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Abstract

As cultural diversity increases in classrooms, it becomes imperative for teachers to gain multicultural competency so that they can provide effective instruction to diverse students. This paper argues that the development of multicultural competency should be solidly grounded on reflective, empathic, and critical understanding of one's own culture as well as others. This cultural understanding, particularly from a Christian perspective, recognizes the connectivity of self and others in God. To enhance the cultural understanding, the author recommends studying self-narratives written by others and writing one's own cultural autobiography. Keywords: cultural autobiography, self-narratives, self-reflection, multicultural teacher education, discourse of others.

Self-Narratives for Christian Multicultural Educators: A Pathway to Understanding Self and Others

Heewon Chang

Summary: As cultural diversity increases in classrooms, it becomes imperative for teachers to gain multicultural competency so that they can provide effective instruction to diverse students. This paper argues that the development of multicultural competency should be solidly grounded on reflective, empathic, and critical understanding of one's own culture as well as others. This cultural understanding, particularly from a Christian perspective, recognizes the connectivity of self and others in God. To enhance the cultural understanding, the author recommends studying self-narratives written by others and writing one's own cultural autobiography. **Keywords:** cultural autobiography, self-narratives, self-reflection, multicultural teacher education, discourse of others.

"Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responded to this simple question with the parable of "the good Samaritan" (Luke 10:30-37, New International Version), which intriguingly redefines the meaning of neighbor in the context of a complex multicultural reality of his time and our time. In this story the victim of the crime is a Jew, an insider of the biblical tradition. One who kindly responds to his suffering is a Samaritan, an outsider whose community has been historically shunned by Jews for ethnic, cultural and religious reasons. At the conclusion of the story, Jesus urges his Jewish questioner to "go and do" like the Samaritan who transcended his socio-cultural predicament imposed by history and showed mercy to the Jewish victim. This story teaches us that the neighbor is "anyone in need," including even others of difference beyond "those we like or those like us" (Pohl, 1999, p. 75). This parable sheds an insightful light on the challenges that Christians face today in this multicultural society: (1) they live in a highly diverse socio-cultural context in which division over differences exists and unfavorable labels are often associated with the differences, and yet (2) they are called to cross man-made division and transcend cultural identity to reach out to other human beings, regardless of their backgrounds, with help of

God's mercy and grace (Mouw, 2001).

Jesus' calling, then and now, to reach out to our neighbors across differences, even to hostile enemies (Matt. 5:43-48, New International Version; Pohl, 1999), does not make Christian living simple or easy. Adhering to Jesus' radical command poses an even greater challenge to Christian educators because they cannot remain in the protective enclave of Christian fellowship, ignore differences, or succumb to worldly demands that threaten their Christian discipleship. Yet, they are expected to go out boldly to the world, examine critically worldly values that compete and collide with their own, and work effectively with children of all kinds entrusted to them.

Christian teacher educators must step up to the challenge of preparing future teachers to be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matt. 10: 16, New International Version). In this paper, I intend to share with my fellow Christian teacher educators pedagogical strategies that may help them in their multicultural teacher training. Two interrelated strategies, studying self-narratives and writing a cultural autobiography, are presented to help future and current classroom teachers discover their own multicultural makeup, understand the power of Christian faith in shaping their cultural values, and explore ways to respond to the needs of culturally different students. As cultural diversity increases in classroom settings, understanding one's own culture and its interaction with cultures of others is a critical piece in teacher training.

Call for Multicultural Understanding

Cultural diversity is not a new phenomenon in the United States. Before the onset of European immigration, culturally and linguistically diverse Native Americans populated the vast land of the current U. S. territory. Then, increasing numbers of European immigrants from different countries and ethnic groups

introduced noticeable cultural and linguistic diversity to the “new” world. European immigration peaked in the 1910s and has been continuing into the 21st century (Bennett, 2003, pp. 110-112). In the meantime, introduction of Africans to this land-initially brought in as indentured servants in 1617 but later as slaves (Takaki, 1993)-complicated the scene of cultural diversity, adding the Black-White racial dichotomy to the already existing ethnic, linguistic, religious, and socio-economic division among Europeans and between Europeans and Native Americans. This cross-cultural interaction centered on Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans continued for several centuries until new waves of immigrants began to change the demographic topography of the country in the late 19th century and the change accelerated in the 20th century. Mexican Americans became more visible in the current U. S. boundaries when one-half of the former Mexican territory-the present-day states of Texas, California, New Mexico, Nevada, and parts of Colorado, Arizona, and Utah-was incorporated into the United States after the U.S.-Mexican War of the 1840s (Takaki, p. 176). This event not only brought Mexicans of the former Mexican territory into the U. S. population but also accelerated the El Norte Hispanic immigration-largely from Mexico-thereafter.

Although cultural diversity had already existed for many centuries, it intensified in late 20th century due to increased immigration from continents beyond Europe. The present-day diversity is indeed unique compared to prior history in the extent and range of differences. Racially, ethnically, linguistically, and religiously speaking, the cultural diversity of the United States now extends beyond the old “triad”-Native Americans, Europeans, and African slaves-to include Hispanic, Asian, and new African immigrants, representing the population and cultures of the world.

In addition, the contemporary notion of cultural diversity extends beyond racial and ethnic diversity to include diversity in social class, age, gender, religion, language, and exceptionality (physical and mental abilities) (Banks and Banks, 2005; Diaz, 2001; Fu and Stremmel, 1999; Gollnick and Chinn, 2004; Noel, 2000). The inclusive notion of diversity not only expands the scope of the discourse of cultural diversity, but also complicates it. While acknowledging the scope and complexity of diversity, the discourse of cultural diversity in this paper focuses on race and

ethnicity, as other multicultural education scholars have done (Bennett, 2003).

The increasing cultural diversity in the general public is reflected in the school population. The National Center for Education Statistics (2002), a subdivision of the U. S. Department of Education, declared that the ethnic and racial minority student population has been on the rise for last three decades with the highest increase in Hispanic students: “In 2000, 39 percent of public school students were considered to be part of a minority group, an increase of 17 percentage points from 1972. This increase was largely due to the growth in the proportion of Hispanic students” (p. 45). In the same document, the U. S. Census Bureau also predicted “that children of color will comprise 50 percent of the school-aged population” by 2040. By the 2000-01 school year, six states (California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Texas) and the District of Columbia had already reached the half-and-half breakpoint, including 50 percent or more of non-White students in their elementary and secondary school population (Young, 2002, p. 60). This means that teachers of the cultural majority will have more and more students of color in their future classrooms. Although ethnic and racial diversity is not synonymous with other types of diversity, it is often accompanied by linguistic, religious, and socio-economic diversity. This culturally diverse context can be intimidating to many aspiring teachers, especially those who have little experience with culturally different people.

Cross-cultural inexperience or indifference limits teachers’ ability to respond to the needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Multicultural scholars have noted that it is not effective to uniformly apply to all students educational principles drawn from the mainstream, White middle-class cultural framework (Obidah and Teel, 2001)¹. Howard (1999) argues similarly that White teachers, without serious examination of their own cultural baggage, would be limited in reaching out to their students of different cultural backgrounds. It becomes imperative to incorporate multicultural education in teacher training, especially for students who lack cross-cultural experiences. Although much attention has been given to multicultural teacher training for White middle-class students, it is also widely accepted that such training is needed for all teachers regardless of their backgrounds because the primary goal of multicultural education is to bring

educational equity to all students and all teachers are expected to work toward this goal (Banks and Banks, 2005; Sleeter and Grant, 2002).

Multicultural education is also needed for Christian teachers (Kennett, 1999; Lingenfelder, 1996). Yet, I note that Christian multicultural education faces a unique challenge because teachers' personal faith is added to the discussion of cultural diversity. Christian teachers understand that they have the same professional and multicultural demands to meet in their classroom as any other teachers. At the same time, they consider their personal faith to be one of the most important aspects of their existence, transcending their identification with any cultural group. Thus, their personal faith and Christian perspectives are likely to inform and shape their responses to the professional and multicultural demands. This is the case with my education students in an evangelical Christian university. Since their personal faith is often the foundation of their action, understanding how their values and standards are formed is a natural place to begin multicultural education.

Understanding Self

For Christians, understanding self is not based on "selfism" defined as relentless and single-minded self-searching where self is glorified (Vitz, 1977). Rather it is deeply rooted in understanding of the relationship with God and others ("neighbors"). This notion of self, however, is not always supported by the Western secular scholarship. Before exploring further how self-understanding can be beneficial to Christian multicultural education, it would be helpful to be informed of how the notion of self has evolved in the Western world and how it compares with other cultures and some Christian perspectives.

Gergen's (1991) historical survey reveals that the Western concept of self has changed from the romantic perspective of the 19th century, to the modern of the 20th century, to the postmodern of the contemporary era. He characterizes the nineteenth-century romantic view of self as "one that attributes to each person characteristics of personal depth: passion, soul, creativity, and moral fiber" (p. 6). From this perspective, a person's emotion, feeling, and intuition are considered integral to selfhood. In contrast to the romantic view, modernists de-emphasize the affective and intuitive

attributes of self and highlight the characteristics of the self residing "in our ability to reason-in our beliefs, opinions, and conscious intentions" (p. 6). With the scientific advancement during the 20th century, a person's reason and objectivity are far more valued. However, contemporary postmodernists are skeptics of this modernist sense of a rational, orderly self. Gergen claim that they replace the modern belief in "moral imperatives" and autonomous self (Taylor, 1989; Grenz, 1996) with the disturbing recognition of a fragmented self "saturated" with over-commitment to often divergently pulling forces and demands of surroundings.

The concept of self is varied not only historically but also cross-culturally. Lee (1959, 1986) and Geertz (1984) remind us that not every society views self as a unique, separate, and autonomous being to be distinguished from others and to be elevated to the center of the universe above a community. For example, Wintu and Oglala, Native American tribes, do not see self and others to be separate and mutually contradictory, but to be inclusive and complementary. "Collectivism" (Triandis, 1995, p. 2), illustrated by Wintu and Oglala cultures, also characterizes the first-century Mediterranean culture that permeates the New Testament writings. Malina (1993) uses the term "dyadism," in lieu of collectivism, to describe the "strong group orientation," manifested in the New Testament culture, in which "persons always considered themselves as inextricably embedded...conceive[d] of themselves as always interrelated with other persons while occupying a distinct social position both horizontally...and vertically" and "live[d] out the expectations of others" (p. 67). In such a culture, selfhood is understood only in relation to others within a community.

Although these historical and cross-cultural variations complicate the definition of self, two related tenets of self can be drawn from the previous examination of the concept of self: (1) a self, while separate from others, is a relational being and (2) it, while shaped by its culture, is a constructive being that is capable of changing self and others. The relational tenet of self implies that a self is a participant of a community, closely interconnected and interdependent with others and often regulated by the community standards. At the same time, a self is not a puppet of a community; rather, it interprets and applies its community culture at an individual level. It sometimes initiates changes

to community standards individually or collectively. With the mental faculties of a person that romanticists and modernists recognize, the self reflects, analyzes, and interprets its past and present cultural experiences to correct, renew, and transform itself as well as others.

Christian scholarship² adds a spiritual dimension to the understanding of self unlike secular scholarship. For example, a contemporary evangelical theologian (Charry, 1990) argues, “the secular self is grounded in itself, while the Christian self is grounded in God” (p. 95). The relationship between the self and God is expressed in the interconnectedness of the self with others according to Christian theologian Thieselton (1995). This understanding of self brings about a new concept of self. A self is no longer considered self-sufficient, capable of taking total control of its existence, but sinful and frail, needing to be “reconciled” to God (11 Cor. 5-17-20, New International Version). Thus, self-preoccupation, self-fulfillment, self-absorption, self-gain, and self-autonomy are inconsistent with the Christian view of self according to Farnsworth (1985) as well as Vitz (1977).

So far, the concept of self has been explored historically in the Western intellectual traditions, cross-culturally, and spiritually in terms of evangelical Christian theology. While all of these perspectives contribute to the multicultural understanding of self and others, the Christian perspective is especially helpful to Christian multicultural teacher education because it emphasizes the relational nature of self and others and factors in the influence of personal faith in the formation of cultural values and standards.

Understanding Others

Understanding self is closely related to understanding others when it comes to the teaching profession because teachers have to deal with others-e.g., students-constantly. Especially in public school teaching, “others” represent a wide range of ethnic/racial, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. Teachers are familiar with cultural values and standards of some students and unfamiliar with others; in some cases, they may feel uncomfortable and resistant to some of these values. Assuming that cultural familiarity is often generated on basis of cultural similarity between self and others, I classify others according to cultural similarity. The first group of others is others of similar-

ity, who share similar values and worldviews with self because both self and others belong to the “same” (in a broad sense) cultural community. In the context of the multicultural classroom, “others of similarity” may refer to students who belong to cultural and religious communities similar to the teachers’. Second, others of difference refer to those who come from different cultural communities from self but whose differences do not pose a threat to the existence of self. In educational settings, “others of difference” include students coming from the cultural backgrounds unfamiliar to teachers. Lastly, others of opposition include those whose values and worldviews are diametrically opposed to the self. Teachers are likely to feel uncomfortable with the cultural perspectives and practices of these students.

Despite the heterogeneity of others, I argue that empathic understanding is the foundation of understanding others in multicultural settings. Empathic understanding begins with two steps: (1) having genuine encounters with others and (2) gaining insiders’ perspectives by viewing their experiences from their eyes. A genuine relationship develops from an “I-Thou” encounter, as opposed to an “I-It” encounter, according to Martin Buber (1970). In this I-Thou encounter, people acknowledge human dignity in each other and are engaged in genuine dialogue as a person to a person, not as a subject to an object. Neither pretense nor insincerity has a place in this relationship. In addition to genuine encounters, a true understanding of others also requires one to make attempts to understand others’ experiences from their perspectives. This empathic understanding (“*verstehen*” in a Weberian term) is an act of “seeing [others’] experiences within the framework of their own” rather than the viewer’s (Geertz, 1984, p. 126). Although perfect *verstehen* is impossible within our human capacity, attempts to do so can reduce incorrect judgments of others and enhance rich understanding of strangers.

While these steps are equally helpful in understanding others of any kind, it may take different courses of action when trying to understand different kinds of others. In case of others of similarity, understanding and affirming one’s own culture may be sufficient because self and others of similarity are enculturated into the same set of values, norms, and customs. Consequently, a self becomes mirrored in others and others become an extension of self in a cultural sense. Cultural pre-suppositions shared by the self and others in this

context are the foundation of homogeneity, unity, and congruity within the community. In such a culturally “congruent” society, relating to others may not be such a daunting task because understanding others begins with affirming the self.

However, knowing and affirming self does not automatically lead to the understanding of others of difference because this type of others represent different sets of cultural values and standards. How can a self then relate to this group of others? One may search for commonality between self and others, instead of “exaggerating” otherness. This strategy is legitimated by the theological claim that “the stranger was created in the image of God and was made of the same human flesh” (Pohl, 1999, p. 97). External differences, therefore, should not keep Christians from embracing others of difference.

Accentuating only the similarity, however, does not dissipate real differences between self and others of difference. Understanding and appreciating differences as they are has a value in multicultural education. To gain genuine appreciation of differences, Lingenfelder (1996) suggests cross-cultural immersion for teacher candidates. Such a poignant border-crossing experience would force them to distance themselves from the familiar and to come face to face directly with the unfamiliar. In the process they will subject themselves to the cultural comparison between self and others, healthy criticism of their own assumptions, and, as a result, come to understand others and themselves.

With extensive cross-cultural experiences, one may become an “edgewalker” (Kreb, 1999). By having lived in different cultural communities, edgewalkers develop cross-cultural competence that helps them to become comfortable and functional in multiple cultural settings. They possess the following qualities:

- 1) comfort, if not identification, with a particular ethnic, spiritual or cultural group, 2) competence, thriving in mainstream culture, 3) the capacity to move between cultures in a way that an individual can discuss with some clarity, 4) the ability to generalize from personal experience to that of people from other groups without being trapped in the uniqueness of a particular culture.... (p. 1)

These qualities help them to turn others of difference

into others of similarity by mitigating strangeness in others and thus expanding their cultural boundaries to include others.

The strategy of edgewalking is also useful to understanding “others of opposition,” which is a more difficult task than understanding other types of others because emotional opposition to this type of others is generally deeper and division between self and others is often perceived to be irreconcilable. For example, how can someone from a pacifist community easily embrace others who believe in violence as a solution to a conflict? Yet, Jesus’ commandment, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:43, New International Version), remains constant. To overcome the resistance to others of opposition, one needs to reframe the division between self and others from “borders” to “borderland” according to Erickson (2005). When the division is seen as a border, insiders (self) are likely to exclude outsiders (others). Genuine appreciation of differences may be the reason for such exclusion. Fear, stereotype, and prejudice, however, often aggravate one’s resistance to understanding others of opposition. In such a case, desensitizing others of opposition is achieved by means of gaining genuine appreciation of differences between self and others and sorting out what the self stands for. In the process, the level of “othering” may be gradually downgraded from the others of opposition to the others of difference to eventually the others of similarity. As empathic understanding of others grows, otherness is likely to diminish.

Even when fundamental differences between self and other exist and cannot be reconciled, it is possible to create a civil community where differences can coexist in harmony. Greene (2000) refers to this inclusive community as an “extended community.” This community is characterized as “attentive to difference, open to the idea of plurality” (p. 44) and grounded on “the desire to extend the reference of ‘us’ as far as we can” (p. 45). The extended community redefines the division of “us and them” and expands the boundaries to include former others of difference, or even opposition, into the realm of the community. In this case the notion of community is no longer founded on merely common characteristics among members, but the shared ideology of democracy (Thayer-Bacon and Bacon, 1998). Beyond this human effort, Christian educators have no choice but relying on God’s intervention of love.

From the Christian perspective, the extended community is based on Jesus' calling for love, peace, and justice and its members' willingness to respond to the calling. As I discussed earlier, Pohl's (1999) theology of hospitality and Mouw' (2001) theology of "Common Grace" provide theological bases for the extended community. This calling compels us to bring Christian understanding of others to a different level. Jesus' calling for loving neighbors includes not only others of similarity and others of mere difference, but also others of opposition. He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44, New International Version). He continues that loving those who love you and greeting brothers are what ordinary people do. His command is to love actively others of difference and even of opposition beyond the ordinary practice of loving others of similarity, as argued in Pohl's theology: "The practice of hospitality forces abstract commitments to loving the neighbor, stranger, and enemy into practical and personal expressions of respect and care for actual neighbors, strangers, and enemies" (p. 75).

How should Christian multicultural educators respond to God's relational calling in their classrooms and schools where others of all kinds-of similarity, difference, and opposition-are mixed? "Abstract commitments" to respecting and acknowledging the human dignity of others may not be easy but are doable, even when strangeness of others is obvious. Yet, the practice of honoring the cultural particularities of their students, when they oppose the personal faith of teachers, is much more challenging to Christian teachers. In the midst of multiple pressures of affirming the non-negotiable truth, maintaining personal faith, honoring cultural diversity, and embracing openness to changes, Lewis (1996) cautions Christians against "absolutizing differences." Lewis (1996) argues, "Loyalty to difference [, plurality per se,] is not the highest good" (p. 458). Discerning the non-negotiable from the adjustable, Christian teachers will be able to tame multiplicity of cultural perspectives and open to self-transformation while maintaining commitments to their faith and profession.

Studying Cultural Self-Narratives

In previous sections, I argue that understanding self

and understanding others are two critical steps to take in multicultural education. In the following two sections, I will discuss two practical and accessible strategies that can be utilized in multicultural education classes to help teacher candidates gain cultural understanding of self and others. While cross-cultural immersion is an effective way of learning about self and others, this experiential approach, especially at the level of edgewalking, is not always available. As one of the accessible alternatives, I suggest careful reading and studying of self-narratives written by others.

The literature of self-narratives is extensive. Lavery's (1999) bibliography-in-progress contains 236 entries of "autobiographies" presented by various authors, with different topical focuses and in varied writing styles. In terms of authorship, self-narratives are written or orated by persons who personally experienced certain events. Although the "owners" of the stories usually pen self-narratives, in some cases more proficient writers aid in the actual writing or extensive editing of others' self-narratives. Even in such a case the authority of the stories is reserved for the narrators of the stories: e.g., Narrative of Sojourner Truth (Gilbert with Sojourner Truth, 1997) and The Autobiography of Malcolm X (Haley with Malcolm X, 1996), and Sun Chief: The autobiography of a Hopi Indian (edited by Simmons, 1942). Authorship of self-narratives has become noticeably diversified during the last three decades, including historically underrepresented populations, such as people of color, women, gays and lesbians, and people with disabilities (Angelou, 1969; Bepko, 1997; Florio-Ruane, 2001; Fries, 1997; McKay, 1998; Sands, 1992).

A topical variety also exists in self-narrative literature. Although mentioning a few here will not do justice to the extensive body of this literature, I cite only a few of them to illustrate my point. For example, Richard Rodriguez' (1982) memoir focuses on his educational experience as a son of a Mexican immigrant. The autobiography of Nelson Mandela, former President of South Africa, is a typical autobiography of a political figure revealing his political activities and convictions interspersed with personal stories. Some self-narratives center on the narrators' spiritual lives. This type of spiritual self-narratives is exemplified by the conversion story of Apostle Paul (Galatians 1:11-17 and Acts 9: 4,5, New International Version), Confessions by Saint Augustine (1999), Christian spiritual journals

by 17th-century Puritan New Englanders³, and contemporary spiritual memoirs, such as ones by Lamott (2000, 2005).

Self-narratives also come in various genres: e.g., journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, life histories, and autoethnographies. Whereas journals and diaries are widely employed by ordinary and professional writers of various historical and cultural backgrounds and tend to capture writers' thoughts and experiences at the moment, memoirs, autobiographies, and life histories are likely to present stories of authors in a more, often thematically, organized manner. Autoethnographies, defined as "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9), focus more on the cultural analysis of stories than narration per se.

Writing styles of self-narratives are also varied. Some employ a more descriptive and self-affirmative style; others are more analytical/interpretive and confessional/self-critical/self-evaluative. Although the styles may be enmeshed within a particular self-narrative, one style may be pronounced in the narrative depending on the intent of the narrator. The descriptive style of writing is more prominent in literary memoirs, in which stories themselves are of high value, whereas the analytical and interpretive style dominates anthropological and sociological scholarly writings that utilize autobiographical stories as materials to analyze rather than as the centerpiece to appreciate. In spiritual self-narratives, such as the aforementioned Christian spiritual autobiographies and memoirs, story-telling serves as a way of confessing the authors' iniquities against God and their neighbors and His merciful salvation in spite of the narrators' imperfection. Thus, spiritual self-narratives are not only stories of self, but of God whose grace is to be revealed through self.

Despite the variety, all self-narratives share two common characteristics: (1) they all reveal something about self and (2) stories of others are interwoven in the stories of self. The first characteristic is obvious because the primary goal of self-narratives is telling the story of self. The second characteristic, however, may not be as obvious as the first one in most writings. The relational nature of self inevitably others into the story of self: family members, friends, acquaintances, and even passing strangers are unintentionally disclosed. The socio-cultural context is also revealed in the story

of self. Joannou (cited in Bloom, 1998) states:

The autobiography constructs a picture of autobiographical self in relation to society which, if it does not strictly mirror the thinking of the social and political establishment of the time, it is still a picture that the establishment did not find uncongenial. (p. 23)

This unintended revelation of self and others in their socio-cultural context is tremendously advantageous to the study of self-narratives. Thus, students of self-narratives will be able to peek into authors' life experiences and their embedded contexts through self-narratives. To gain the maximum benefit from such a study, it is recommended to read self-narratives analytically and interpretively, rather than casually. Florio-Ruane (2001) argues that this exercise of studying others' self-narratives is particularly beneficial in multicultural education when autobiographies written by writers of color are used. In autobiography discussion groups, her education students, predominantly White middle-class females, learn about different cultures presented by Asian, Hispanic, African-American, and Native American autobiographers.

Reading and studying others' self-narratives is hardly a one-sided activity resulting in understanding only others. The studying of others invariably invites readers to compare and contrast themselves with the cultural texts they read and study, which leads to understanding self. Hall (1973) argued that "the real job" of studying another culture is "not to understand foreign culture but to understand our own...to learn more about how one's own system works" (p. 30). As Florio-Ruane (2001) and Phillion, He, and Connelly (2005) would concur, self-reflection drawn from the study of others' stories is indeed a foundation of self-discovery, and self-discovery in a cultural sense is intimately related to understanding others. Whether seeing self through others or against others, the study of self-narratives through self-reflection is beneficial to the cultural understanding.

I have used the comparative analysis of self-narratives in my graduate course called "Advanced Seminar in Multicultural Education." Since the course focuses on gender equity in education, students are assigned to select an autobiography and to compare gendered experiences and assumptions between the autobiog-

rapher and themselves. I have encouraged students to select autobiographers written by authors from different cultural backgrounds because cultural comparison between obvious differences tend to bring richer experiences to students although they have to be warned against resorting to superficial comparison drawn upon their stereotypes of others. Here are some examples of how this cultural analysis benefited some of my former students. A female student who aspired to become a missionary selected an autobiography of a male missionary to Motilone Indians in Columbia (Olson, 1993) and compared his gender consciousness as a male child with hers as a female child growing up in the same country. She was “surprised” to discover that she shared with the autobiographer the similar gender stereotypes “typical to the U. S. society”-i.e., men as problem solvers and adventurers and women as followers of men; at the same time, she realized that his gender awareness was much weaker than hers. She speculated that her “minority” status as a female forced her to become more aware of her gender-based disadvantages. Another female student who selected an autobiography of Maya Angelo (1969), an African American woman novelist, compared her gendered experience as a White female with this African American female author and noted that her gendered experience was devoid of racial consciousness whereas Angelo’s gendered experience was intertwined with her racial consciousness. These examples are limited to gender issues to match the purpose of the course. However, I have no doubt in my mind that the same exercise can be expanded to other multicultural issues.

Writing Cultural Autobiography

Studying self-narratives, as I argued in the previous section, is a useful exercise in increasing cultural understanding of self and others. Yet, understanding self vis-à-vis the stories of others can be limiting because others’ stories, whose boundaries are set by their experiences, can narrow the window of self-exploration. Writing one’s own self-narrative opens up another possibility, in which the experiences of the self are the sole framework for self-reflection and analysis. I promote writing a “cultural autobiography” as a format for this purpose. A cultural autobiography is autobiographical as it contains stories of self; yet it is distinguishable from other self-narratives in the sense that its scope intensely focuses on the culture of the author and cultural analysis and interpretation is more emphasized

than mere description and story-telling.

I require my graduate and undergraduate students to write a cultural autobiography in my multicultural education courses (Chang, 1999). Upon assigning this project I carefully instruct them not only to narrate their stories of the past, but also to use their stories as cultural texts to analyze and interpret. For example, students could describe with interesting details of their family dinners at Grandmother’s house on every Sunday afternoon while growing up; they could include details about who attended, what was served, and how they spent time together. To be able to analyze and interpret this memory, however, students need to go beyond these fragmented memories of family dinners. With the emphasis on the cognitive and affective aspect of culture-defined as “standards for perceiving, evaluating, believing, and doing” (Goodenough, 1981, p. 98)-new questions emerge: how these experiences have shaped their sense of self and community, why the family dinners were done regularly, which role Grandmother played in the community, and how this experience differs from the experiences of others.

To aid in the self-reflective process, I engage students in a variety of pre-writing activities, which I have written about elsewhere (Chang, 2002). One of the activities is “culturegramming,” in which students visually place their multiple identities on a web-like chart. I encourage students to write down types of communities they are part of, feel comfortable with, and know a lot of in terms of religion, ethnicity, race, language, gender, education, vocation, socio-economic status, political orientation, hobby, and other self-selected categories. A sample culturegram of a student may describe her as a White, German-descent, Mennonite, Republican, English-speaking, female who grew up in a large farming family of six children with horseback riding as a hobby. At this point, students see themselves as persons with multiple fragmented identities. Then students are asked to select one-to-three primary identities that would represent them best and subsequently identify overarching values embracing their fragmented identities. At this stage of reflection, students need to negotiate between their fragmented self-identities and a wholesome self. It is common that Christian faith surfaces as one of the primary identities for my students. The result of the pre-writing activity enters their cultural autobiography.

While narrating memories, dissecting experiences, and interpreting cultural meanings, students are engaged in reflection of their past and present. The activity of narration requires an act of engagement with self. In order to select culturally meaningful stories, students need to travel back to their past and sort out stored memories, often fragmented and sometimes buried in the hidden closet. The present perspectives of the narrators could easily censor the past. Digging into sometimes painful memories could also strain the process, but somehow most of my students reach a satisfactory level by the end of the arduous and demanding process. The memory of self is ultimately acknowledged and affirmed in its own merit.

Differing from narration, the act of cultural analysis and interpretation proves to be more difficult to my students because the intentional act of distancing from self is often an unfamiliar exercise, especially to those who had little lived experiences with others of difference. The activity of analysis and interpretation demands disengagement from their own stories so that students can gain a contextual understanding of their experiences to be ultimately evaluated. This metacognitive task forces them to assess their intimate and distanced experiences with their own communities and the larger society, which have been very integral to their very existence. For my Christian students, the challenge at this stage is how to bridge their safe, intimate *Gemeinschaft* with the larger secular society that is often construed as something different or hostile at worst. When they survive this more demanding level of self-reflection, they are likely to come out with an understanding of their own cultural assumptions underlying their behaviors and the values of their relationship with others of similarity and difference.

Despite the struggles they experience, this self-reflective and self-evaluative assignment is particularly beneficial to my Christian education students because it helps them to become cognizant of their cultural comfort and discomfort. An undergraduate female student sums up how this exercise of writing her cultural autobiography helped her to discover her cultural identity:

By presenting cultural experiences of both my past and present and going further to reflect on and analyze them, I have created a more complete picture and understanding of myself as an individual, who is a

member of multiple micro and macro cultures. Determining my primary identities has allowed me to present those instances that have most greatly influenced my life. Clearly defining the relationships that exist between myself and others presented a socio-cultural perspective which revealed not only what types of groups I identify with, but why and how I was able to join such group.

She claims that she “can more confidently go about attaining a fuller awareness and appreciation of others” as a result of this reflective and analytic exercise of cultural autobiography. Whereas mere narration of their experiences tends to leave their experiences unexamined, which could lead to or reinforce self-indulgence, cultural self-analysis and interpretation, as this student experienced, could afford an opportunity to evaluate self and others critically. Through the opportunity of cultural analysis and interpretation, students are encouraged to tease out their cultural assumptions and practices, even in relation to their seeming “Christian” identity, and focus on the non-negotiable core of the Christian faith—“Love God and your neighbors as yourself.”

Self-knowledge gained through cultural autobiography then becomes a foundation of self-adjustment or self-transformation. Self-adjustment refers to a minor change to self and self-transformation to a significant change. Self-transformation occurs when self seeks intentional contacts with unfamiliar others, develops positive attitudes toward them, and gains new knowledge of those cultures so that the others become no longer strangers but members of their extended communities. However significant the change to self is, it is a necessary step in understanding others. At the same, the balance between self-affirmation and self-transformation is also desired in multicultural education on which the assignment of writing a cultural autobiography is grounded. Once their spiritual guidepost is set and their vocational calling is clearly defined, they can venture out into unknown territories of their students with God-given confidence and Christ-like openness.

Conclusion

Multicultural education does not, cannot, and should not promote absolute cultural relativism, a moral vacuum, and balkanization of different cultural communities because the goal of multicultural education is

framed by and responds to the educational mandate of a society. The educational mandate is founded on the democratic principle of the country—namely, to provide equal educational opportunities to all students regardless of their backgrounds (Nieto, 2003). In this educational philosophy, consideration for cultural diversity comes as a means to an end, rather than as an ultimate goal. Understanding and appreciation of cultural differences is advocated in a genuine sense, not to absolutize differences but to work with them. Multicultural educators are daily reminded of the tension between diversity and unity. Balancing between diversity—understanding and appreciating cultural differences—and unity—fulfilling the universal educational goal of providing coherent and equal education to all students—is not an easy task in their daily practices.

Imagine a high school teacher who has a female student from a traditional Punjabi family in her class (Gibson, 1988). Due to the student's family belief that girls should not advance to colleges so that they can keep their sexual purity intact and remain desirable for an early marriage, the student with an excellent academic ability is kept from further education and distressed by the conflicting standards between home and school. How should a multiculturally sensitive teacher act upon this case? Should the teacher accept the student's home culture and deprive her of educational opportunities or ignore the cultural importance to the girl and the family and insist on the American educational demands? The answer is never simple, especially assuming that the girl may never be perfectly comfortable with abandoning either side. I do not intend to provide a black-and-white solution to the case. Yet, I must argue that multicultural educators need to come up with an answer that would satisfy their conscience, educational demands, and cultural sensitivity.

Christian multicultural educators have yet another aspect to consider: their Christian calling. How may their faith affect their decision in such a case? Lewis (1996) supports Christian multiculturalism on the grounds of Christology, creation theology, and ecclesiology. In terms of Christology, he argues that Jesus is a product of a particular culture of his time and thus we need to honor cultural particularities. With regard to creating theology, he reminds us that God's creation attests to the goodness of diversity. Ecclesiologically speaking, diverse, yet catholic (universal) church has existed for many centuries for His people of the world

to worship the same God. While acknowledging the theological foundation of Christian multiculturalism, Christian multicultural educators need to hear Lewis' caution that honoring the particularity of Jesus, diversity of creatures, and denominational differences should be submitted to the universality of God that created, yet binds, all differences. They may "acknowledge and preserve differences" but do not absolutize the differences (Lewis, p. 458). They may "acknowledge and preserve" individual rights but do not lose sight of God's greater command of love, peace, and justice toward all students (Wolterstorff, 1983). God is our measuring stick, confidant, and guide. Christian principles do not have to compete with the multicultural educational commitment; rather they can be driving forces in bringing about the best result. In doing so Christian multicultural educators need to affirm their Christian self; simultaneously, they need to examine the meaning of self in relation to others and God. By expanding the boundaries of their community, to include not only others of similarity but also others of difference, even those of opposition, Christian multicultural educators will be able to follow Jesus, the bold edgewalker, as his disciples and make a difference in the lives of their students. Reading and writing of self-narratives can serve as effective tools to advance this goal of multicultural education for Christian teachers.

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The wide discussion of Christian theology of self is beyond the scope of this paper and my expertise. It should be noted that only an evangelical tradition is cited here.

The church later published spiritual journals written by Sarah Osborn, Susanna Anthony, Harriett Newell, Fanny Woodbury, and Abigail Bailey (Taves, 1992) and Daniel Shea (Mason, 1992).

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