Final Project: Culture Immersion

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Identification and Description of Population

As I read through the directions of this project, I thought about the many different cultures we learned about in this course. I examined each culture closely, looking for one I felt the most separated from personally; I wanted to immerse myself in a culture that would help me grow through the experience. Before making a decision, I considered closely my own upbringing, assumptions, opinions and beliefs. That introspection helped me decide that the very broad Asian culture is of the most immediate interest to me at this point in my life. The reasons for this are many.

Interest. First, the Asian culture is one with which I lack a personal connection. Although I was raised in an urban area, where one would assume exposure to various cultures was plentiful, this was not the case with regard to the Asian population. In 2010, Asians accounted for only 2.9% of the population in Dallas, Texas (United States Census Bureau, 2012); I can only imagine how much smaller that representation was in the 1980s. While my family had no prejudices or judgments about Asian people, this was just not a culture we had interaction with in any purposeful way. Any information I gained about this culture came from school, my family’s beliefs, opinions and assumptions and stereotypes of the community. This led me to become aware of a few common qualities between our cultures, like the importance of family and respect of elders.

Another major factor in deciding to immerse into the Asian culture was the population of the school where I currently teach. A large number of Asian students attend the school and are in my class, and I thought this project could help me gain a better perspective on their influences.

Finally, although the Asian American population is small “compared to other minority groups (such as African Americans and Hispanic Americans), they represent a rapidly growing, diverse culture in America” (Baruth & Manning, 2012, p. 159). To that end, learning more about
the traditions and worldview of this (and eventually other) culture(s) will enable me to provide the best possible care for the students I will serve in the future as a professional school counselor.

**Differences.** I am of European American descent; the differences between my culture and the Asian American culture are vast. The most obvious are our appearances and how we speak. Asian Americans are typically slighter in frame and stature, while European Americans tend to grow taller and heftier. The average height of an Asian male is 5’6”, whereas the European American male is 5’10”, which seems insignificant, but is really quite a big difference. Other outward differences include the color of hair (Asian Americans typically have black hair; European Americans’ hair shades run the gamut from white-blonde to dark black) and facial features: Asian faces are generally wider through the forehead than Caucasian faces, which are more round; Asian eyes are more slanted and slightly narrower than Caucasian eyes, which are rounder; Asian faces generally have shorter flatter chins, and Caucasian faces project longer and sharper chin lines (Michaelson, n.d.). Of course, these are generalizations and vary considerably, but still the differences in physical characteristics between the two populations are notable.

Spoken languages present another obvious difference when comparing Asians to Americans. A wide variety of languages (with hundreds of different dialects) are spoken throughout the many Asian countries. The dominant language spoken among European Americans (even beyond the borders of North America) is English.

Some of the not so obvious differences would be the variety of religions and the influence of collectivism on families. It used to be that Communist governments, of which Asian countries typically fall under, suppressed the idea of religious freedom. This meant that the people in that culture would have to conform to the religion practiced in their particular geographic location. However, in recent years, the Chinese government has become more
tolerant of religious expression, and more Asians are able to explore a variety of traditions and religions. Chief among those are Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Baha’i Faith and Christianity. In contrast, Americans may practice any one of the global religions anywhere they please; our Constitution gives us this unalienable right.

The concept of family-first, or collectivism, among Asians plays a significant role in promoting and maintaining cohesiveness and stability in the family. This cultural obligation places the family’s needs above one’s personal needs, which stands in stark contrast with Western individualistic values. Despite some changes in values and the shifting trend toward increasing individualism in the Asian community, the concepts of family loyalty, respect and obligation, and harmony and group cooperation still play significant roles in determining family and individual behavior (Baruth & Manning, 2012, p. 169).

Observations

Observation One. For my first observation activity, I chose to attend a celebration called Holidays in Asia at the Asia Society Texas Center (ASTC). The ASTC is located in the heart of the Houston Museum District. The organization’s building is architecturally beautiful and reflects an Asian culture; clean lines, details of glass, metal and rich, dark woods, and open spaces are maintained throughout the structure. With such extreme features, some may consider the building to be cold and uninviting, but I believe it highlighted the warmth that came from the people and activity inside its four walls. Immediately upon entering the event, I felt the presence of a close-knit community, which was obvious by the smiling faces and welcoming energy.

For this event, members of ASTC performed a variety of different rituals celebrated during the holidays in Asia. First was the Chinese Lion Dance. It is a form of traditional dance in Chinese culture, where performers mimic a lion’s movements while wearing a lion’s costume.
The performance was historic, beautiful and entertaining all at the same time. The lion costumes were very intricate and detailed. The lion’s eyes opened and closed, and the ears wagged making the lion look very real. Two dancers inside each lion moved their costume-props around the stage and through the audience. The main lion, perceived to be a male, danced as he climbed up and over a ladder on the stage. It’s clear that this performance took practice and skill to master. On the other side of the ladder (the new year), the lion was fed some lettuce (money) and a New Year red envelope. The lion spit out the greens, but kept the red envelope symbolizing good luck. The Lion Dance is believed to bring good luck and fortune to businesses; the dance group is rewarded with their own red envelopes, which are usually filled with money.

Later, ASTC members performed in a Vietnamese New Year Skit. The skit was not at all what I expected. While American skits are more of a parody or comedic performance of sorts, this was a beautiful display of Vietnamese cultures and styles. Traditional clothing was worn by the women and men who participated in the catwalk-type dance. The women entered the stage, and then their male partners met them in the middle. The couples then walked together down the middle of the stage, modeling their chosen attire. The beautifully designed gowns worn by the women were of traditional Asian flair, flowing with many different colors. The group then performed a traditional dance that might be seen during the New Year celebration to old-style Vietnamese music. The interaction between the couples on stage demonstrated the strong respect men in that culture have for their women. To end the presentation, one of the young women spoke about the importance of Vietnamese traditions and the group’s desire to share their history and rituals with others.

Observation Two. My second immersion observation, also at the ASTC in Houston, allowed for a more up close and personal interaction with people in the Asian community: Family Day.
The theme of the event mimicked ASTC’s earlier celebration of holidays in Asia, but proved to be more hands on with various activities in which visitors of all ages could participate. Following are some details of the different events I was able to experience firsthand:

Kamishibai is a form of storytelling that originated in Japanese Buddhist temples and literally means “paper drama”. Storytellers would travel from village to village, sharing stories by using a set of illustrated boards inserted into a small, wooden stage and replaced one by one as the story was told. This was something I’d never seen before or even knew existed. Each picture of the Kamishibai story was intricately and beautifully drawn, and the storytellers were engaging and entertaining in their delivery.

I also learned about Nengajo, which are postcards sent out as a greeting for the New Year. The presenters at this activity described Nengajo as a means of expressing gratitude for or maintaining faraway friendships.

Vietnamese New Year red envelopes were also on display. These special gifts are usually presented at social and family gatherings, such as weddings or on holidays like the Chinese New Year, which is also celebrated in Vietnam and other countries with large Chinese populations. The red color of the envelope symbolizes good luck and is supposed to ward off evil spirits.

Beautiful Vietnamese full moon lanterns were also on show. The lanterns are used during the Lantern Festival, which marks the end of the Chinese New Year celebration. I was told that lanterns are often released into the night sky during the festival as symbol of letting go of the past and looking forward to what will come in the New Year.

Colorful Filipino Christmas Parols were also displayed. I learned about the history of the parol as I made one for my classroom. According to the Society member helping me, the parol has become an iconic symbol of the Filipino Christmas and is as important to Filipinos as the
Christmas tree is to Western cultures. This was confirmed when, after seeing the handmade parol in my classroom, one of my Filipino students exclaimed with joy, “We have these [parols] in our house. It is so important to my family.” I cannot even begin to describe the size of her smile as she told me this. I can only assume that joy came from the connection she felt between her home life and school life. That, of course, made me smile.

**Reflection of Observations.** The two events I attended at the ASTC amounted to a wonderful opportunity to directly experience the cultures of various Asian countries. Although I felt like I stood out in the crowd as a Westerner, everyone was open and inviting. This initial acceptance helped me to shed any insecurity I had about participating in the activities. All were eager to share with me and not at all threatened or annoyed by an outsider’s presence. Throughout these observations, I found myself to be engaged and hanging on to every detail.

In witnessing the traditions and history of the Asian cultures firsthand, I saw a group of people who are immensely proud of their history. In a world that says we must conform to the latest trends, it was heartwarming to see that Asian Americans are committed to their heritage. Overall, I believe my immersion experiences have already made me a better teacher and will one day contribute to my success as a professional school counselor one day.

**Immersion Dialogue**

I chose to interview Powana Sananikone Hopson for my immersion dialogue. She is a coworker whose family is from Thailand; she was born in the United States. I thought Mrs. Hopson would be the perfect person for this part of the project due to her connection with the Asian culture.

**Atmosphere.** Our conversation took place in the comfortable setting of Mrs. Hopson’s classroom. I explained the details of the project and why I chose the Asian culture for immersion. She agreed that having actual experiences in the culture would allow me to be a more well-
rounded professional school counselor. Mrs. Hopson and I were both very comfortable in our dialogue; she seemed to appreciate my desire to learn more and truly opened up to me. As we discussed my questions, she used the internet to show me pictures and videos of her childhood and the different rituals she had been taught.

**Preconceived notions.** While I did not grow up with much exposure to the Asian community, I have built many friendships with Asians as an adult. Because of this, I had confidence that my immersion dialogue would go well and was hopeful I would get to experience Asian life from a personal perspective.

**Future interactions.** This dialogue has confirmed for me how kind the Asian community can be. Having had such positive experiences on all parts of this project will help me to feel open and comfortable with others from the Asian culture in the future. I now know that Asians are ready and willing to share their worldviews with others.

**Positive experience.** This entire project has been very insightful and truly eye-opening for me. I feel like I have learned about and experienced thoughtful traditions of a population with whom I had very little interactions with before. I’m confident this new perspective will help me relate better with the students I teach now, as well as those I’ll serve in the future as a professional school counselor.

**Similarities.** My experiences among the first two observations and the immersion dialogue were similar in many ways. First, everyone whom I shared the details of this project with during my encounters has been pleased to hear about the assignment and open to sharing with me about their background. At ATSC, although I was a stranger among friends, I felt like I belonged to a tight-knit community by the end of my second observation. With the dialogue, I have known Mrs. Hopson for many years, but never really taken time to learn about her past or what is
important and special about her culture. Our dialogue took our friendship to a new level, I believe. I think it made her feel special to share with me, and she seemed excited and amused by my curiosity. She even had to laugh at me a few times when I showed my ignorance about the wide variety of Asian cultures (P. Hopson, personal communication, December 14, 2012).

No matter whom I talked to or interacted with, all had the same sense a pride in their history and a strong desire for others to understand its significance. For these reasons, I am glad I chose to immerse myself in the Asian culture.

**Reaction**

What I learned from this experience is that while some stereotypes hold true, there are many layers to the Asian American culture. The observations at the Asia Society Texas Center helped me in understanding the traditions of the community, where the dialogue with my colleague gave me insight on family dynamics. I appreciate the new awareness I have, but also realize there’s so much more to learn and experience in the Asian culture. For instance, although I touched on the influence of the patriarchal relationship in my dialogue, I’d like to have a better understanding of how this dynamic impacts Asian American adolescents today. After all,

Children [in the Asian community] are encouraged to remain dependent for as long as possible within the family: expectations of self-care and participation in household chores are delayed, whereas unquestioning obedience to parents is presumed. Hierarchy in Asian American families is based on roles, positions, and status. The father holds the highest position. The mother is expected to defer to her husband, to his parents, and to her oldest son when he reaches adulthood. However, she is also expected to ‘meddle’ in her son’s marriage, that is, to train his wife how to live out her role (Berg & Jaya, 1993; as cited in Kane, 1998, p. 96).
As a professional school counselor, I imagine myself serving and providing counsel to Asian American students who have been acculturated to Western ways. I’m curious to know how such old-world ideals influence or challenge their contemporary thinking. And what conversations or problems does that create for these students at home?

Baruth & Manning (2012) suggest that counselors have a responsibility to “become culturally sensitive individuals with new knowledge and skills and to reorganize old knowledge that no longer applies to current situations. Such a change also requires counselors to use counseling interventions that reflect clients’ differences and worldviews rather than counseling techniques thought to be effective for all people” (p. 48).

I’m also curious to find out how Asian Americans deal with such matters as conflict, disappointment and failure. Traditionally, in Asian cultures, these issues are not openly discussed or debated. Often, “parents emphasize the children’s obligation to the family and their responsibility to meet family expectations. If a child acts contrary to the family’s wishes, the child is considered selfish, inconsiderate, and ungrateful. Aberrant behavior is usually hidden from outsiders and is handled within the family” (Baruth & Manning, 2012, p. 162). This is definitely still a foreign concept to me, someone raised to speak openly and honestly about my mistakes or bad choices.

These are just some of the things I realize I still have to learn about the Asian culture. Perhaps volunteering at an Asian-centered medical center or outreach community will allow me to experience a different, grittier aspect of the community than the celebratory atmosphere at the ASTC. While that was fun and engaging, I think there’s more to learn about how I can better serve Asian students facing real-life issues.
All in all, this has been a memorable and meaningful experience; one I imagine will have great influence on me as I work to become a professional school counselor. In fact, I have set a personal goal to seek out similar immersion activities in the other cultures I have limited connection with. After all, “formal preparation and firsthand experiences with people of differing cultural background are essential for multicultural counseling to be effective” (Baruth & Manning, 2012, p. 45).

Glogster
The creation process of the Glogster was interesting, to say the least. I had never heard nor used Glogster before, so I spent a few hours just playing around with the program throughout the past few weeks. While it was fairly simple to maneuver through, I felt like some aspects of the program still need work. For instance, figuring out how to upload pictures was easy, but very time consuming for them to load. I also felt like the text box and frame options were very limited both in design and application. Regardless, I’m proud of what I was able to create, and I hope you can see from my work that the Asian culture has had a great influence over me.

In my Glogster, you’ll see that I separated the two observations: Holidays in Asia is the top half of the page; Family Day at ATSC is the bottom half. Activities I detailed in this paper are also detailed through photo images and brief descriptions where needed: Chinese Lion Dance, Vietnamese New Year Skit, Kamishibai, Nengajo, Vietnamese Red Envelopes and Filipino Christmas Parols. Traditional Japanese music can be enjoyed while viewing my Glogster; simply push the play button pinned to the picture of the fountain. This link will take you to my project: http://www.glogster.com/ashleydixonburns99/multicultural-final-cndv-5320/g-6l37l95n48jlvmten6f6ra0
References


