Culture and Mental Health Self-Awareness Essay

Ashlie Dao

University of California, Los Angeles

PSYCH 129C: Culture and Mental Health

Dr. Denise Chavira

May 12, 2023

I was born and raised in the Netherlands to Vietnamese refugees. My parents got married in 1973 and had my brother a year later. When South Vietnam lost the war against the Communist Vietnamese Party in April of 1975, my father was forced into re-education camp. After several failed attempts, my mother, then a newly single mother, successfully fled the country with my brother by boat. A Dutch fishing boat brought them to safety and offered asylum status in the Netherlands in 1977. It was exactly ten years after my parents were separated that my father reunited with them in the Netherlands. In the late ’80s, my parents had me, their only other and last child. I believe that my Vietnamese ethnicity, Asian culture, Dutch upbringing in the Netherlands, (and luck) allowed me to grow up without feeling discriminated against nor consciously understanding what the racism construct meant until I began studying at UCLA.

Being raised in the Netherlands helped me look at the world through an irreligious, liberal, and open-minded lens. Generally, one of the primary purposes of religion is to promote social conformity and respect for tradition. Historically, we know that religion has been used as a tool to justify racism, as famously demonstrated in the 1861 sermon by an American white supremacist James Henley Thornwell that used the Bible to defend slavery. However, the Netherlands is one of the most irreligious countries in the world. The royal family of our monarch is traditionally Protestant but does not promote religion in its official government business and documents. Compared to America, “In God, We Trust” is interwoven into every government, federal building, dollar bill, constitution, etc. The epitome of being a respectable American is to be a “good Christian”–an indoctrination adopted from the dominant group of “White” Americans. I use this as an example because I do not think that it is a coincidence that the Netherlands is a country that pioneered several first legalizations of several historically

“controversial” matters. For example, they are one of the first countries that recognizes same-sex cohabitation by law in 1979 and in 2001 became the first country to fully legalize same-sex marriage. I think that the lack of enforced religion on Dutch citizens allows us to make rules based on evolving values, rather than antiquated traditions set by the Church.

Being raised in the Netherlands allowed me to preserve my heritage. In my elementary and middle school education in the Netherlands, there were two other Vietnamese students in the entire school. Despite only having such a small group of Vietnamese students out of 240 students in the school, our then-Queen Beatrix believed in integration as an acculturation strategy. She set aside an education fund for fellow Vietnamese refugees to maintain our culture in the Netherlands. One of which was to help second-generation Dutch students like me to preserve the Vietnamese language. Every Wednesday for two hours, a former Vietnamese refugee came to our school and pulled us three Vietnamese students aside to teach us how to read and write in our mother tongue. To this day, I am fluent. What this taught me (in hindsight) is that my family’s hosting country respected our differences, thus they did not expect us to assimilate into the dominant Dutch culture. My parents were able to continue celebrating Vietnamese holidays, Vietnamese food (albeit we had to go to the city or sometimes Paris to shop for Asian groceries), entertainment, and speaking with their children in their native language. When it came to work, fraternizing with colleagues, and enjoying recreational activities, they were able to choose to integrate and go to Dutch establishments that were welcoming of everyone, regardless of race.

Now, of course, given the Netherlands’ colonization history, I am not suggesting that the country is free from racism. Occasionally I have had to respond to random kids' yelling “Ching-Chong” while mocking Bruce Lee's “kung fu” moves. However, at the time I just passed it off as bullying and not as an act of racism. This racism construct was not taught in schools,

neither was the message as overt in schools when compared to America. As a result, I was friends with everyone in school. It was less about cliques that were segregated into racial groups, but rather in the good ol' popularity hierarchy. Despite technically being a minority in my school, I still thrived and was included in the "popular group." Personally, I did not experience that my minority status hindered me from entering/winning competitions, being selected for special roles in school plays, playing sports, and other activities. Perhaps because of the lack of feelings of disempowerment, I never really understood what racism was. In hindsight though, I realize that there were no Asian role models who were visible or respected in the Netherlands. The Dutch were mainly represented by European white people with blonde hair and blue eyes, and some minority groups from Dutch territories: Indonesian, Surinamese, Aruban, Moroccan, and Turkish people. As a result, second-generation Vietnamese Dutch kids, like myself, looked down upon our own culture because all the role models who were considered cool did not look like us. Thus we downplayed our ethnic identity. My worldview up until then was quite assimilated. I did not (consciously) experience racism towards me, however, in a strange way I discriminated against my own culture.

For high school in 2000, my mother and I immigrated to the United States of America. We settled into East San Jose in California. It was a predominantly Vietnamese, Hispanic, and African-American school. For the first time in my life, I experienced being segregated within the school and having to hang out with Vietnamese ESL cliques. They did not accept me because I was too Westernized, and I felt uncomfortable with them because I thought that they were too loud and obnoxious when they speak. Quickly, I learned to join ASB because it seemed that those were the popular kids. I was eager to be accepted somewhere and resorted back to try to continue my popular streak from the Netherlands. I was most surprised to learn about the

different clubs that explicitly sorted themselves by their ethnicity. We did not really have the overt groups in the Netherlands. For example, I was invited to the Vietnamese Student Union (VSU) because that seemed the only natural choice for me according to my classmates. However, my best friend who happened to be African-American invited me to join her in Black Student Union (BSU) and that was the only way that I was able to hang out with other African-American classmates. I did not have any close Latina girlfriends at the time, thus I was not really welcomed anywhere other than in my Spanish class. It was a really strange time and I experienced major culture shock. Fast forward to a couple of years later, we moved to Westminster, California–a place known for its largest Vietnamese population in the world outside of Vietnam. This allowed my family and I to live segregated lives and indirectly avoid experiencing full-blown racism from the dominant culture. It was called Little Saigon–everything was in Vietnamese–from the signage in shops to the foods, services, USPS, traffic school, medical care, pharmacies, etc. My mother was completely self-reliant and did not need to learn to speak English and got by just fine.

I was ignorant, oblivious to racism, and had not developed Cultural Awareness until I went back to college after living in America for over twenty years. I can honestly say now that after I began studying culture, prejudice, and racism, in hindsight I experienced discrimination as an Asian-American woman in America. For a really long time now, I have always wondered why certain groups of women felt empowered enough to be able to verbally attack me as though there would not be any consequences following their verbal spews. In a very prejudiced way, I just assumed it was the "catty" nature of women. However, I began to realize that the intersectionality of being a woman and an Asian person in America, regardless of socioeconomic status, somehow automatically elicits the audacity in White and African-American women to

disrespectfully overpower Asian women in conversations. Just as the stereotype of African-American women having the false presumption of automatically being “black, angry, and aggressive,” Asian women are presumed to be “submissive and/or sexualized objects.” As a middle-working-class single mother, raising two Asian daughters in a predominantly White, affluent, and politically conservative community in Huntington Beach, I have experienced my fair share of moms discriminating and verbally and aggressively overpowering me as a room mom or for being part of the school’s PTA.

As a Dutch-born Vietnamese American woman, living in America and aspiring to become a clinical psychologist, developing Cultural Competence by having Cultural Humility is something that I know want to continue to work on. Recently, I experienced a work conflict that I believe was a matter of personality and communication style differences. My colleague speaks fast and has a get it done now attitude whereas I am more deliberate and detailed in everything that I say and do. I slow down and ask for details and she likes to move past it and just do. When we had a disagreement, my colleague's demeanor and the way in which she spoke to me was received by me as aggressive. Her tone and her constant interruption were a stark contrast to our normal pleasant exchanges. The problem is that when I identified her demeanor as “aggressive” when it was escalated to our supervisor, it became a very sensitive issue because she is an African American woman and there is the stereotype that African American women are called angry and aggressive. I want to learn in a case like this, as a mental health professional, how should one talk about their experience of receiving aggressive messages from someone who happens to be an African American woman who comes off as behaviorally aggressive. I want to learn the vernacular to be culturally sensitive and yet be able to help myself and my future clients navigate these inevitable issues. With my cultural background that is anchored in being a

minority group in America, but being raised in the Netherlands without experiencing overt racism in my youth, allows me to see issues of race from both an outsider and now an American and UCLA-educated student points of view. I believe it helps me see racial issues from a less emotionally charged place–this I think can be an advantage for me as a future psychologist.

My last point about how my Asian race and Vietnamese ethnicity affect my worldview is that I genuinely believe that being a daughter of refugees and being a first-generation immigrant in America, my parents taught me to just put my head down and work as well as to mind my own business. They remind me that I am in the land of opportunities where I have the freedom to be anything that I set my mind to and that I should appreciate it, make the most of it, and not waste time and squander my life busying myself with life being unfair. Being born and raised in the Netherlands along with a healthy amount of luck, I have lived all my life relatively free of overt racism. Therefore I believe I see the world through an optimistic lens–one where I believe we can certainly coexist and more happy because of it.