

Cultural Learning Project

When introduced to the Cultural Learning/Bias Challenge Project, I decided to complete the skin tone test. The test revealed that I might have a slight automatic preference towards light skin compared to dark skin. Although I would like to disagree with the idea that I have a bias, I cannot completely discredit the results. Because my reference group is primarily fair skinned, I believe it affected the results of this test. I don't know if I believe I have preference towards light skin over dark skin, but I definitely have more experience with lighter skinned people.

After I received my results, I began reflecting on the cultural event options I could participate in. One day at work, I overheard another server, Christina, talking about how her brother was turning 17 and the party her family was having for him. Christina is Mexican, and her parents emigrated from Mexico before she was born. I thought that this would be an excellent opportunity to experience a Mexican American family's customs. I felt awkward asking, but I approached her to see if there was any way I could attend. I was relieved when she said yes.

When I pulled up to the house, I felt panicked and rude. I felt as if I were intruding on a private family event, and when I saw a few older family members step out of the front door, my heart dropped even more. I called Christina on her cell phone to let her know I was there, and she quickly came out to the front. As I walked into her house, I noticed all the people: women leisurely cooking and chatting in the kitchen, elders and a few other people gathered around the table playing cards, the children outside playing soccer, and men watching over them, laughing and gulping down beers. Even though I was introduced warmly, I felt a little awkward. They were all speaking Spanish, so I couldn't understand a word that was being said, and I was the only one with fair skin. I felt like I stuck out like a sore thumb.

I wanted to be helpful and show how appreciative I was, so I asked to help out in the kitchen, but the women declined. They were not being rude; because I was their guest, they didn't feel I needed to help. I talked with Christina for awhile, and she brought us a margarita and sat with her cousins. They talked about their grandparents in Mexico, about soccer, and school. It reminded me of conversations I have with my own family.

When the food was served, I was overwhelmed; at my house we usually have a lot of food, but there are often some store bought things too. The only store bought things I spotted were the beverages, chips, and tortillas. Mounds of carne asada, homemade salsa, guacamole, tortillas, cheese, sour cream, and rice covered the table as a pot of beans simmered on the stove. The meal was also a difficult piece for me because I'm vegan, so I could not eat all of the foods, but I didn't want to seem ungrateful. A few family members asked questions and tried to give me slices of meat, but Christina quickly explained to them in Spanish and they walked away, usually not without a confused look (but this a common occurrence for me).

While conducting the interviews, I learned a lot. Both people I interviewed said they enjoyed being a part of their ethnic group but that they felt they needed to work extra hard to avoid being what people perceive as the "stereotypical Mexican." Christina also said that she experienced prejudice from her own ethnic group when they criticized her for "not being Mexican enough." This shows how hard it is to find a good balance. For me, being a part of the dominant group, I never really have to worry about not being too white or not white enough. I can eat whatever I want at lunch -- a sandwich, burrito, pasta -- and no one will think, "Oh, she is so white" but if Christina or her brother were at school eating a burrito, they might be worried that people thought they were being "typically" Mexican.

Both Christina and her brother, Samuel, mentioned in the interview that they wanted people to realize that somewhere in our ancestry, our families were immigrants in search of a better life. Christina's parents emigrated from Mexico before she was born, and I feel that it allows Christina to appreciate their hard work and how they rose from poverty in Mexico to a middle class family in America. This makes me think back to my own family, and I wish I had a story to reflect back on. When I ask my mother where her side of the family came from, she says Connecticut, which doesn't really help me. I think knowing your roots is beautiful, and I envy Christina and her family for having such strong ties with past history.

I would say that the most comforting thing about this experience was seeing how similar Christina's family and my own family are. Despite differences such as language and food, the family gathering reminded me of my own. In both households a strong sense of family, love, humor, and admiration was present. The children run wildly in both her home and mine, the family jokes and laughs just as often as my own, and they are quick to reach out a helping hand to one another. In a previous class I was told that concerning people of different ethnic groups, there is more within group variance than between group variance; my experience with Christina's family further strengthened my belief in that.

Christina and I have since been talking a lot more at work. I feel that by having members of different ethnicities in my reference group, I am getting to learn a lot about not only others, but also myself. From this experience I have learned to approach others, no matter how different they seem, and know that we inevitably share things in common. In addition to broadening my reference group, I also will take Christina and Samuel's advice by recognizing that most people are trying to do what is best for their family, and that you need to get to know each other's stories before you can judge them.