
Cultural Identity of an Indonesian Immigrant

One can become acculturated to the value, belief, norms, or even culture that they were not born into because culture is learned. I was born and raised in Indonesia until I was 17 years old. I considered myself as a Southeast Asian woman who is a mix of a dominant ethnic group and co-culture ethnic group in Indonesia, Javanese and Sundanese, and grew up as a Muslim. There are many aspects of life that my family has taught me.

I was taught to embrace:

- family;
- history of cultural background;
- religion ;
- group thinking/collectivism;
- uncertainty avoidance;
- power distance;
- high context orientation;
- activity orientation;
- time orientation.

These aspects of life are the most important elements of my culture. However, these characteristics are slightly changed since I migrated to the United States and experienced life throughout young adulthood. The changes I encountered have influenced who I am today as an individual and have also changed my belief, point of view and values of life.

Family

I have been taught that financially I can always depend on my extended family in any conditions and that they are always there for you, no matter where you are and no matter what conditions you are in. This means that I should never be ashamed asking for help from a family member and must follow their advice at any given time. Thus I always think of my family whenever I do things. I always think that my main goal is to make my parents, grandparents, aunts, uncle and cousins happy.

This characteristic is conflicting with the U.S. culture where a nuclear family style is observed. The nuclear family has “less emphasis on obedience” and the ability to explore something new without thinking of other family members embrace. These two conflicting ideology have shaped my decision-making. Besides thinking about family members, the first thing I would do is to think

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about myself. This action gives me more opportunity to explore what makes me happy and avoid focusing on what makes others happy.

History of cultural background

Indonesian. That is what I said when someone asked me who I am and what nationality am I from. Every now and then I wear my traditional garment/clothing to show that I am Indonesian. Cooking or bringing Indonesian food is also another way to show people that I am Indonesian. Because of its geographic location, Indonesia is famous for its spices as well as its exotic natural resources. Indonesian ancestors have known to use fresh spices, tropical fruits and vegetables to cure diseases as well as maintain healthy body, mind and spirit.

Our ancestor believe that these natural resources are much more effective in giving nutrients our body needs for its durability and best in curing diseases. Therefore consuming fresh fruits, herbal, or other alternative medicine is preferred. I have never realized the importance of these resources until I came to U.S. People in Seattle, WA where I live to embrace the idea of healthy living while utilizing holistic medicine to cure diseases. This finding has got me excited to pursue a nutrition degree and has made me more conscious of what I consume.

Another history that plays part in creating my psyche today was an Indonesian heroin name Kartini. She introduced Indonesia to feminism in a midst of masculinity. Indonesia declared a national holiday in the name of Kartini to remind us of her work as a feminist who helped the liberation of women. Because of Kartini, women in Indonesia have equal opportunity as man. The idea of feminism has been engrain in my daily activities. I have been becoming more self-reliant and never depend on a man to do anything. I have showed people that I can lift or carry furniture, fix electrical issues, plumbing, work on cars, do woodworking, etc.

Religion

I believe I am on the planet Earth because my ancestors have taught us that we live on the planet called earth. This knowledge has been passed down while science and technology have supported the statement. I grew up as a Muslim, the Islamic teaching has been embedded into my daily activities. The teaching of Islam is about “a complete way of life”. I have always been told that we have to always be aware of our action and show our best behavior in any kind of live setting such as “private, social, economic, ethical, political, and spiritual.” We are to behave in good manner in any circumstances from eating to interacting with animals. Thus, my ultimate purpose in life is to experience life through interaction with living and non-living things, to experience the nature and to coexist with each other.

Group thinking/collectivism

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My family has taught me the sense of togetherness. Because of the collectivist background, the importance of being together and having a family whether they are a friend or stranger are one of the important elements of life. There is a proverb in regard to this matter, "We stick together through thick and thin". I live by this proverb to maintain my relationship with family and friends because without them I can never succeed. I also believe that being in a bigger group is much more fun than being by yourself and that we can finish things a lot faster. I always treat friends like family members and I always told them that if they ever need help they can always depend on me and vice versa. This characteristic is much more common in a culture that embraces collectivism.

People who are raised in a collectivist matter expect to depend on each other and to be part of their family, thus I always expect people to treat me as a part of their family. When I came to the United States, I came across conflicting ideology. People tend to be individualistic and cling onto the idea of being independent. They respect the idea of self-reliant and that to depend on someone implies weakness. As an adult who has observed individualism and collectivism, I can consider myself a hybrid. Since I believe there are good and bad things in all aspect of live, being individualistic and collectivist are the best characteristic. I strongly belief that sometimes we need time for ourselves to retrospect and do things on our own, but sometimes things are better to be shared whether it be food, experience, or knowledge.

Uncertainty avoidance

As a young girl, my parents taught me to be open minded and flexible of accepting differences. This low uncertainty avoidance value has carried onto my current young adulthood. I am aware of my surrounding and am tolerant to changes in any circumstances. For instance, I believe that unforeseen occurrence always happens in any given time, thus, it is acceptable for someone to show up a little later than they expected to. Another example is when a friend of mine and I have planned for a night out in town. She called one hour prior to meet, told me that she had to help her friend, won't be able to make it out and she apologize for cancelling the plan. My reaction was to wish her luck and accept her apology.

Power distance

I embrace low power distance because I believe that everyone is equal and there shouldn't be differences in social status. For instance, it is normal for middle class Indonesian to have a live-in driver, housekeepers, gardener, nanny, etc. They sometimes treat their employee unequally because of their social status. I also noticed that people who hire these workers have no interest in getting to know the person they work with, even though they stay on their premise. This action did not fit my personality because I live by the proverb "Treat others as you wish to

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be treated”.

How can I expect better treatment from others than I give them? It is only fair to expect the same treatment from others as I give them. Of course I want to be treated well therefore I see it necessary to treat others well. This is a rule that everyone learns as a child, but many have forgotten as they have gotten older. Living by this rule allows us to share differences and is a way to avoid prejudice with people of different social status, thus, I have always befriended anyone I met without any judgment.

High context orientation

I have always been a high context type of person. It is because my cultural background taught me the importance of indirect communication such as silence. Thus, the statement of “silence is golden” has been managing my interaction in any social settings. When I come across conflict with someone, I tend to take a step back and be in silence for a while to give myself the time to think and analyze. It can take some time for me to be ready to discuss the problem or (most of the time) I tend to forget if there was a problem in the first place.

Activity orientation

Being-in-doing orientation is an important aspect of my life. This orientation allows me to expand in all directions. I find myself exercising activity orientation by always being open minded and willing to change. This allows me to step out of my comfort zone and explore new areas of life. Often people remain in their comfort zone and are afraid to try new things, so they remain in a stagnate life with no changes. I believe in the idea of personal development and the idea that people are always learning something new to understand the meaning of life such as why we are here in the world and what is the purpose of our life. Being open minded gives the opportunity for a person to grow as an individual.

Time orientation

I followed past orientation when I was growing up. I used to strongly believe in past events that prior events, history and traditions are important to us to maintain our activities. However, as an adult my perception of past orientation is becoming a future orientation. I always think of the possibilities whenever I make decision to anticipate what is going to happen. This behavior has definitely helped me to plan ahead of time.

“Wherever we live, we must observe the local custom.” I go by this proverb wherever I go whether going to friends’ house, staying the night at a relative’s house, traveling to other country, attending seminar, attending classes at school, etc. I follow this proverb by being

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mindful of the rules and regulations that come with the activities of human interaction. When I visited a friend and staying over at his or her place, I tend to ask if they have something I need to know regarding their ways of doing things. This means that I acknowledge or respect their values. I have attended school for undergraduate and graduate degree.

Most schools have student code of conduct that needs to be followed. Furthermore, every class I have taken has its own regulations depending on the professor who manages the classroom. A professor may permit the student to have their laptop open during lecture, others demand students' full attention and prohibit student to bring their laptop to lecture. These rules and regulations are made to be followed thus allowing people to be flexible, open minded and adaptable to others' way of doing things.

The term good and evil are abstract. However, I believe there is evil and there is good in every action we take. Humans can be both good and bad to balance their acts, similar to the idea of yin and yang. I have the tendencies to follow this rule because I believe that nobody is perfect and that everyone is subjected to sins. For example, when I was walking downtown, I saw someone drop an object on the ground. Instead of picking it up and let the person know that they had dropped something, I just went by them.

I grew in a culture where animism is common. We believe that there is no separation between the physical and non-physical world in which human and nature will have to live in harmony. I believe that all the living and non-living subject matter have spirits in them. Thus, whenever I go out in nature, I have always respected the land and greet the place by simply saying "hi" and try to appreciate their coexistence on earth by saying "thank you".

I speak fluent Indonesia and English. I speak Indonesia to those who speak Indonesian and speak English to communicate with other people who do not speak Indonesian. I sometimes speak my own language that my friends and I created. Currently I live in the US so I speak English all the time unless I meet Indonesian people. I speak Indonesian to my parents and sometimes communicate with them in English if my English to Indonesian translation is lost in process.

Silence and eye contact or gaze are the two best example of nonverbal communication that reflects my culture. I tend to be silent when handling a conflict. I feel that I will hurt someone's feeling if I express my feeling toward the problems and I do not want to make things more complicated. Similar to the Japanese tradition of interpreting direct eye contact for a sign of disagreement, rejection or disinterest, direct eye contact is considered rude and disrespectful while engaging in conversation. Moreover, it is preferred to look away when speaking to someone and lowering the eye gaze to show some respect.

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Whenever I speak to someone I have the tendencies to look away after a few second of direct eye contact. Touching is also part of my cultural backgrounds. It is normal for friend such as two girls and two guys to hold hands and to touch lightly when they are engaging in conversation that leads to a lack of personal space.

Because of collective culture, people don't think much of personal space. Thus, I always caught myself in someone's bubble while engaging in a conversation. When I shake hand and do other things I do it with my right hand because the left hand is considered a social insult. This was because "the left hand is used to engage in basic biological functions" (266). Touching of the head is normal when someone older is touching the head of someone who are younger. Paralanguage has also been used to give a clue regarding someone's internal state. Because paralanguage is used in my cultural background as nonverbal cues, I am aware to how people respond or interact with me directly or indirectly. I can tell if someone is interested or not during the conversation by listening to his or her vocal qualities or the tone of voice.

Although I still value my eastern culture, the western culture is much more dominant. Ever since I migrated to the US to further my education, I consider myself to be an Indonesian that has been westernized. I respect the culture I was born with; however, I have embraced western values at the same time. I believe that if one is persistence in the development of their self-growth, the duration of acculturation will be short. Thus, I have embraced Western cultures in many instances such as experiencing the individualistic style, adapting to a low context value as well as practicing low-power distance freely. As someone who enjoys being unique, being able to express my feeling through the way I dress is rewarding. I can wear anything I want without worrying what others would say.

In the US I can politely say "no thanks" to refuse any offer. This is great because we are not being force into doing anything that we don't want. At the US schools, my academic achievement as an individual is much more appreciated than it would be in collectivism. I embrace low context value by focusing on how I feel rather than how others would feel. Since I was a young girl, my parent taught me to have as many friends as I can and to be friends with anyone without judging him or her age as well as looks. This low power behavior is against my cultural background and that we must utilized high power distance to get us anywhere. Thus, many people are afraid to show their low power distance belief in public. Being able to freely show my low power distance behavior in public has helped me to make friends with people from different ages.

Seattle, WA is the placed where I incorporate my eastern culture into the western culture. I found it interesting that many Seattleites hold onto the eastern culture dearly. Unlike what our textbook mentioned, "young people in the United States are sometimes unwilling to interact with elderly individuals" (71), I found that many of Seattle's youths have respects towards the

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elderly. For example, a few weeks after I moved to Seattle from Jakarta, Indonesia, I was taking a bus from Seattle Center to Capitol Hill area on a rush hour and was sitting in the back of the bus. The bus was full and it made more stops before it got to my destination. When the bus stopped to pick up more passengers, I saw an elderly woman come up the stairs and look for a place to sit.

On a split second I saw a young adult stand up to give his seat. I was surprised that this would happen in Seattle because I had a perception that all cities in the US have the same cultural background in which appreciation towards elderly is inferior. I have definitely changed this perception and practice to set aside stereotyping. The young adult's behavior reflects my eastern value and it happens not only once but also many times. The feeling of having similarities to another culture is exciting because I can relate to what I believe in good etiquette. I also found that Seattle is a melting pot to which many cultural backgrounds are embraced. I have seen more mixed groups and intermarriage couples within the greater Seattle area than any other city in the US. The way Seattleites embrace diversity is similar to my cultural background. Thus, I can relate my identity to the Seattleites and consider myself to be part of their cultural practice.

Instead of being entirely westernized, I still find myself practicing the culture I was born with, Eastern culture, and it is being the co-culture. The eastern values I still hold onto as much as the western values are the high-context value, collectivism and respect of the elderly. In spite of following individualism, I still value togetherness in many instances. I feel that having someone around will be crucial in case of emergency while it increases the sense of being wanted. I can alternate the need of having someone around accordingly.

If I can do things on my own, I would rather do it on my own and if I feel the need to have someone around, I would ask around. Surrounded by the low context community, I starting to find being open or honest about my feeling towards others is rewarding. However, it is difficult to practice a low context value when my high context value background has been the most comfortable thing to do. For almost 12 years living in the US, my high-context value is sometimes still affecting how interact with each other.

My family and friends, history, and identity are what I hold dear. Without family, I would not have history to share and I would not have been "me". Without history, having family and friends means nothing and I would not have an identity to differentiate. Without identity, I would not be me. I wouldn't exist, wouldn't be able to type this paper. My life would be empty without family and friends. These three values are my circle of life. They are worth dying for and worth protecting.

In addition, being able to explore the nature, experiencing humanity through cultural diversity by traveling around the world are two other elements worth dying for. Most importantly, being able

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to communicate, understand and convey a message through verbal and nonverbal communication with someone from other cultural background is critical to avoid stereotyping, prejudice, racism and ethnocentrism.

Although developing ethnocentrism is very common, I have learned that being open minded is the best way to explore multiculturalism and that we would be surprise to see how cultures can integrate with each other fairly well. I can say that I have been enculturated with many cultures whether it is a culture I relate to or that of conflicting culture. However, I may still easily form biases regarding other cultures by asking rhetorical questions. When I catch myself asking these rhetorical questions, I have to stop my train of thoughts until I am ready to educate myself with new cultural related information.

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