Cultural Handbag Paper

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Every individual possesses a unique blend of culture which shapes their entire perspective and world view. Cultural competence is essential for Peer Specialist work as it enables us to learn sensitivity and adapt to cultural norms that differ from our own in order to help others in a way that is fully respectful and beneficial to them. Becoming acutely aware of our own culture and biases is essential to comprehending distinctions from others.

I approached this assignment somewhat peculiarly and pragmatically. Since we are using an actual bag and presenting the result to our class, I decided to exclusively print out images representing my surface culture to tape to the outside of the bag but the inside is filled entirely with objects signifying my deeper culture which are intended to be passed around. Since we won't be leaving the bag with our instructors and are likely to be graded solely on whatever is memorable from our in-class presentation and our paper, I have attached a relatively brief description of each piece of my included culture to the end of this paper (which also serves as the outline for my presentation).

Most cultural associations and affiliations can be categorized similarly to our Strengths Assessment. The majority of them naturally fit into Social Supports, but many also are significant in other categories as well. Being a professional video game developer was clearly Vocational and impacted my Financial situation. Being a “cat person” is an important part of my Daily Living home life. Activities such as motorcycling and snowboarding have been an important part of getting exercise for Health as well as Recreation. Judaism and my Unitarian Universalist affiliation are obviously important aspects of my ongoing Spirituality.

I found most of my cultural influences to be so familiar that it was extremely easy to identify and represent them well with a single image or object. Maybe the greatest difficulty I had was figuring out how to verbally describe each piece with enough brevity to fit adequately within the time-limits we were given for presentation. I also encountered some difficulty in facing my conflicted emotions regarding my Dad's often dominating influence on so much of my identity. I believe he has always loved me as well as he has been able to, but his contribution to my internal sense of self regularly remains more hurtful and counterproductive than I would prefer, usually by emphasizing the grandiose and unrealistic. My own mental health has constantly been threatened by his interpretation of our respective roles and the significance he places on our relationship.

I think compiling all of these diverse associations together into a collage of cultural artifacts bolstered my sense of pride surrounding each of them. It has enabled me to reflect positively on myriad aspects of my past which continue to shape who I am today and who I am becoming. I have endured several recent years of general hopelessness, so it is refreshing to be emerging from this period of extended depression and minimal self-esteem to find myself able to once again be proud of so much of my past associations and achievements. This assignment has served to further improve my self-image and I am glad to have had this beneficial opportunity.

I believe I have become more culturally aware by recognizing and describing my own major influences. I have also appreciated being exposed to those of my classmates. I hope this entire experience continues to inform me and prepare me to be more culturally competent for whatever Peer Specialist work awaits me. I intend to continue to grow in understanding and sensitivity towards each unique individual's culture and I look forward to becoming trustworthy enough to learn about other people's deep culture in particular.

Surface Culture:

\* picture of Darjeeling on my bed and a bag of organic tea: Darj is my beloved cat. I have had her for a few years and she has been a wonderfully loving companion. She is all black (like the tea she was named after). Her right ear tip was cut off because she was a stray that they fixed in Madison, Wisconsin (where my sister found her before giving her to me). Darj is the sweetest purr-monster with a little kind of raspy “mrrreow” voice. I adore her. I was raised with both cats and dogs as pets but I have preferred living with just cats (lower maintenance) most of my life.

\* Vegan food logo: I have kept mostly Kosher and vegetarian throughout my life and a few years ago I started trying to constrain my diet to vegan “cruelty free” foods due to my love for animals and recognition that I prefer they not be killed or made to suffer. I still occasionally eat some cheese or ice cream (this being Wisconsin and all) but I prefer avoiding any animal or insect products (including eggs or honey) when I am able to purchase my own groceries. Vegan food is generally more healthy and also leads to more efficient use of global food resources.

\* picture of me racing my R6 motorcycle: In California, I owned two 2005 Yamaha YZF-R6 motorcycles (one black and one red) which I heartily enjoyed racing around on freeways and race tracks. I lost one after Highway Patrol clocked me going 156 miles-per-hour and impounded it. I think my motorcycling days might be behind me, but I still remember the thrills fondly. Motorcyclists exist in a notable sub-culture and typically signal each other in passing. My Dad always preferred convertible cars where the prevalent experience of blustery wind and significant noise passengers experience is comparable to that which occurs when motorcycling.

\* picture of me taking a snowboard jump: I have enjoyed snowboarding fast and taking big jumps throughout much of my adulthood. Almost every season in California, I snowboarded frequently, but I have only been to Rib Mountain in Wasau a few times since moving to Wisconsin in 2010 and didn't feel like boarding at all last season (even though snow was deep). Snowboarding is a popular part of extreme sports culture. Similarly to motorcycling, I have greatly enjoyed the thrill of speed and need for careful and precise balance when boarding.

\* Unitarian Universalism rainbow chalice: I have found a spiritual home in the Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship (where my mom, Dottie Mathews, was the Assistant Minister for several years before she moved on to become the Organizational Chaplain of NCW Goodwill). The rainbow also symbolizes GLBTQIA culture which I have been exposed to ever since my Mom came out of the closet as a Lesbian when I was about 11. Our family attended regular “Gay-Pride” parades in California during my adolescence. I'm straight, but gay-friendly.

\* Alpha Epsilon Pi logo and crest: I am a brother of the international Jewish fraternity AEPi, Zeta Tau chapter (from the University of California at Irvine where I attended college). I haven't attended any events or even had much contact with my brothers since moving to Wisconsin. I am sure I would enjoy reuniting with many old friends and participating in alumni and rush events again whenever I become able to return to Orange County in Southern California.

\* Sony PlayStation logo: I was a professional Tools Programmer and Gameplay Designer for several Sony PlayStation video game projects back in California. PlayStation has consistently been my preferred video game platform. P.S. PostScript: I also have always felt superficially connected to PlayStation because it shares my initials (and so does PeerSpecialist).

\* GNU/Linux “Tux” penguin logo: Ever since I attended UCI in the late 1990's, I have strongly preferred GNU/Linux (ahead of any Microsoft Windows or Apple MacOS) operating systems for all computers I have had control over. I have spent many years entrenched in classic Unix “hacker” culture (using the original affectionate form of hacker which means a skillful programmer, as opposed to the modern popular understanding of hacker as a malicious coder who defeats security measures to break into remote systems for personal gain).

Deep Culture:

\* a card from my Dad: My father, Gerry Stuart, has had a profound impact on my entire life. He raised me to understand him to be G-d the Father and myself as his firstborn Son, destined to become the Messiah and Savior of the world. My Dad was dogmatic about his own preeminent interpretation of Christianity. He continues to write me letters with some regularity and I attempt to at least e-mail him every year on his birthday to let him know a bit about how I am doing. My Dad has been diagnosed as having Paranoid Delusional Schizophrenia, but probably has accompanying Anosognosia because he has never been willing to take any prescribed medication (even when doing so was the only prerequisite to having visitation rights with his 3 children). My Father is also a computer programmer like me. I am not certain about my heritage but I think my Dad's main background is Israeli, British, and Irish while my Mom's is mainly Greek, German, and Native American. My upbringing did not include much distant culture.

\* Hebrew Bible: I have included a somewhat unique Hebrew translation of the New Testament (called the Brit HaChadashah) which I acquired when I was briefly a Messianic Jew. I later progressed into Nazarene and then Orthodox Judaism before resolving to be a Noachite (a righteous gentile). The original New Testament was written primarily in Aramaic and Greek so a Hebrew translation is rather peculiar (even though it seems logical and appropriate).

\* blue dreidel: This is a Jewish toy which is typically played with around Chanukkah.

\* Kuromi key-holder: This is a SanRio character (basically a sibling of Hello Kitty) which I have always had a particular affinity for. I also like Chococat and Keroppi quite a bit. I think Kuromi also symbolizes my affection for cute cartoon characters from Japanese culture.

\* L.A. Kings hockey puck: My dad used to take me to hockey games when I was a child and I have always enjoyed watching the sport (even though I have never learned to ice skate particularly well). I haven't been able to attend or watch televised versions of many games in my adulthood, but those I have been able to see were exciting events to observe.

\* marble Chess piece: I am pretty sure my Father taught me how to play Chess at a very young age but I never took the game very seriously until I came to Wisconsin. In November of 2013 I started writing my own Chess program which I hope to eventually sell for mobile platforms.

\* Rubik's Cube: In high school I learned how to solve Rubik's Cubes (usually in under 3 minutes) and I have written several software versions for different platforms over the years. My Dad is able to solve Rubik's Cubes also (although I'm not sure about how quickly he can).

\* Garbage Pail Kids and Baseball cards: Garbage Pail Kids and Baseball cards hold significant memories for me since I have been able to preserve my childhood collections of them.

\* Spiderman movie on Sony's PlayStationPortable UniversalMediaDisk format: I am proud of having developed the widely acclaimed Death, Jr. game for Sony's PSP. I love Spiderman too.

\* Ryu PlayStation2 controller: I have always been fond of the Street Fighter series of fighting video games and named one of my development computers after protagonist, Ryu.

\* Lakai skate shoelaces: These are extra laces from my favorite skateboard shoe company and symbolize my love of skateboarding and appreciation for good sturdy shoes.

\* Sennheiser headphones: These are made by my favorite headphone manufacturer and symbolize my love of music generally and dubstep as my favorite genre specifically. Dubstep is a popular part of Electronic Dance Music (EDM) in the strong heritage of House and Techno music. Sennheiser is also my Dad's favorite brand of headphones, ever since he was a radio DJ for several years in California.