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Multicultural Interview Report

**Summary**

The most important thing that I learned from this interview is that a person’s class at birth is generally – but not absolutely – indicative of where a person will end up in society, and that our choices still do matter in where we end up. One small mistake, one teenage pregnancy, can change a life permanently. This lesson doesn’t really apply to my future profession as a computer scientist; it’s more of a life lesson, which I have tried my best to preemptively follow.

I suppose from that lesson, it also follows that a person’s class shouldn’t be assumed based on their race. Unfortunately, even this lesson isn’t very applicable to my major, mainly because computer science is largely a profession dominated by middle to upper-class males and practically all diversity in it (from experience) is centered around Indian people who are usually \*very\* well integrated into American society already. It’s not to say that these lessons aren’t great lessons to learn, but the harsh reality is that they probably won’t be used that much in a computer science career.

To summarize my experience, I was initially nervous to find somebody to do the interview, but once I managed to, I learned a lot. Shawn and I talked about topics relevant to diversity in society and in education, such as: cultural background, how race impacts academic performance, how race and cultural differences impact resistance to teachers, discrimination based on race, and American society as a meritocracy. Shawn’s childhood as an African-American in a predominantly white culture made her childhood similar to mine, but her teenage pregnancy threw her from the upper middle-class to the working class because she couldn’t attend college. As a result of her education in a Christian school and her anxieties and general quietness (she told she had virtually no friends), she was only notably discriminated against once and never had any problems in her classes (even English) or with her teachers.

Ultimately, I would say that if I had to do the interview again, I would have thought out more specific and/or complex questions that would have evoked more thoughtful answers. The problem with interviewing a stranger is that it’s hard as the interviewee to be prepared to give thoughtful answers to broad questions, especially with time constraints. Nonetheless, I still think the experience was enlightening and I reaffirmed not to judge a person’s class based on their race. It’s always surprising how similar we humans are in a society that constantly stratifies us.

**Questions**

1. I interviewed Shawn Cassida, a housekeeper that works at Metro Health Hospital. Shawn is African-American, and I chose her to interview because she was on her lunch break by herself. I found her by walking around in the area near the Spartan Stores YMCA – I did a special project last year for my job and knew that there were a lot of workers in the area that went out on lunch.
2. As this was an impromptu interview, there wasn’t a lot of planning that went into the interview outside of developing questions. When I was developing the questions, I tried to avoid questions that were obvious (I’m not sure how much I succeeded) and wanted to rely more on off-the-cuff and more personal questions. For the actual interview, Shawn and I were both nervous to talk during the interview (she let me know that beforehand), so questions and answers obviously weren’t going to be perfectly executed.
3. Shawn was anxious to do the interview but accepted happily. By the end, I felt she had enjoyed informing me about her life and culture, which doesn’t surprise me at all. People have to talk about their experiences – get stuff off their chest – and the opportunity to do that with someone who won’t (by situation) judge them is excellent.
4. Shawn spoke very clear English; this was not a barrier to the interview. There was little external noise or distraction at the table we interviewed at, so location was also not an issue. Both my and Shawn’s anxiety made the interview relatively awkward and not as open of a conversation as I would have liked to have had, but this was really the only barrier.
5. Before the interview, I was relatively anxious (particularly when looking for someone, and it would have been much worse if I had put it off until the last minute), but once I started the interview I was fine. Generally, I’m better at talking to people one-on-one than I am at presenting to groups. After the interview, I felt enlightened and happy that I had completed the project and learned a little more about a minority’s culture. I was also really panicked afterwards because I forgot to record the interview, but thankfully I was invested enough in what Shawn told me that I remembered most of the interview.
6. Shawn was very thoughtful about answers I presented that were more in-depth, and she had a very definite tone and very quick and sharp movements when discussing her childhood, which showed that she probably thought about it very often.
7. I learned that Shawn grew up in a relatively wealthy neighborhood under single-parent households with her mother, then father. Shawn’s case is an interesting one: an African-American who wasn’t born into poverty, but instead into a wealthy white culture. She attended a Christian school, had mostly white classmates and white teachers, did just fine in her English classes, and was only notably harassed once due to her race. The reason she ended up in a working-class job was because she made a poor choice and got pregnant before she finished high school, so she never went to college to get the crucial degree needed for a higher-paying job. All of the above surprised me because you wouldn’t expect such a housekeeper to come from such a background. The biggest contrast between me and Shawn is that my anxiety hasn’t got the better of me and caused me to make poor choices. Additionally, she came from a religious background; I didn’t. I also grew up with a tight-knit traditional family while she grew up in a single-parent household and was a parent at sixteen years old. Our biggest similarity was our personalities; we actually understood each other relatively well and we could definitely be friends in a different life. Additional questions I asked that weren’t on my original list involved her family (which she talked more about after I stopped “recording”), which was fraught with issues due to her early parenthood.
8. I learned that I’m comfortable around minorities. I grew up in southeastern Michigan in a large village with mostly white people, so I’m happy that the values I’ve learned in school and from my parents have served me well in treating people with kindness and respect.

**Transcript**

(Note: When I conducted the interview, I attempted to record the interview with my phone, but ended up pressing the wrong button. As a result, none of the interview was recorded and the following is my immediate transcript of the interview from memory.)

Andy: Alright… we’ll get started. Hi, I’m Andy!

Shawn: Hi, Andy.

A: Go ahead and give your name and job title.

S: My name’s Shawn Cassita, and I work in housekeeping.

A: I’ll start by asking some basic background questions, so I’ll start with… where did you grow up?

S: Right here in Grand Rapids.

A: Who raised you?

S: My mom… until sixth grade, and then my dad raised me after that.

A: Okay, and these were separate? I mean – your parents were single parents? Like, just your mom then just your dad?

S: Yes, just my mom, then my dad.

A: How was your standard of living?

S: Good… yeah, my family was good.

A: By that, I mean… how were your finances?

S: Good, good. We were fine.

A: Okay, so how did that compare to the rest of your neighborhood? Like, were they richer or poorer…?

S: No, about the same. We lived across from doctors, lawyers.

A: Okay. \*surprised\* From there, then… what’s your highest education level?

S: Eleventh. Eleventh grade.

A: So you didn’t complete high school?

S: No, and so… I got pregnant at age fifteen.

A: \*nods\*

S: I got pregnant at fifteen, had my daughter at sixteen. And I couldn’t continue high school because of that.

A: Right, you couldn’t have. Okay… were your classmates like you… like in terms of race?

S: No, well… I went to a Christian school, so everyone was white. Except for two other black girls.. and me.

A: Were there ever any problem with that?

S: No, except for one time. When I got onto the bus after school one day. Now, I was too young then to know what it meant, but… one kid called me a jigaboo.

A: \*nods and looks expectantly\*

S: And I didn’t know what it meant, I was too young, but I knew that it was a slur and so… I slammed the bus door on his fingers.

A: \*smiles, chuckling\*

S: \*also smiles, looking a bit embarrassed\*

A: No, that’s totally… I would have too. Okay. So, I assume that your teachers were also white, then?

S: Yes.

A: Okay, so… was there ever resistance because of the culture difference between you and your teachers?

S: No, not really.

A: And what about your English classes in particular? Did you struggle in them at all?

S: No… no, I did all right.

A: Okay, so did your education play any part in getting to where you are now?

S: Oh, no… \*dismissively\*

A: Okay, so what do you think school could have done better do help you succeed?

S: Well, it wasn’t the school that was the problem, it was me. I had anxiety. I didn’t talk to anyone, I didn’t have any friends, I got pregnant, and all of that got in the way of my education.

A: Okay. Do you think that society, in America, is a meritocracy? And by that, I mean, do the people who work harder get more reward?

S: No. \*definitively\*

A: Do you think race impacts that at all?

S: Well… no. At least, I don’t think it does, or… I hope it doesn’t.

A: All right. Do you think your race has ever benefitted you?

S: \*puzzled\* Like…

A: As in contrast to being discriminated against because of your race?

S: Well, no… no, I can’t ever think of a time.

A: All right, that’s about what I would expect. Do you have anything else you want to share about your culture?

S: No, I can’t think of anything.

A: Well, I guess that’s all I have, then.

S: Aw, that’s all you have for me? I’ve never talked about this, not even with my family?

A: Really, not even with your family?

S: No!

A: Oh! Well, it’s good that we did, then. You know, it’s always good to open up dialogues like this. That’s why my class requires it.

S: Yeah!

A: Thank you very much, Shawn!

~End

**Picture**

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