



## Chapter 6

# REFLECTIONS OF A NONVISIBLE RACIAL/ETHNIC MINORITY

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ROSIE PHILLIPS BINGHAM was elected Division 17's (Counseling Psychology) first African American president in 1998. Her presidential address was a wonderful call to the Division to strive to embrace diversity; she asserted that while exclusion may be easier, inclusion was better. At the end of her address, noting the changes she had witnessed in the Division, she mentioned that Division 17 had just elected its second woman of color. There was audible speculation in the audience: "Who is she talking about? I don't remember anyone of color running for president this year." Then, when it became clear that I had just been elected president-elect, I heard "But Nadya is White!" I received a number of questions about my ethnicity: What do I call myself? Am I a minority group member? Am I a woman of color, or am I a member of the majority culture? When do I decide to be "out" as a minority? I also received the challenge that because I can "pass" for White, I need to prove my commitment to cultural diversity much more explicitly than do more visible racial/ethnic minority group members.

The audience's reaction and my colleagues' subsequent questions and challenges captured for me the essential struggle that I have faced all my life: the incongruence between how others perceive me and how I perceive myself. I see myself as a racial/ethnic individual, but others view me as a member of the majority culture. I see myself as different from those around me, which informs everything I do. Others view me as a prototypic successful White woman, juggling work and family. I identify very strongly with my mother's Brazilian culture and call myself Hispanic but have been asked to justify why a White woman with an Arab surname can speak knowledgeably about Hispanics.

When Robert Carter began writing about visible racial/ethnic group members (VREGs) in the late 1980s, I wondered about the issues for

*nonvisible* racial/ethnic group members. Clearly, I perceive myself as different from European American native-born individuals, but others perceive me as a member of a privileged majority culture. The incongruence has benefits and liabilities; it has also very much influenced my development both personally and professionally. At times, I have valued the incongruence; at other times, I have tried hard to reduce the perception that I am different from the norm. On the whole, though, my struggles with fitting in and being different have led me to be a counseling psychologist committed to studying culture. I am honored to have been asked to contribute to this section of the *Handbook* and have benefited from reflecting on this struggle. This chapter focuses on four themes that have led to that development: (a) when different is positive, (b) when different is negative, (c) the influence of multiple cultures, and (d) being a nonvisible minority.

### WHEN DIFFERENT IS POSITIVE

I was born in a small town in Iowa (Ames). My mother came from Brazil and my father from Egypt to seek graduate degrees at the University of Iowa. They met, courted, and secretly married in 1953. They moved to Iowa State University in Ames for my father to pursue his doctorate in electrical engineering. My mother left her master's program when she discovered she was pregnant with me. I was born in 1955, a natural-born U.S. citizen with foreign parents.

Upon graduation, my father was obligated to return to Egypt and teach as a condition of his grant to study in the United States. I was 6 months old when we left Iowa and moved to Cairo. My earliest recollections are of a strong sense of connection to my father's extended family. I remember being treated as a special grandchild, and that different was good. In part, this difference was due to age; I was an affectionate little girl when my cousins were all difficult teenagers. But it was also due, I believed, to my father's special place in my grandmother's heart. He was the only one of her children to leave, and although he returned, he was living an altered life than she had expected for him. He had chosen his own wife, one who was not Egyptian or Moslem, and was following an occupational path that was not very lucrative in Egypt. Doting on me was a way for her to connect to him, and I loved it.

My grandmother had been raised at a time when the French occupied Egypt and the upper class went to French-speaking schools. She taught me French, and this was the beginning of a multilingual life. I spoke English at home with my parents, French with my grandmother, and Arabic with everyone else. I enjoyed having a language I shared just with my grandmother, and at that point in my life, being multilingual was good. My brother was born during this time, an Egyptian citizen.

My parents left Egypt in 1959 to spend a year in Brazil to be close to my mother's large extended family. While in Rio, my father received an offer to join the faculty at Iowa State in the Department of Electrical Engineering. We moved back to Ames, Iowa, in 1960. I would spend most of the next 15 years there, graduating from Ames High School and receiving my bachelor's degree from Iowa State.

In Ames, I was often uncomfortable about being different from everyone else. I spent lots of time wanting *not* to be different during my elementary grade years, but I was proud of having traveled and lived all over the world, even if I did not have strong memories of those times. I had such a strong sense of linkage with the families in Brazil and Egypt that at times I imagined strings running from Ames to Cairo and Rio connecting us. My parents, and especially my mother, strongly reinforced the notion that I was very special because of my unique background.

In 1969, when I was 13, we went for a two-year visit to the Philippine Islands, and in many ways this was a paradigm shift for my entire family. We were distinct from our friends in Ames because we were going to live overseas, and then when we got to the Philippines, we were unusual because we had come from Iowa. My father was working for the Ford Foundation at the University of the Philippines, and the other Ford Foundation families had set routines and ways of living that my parents chose not to follow, and that made us unique in a good way. Their convictions included a choice that we would not join a particular club because of its racist policies, so we joined a different club. Clearly, in this case, being different was associated with following principles of equity.

Two years later, in 1971, we returned to Ames. While my friends had been navigating middle school, I had traveled and had learned how to adapt to a different school system as well as an entirely new culture. I had learned that my language skills were valued and that my parents' background was an asset. Their international backgrounds attracted interesting people, and we had a wide range of friends and acquaintances. I no longer wanted to define my world by the boundaries drawn around Ames.

During high school, I knew I wanted to be a psychologist and knew graduate school would be competitive. I decided it would be good if I had a number of additional volunteer experiences and so volunteered for "Open Line," a crisis telephone program, as a junior. I tried hard to create a life for myself outside high school so that I would not simply be defined by those boundaries.

### WHEN DIFFERENT IS NEGATIVE

Although I sometimes reveled in feeling special because of my unique background, there were many more times that I was uncomfortable when I

did not fit in. I learned to speak Portuguese when we moved to Brazil from Egypt but refused to speak Arabic or French. When we moved back to the States and I entered kindergarten, I spoke English, refusing to speak Portuguese. I was intensely interested in "being American" and assimilated into mainstream small-town U.S. life. Being like everyone else was critical even when it meant trying to be—or act like—someone I was not.

There were painful memories, too, of times kids made fun of my name and called my brother names for his darker skin color and of inexplicable hurts that U.S. girls seem to inflict on each other for real or imagined reasons. For example, my third-grade year was several dark months characterized by events such as coming into the classroom and tripping over string put between my desk and the next one. Some girls had decided I was too foreign and so decided not to speak to me for most of the year. Just as suddenly, though, this meanness was over, with no explanation. From that, I took that being foreign was bad and also learned how quickly people could turn on you if they have reason to believe you are different. I was even more determined to try not to be different. I was ashamed of my mother's accent. In second grade, I tried to make her change her speech, even though I identified so closely with my mother that I told people I was Brazilian. Sometimes, my brother and I were like people in a zoo, when people would exclaim, "I've never met a real Brazilian-Egyptian before!" I saw my family through the eyes of the people around us and was not always proud of what they were seeing.

I was field dependent, with an inability to see beyond my immediate world. If we had not moved to the Philippines, I would have defined myself by my perceptions of "popular" and "normal." I was too concerned with fitting in and was more than willing to shape my aspirations by the relatively narrow, concrete things I could see in Ames. I wanted to be a waitress with a name tag on my blouse that said "Marilyn," and more than anything I wanted the black flat slip-on shoes sold at Woolworth's. This was the essence of "American" to me and, as it turned out, was the essence of lower-class aspirations to my mother, who was horrified. I never did get those shoes.

The most intense time for me of trying to fit in was when I went to college. I majored in psychology at Iowa State University. I was very much taken aback by the narrow perspective of many of the other students I met my first year there. This was perhaps the first time in my life that I encountered such parochial views of the world and had to answer questions about my "odd" background without the active support of my family. I met boys who said their parents would not let them date "one of you," which I did not entirely understand but knew it was not good. I struggled to fit in by acting a lot like the other students and denying parts of who I was. I cut classes, played down my academic accomplishments, and socialized with other students. I concluded that assuming leadership roles was the best way to fit

in and be like everyone else, so I became a resident assistant my third year of college.

Perhaps the most extreme example of subverting myself to "fit in" occurred during my sophomore year when I began dating a boy I met in the dorm. We became fairly serious, even though we were mismatched in almost every respect. This relationship distressed nearly everyone who knew me. My boyfriend flunked out the fall of my junior year and decided to join the Navy. By this point, I realized I had enough credits to graduate from college. It made sense to graduate and apply to graduate schools so that I could be in school while he was in boot camp. I applied to only master's programs because he did not want to be "Mr. and Dr." My decision was an apology for being more successful than he was and for violating "my role" as a woman.

### INFLUENCE OF MULTIPLE CULTURES

Looking back, it appalls me to think of anyone circumscribing another person's aspirations for such stereotypically gendered reasons. It is even more appalling that I agreed it was a reasonable request. I grew increasingly angry at the sexist expectations of my relationship when I went to graduate school and so ended it. I was accepted into the counseling psychology master's program at the University of Minnesota. It turned out that this decision was a major step in defining my professional and personal life. A year into the program I knew I did not have enough knowledge to be a competent therapist and wanted to go on for my doctorate. There are two programs in counseling psychology at the University of Minnesota, both of them with long and illustrious histories and legions of pioneering graduates. A strong identity as a counseling psychologist was formed and fostered there, with friendships that are still among my closest personal and professional relationships.

I began to study culture in graduate school and to understand the multiple cultures in which I had lived. I was a product of my father's Egyptian culture, my mother's Brazilian culture, and the third culture they created in our home. If both had been from the same culture, I am sure that my life would have more focused on their country of origin than it was. Although, for example, we have many rituals around Egyptian food, we celebrated U.S. holidays and traditions rather than those unique to Egypt or Brazil. My parents explicitly lived a life assimilated into the majority culture. They spoke English at home and became American citizens shortly after coming back to the States in 1960. They raised their children with traditional majority culture values to achieve high academic and occupational goals. My parents also instilled in us a passion for equity and a strong interest in intellectual and cross-cultural pursuits. Both my brother and I ended up applying our work in cross-cultural areas. He is an international tax lawyer,

travels all over the world, and is multilingual. I have spent my career focusing on culture as a variable in counseling and particularly in vocational counseling and assessment.

I also lived much of my life in a fourth culture, that of a small college town in Iowa. In many ways, this was an idyllic childhood. I was loved, safe and secure. There are many aspects of this culture that are still with me, particularly an appreciation for small-town relationships and obligations. My husband and I are raising our three sons in a small town that is a suburb of Milwaukee, where the circles of their lives overlap and they see their friends at soccer and baseball games, at school, and at the grocery store. I also laugh a bit at myself, realizing that my impulse to bring a covered casserole to a new neighbor or a sick friend comes from my Iowa childhood.

I also was a girl in a sexist world, which constituted a very powerful culture. I was shaped by the messages I received about appropriate behavior for a girl. I was also shaped by my struggles against those messages, for most of them contradicted. I received strong messages about doing my best, about using my brains, about achieving. But it was not always clear how to go about achieving, for I learned very early to be ashamed when I was called ambitious, bossy, or strong. Then, too, I received strong messages about the importance of being a good mother, having a family, and taking care of others rather than myself.

My father is, of course, a product of his own culture, which is not particularly known for an egalitarian ethic. For example, he said, "Girls don't need science" when I was in the ninth grade, but he also was disappointed that I did not become an engineer. He is still my strongest role model of the ideal professor. He won many distinguished awards in his field both as a researcher and as an educator and was inducted into the National Academy of Engineering in 1996. He is proud of what I have accomplished in my career. However, the balance between my husband's career and mine troubles him, as does the amount that I travel and the amount of time I am not with my children.

My mother was also a strong role model as a Brazilian woman who left home in the 1950s to travel to a distant country to study. But I spent many years chastising her for putting her career on hold while she followed my father around the world. It is only as an adult that I realize she was accomplishing her goals of raising a family. Her gift to my brother and me is absolutely unconditional love and the steadfast belief that we can do or be anything we want to. Even though my mother wanted me to have a career, I think she would say her career was being a wonderful mother, and she succeeded beautifully at it. I only hope I can give my children 1/10th of the belief in themselves that my mother has given me.

Thus, I have somehow tried to blend the multiple, sometimes conflicting, cultures of my background. I have strongly identified with my mother's culture, but I also have grown to realize how much all my cultures have

contributed to my worldview. This results in my balancing my own cultural perspective in my work, yet my husband and I are raising our three sons largely immersed in the majority culture.

My husband, Bob, and I met in graduate school and married in 1981. He is of German, French, and Irish descent and is now Professor of Management Information Systems. Our families were very similar in educational level (both of our fathers have Ph.D.s), social class, and expectations of their children. Our extended families are very different, though; his has a rich pioneer tradition and they still tell wonderful stories about the early days of settlers in South Dakota. I probably have romanticized this, for it must have been a hard life, but when our first child was born in 1982 I was a bit in awe that my child would belong to that heritage and history. My children view themselves as lucky to have a rich cultural heritage that spans three continents.

### NONVISIBLE MINORITY

One of my central struggles has been to negotiate the conflicting expectations of the multiple cultures in which I have lived and others' conflicting attributions of those cultures. As I noted earlier, how I see myself and how others view me differ. At times, I openly counter others' perceptions; at other times, I choose not to do so. This, of course, is the central privilege of nonvisible minorities, for visible racial/ethnic minority group members cannot make the same choice. My visible racial/ethnic friends and family are always aware that others may react to the color of their skin or their facial features and that those reactions may literally be life-threatening. Although I have been the target of anti-Arab discrimination and have dealt with my share of sexism, being a nonvisible minority member means that I do not personally deal with racism.

Thus, my struggles are primarily internal—how I react to the world around me and how at times I struggle against it. I do not fit typical conceptions that others ascribe to me. I am a woman in a traditionally male environment. I look Arab and have an Arab name but identify as Hispanic. I am a mother of three children, two still in elementary school when most highly achieving professional women either do not have children, have only one child, or wait to commit to their career after their children are grown. I am a professional woman in extended families where the women are educated but not career committed. And I view myself as a woman of color married to a White man, living in a predominantly White culture. There are few role models for how to put all of this together.

My multiple cultures come together in my worldview, in our commitment to give our children a passion for equity and an appreciation for diversity, and in my work. I have spent most of my career joining others such as

Fred Leong, Michael Brown, Rosie Bingham, Sharon Bowman, and Consuelo Arbona in pushing vocational psychology as a field to pay greater attention to cultural variables. We have been fairly successful. This is evidenced by a conference on contextual factors in vocational psychology in 1999 and chapters in this and other books devoted to the research in the area. Of course, there is a great deal more we need to know about how class and culture influence the career concerns of clients. But we have begun to influence scholars to address cultural variables, and I am excited about our ability to apply that knowledge to help individuals make culturally appropriate choices.

My multiple cultures come together in my professional service as well. I serve on a number of editorial boards because I feel strongly that a focus on cultural variables must be addressed in published articles. My positions of leadership within Division 17 have been avenues to focus on cultural competence and a way for me to demonstrate a commitment to diversity. I have had the great good fortune to work with some of my heroes in the field—Allen Ivey, Derald Sue, Patricia Arredondo, and Michael D'Andrea. We have formed a team to pull together guidelines for culturally competent practice, education and training, and research, and we hope the American Psychological Association will adopt these. As I write this, Division 17 and the Council of Counseling Psychology Training Programs are planning a national conference for March 2001, focusing on ways that counseling psychology can make a difference.

Writing this chapter has helped me reflect on what being a nonvisible minority means. For me, it has at times meant choosing to not fully explain exactly what my backgrounds are. This translates into not answering the question "That's an unusual name, where do you come from?" or merely saying "Iowa." But at other times, it has meant that I have to go further to help people understand why I am so committed to cultural issues and diversity. I do not have the instant credibility that a person with darker skin color or differently shaped eyes has. However, living a life defined by being a visible racial/ethnic minority is not the only way to foster a commitment to cultural diversity. We need to acknowledge that there are a lot of people like me, who are products of multiple cultures and worlds. We also need to acknowledge that people like me may feel like nonvisible minorities and that our voices need to be heard to truly understand the complex issues of diversity.

### RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS

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