We encourage our listeners to join us for part 2 of this conversation. Thanks for joining us on Byte-Sized Brain! Thanks, Kevo!

Rivera:Thanks Ola!