

Cultural Ecology of Health and Change

Who Am I?

An Exercise in Exploring Multiple and Core Selves¹

By

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Introduction: John A. Powell, in his book, *Racing to Justice: Transforming Our Conceptions of Self and the Other to Build an Inclusive Society*, suggests that people possess more than a single sense of self, but multiple selves. Multiple selves evolve over one's life course as a consequence of living in different but significant social settings, the impact of others with whom one interacts within those various settings, and who they think you are. These significant others interact with the self-based on their views of your self, and provide what Rosenblum and Travis in their frequently revised book, *The Meaning of Difference*, refer to as status³. Please note in their discussion of social statuses, however, Rosenblum and Travis are not using the word status as it is commonly used in the hierarchical fashion associated with high or low status; but simply to one's position within significant social groups (e.g. household, family or kinship systems, ethnic or clan, peer or other groups, various networks, organizations, or institutions, such as religious or educational institutions, and local community, wider society, or more global structures). I added the concept of identity status here to emphasize the point that sometimes the status by which you identify yourself may be different from the status in which others view you.

From my personal life course of growing up in the racially segregated US South, to living in the Middle East as a Peace Corps volunteer in the 1960s, I became aware of the fact that immersed living among other cultural groups leads one to learn not only a lot about one's host cultures, but also about oneself. Indeed such immersion can contribute greatly to one learning that one has more than a single self, but about one's multiple selves, most of which might have resided in one's vast subconscious. Later becoming a professor in cultural

¹ This exercise was first developed and used in an Honors class that I developed and taught while a full time faculty member at the University of Maryland, College Park during the Spring of 2012. It was updated during the Spring of 2016 for a class that I currently teach for the Osher Life Learning Institute (OLLI) at George Mason University.

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³ Rosenblum, Karen E. and Toni-Michelle C. Travis eds (2011)., *The Meaning of Difference: American Constructions of Race, Sex and Gender, Social Class, and Sexual Orientation*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

anthropology I had many more experiences with cross-cultural immersion. In the Introduction to the book, *Self, Sex, and Gender in Cross Cultural Fieldwork*, my co-editor and I wrote that for an anthropologist to write objectively about the culture that he or she is studying, he or she must first recognize their own subjectivity, accept what they learn about themselves, and work on resolving personal biases and interpretations of the other that causes them discomfort⁴.

Directions Please write an essay of between 3 and 5 double spaced pages telling me who you are. There are several things that I would like for you to consider in this reflection. First, I would like you to give me such information as to where you grew up (country, state, city, or rural area); the type of family you had while growing up, e.g. nuclear (mother, father and siblings), single parent (headed by mother or father), or extended (with persons beyond primary relatives (i.e., mother, father, siblings); the occupations of the adults in the family; and your position in the family (oldest child, youngest, middle, or whatever).

Next, I would like for you to tell me about your multiple selves or identity statuses that you have, and how new statuses might have emerged over your life course. As example, I will go back to my own experiences of accumulating statuses over the life course. Growing up in the segregated South in a poor tenant farming African American family, I was simply another “colored” child who could expect little more than continuing that Negro status of my ancestors since being enslaved and brought to the Americas. Other statuses I experienced over the grades k-12 of my life course included being a good student, class president 3 straight years, and a pretty decent athlete in my small segregated high school. I also had the status of being a super star in my Sunday school because of my penchant for memorizing a host of Bible verses. It was assumed that I would become a preacher after receiving a United Negro College Fund scholarship. And being the first to go to and graduate from college brought new statuses within my extended family, as did being the first and only in my family to later earn the PhD. Holding several leadership positions while attending a Historically Black College/University (HBCU), including senior class president, and being a student civil rights activist, all brought new statuses to my life course. Attending Peace Corps training, and living among whites for the first time brought new complex statuses, both in my own identity status as well as those held of me by my fellow white volunteers. More statuses were added from my time as a volunteer in Turkey and from my travels to other Mediterranean countries. More were added in coming back to graduate school in the US, becoming a community health activist, getting my masters and doctoral degree, becoming a professor, a community health educator, a husband, and a father.

Next, I want you to consider your identity and social status in terms of what Rosenblum and Travis refer to as one’s *master status*, and what I refer to as one’s *core* sense of self, among your multiple selves. That is, among your many statuses or selves, which one(s) seems to dominate in terms of your own sense of who you are (identity) and the dominant sense of who you are, as held by others. For example, given the various statuses of myself discussed in the preceding paragraph, the dominant or master statuses for me are those of African American and African American male. These two statuses have emerged as dominant not only because they are the dominant ones that have been ascribed to me over my life course, in different locations, but also because it is one that I have enjoyed and thereby embraced

⁴ Whitehead, TL and ME Conaway (1986), “Introduction, *Self Sex, and Gender in Cross Cultural Fieldwork*. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press,

over the life course, even during times of unfavorable views associated with these statuses by others.

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