

Cultural Autobiography

An exercise to explore “you”, your ability to understand other cultures, and your ways of understanding the world around you

This exercise was modified from an exercise developed by Alicia Chavez, PhD, Educational Leadership and Policy, University of New Mexico. It has since been published in Chávez and Longerbeam (2016), Teaching Across Cultural Strengths: A guide to balancing integrated and individuated cultural frameworks in college teaching (Stylus Publishing LLC). The instructors appreciate her willingness to share this project and assist in running the exercise. Thanks Alicia!!!!

During this first day of the workshop, we will be working with tools and concepts to help you explore yourself and understand how your cultural background affects your approach to teaching and research. This kind of introspective analysis is often difficult, and you may find yourself staring at the paper, not knowing how to proceed. We will do our best to help you move forward into this self-analysis. The short time we have will only allow us to begin this process, and view this part of the workshop as offering tools to help you continue this process after you leave this workshop.

Exercise Explanation

We each have many **identities** including those we were **born as** such as gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, body type and those we were **born into and learn** such as culture, religion or spirituality, socioeconomic class, nationality, the norms of our families, etc. Each of our identities influences who we are and how we experience, interpret, and do everything. Our identities can also affect how we are interpreted and treated.

The more we understand and are confident in our own identities, the better we can learn to navigate the rigors of the academic career, draw from our own strengths as teachers and researchers, understand and improve from our limitations, as well as negotiate and maintain relationships with others.

One of the major contributing factors to your ultimate identity is the **culture** in which you were raised. This affects your ways of thinking and understanding the world around you. This exercise will assist you to apply a self-reflective process to explore how your culture affects your perception of the world around you and how it affects you in your role as a professor (or other academic position). Through this exploration you will gain deeper understandings of how some of your values/traits from your culture play out in the way you experience, interpret, and do things in both the classroom and in your research. You may also find that this provides a means to help you understand others from different cultures.

Each of our identities has within it an “identity culture” made up of **values, assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors**. Culture, being one of your identities, has these concepts associated with it. By reflecting deeply and analyzing your cultural background, you can get a better sense of how personal values/traits originating in your culture manifest in your daily life. In addition, this type of self-analysis and awareness offers insights, empathy, and greater effectiveness for living, learning, and working with others from similar and different cultures and backgrounds.

Autobiographical writing is a kind of storytelling or making sense of things through narrative. This cultural autobiography should be a **narrative & interpretation** about your life from within this identity culture. **Be sure to go deep!** You are encouraged to utilize whatever metaphors, artifacts such as photos, themes, or other creative means to explore your cultural identity, but be sure to stay focused on specifically describing and interpreting elements of your **culture** and how these manifest in **your life** as a professor or other academic field.

Identity Autobiography Assignment developed by Alicia Fedelina Chávez, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Educational Leadership & Policy, University of New Mexico

as well as in your approaches to understanding the natural world around you.

Your cultural autobiography will be kept confidential though you may be asked to discuss what you have learned about yourself from doing this autobiography in a discussion.

Exercise Components

For this exercise, evaluate the culture that you were raised in. Analyze, illustrate, and process personal values/traits originating in this culture, how each manifests in your daily life, how you believe it will manifest in your teaching, research, and in how you explore and understand the natural world (e.g., science).

Identity and cultural self-analysis can be uncomfortable (I can say that from experience!), even for those of you who are naturally reflective in nature. Discomfort is to some extent almost always present in deep learning experiences and is helpful to our growth and development as human beings and professionals. So, embrace the discomfort if you are feeling that as you go through this exercise.

- **Cultural Self Analysis Tools and Activities** – over the next couple of hours, we will facilitate several activities to assist you in getting started on this exercise.

Eventually, you may want to continue this activity and develop an essay that is your cultural autobiography. We strongly recommend doing this. In the near future, a book will be released by Longerbeam and Chávez that contains several cultural autobiographies written by faculty from a variety of higher education settings (Gary's will be included in this compilation). Watch for this! The working title is: *Going Inward: The Role of Cultural Introspection in College Teaching*.

For a fuller, more detailed discussion of writing a culture and teaching autobiography, we recommend that you read and work through the exercise in Chávez and Longerbeam (2016), Appendix A. This has more prompts and details to help in the writing.

Autobiographical Steps of Analysis

Introduction

- Describe your cultural identity in general and what you know about your cultural origins, history, family names, and generational journeys. Tell a story, in words or drawings, to capture an overall sense or spirit of the cultures in which you were raised, even if these cultures were not overtly discussed as culture within your family or community. This culture **MUST** be one that you were born into and have lived within for all or most of your life. We will explore how culture is just one of many identities you have, and will use the "Identities of the Self" Worksheet later in this document to do this exploration. Identities can be divided into generally two categories:
 - **Born as** – i.e. gender, sexuality, ethnicity/race, ability/disability
 - **Born into and learned (prior to age 5 or so)** – i.e. **culture**, family size/type, socioeconomic class, religion or spirituality, nationality, geographic region, or circumstance such as rural or urban upbringing etc. This must be something you've lived with all or most of your life.

Identify, Describe, and Illustrate 3-5 major values or traits originating in your culture. You probably defined some of these values or traits in the "introduction" portion, above. If not, think about some values or traits that

come out of your culture. We'll work with these next.

NOTE: for the following components of this exercise, feel free to integrate all components around each value/trait of your culture (a non-linear approach) OR use the step-by-step approach shown here.

- If you would find it helpful, we will explore using the “Identity Values/Traits Worksheet” (at the end of this document) to **analyze each of 3 major values/traits** that originate in your culture (we will use this in an activity during the workshop). You could instead use metaphors or other symbols to embody each value or theme.
- For EACH value/trait from your chosen identity:
 - First, **describe each value or trait** -- tell stories or give examples to illustrate how/why this value/trait is important to you and how it manifests in your behavior/life.
 - if you were taught to take responsibility for others' well-being as an **oldest sibling** this might mean that you often took care of younger siblings.
 - if you were taught in your **culture** to see how things are connected, this might mean that you work hard to stay connected to immediate and extended family, friends, tribe, community etc., or you may find that you need to stay connected to your research or teaching community.
 - if you were taught that individuals of your **gender** take care of themselves so as not to burden others, you might be very resourceful in figuring things out.
 - Second, **write about assumptions and beliefs** that are behind this value and their meaning for you?
 - If you come from a culture that interprets most things from a shared or collective (rather than individual) perspective, then working together for the greater good is likely an underlying assumption beneath some of your values, behaviors and beliefs. If you come from a culture or cultures that highly value individuality, then self-reliance so as not to be a burden on others is a probable underlying assumption beneath many of your values, behaviors and beliefs.
 - Third, **reflect and write about how this value/trait might show up** while you are teaching and how you evaluate the world around you. Focus this on how each of these values/traits can be a **strength** for your success in teaching or research as well as how it might be a **limitation**. By understanding both, you can develop strategies both to draw from your strengths and resist or minimize any limitations. For example:
 - if you were taught to take responsibility for others' well-being as an **oldest sibling** this might mean that you reach out to students in your classes or colleagues to offer assistance and support or choose a job that allows you to help and serve others which makes you feel confident and strong. This might also sometimes be stressful for you and take time away from other important things in your life.
 - if you were taught in your **culture** to see how things are connected, you might naturally teach using examples, case studies, stories, or other hands-on activities first and then draw out theory and concepts from there. This could also mean that you struggled in classes where instructors focus only on abstract theory or concepts and might have benefited from tutoring or studying with other students so you could discuss material.

- if you were taught that individuals of your **gender** take care of themselves so as not to burden others, you might be very resourceful in figuring out the teaching approaches, etc. This could also mean that you are hesitant to reach out for needed help or you may expect students to work individually.
- Third, reflect on ways these **3-5 values/traits might affect the way you interpret and work with others** such as other faculty, students, and staff on campus. Focus especially on how these specific values might influence how you view/judge/interpret those with **different** values than yours. Take this one step further and consider what you might learn from those with different values/traits than yours? Finally, how might you learn to work effectively with/learn from/be friends with those having different values/traits than yours? For example:
 - if you were taught to take responsibility for others' well-being as an **oldest sibling** how might this influence your interpretation of those who have not specifically been taught to take responsibility for others?
 - What might you learn from this person?
 - How might you work effectively with this person?
 - if you were taught in your **culture** to see how things are connected, how might you interpret those who find it natural to study or teach things in separate parts?
 - What might you learn from this person?
 - How might you work effectively with this person?
 - if you were taught that individuals of your **gender** take care of themselves so as not to burden others, how might you interpret those who were taught that people should take care of each other and ask for assistance when needed?
 - What might you learn from this person?
 - How might you work effectively with this person?

Summary - Identity and Succeeding in College and approaches to understanding the natural world

To summarize your essay, discuss some of the ways understanding this identity in yourself can be helpful to your success in college and beyond and how this identity affects how you think about the world in a 'scientific' manner.

Creative Enhancement

You are encouraged to enhance your identity autobiography with metaphor, photos, poetry, imagery, visual representations such as models or flowcharts etc.