

Embracing Resilience: Exploring Identity through Cultural Exploration

By Shandel Teafatiller

Today, I to aim encapsulate my journey through the multifaceted lens of anthropological exploration, where every experience becomes a thread intricately woven into the fabric of my identity. From the earliest memories of my upbringing in Oklahoma, to my current streets of Colorado Springs, my life reflects a profound interplay between personal narrative and broader cultural forces.

Growing up in SE Oklahoma allowed me to see the rich tapestry of indigenous traditions. My native american heritage, intertwined with Italian and Lithuanian roots, was not a minority in my community. My grandparents were first generation immigrants from Italy and Lithuania. They had arrived with little more than nothing, growing a family on unfamiliar lands – perhaps sending a gene for resiliency to my generation. I lived minutes from a scenic town originally settled by Italians. My Choctaw heritage was intertwined in resources provided by the tribe and seeing the attempts of the tribe leadership to include the younger generations with pow-wow activities, language courses, etc.

However, I was held in the crucible of my single-parent household, familial dynamics mirrored wider societal structures, unveiling the complexities of kinship and socialization. As an adult, I grapple with a legacy of childhood emotional abuse and financial struggles, recognizing the enduring impact of intergenerational trauma on familial bonds and individual resilience. I cannot relate with the enduring bonds that

characterize most mother-daughter relationships. My mother was a distant, standoffish woman that told no stories of family members and traditions long past. My father left when I was too young to remember even his face. Even with a broader cultural community, living within my house felt isolated.

Going to the big city of OKC meant escaping my childhood and an opportunity for growth and a world just waiting to be explored. The search for stability that I had not experienced before was an exhausting and daunting prospect, but escaping the social determinants I had been born into was paramount. This focus on doing as much of the opposite as possible of my childhood has followed me into adulthood.

This also included getting married to my husband after only 9 months of dating. I, with the blessings of hindsight, lucked out in finding the stability I was searching for. But I could have just as easily been locked into a horrible situation. Skipping forward a few years, after three deployments I felt the dependence on being resilient as an ever heavier daily chain.

Relocating to Colorado due to my husband's service in the Air Force marked a pivotal moment in my life's trajectory, underscoring the resilience required to navigate transitions and cultural dissonance. Anthropological theories of acculturation shed light on the challenges and opportunities inherent in migration, highlighting the transformative power of adapting to new environments. Yet, amidst the uncertainties of relocation, I found solace in the camaraderie of fellow military spouses and the bonds forged within our new community, embodying the resilience inherent in human connection. As hard as I found it to form these relationships, it just enhances that feeling of stability that I use my life to constantly seek.

In my career, perceptions of body image intertwined with professional identity, revealing the gendered dimensions of body image within occupational settings. Drawing upon feminist anthropology and the sociology of work, I reflected on the pressures to conform to societal standards of appearance while maintaining dedication to my work. Despite these pressures, my commitment to providing care remained unwavering, embodying the structural-functionalist perspective on employment as a stabilizing force within society. I have stayed at a job that I am mostly neutral about because the fear of the unknown would shake the stable foundation already built. As the years pass, the fear of failure continually prevents me from even making goals to try to achieve.

Therefore, my pursuit of higher education has become a transformative journey, embodying themes of agency and social mobility within the framework of anthropological theories of education and social stratification. Despite facing so many obstacles, including the legacy of educational inequities, my educational journey reflected a quest for self-improvement and empowerment. Symbolic interactionist perspectives highlighted the role of education in shaping individual identity and expanding future possibilities beyond the constraints of my upbringing. I feel myself putting an enormous amount of weight on receiving that fancy paper with the gold border, strong black lettering telling me an entire era of my life is finally, at least minimally, complete.

This doubt in myself did not come from any fear of higher powers, unfortunately. Identifying as agnostic, my spiritual journey embodied themes of existentialism and cultural relativism within anthropology. So, I just can't blame anyone but myself – which makes the prospect of failure an all encompassing, identity defining – characteristic.

In reflecting on my life's journey, I admire the enduring spirit of human adaptation and the quest for meaning in the world. Anthropological theories provide a framework for understanding the complexities of identity formation within the context of cultural diversity and social change and as I continue to navigate life, I am embracing resilience and transformation. Through the lens of anthropology, I come to understand that resilience is not merely a trait possessed by individuals but a collective force that shapes our societies and cultures, propelling us forward on our journey of self-discovery and transformation.