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Exploring Factors that Influences an Individual’s Familial Identity

“Alif, Lam, Meem…” I would repeat after my father as he tried to reteach me Arabic so I could continue our Quran lessons. Although Arabic was my first language, I ended up forgetting it almost completely by kindergarten. I was obsessed with learning English as a toddler. Before I was old enough to go to school I would sit and watch PBS Kids for hours every day trying to learn the language so I could fit in when I went to school. For a long time, I wanted nothing more than to be like the characters in the shows and to be American. This possibly caused me to unintentionally separate myself from a big part of my familial identity, our religion.

My family practices Islam and I’d consider us to be moderately religious as a whole. We celebrate Eid together, we fast together during Ramadan, as well as pray for each other regularly. Whenever entering a car or our house, we say a prayer, and we bless our food before eating. Although I grew up with all these traditions and religious habits, I always felt like I was separated from this part of my family’s identity. This led to me constantly wondering what were the factors that influenced this to happen. Despite by father’s efforts, I never ended up relearning Arabic so I couldn’t read the Quran like the rest of them or speak the language around the house. This also made it difficult to remember the prayers they would say that I was supposed to know.

Along with all these differences, what other factors could have caused me to latch onto this idea of separation from this identity? Could it be the relatively big age difference between me and the rest of my siblings? Or possibly the fact that I had access to the internet at such a young age. The environment one is surrounded by is proven to heavily influence their identity and personality, so the difference in me and my siblings’ environment growing up could contribute to this. Such as in my case, if siblings grow up within the same family and there are other families who share the same traditions and religions, what causes some people to stick closely to their familial identity while others don’t?

An example of this can be seen within the Moran family of *Amongst Women* by John McGahern. The eldest son, Luke, grew up in the same household as his siblings, but we learn that eventually he distanced himself from the family and its identity by moving away. This makes the reader wonder that if he left so easily, what causes the three middle sisters to be more attached to and reluctant to break away from their father’s grasp? Throughout the story, we are constantly being shown how overbearing the father, Moran, is over his children. He tries to manage control over their lives and choices, and it becomes customary within the siblings to witness him release his anger when they don’t do what he says, or if they mess up. This domineering over his girls could perhaps be linked to their mother’s passing along with Luke moving away and cutting himself off. This could support the idea of the environment one lives in influencing one’s identity with their family.

Similarly to me, Michael is the youngest of the Moran family which causes a natural distance between him and the rest of the family. “Though they loved him as if he were their own child they left him out of all things that mattered in the running of the house.” (McGahern 36) This distance can also be understood from how little he’s mentioned compared to his three sisters. Although it is not intentional, the age difference is a big contributor to the feeling of being the odd one out. Instead of sharing the close sibling relationship that the girls have with each other, he seems to be treated sort of as their own child. My brothers are four and five years older than me, and my sister, the oldest, seven. Although we still bond and I’m close with them, I never shared the same experiences with them growing up. For example, when we would visit some relatives in Toronto during some summers, I was too young to join them on their adventures throughout the city at night with our cousin. Before I was born, my parents entered them in Islamic schools during the summers to learn about our faith. In addition to this, they were also able to attend the same schools at the same time while growing up. These experiences led to their relationships with each other and their faith being relatively closer than mine.

Another idea to consider would be if the racial demographics of where one lives influences their closeness to their familial identity. I grew up in a small city in Tennessee called Jackson, and the area I lived in and schools I attended were majority white. This could have been a strong factor in why I was so obsessed with speaking English when I was very little. My wish to fit into American society was furthered as I grew up and went through grade school. We were one of the only two Ethiopian families in our city and there was not a big Islamic community so being influenced by outside cultures proved to be really easy. It led to my identity inevitably being shaped by both my family and western society. This caused me to question some familial values that deal mostly with religion. Since I was anchored in a white, western environment, I found myself in a kind of cultural schism, between my family’s identity and the influence of the outside world.

Along with the environment I grew up around, the “outside world” also includes the internet. As mentioned earlier and similarly to many of my Gen-Z peers, I had unsupervised access to the internet at a very early age. The time our generation grew up was a pivotal moment in technology. With the dot-com boom of the late 90’s and peaking during the year 2000, the internet started finding its way inside of most American homes, along with mine. My closest brother used to play video games a lot but would usually play with his friends online, leaving me to find my own games and entertainment for my enjoyment. While he would be on the PlayStation with his school friends, I would be sitting on the family computer, playing games, watching YouTube, and making friends of my own online. These friends I made came from a huge variety of backgrounds. I was exposed to many different social classes, sexualities, and disabilities. Despite these differences, my mind was only focused on the objective of the game and one’s skill levels. When playing with someone, I often did not learn anything personal about them until after gaining each other’s friendship, and by then I already thought fondly of them, which could have possibly fostered me to grow up to be more open-minded. I did not mind anyone’s background or identity as long as we were playing the game and having fun.

Dr. Christian Weyand, of the University of Cologne in Germany, dives deeper into this phenomenon in his doctoral dissertation about how the internet affects open-mindedness within individuals. Through his research, he found that internet usage has a positive impact on liberalism. The report “points out that the internet is beneficial to a much broader social sphere and can increase people’s general open-mindedness.” (Weyand 142) Some may try to argue that it alone will not end discrimination and inequality, but internet usage can still be considered “one of various processes that can make people more open-minded.” (Weyand 143) This mindset, strengthened by the internet, could contribute to the shaping of one’s familial identity, as they can take on many different perspectives and ideas along with their family’s.

Provided all these reasons, why is one’s closeness to their familial identity so important? As the holiday season approaches, many families come together to celebrate and practice annual traditions. These traditions along with other rituals and habits are all examples of factors that develop familial identity within a person. However, there is more that meets the eye as all these different factors are arguably important to the creation of one’s own identity as a whole. Irish poet, Seamus Heaney alludes to this issue in his poem *Digging*. The poem starts with him flaunting how a squat pen rests between his finger and thumb. He then shares how his father and grandfather both did the same work, cutting turf, and describes how good at it they were. The poem is concluded with him explaining how unlike his father, grandfather, and possible generations before, this work was not for him.

But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I’ll dig with it. (Heaney)

He would not follow in their footsteps and instead is passionate about poetry. Their jobs could be seen as a part of his family’s identity, but instead of letting it constitute his identity, he shapes his own. Although he chooses to separate himself from this part of his family identity, he still acknowledges their hard work and dedication.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.

Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day

Than any other man on Toner’s bog. (Heaney)

This is an essential lesson to take away from this poem. There could be many reasons the author would not stick close to his familial identity. Despite this, the reader should still take note of how he respects it but still does his own thing and forms his own version of himself. This is something I have had to figure out over the past few years. There are many ways in which my identity has been influenced to be much different from my family’s. Although I am not as religious as them, I have learned that there is no reason in this being a problem. Unlike Luke, I don’t have to cast myself away, but I can still love and respect my family and their beliefs, while also creating an identity for myself and perhaps eventually my future family. It could be argued that blindly basing who you are based upon one or a handful of forces can lead to an unfulfilling and confusing life. It can be useful to dig deep into oneself and analyze the variables that form who they are and what they stand for.

Works Cited

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