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## **Social Identity and Communicating Difference in the Current Sociopolitical Environment**

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Social Identity and how it ties to communicating difference  
(TITLE)

BY  
Jennifer Felami

**UNDERGRADUATE THESIS**

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DEPARTMENT CHAIR

RUNNING HEAD: SOCIAL IDENTITY AND COMMUNICATING DIFFERENCE

Olorunjedalo Folami

Communication Studies

Undergraduate Honors Thesis

Social Identity and Communicating Difference in the Current Sociopolitical Environment

Advisors: Dr. Richard G. Jones, Jr. and Dr. Matthew Gill

### **Abstract**

As an individual, I have always valued diversity. The blending of different cultures has always been a part of my reality because of the environment where people from different tribes, ethnicity, and religion lived together in harmony. Growing up in Nigeria, the different tribes of my country were able to co-exist, more than that, they often shared the information about their different beliefs. The sharing of the different cultures helped foster a community that was accepting of people regardless of what made them different. Moving to the United States, I experienced a culture shock because I was in a new environment where difference is not celebrated, but actually comes with hostility and culture division. This realization was tough to accept. Knowing the history of the United States, I curious to understand why people were not as accepting of each other, a reality different from what I experienced coming from a different country. Through my communication studies classes, I became more aware of the roles cultural identities played in how we interact with each other. I was also more aware that good communication is the key to fostering community. Because of this, I decided to explore this topic to understand how our social identities played a role in how we communicate the differences we had. To do this, I read multiple research papers who shared my desire to bridge our community; I explore political correctness, cultural competence, cultural humility, and why difference matter. I also interviewed fifteen individuals to get their insight and have an answer to my main research question which is "what needs to happen to help people be able to communicate better about the difference?"

### **Social Identity and Communicating Difference in the Current Sociopolitical Environment**

The desire to pursue this thesis was birth out of many different things; one of them was the ability to say, I completed an undergraduate thesis during medical school interviews. Since medical schools are very competitive, having a leg up by completing an undergraduate thesis was enticing as I launched my decision to complete this independent study. Even though I knew I wanted to complete a thesis, I had no idea what topic to explore as I am passionate about multiple social issues.

To make a decision, I decided to reminisce about my first three semesters in college, and a constant in my life was this feeling of ‘other’ that seemed to accompany my social identity both as a person of color, a woman and as a liberal. I realized that I got heated during class discussions because I tend to get defensive about what it means to be a person of color in America as well as why my political beliefs were better than any other alternatives. Those conversations never ended well. Because I always got defensive and result to anger, I could not see why anyone has hatred towards people of color, people who practice different religion, people who were different than them. I did not understand why they could not see the systematic oppression as well as institutional racism that people of color still have to face in the US. Furthermore, I could not understand how anyone was so complacent in their beliefs and never question why they hold inaccurate biases about people’s right simply because it did not conform to theirs.

Once I began the process of my research, I became overwhelmed by the possibilities of what I could explore as my topic. However, If I had to point to one moment that led me to this topic, it would be a conversation I had with a few friends the second semester of my sophomore year where one of my friends insinuated that the black people, especially black men, were the

reason they were experiencing police brutality in our society. Although this comment was born out of ignorance, it was so disheartening to realize that there are many people out there who shared this belief and used it to justify why minorities, especially men of color, were being treated poorly by our society.

At 19, I wanted to have a conversation about it, but unfortunately, whenever I brought up a topic about social issues, like police brutality towards people of color specifically African Americans, the conversation was often changed to a lighter topic. Eventually, I got very frustrated, so I asked my friends why they so fiercely avoided political and social discussion. One of them said they believed these conversations were never fruitful as they often lead to conflict in friendships. They also said that they were not sure how to correctly have these conversations without getting defensive and offending people of color like me. Realizing that the major reason they avoided this conversation was the fear of saying things incorrectly, I decided to pursue a thesis about political correctness.

The first semester of my research, I researched the history of political correctness, what I found did not properly answer the questions I had, upon discussing with my research mentor, Dr. Jones, we decided that what I wanted to know more about was cultural sensitivity--- specifically how to communicate differences sensitively. This realization took the project in a different direction. While I was finding what my research project should investigate, America was struggling to decide who its next president should be. This new era was tough to navigate for anyone who did not like to discuss political issues; I began to notice that political topics were avoided in class discussions which were baffling to me because with what was at stake, shouldn't we have been discussing social/ political issues even more?

As I was a Nigerian, who now shared the reality of what it meant to be a minority in America, it became very hard to ignore the people who did not want to discuss these issues. It was even harder to tolerate those who chose not to vote. The media highly promoted the sitting president by constantly giving him airtime over the democratic candidate. According to Ebert (2017), the left media allocated sixty percent more airtime to Trump than they did Clinton, and in her opinion, led why the polling numbers affected Clinton adversely as what more people heard from this airtime provision to the Republican candidate was how bad the Democratic candidate was. Some were also tired of the current economical issues faced by the United States which made them more willing to ignore all the bigoted, misogynistic, racist, ableist, sexist, and other -ists comments made by the said candidate. For others, the reality that the upcoming presidency could strip away their human rights was unnerving. For others, the propagandas about immigration, provision of refuge to countries in need was easier to believe because of the “us versus them” culture that exists in America. The “us versus them” culture promotes the ideology that creates conflicts as people believe that in order for them to get a leg up, the other needs to be stumped upon.

It is important to note that my main focus is not discussing the result of the elections but to cite an example of when people avoid discussing social issues. I also made observations during this time that people’s social identities played a role in their political beliefs. I noticed that minorities towards the end of the 2016 election race became more willing to have these discussions. In my opinion, these conversations about the candidates and their qualifications should have started a long time ago before it became a debate about who wins. The policies in question should have been brought, all students over 18 should have been educated because a lot of the decision made during this election, in my opinion, was born out of ignorance rather

than the decision to hurt others. It eventually became more about *us versus them* rather than discussing policies and how effective or harmful they will be to our society.

To clarify, my goal is to discuss how people's social identities tie into communicating the difference in the current sociopolitical environment. My paper highlights some of what communication scholars suggest as ways we can foster a climate for better ways to communicate difference not just about social issues but in general. To properly dive in, we must begin by talking about political correctness, cultural sensitivity, and why *difference* matters.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Political Correctness and Cultural Sensitivity***

Earlier in my research, I explored political correctness. Fairclough (2003) and Andrews (1996) had the most clear journal articles, although my topic shifted from political correctness, I believed it was still important to share what I found as it ties to the rest of my study

Fairclough (2003) discussed the objective of political correctness as being a cultural change that will trigger a broader social change. He claims that political correctness aims to reduce discrimination through language. Social change is a change in the networking of social practices and the articulation of elements. Language is a major part of our society and how we use it matter a great deal. Because human beings are reflective, there is always a dialectical interconnection between what they do, how they represent, value, and identify themselves. The relationship between culture and language is complicated. As a signifying system, the theory of this relationship constitutes an articulation of large representation of many things. Social identity plays a significant role in discourse and how people interact. It also represents what they do, by sometimes drawing upon the representation of what they do from practices including governmental and 'expert' practices. Essentially, the idea that what people say is a representation



of what people do. This perspective is the basis of social constructionism- - a theory that concludes that social life is socially constructed as an effect of discourses. This discourse theory helped shape forms of cultural politics labeled as ‘political correctness.’

An attempt to change the processes of cultural and discursive intervention will ensure a change in the discourse. The discourse includes the hypothesis that changing the conversation will lead to changes in other elements of social practices through the process of dialectical internalization. For example, destigmatizing popular beliefs about negative associations used in the social identity of certain groups will positively impact social change. For instance, if we as a society created an environment where people who identify as being gay, lesbian, non-gender conforming, or transgender could state their identities without the fear of experiencing backlash or harm from their society, there will be consequential changes in how non-heterosexuality is perceived, and in turn how people react towards them. Part of the controversy over political correctness can be attributed to implicit differences between those who assume some form of ‘discourse theory,’ which implies that representation is always positioned, value-laden and chosen against alternative representation. This theory compares with those who assume that there is a transparent relationship between what is written versus what is said and the language without mediating the discourse.

Fairclough (2003) focusses on the fact since language plays a significant role in our society, if the use of terms accepted by the individuals with the identity in question gets embedded in the people, it will slowly becomes the only language that is used by individuals who do not share this identity. To expanciate, If we followed this theory and used, for example, non-conforming gender identification to test/support it, then the use of they/them pronoun would eventually be considered “normal.”

Andrews (1996) brought up some similar ideas as Fairclough, in her essay she addresses some of the linguistic concepts that underline the political and highly sensitive issue of political correctness which she claims is better described as 'cultural sensitivity'. While her essay was written in 1996, the issues she addressed are very much still relevant today, one of the biggest issues associated with "correct speech" is particular to naming and focuses on how language associated to naming should publicly be used. Andrews (1996) associates why, to the minimalization of the problem to available media contents. The media often misrepresent social identity, political issues, and social issues either by exaggerating the problem, making fun of it, or ignoring the issue completely. Multiple tv shows continue to make satires about polite speech (or political correctness), so much that even those who are completely unaware of its meaning have deemed it to be something bad because of its representation on television.

Andrews (1996) also addresses why it is important to normalize certain ways of speaking because language and thought are associated with each other, that is the words we associate with certain concepts (people or thing) plays a significant role in how we see those things. I grew in a different country where the international media I received about African Americans in the United States was quite discriminatory. Although it was not a conscious decision, but when I first moved here at twelve years old, subconsciously, I avoided "black" people because the media had embedded in me the idea that they were dangerous and only caused menace in society. It was not until I had multiple conversations with African American adolescents was this prejudice lifted. This is a clear example of the social reproduction that results from poor promoting certain individuals on television. I am just one person who has been brainwashed by the media to see certain people in a certain way which why it is so important to have these conversations about cultural sensitivity.

The use of culturally sensitive language connects to the position that language represents thought and may even control it. For example, if a female speaker is no longer referred to like a *girl* but instead a *woman* by her male counterpart, the male counterpart is more inclined to see that the said speaker is his equal rather than his subordinate. As I mentioned earlier, at a very young age, my bias about what it meant to be African American was negatively influenced, but I was able to overcome this by becoming more away of those bias. Another example was when one of my colleagues who is anti-LGBTQA+ recently used the word *faggot* to describe someone who was part of the LGBTQA+ community; I remember being appalled because the word that has a strong negative connotation is part of the problem. As mentioned by Andrews (1996), the relationship between language and thought is a relative in nature; the use of proper terms will change perception by simply using the right term. Andrews also mentions why the use of negative terms along with the expression of negative reaction affects the use of what is sensitive language; for instance, the use of the proper pronoun to identify a person often faces a clash because people have been conditioned to believe that gender is only male and female. Using proper pronouns including they/them will continue to challenge a socially constructed idea of what gender means and eventually lead to a change that is effective and ‘normal.’ Since no clear institution decides what culturally sensitive language is, a consensus can be made within the affected community. Once the consensus is made by the community, it is the job other individuals who are not part of the affected community to adhere to their new standard. This consensus will be the driving force to determine what is accepted and what is not.

### ***Cultural homogeneity and why difference matters***

No matter how the topics start, whether its focus is a discussion of polite talk or the use of culturally sensitive language, the discussion never progresses if the reason why we should

have them never comes up. While in theory, it might be easier to maintain cultural homogeneity, the reality is that cultural homogeneity leads to nationalism and the uprise of neo-Nazi groups who promote the idea that a compound like melanin has a bearing of racial superiority. These consequences are why it is important to discuss as well as promote diversity in the United States, a place to start is thinking about why difference matters.

Thinking about the reasons why difference matter can feel vague. For someone like me who is passionate about bridging the gap amongst members of different communities, the first response that comes to mind is; “it just does.” As a biologist, it is also impossible for me to ignore that diversity in a population will positively the impact the fitness (likelihood to survive) of that particular population. Therefore, having diversity would have a positive impact on the genetic diversity which means the population will most likely thrive better than the population without diversity, but *Difference Matter* by Brenda Allen (2011) has given me a newer perspective. The way we see the world is rooted in our upbringing, and as a matter of fact, we have seen so much injustice in the world that we have become desensitized to it. We either start to believe that is the norm or we believe that injustices of the past have been resolved because we have become desensitize them. The injustices of the past are still present in society today, but our desensitization to them is why we either don’t notice them anymore or have conformed to the idea that things could never change.

Sometimes, we do notice it, we sympathize with the victims of these injustices, we rant, but then we move on because we don’t believe that there’s anything that can be done fundamentally to change it. We sometimes buy into the rhetoric that the victims could have somehow acted better to prevent the event. For example, recently when the gun control debate came up because of the Parkland school shooting, it became an argument that if the members of

the affected student body were nicer to the student who committed the atrocity, then it could have been prevented. This rhetoric did not consider his access to military grade rifle or lack of mental health support.

Because we all grew up having certain assumptions about people or particular groups, we tend to treat those groups in the ways we assume they should be treated and sometimes we are biased. The notion that social identity is natural and unchangeable is simply untrue; everything we know about identity is learned as a result of socialization and social reproduction. As an individual, the way you act can be changed, and the first step is realizing that we are capable of imagining and performing in a way that is contrary to our assumed social identities. Allen's (2011) advice is to challenge the norm, avoid quickly assuming stereotypes about individuals you don't know, better yet, challenge those biases. Another thing to do is not be the stereotype assumed for the group you identify with; this is done by resisting the pressure that tells you how to act in a certain situation.

*Difference* matters for many reasons; the first reason difference matter is changing demographics. The truth is society is changing whether we acknowledge it or not. People have become more vocal about rights and recognition in the workforce and other divisions of society. For example, laws like the ENDA (Employment Non-Discrimination Act) seek to protect employees from discriminations and ensure equal employment opportunities. Laws like this expand the type of diversity we should see in the workplace. Some rewards for valuing difference include increased creativity, productivity, and profitability (Allen, 2011). Valuing difference is not only useful in the workplace, but it is also useful in our everyday lives. By valuing difference, we can learn more about each other, have productive interactions, in turn, enrich our lives.

The second reason difference matter is, it allows for more vocal and visible movement by people from marginalized groups. These conversations and movement allow us as a society to create a higher degree of equality between dominant and nondominant groups. The truth is people will never be equal, dominant groups will always possess more power than the nondominant groups, but the way to make the world better is to ensure that every group has equitable opportunity, What do I mean my equitable opportunity? It is important to realize that every individual needs a varying degree of support from society, that is, the top one percent does not need the same amount of help as the middle class who does not need the same amount of help as the lower ten percent of the population. The power we possess, as humans, is used in power relations to make, modify and maintain meaning about social identity.

However, because of the way our society is structured, there are power hierarchies and ideologies that are persistent in teaching us how to think about the matters of *difference*, and as a result, most people think very little about the implications of these structures ideologies and hierarchies. People from dominant groups or positions of privilege tend to reap the benefits of these structures while people from nondominant groups are not. By realizing that difference matter, you can advocate regardless of your group status for change and resist these structures by initiating social movements, campaigning for new policies as well amendements to the existing laws, developing social and economic programs, and engaging in other actions that help make changes to the status quo.

The third reason *difference* matter is that different needs to be discussed. This is to say that difference, is a hot topic (Allen 2011). A discussion about *difference* is a good start to learning why it should be valued. Discussing difference allows us to use the power of communication to help increase progress toward equal opportunity for life, liberty and the

pursuit of happiness. We use communication as a tool to produce, interpret, and share meaning about diverse groups of people. Communication is a powerful tool as it can be used to create or dismantle the way we classify and attribute power to gender, race, class sexuality, age, and ability. By realizing the power of communication, we can become critical consumers of the messages we receive through media reports about social identity as well as media portrayals about social identity. Most media portrayals reinforce dominant ideologies and stereotypes, but by being critical consumers, we become more conscious in how we receive those messages, we become more likely to make better decisions including challenging those ideologies and stereotypes.

The power of communication allows you to appreciate and value *difference*, reimagine social identities and empower yourself as an individual. Communication helps create meaning by realizing this; you now have the power to challenge the norm and create a better society. Being able to value difference is the first step to wanting to challenge the norm. Valuing *difference* is not always going to be easy. One of the obstacles that arise from valuing *difference* is that members of nondominant groups may feel singled out during discussions which may lead them to feel like they have to represent their group. Another is that members of the dominant group may believe that members of the nondominant groups are exaggerating because they have no idea what being on the other side of the equation feels like, they may also feel attacked. A third is that some people believe that discriminatory -isms are already dealt with, and only need to be addressed as a result of blatant violence. A difficulty may also arise when individuals feel as though, they need to be politically correct; a notion that promotes appearing objective and rational rather than expressing vulnerabilities or emotions. This notion has created a barrier to

fixing internalized issues, because if we cannot talk about it, how do we know that it exists, better yet how do we fix it if we don't even know about it.

Allen (2011) also talked about being mindful of Thinking Under the Influence- something she dubbed TUI. To think under the influence is to think under the assumption of prejudice, stereotypes, and dominant ideologies. TUI is not just limited to the ideas we have about groups different from our own; sometimes we may have internalized negative attitudes about our own groups. The best way to overcome this obstacle is to catch yourself in those moments of TUIs and recreate the meaning you attribute to those groups. For example, instead of assuming that "all tall black men play basketball"; realize that being tall and black is not a reason to play basketball, and is you thinking under the influence of stereotype. By realizing this, you can correct yourself and reframe that idea; a tall black man can be interested in other activities that are not sport related.

Another obstacle that you might face is being able to relate to others who are different than you. For example, white males, heterosexual individuals, able-bodied, or young might not realize that their privileges. These privileges might make it harder for them to see a problem with the dominant ideologies in our society since it favors them. In other overcome this obstacle, you need to be proactive which means taking the initiative and responsibility to make things happen; this can be achieved by learning about social identity and other cultures, leaning your power and privileges, realizing that there is a problem and using your privileges to help create social change. It is also important to understand how social identity plays a role in communicating difference as well as aiming for positive social change.



### *Social identity*

Social identity is a person's sense of who they are, usually based on their social group membership. It influences the way they see the world, communicate with the world and interpret the world. Social identity is influenced by many sources including the media, interactions with the world as well as upbringing. The way an individual identifies socially is different from their personal identity which has to do with how they see themselves as a person. According to the social identity theory, the mere act of individuals categorizing themselves as group members was sufficient to lead them to display ingroup favoritism. After being categorized as a group member, individuals seek to achieve positive self-esteem by positively differentiating their ingroup from a comparison outgroup on some valued dimension. Social identity can sometimes lead to biases because members of a particular group consider themselves as "us" and individuals not part of the group as "them." Ingrouping leads to situations where people treat "them" badly in order to gain favors in the member of their in-group. I want you to think of situations in your life where this holds, have you ever avoided associating with certain individuals in order to avoid backlash?

Social identity plays a huge part in our lives as we are socialized and how we socialize. From the moment a child's sex is confirmed, the world already decides how that child should behave, what they should wear, what toys they should play with and so on. If you share my viewpoint, then you probably think this is bizarre too. The idea that girls should like pink and boys blue is weird or that girls should act poised while "boys will be boys." I intend to delve into a conversation about privilege as I continue this study, but for now, I want to discuss *Social Constructionism*. Social constructionism theory talks about the ideologies that are dependent on the contingency we have created socially. For example, studies have established that race, class, and gender are not real concepts. However, they still control so much of our lives including how

we communicate with ourselves and others outside of our subscribed concepts, and that's because they are social constructs and are widely accepted. They play a huge role in the way we see ourselves and others. The environment (town, city, rural, country, culture, etc.) is fundamental to our ideas of gender, class, and race. For example, growing up in Africa, the race was highly irrelevant in my society because we were all the same; for us, class and gender were the biggest driving forces in our relationships with others. As a child of the upper middle class, I taught it was socially unacceptable to have friends from lower classes, and I had always wondered why, luckily, I am studying communication, and I am constantly learning theories like social constructionism to help explain some of the things I wondered about when I was younger.

Exploring the topic of social identity and how it affects the way we communicate has been fascinating; it has been satisfying to know that the curiosity about this topic is has been researched by other communication scholars.

***Practicing Cultural Sensitivity, humility, and competence***

As a biologist as well as a communication scholar, it is inherently difficult for me to separate my two fields. This is why in this pursuit of this research, I also I researched how being more aware of social identity as well as being culturally competent through the use of culturally sensitive language will only make me a better physician . Especially because I intend to provide medical care to underserved population which most often include minorities. Through this research, I was able to find some articles that featured numerous studies which highlighted the medical fields and attempts being made to create culturally competent professionals; these articles got me quite excited. One of the main reasons I want to become a doctor is to ensure the provision of quality care to people like me. By reading these articles, I now know that steps are being taken to ensure equal medical treatment for everyone regardless of their race or class.

In their study, Fisher-Borne et al. (2006) found that clients from historically marginalized communities are less likely to access or receive needed services due to lack of culturally appropriate service provision, they also noted that the services received by clients from marginalized communities are of poorer quality than those received by their white counterparts. As someone who had shadowed/observed doctors in the emergency department of a hospital, I can attest to the findings made by Fisher-Borne et al.

At this point, I expect educated individuals to know how to overcome their prejudices against marginalized groups, but some of the comments I have heard from the doctors in the emergency department are cringy and unacceptable. Everyone should be culturally sensitive to others, while none of the articles I read defined what it means to be culturally sensitive; I found an article on the red shoe movement website that did.

They defined *Cultural sensitivity* as being aware that cultural differences and similarities between people exist without assigning them a value – positive or negative, better or worse, right or wrong.” It simply means being aware that people are not all the same and that no culture is greater than another.

No one is perfect, and at various moment in our lives, we buy into some stereotypes or act in ways that would be considered prejudiced against other individuals. The goal of a study like mine is to bring awareness to this and to hopefully get us to a place where we can create an environment that promotes *multiculturalism*-the support of the presence of culturally distinct groups within our society. The articles I read during this part of my research had numerous things to say on how to overcome these internalized stereotypes; one focus was equipping social work educators with the tools they need to ensure that future social work professionals are well equipped to treat others with cultural humility.

Social work is dedicated to addressing the needs of individuals, families, and communities. Fisher-Borne et al. in their article talked about the existence of cultural competence in the medical field, they defined *cultural competency* in this field as understanding the learned, shared, and transmitted values as well as beliefs, norms and life experiences of a particular group which will help medical professionals provide culturally specific and congruent care. An example where being culturally competent comes in handy is a situation where a patient religious belief may prevent them from accepting certain types of care. For example, during one of my observation sessions in the emergency department, a patient refused to accept blood transfusion because of their religious belief, the attending doctor was very insensitive to treating this patient. The doctor made it clear to the patient that if they did not receive the blood transfusion, they would die what the doctor was not aware of was they could receive blood from family members, and it wasn't until another attending reached out to the patient sensitively, was this information acquired. Situations like this should be navigated with more care by medical professionals but because the attending, in this case, was unaware that such religious beliefs existed and simply assumed the patient made it up. This example is one of the reasons Fisher-Borne et al. say that cultural competence is not enough to ensure equal treatment of everyone and therefore, cultural humility should be used as an alternative to cultural competence. The reason why my focus is being drawn to the medical aspect of the article is that of my desire to become a doctor and my hope to educate other doctors about the importance of acquiring cultural humility.

Before I go on to explain what cultural humility means and why it is a better alternative to cultural competence, I want to highlight the critiques Fisher-Borne et al. (2006) made in their article about cultural competence. Fisher-Borne et al. had four major critiques of cultural competence. One critique is that social competence focuses on self-awareness and the idea of

getting comfortable with ‘them.’ This idea promotes some level of self-awareness and focuses on creating an environment where medical practitioners are more comfortable with others; you might be confused on why this isn’t a good thing because I know that I was at first too. This framework of cultural competence perpetuates the idea “us versus them” instead of bringing awareness to the existence of power differences (in this case, between the medical professional and their client) including the biases and assumptions that will occur within a provider-client relationship especially when working with clients who share different identities or have different background different from the providers. This framework also fails to explore how cultural values and structural forces shape the opportunities and experience provided to clients from marginalized groups and how providers who are part of the dominant groups (an example is a white, middle-class doctor) might approach the type of care they are willing to give such patients. Providers who are part of dominant groups might not desire to understand the privilege that they unconsciously provide to members of the dominant group and the discrimination to have against members of the nondominant group. This idea makes sense as the cultural competence framework fails to account for the complex history and the reality of health, economic and social inequalities that still exists in our culture today.

The second critique is that the cultural competency framework focuses on racial/ethnic group identity as a proxy for ‘culture. Cultural competence often focuses on just race usually non-white racial identities but ignores the disparities that exist in other aspects of social identity such as gender, socio-economic status, disability, sexual orientation, and so on. This leads us to a place where the idea of culture is static alluring that it does not change over time even though we all know that it does. The third critique is that the cultural competence framework promotes mastering the knowledge of the ‘other’, this part of the framework is particularly problematic as

it suggests that knowing the broad description of various group identities can translate to knowing the life experiences of an individual client. It also perpetuates the belief of 'other' in the sense that 'white'/ dominant cultural beliefs such as heterosexuality and Christianity are seen as the norm and while defining 'other' as 'nonwhite', 'non-heterosexual', 'non-Christian'. This alludes to the idea that simply learning about a group's history is sufficient to understand the barriers between the provider and client without any strategy to strive for social justice in order to eliminate oppression. Since the goal is simply 'to understand', it leads to a situation where culture is seen as "monolithic and knowable which may create stereotypical composites of various group identities" (Betancourt, 2006) leading to professional who might describe themselves as "culturally competent" whilst holding negative stereotypes about the people they work with. The fourth critique is that cultural competency fails to challenge systemic inequalities, as the majority of cultural competency focuses on practitioners learning about others as a means to combat inequality. It fails to identify the structural forces such as poverty and racism that underline health and social disparities (Jacobs et al., 2003). While cultural competence has provided an opening to discuss what it means to provide quality care to members of historically marginalized communities, it has not created a transformative agenda to add inequality or ways to close the gaps that still exist between the care given to members of dominant versus non- dominant groups.

The solution Fisher-Borne et al. (2006) suggest in their article is using cultural humility as an alternative to cultural competence as I mentioned earlier. Cultural humility is the process of committing to an ongoing relationship with patients, communities, and colleagues that requires humility as individuals continually engage in self-reflection and self-critique (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, 1998). Cultural humility takes the fluidity and subjectivity that exist in culture

and challenges both institutions and individuals to address inequality resulting in active engagement in a lifelong process that individual enter into with their clients, organizational structures, and within themselves (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, 1998).

While cultural competence compares to cultural humility in the sense that they both desire to address the existing disparities in how medical care is delivered. They differ in their approach as cultural humility emphasizes the need for accountability on both the individual and the institutional level compared to the knowledge acquisition model portrayed by the cultural competence framework. Cultural humility also acknowledges power differential between providers and clients asserting that problems do not often arise from 'lack of knowledge but rather the need for a change in practitioners self-awareness and attitudes towards diverse clients (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, 1998).

Cultural humility offers a deeper foundation to begin the work of eliminating inequality; it seeks to cultivate self-awareness on the part of the providers. It acknowledges how cultural values and structural forces shape client experiences. Because of this, cultural humility accounts for structural inequalities and the complexities that are absent from existing cultural competence models ensuring that practitioners and other social works are reminded of the importance to participate in social justice which in turns ensure that practitioners remain culturally sensitive to others.

Throughout my literature review process, I found that the lack of education of people in our society played has the biggest influence in the current state of complacency held by members of our society. To continue this research; I decided to interview people in my community, to learn more about how they think their social identity play a major play in how they think about discussing difference.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The goal of this research was to explore how people's social identity plays a role in how they discuss *difference*. Throughout this research process, scholarly articles were explored to understand better ways to communicate *difference*. By conducting the interview, I aimed to show that people's upbringing has a primary effect on their thinking about political and social-cultural issues. I also wanted to investigate if people are comfortable discussing difference, to achieve this. The main research questions asked during this process was "How does one's social identity affect socio-political discussions and how they discuss difference?"

To do this, the following research questions were asked:

RQ1: What comes to mind when people are asked about their social identity?

RQ2: Do people's thinking about culture and politics change throughout their lives?

RQ3: Are people grew up hearing/discussing political and social-cultural discussions more likely to participate in these discussions as adults?

R4: What social-cultural or political issues do people care the most about today?

R5: What needs to happen in other foster communicating difference?



### **Methodology**

In their book, Lindlof and Taylor (2002) describe a qualitative research method as one that is “primarily inductive, emergent, and somewhat unruly” (pg. 66). To say something is inductive is to say that the conclusion made from it arose from a set of observations, that is a broad set of ideas give rise to concise idea or pattern of ideas that can lead to a hypothesis or the emergency of a theory. Because of qualitative research is inductive, the “rules” that apply to it are not rigid as most qualitative research begin because researchers plan on making decisions about issues they have yet to discover, this process usually begins with a sense of purpose, some broad questions, and assessment of other research literatures. Qualitative research usually refrains from predicting how their study will turn out, for qualitative researcher, the process produces the result.

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) also describe the qualitative research process as “cyclical in its basic movement; that is most qualitative studies cycle many times though the same steps” (pg. 66). It is also cyclic because the process goes on until the researcher feels that they have gotten it right which can make a qualitative research timeframe longer than a research that takes a quantitative approach. The process that a qualitative research method entails requires qualitative researchers to be disciplined, these researchers “must learn when to watch, when to listen, when to go with the action, when to reflect, when to intervene tactfully” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). In order to be a successful qualitative researcher, one must be inquisitive, you must ask questions about the research literature, the world around you and yourself. The ability to be aware of yourself and others’ actions and motive is “an act of inner control” which is equal to the external control of a quantitative researcher. The qualitative research process requires using questions as a navigational device to find your way around “the social terrain of the scene”(Lindlof and Taylor,

2002), in a qualitative research process, one may find that the questions they are now asking as the research process approaches its end scarcely resemble the one they were asking at the beginning. By the end of a qualitative study, researchers often wonder what the best way to represent the stories in the studies as well as the stories of the study is.

Questioning ourselves is a step all researchers should confront before embarking on a research project, according to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), the researcher should answer the big question “is this the right project now, for me?”(pg. 77). In the early process of designing their project, researcher should be able to answer some question to help decide if this is the right project for them. The idea of pursuing research might seem easy for someone who has never embarked on research, but the truth of the matter is, research is a lot of work and being able to stay the course is absolutely important for a fruitful and purposeful research study. One question to answer is “Is the idea congruent with my personal researcher’s identity?” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002), for researching social identity was sparked because of the difficulty I experienced when I first moved to the US, I was 16 years old and I didn’t know what identity to hold on too, I had a very strong accent that made it really hard for me to share my intelligence with my class because my teachers could barely understand me, I also has to navigate being black in a culture where the color of your skin was relevant so choosing to do research I was sparked by those different element, as I began to discover myself through the years I became more fascinated with social identity and how your geographical location affects. The project has become one than just that in the last two semesters and that is the beauty of a qualitative research process. Another question to consider is “can I sustain my interest in this project over the long haul?” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Researcher must consider this question because it may become difficult to experience the research thrill when a study is mundane, so knowing pursuing a project that interest you will make

the process easier. I can say firsthand as a student who is enrolled in 22 credit hours, along side being in my 20s and having a job, research is hard. Some days, it feels almost like the research is at a halt and I'll never finish. But because of the interest I hold for my research I have been able to find time even when it feels like I don't have any. Questioning ourselves is an important step before embarking on research because it allows you to weigh the work and think of the reward, hopefully by question yourself, you reach a conclusion that the work will pay off in some way, for me earning an undergraduate honors thesis is the "currency" that kept me going with my research.

At another level, rapport means both the researcher and interview participant agree about matters of communication style such as the turn taking of questions and answer format, the right to finish without interruption and the freedom to use any form of expression. At this level, it is important for the researcher to note that, this doesn't mean that they must use the same word to express the same idea but rather that the neither person will be thought of as worst for not using the same words (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, pg. 189). On both levels, the true function of rapport is to establish quality in a communication event rather than a relationship. That is to say "just as respect can develop between two people who do not particularly like one another, rapport can exist in the absence of fondness and affection" (as cited in Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, pg. 189; Spradley, 1979, pg. 71).

Establishing rapport begins with the researcher's clarity of purpose, it is important that the participants are given clear, honest reasons for why they have been contacted, what the goals of the study are, and how the interview will be conducted. The researcher should also tell the participant their personal connection to the study (that is why they are interested in that particular study), this type of disclosure is one way to engage the participant's interest and pave the way for

meaningful interview. Also engaging in an informal interaction with the participant where you tell them a little bit about yourself can create an environment of reciprocity, this approach allows the participant to feel more comfortable with the researcher and more willing to share (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, pg. 190).

Establishing good listening habits as a researcher is crucial in a qualitative study. Good listening habit always call forth more and better stories. Listening at its basic level means paying attention. It is important to engage in active listening during interview, this means that the researcher is trying to hear the significance of what the interviewee is saying. This involves the researcher thinking through the conversation as it unfolds and asking “what am I learning now? What else should I learn? What can I do to help the participants to express themselves?” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, pg. 193). Establishing good rapport and using active listening can help transform the result of an interpretive study and make a huge difference in the conclusion the research reaches.

To complete the interview portion of my research, I decided to take a qualitative data collection approach as I believed it would be the most effective in attaining the goal of my research. I interviewed 15 individuals who were willing to explore this topic with me; I did not do my best to interview a diverse demographic to ensure more inclusive data. I interviews 10 of the participants in person, and they created a survey in an attempt to get more individuals to be part of my study, and through that, I was able to get five more people to answer the question. I was nervous about using a survey because I wanted an opportunity to in-depth answers. Luckily, the people who participated in the research sent very in-depth answers.

Getting to people to participant in my research was not difficult. I know my topic of research is one that people have little understanding about, so to get the in-depth answers as I

wanted, I decided to be a little strategic with who I asked to participate. In the earlier times of my research, I discovered that college-age adults (18-21) were not giving me the in detail answers I wanted. This was one of the major reasons I expanded my demographics as my interview became more in-depth and had what I presume to be valuable answers, especially for my last interview question.

### **Analysis**

My first research question asked about my participants' cultural identities as well as asked them to state which identity was most important to them. Majority of my participants were often confused. They were not what exactly I was asking them. To get an answer, I sometimes had to explain what I meant by cultural identities. I explained that cultural identity encompassed a person's ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, racial, as well as personal identities (such as being a father, mother, sister, brother, etc.). The result from the first question indicated that 47% of my participants who happened to be social minorities valued their identity as member more than other identity. These participants identified as being either women or persons of color first, before diving into any other identities that they were ascribed to them. Of the 73% who did not feel like their gender or racial identity defined them, 25% of them identified as being Christian and believed that their religious status played a more significant role in their daily lives than any of their other identities. The remaining 48% of the 73%, had different answers. One of the participant mentioned that their most important identity was being alternative which they explained that this identity allowed them "to go against the norm in different performances of identity."(Personal interview, 2019) Another participant valued their identity as an instructor at a university because it gave them an opportunity to impact the lives of college age adults in ways they might have never had. They stated, "I love seeing my students have a 'ha-ah' moment

where their thinking about the norms is challenged and they become more intrigued by the social topics” (Personal Interview, 2019)

My second research question was to find out if people’s thinking about culture and politics change throughout their lives. The result of my research demonstrated that 100% of my participant agrees that their thinking about culture has changed throughout their lives. However, 46% of my participants noted that their political beliefs have not changed, but their ideas of their political views have been strengthened. This observation was especially true for individuals who identified as liberal, one of my participants stated: “I believe in equality and justice, and to me, liberal policy support the provision of both and that idea has only become stronger throughout my college years.” (Personal interview, 2019). Another 46% stated that their political beliefs evolved as when they came to college and they do not share the same political beliefs they grew up having. Something that stuck out to me was that participants who were over the age of 40 were more moderate rather than identifying as either extreme. In fact, they all stated that they lean more towards left or right and stating that they had things from both sides that they support. To explore this, I asked why they had these response and majority alluded it to their academic background and attending diverse colleges. One of my participant explained that when they got to college, they realized majority of their belief systems had been influenced by their parent’s and that “the only reason I’m Christian is because I grew up in a Christian household, it occurred to me that if I was raised in a Hindu family, I’d probably be practicing that right now.” (Personal interview, 2019). Other than the realization that who are, as adults, is primarily a result of social reproduction, Participants over 40 years old as a group noted that they are more aware of the discrepancies that exist in our world and as such, their bias against people who are different than them is in check.

An example is when one of my participants who identifies as being more conservative explained his ‘ha-ha’ moment about immigration any he no longer agrees with the extreme immigration policies that people who like to see play out in the United States. He stated: “after having a conversation with a church member who explained to me some of the atrocities that people who seek refuge in the US face which I was not completely aware of. Understanding what they go through made me more sympathetic, but what really sealed it was when he asked me ‘if your family was in the same situation, would you stay?’ I realized I wouldn’t, and I would get the hell out of dodge.” (Personal interview, 2018)

From this part of my interview, I realized that the biggest thing that was lacking in fostering an environment where people felt comfortable to discuss difference was primarily; lack of knowledge. As I mentioned earlier in my paper, the culture of “us versus them” plays a strong role in fear of those different than us. Understanding more about people who are different than us will help foster a cultural bridge which may help reduce the impact of the “us versus them” culture as well as promote understanding and solidify that we are not so different at all.

The third question of my research aimed to discover if individuals who grow up discussing political, social, and cultural issues were more likely than individuals who did not to discuss those issues as adults. Contrary to what I assumed, the discussion of political, social, and cultural issues growing up did not encourage individuals who were interviewed to discuss or not discuss politics. What I found was unique in that, 26% of my participants were previously interested in politics, so when they reached to their parents and asked about political topics. The conversations they had encouraged their curiosity and they became more aware of how politics works as well as how policies played a big role in their everyday lives which makes them judicious consumer of media, especially during elections season. Another 40% of my

participants who did not experience the discussion of political discussion, claimed it did not affect their decision to now discuss politics. They stated, “I grew thinking that voting was a decision you made between you and God, you go in that poll, vote and never speak of it. It was an unsaid rule, so when I got to college, it was tough navigating these discussions, but I was curious as I was also questioning everything I knew up until that point. A conversation with one of my friends encouraged me to take a sociology class which eventually drove my desire to study sociology to understand more about social issues — having a sociological perspective” (Personal interview, 2019). One of the participants who were part of this statistic stated, “like I won’t initiate the conversation, but I no longer get nervous about being part of these discussions. I credit that to my discussion classes in college where my professors strongly encouraged us to share our thoughts...” (Personal interview, 2019). The other 34% of my participants shared that because politics was discussed in their homes growing up, they were more turned off from political discussion during their teenage years. However, as they got older and became more exposed to people different than them, the more they understood how impactful politics is in society. According to one of my participant, “it becomes more relevant when I realized I directly affected by these policies, realizing that policies were the reason why my student loans were as high as they were.” (Personal Interview, 2019). This part of the interview process showed that unless you open your mind to understanding different things, it is difficult to understand the worldview of those who are different than you.

My fourth research question asks the participants about what political or socio-cultural they cared about today. About 53% of the participants stated college loans as the sociocultural issue they care the most about, while about 27% mentioned gun control, 3% mentioned that police misconduct was the issue they cared the most about today. Others issues that were stated



include; wealth disparity, educational inequality, racial/sexuality/gender intolerance, political corruption, and political polarization. The main point found in this part was the desire to push policies that will fix or work to minimize the effect of the sociocultural/ political issues that they cared about today.

The last research question I had was asked my participants to state what they believed needs to happen, so people can better communicate differences. The consensus was that people needed to listen more rather than just being concerned about their personal opinions. People need to be held accountable was another favorite of mine, one of the participants stated that “a big issue in these discussions is that people tend to use the narrative that “if it happened in the past, it no longer matters.” The issue behind this is that it erases the generational influence that put a lot of the systemic oppressions we have in place today. People need to understand history influences the present and that a lot of narratives are silenced due to those in power controlling a lot of those narratives” (Personal Interview, 2019). Another that was stated was that as a community, we also need to practice a culture of empathy because a lot of disagreements tend to come more from an unwillingness to address those emotions in place and rather dismiss them. Emotional connection is a big part of humanization, and if it can be utilized as a tool of connecting people across culture, the issues of how different we are will be minimized, and the conversation will shift more towards us being able to bridge our cultures.

Lastly, I interviewed several humanities professors during this process, and the one consensus they all shared was that the real change that needs to happen would occur with education. Essentially, we need to revamp the education system to promote a culture where people learn more about other culture instead of the common core. It was stated multiple time

that planting the seed of sociology as well as communication will increase the promotion of intercultural relation and will slowly bridge the gap that exists in our culture today.

#### Limitations and Future Study

If this study were to be redone, some change would be made as there were several deficits in the data collection process. One of the first thing that would be done was an increment of the number of participants. A sample size of 15 is not enough to conclude how social identity affects communicating difference, while generalization could be made, having a large pool to draw from would have positively impacted this study. Although, I raised my thesis in one of my classes a few times as part of an informal discussion and the same ideas shared by my participants were part of the conversation. However, interviewing each of the people who participated in that conversation will have increased my data accuracy. The researcher should have created an online survey that would have reached more people thereby increasing data yield.

Future studies should aim to propose a course to test if, at the end of the semester, students were now better at communicating difference. Advice would be to use focus groups to collect data. Although focus groups have limitation like the exposure to groupthink, several focus groups along with better word question could transform the result collected. I believe that this project could gain footing and lead to some changes, designing a course where students' ideas are sparked on realizing that our identity plays a major role in how we see people and how we treat them. Rather than being afraid of those difference, we should embrace them as this will help us realize, we are not so different after all. As a majority, we care about similar things regardless of color, class or creed. This realization will, in my opinion, act as a glue to bring us together rather than tear us apart.

### Conclusions

This research focused on determining what needs to happen in order for people to be able to communicate difference. The research asked five major questions: What comes to mind when people are asked about their social identity? Do people's thinking about culture and politics change throughout their lives? Are people grew up hearing/discussing political and social-cultural discussions more likely to participate in these discussions as adults? What social-cultural or political issues do people care the most about today? What needs to happen in other foster communicating difference?

PI utilized personal and electronic interviews to collect the data for the data collection portion of this study. The study had 15 research participant who varied in demographics. The participants were willing to answer the questions and any confusion that arised from the format of the question was explained by the PI

The study showed that 47% of the participants who happened to be social minorities valued their identity as member more than their other social identities. These participants identified as being either women or persons of color first, before diving into any other identities that they were ascribed to them. Of the 73% who did not feel like their gender or racial identity defined them, 25% of them identified as being Christian and believed that their religious status played a more significant role in their daily lives than any of their other identities. The remaining 48% of the 73%, had different opinions of what their society is to them.

The second research question response indicated that 100% of the study's participants agree that their thinking about culture has changed throughout their lives. However, 46% of my participants noted that their political beliefs have not changed, but their political views have been strengthened through the years and their interactions with people. In contrast, 54% believed their

political views changed because of their interactions with other people, mostly individuals who are different than them.

The third major responds from this study showed that 26% of the study's participants were previously interested in politics. The conversations they had with their parents and other adults figures encouraged their curiosity and they became more aware of how politics works as well as how policies played a big role in their everyday lives which makes them judicious consumer of media, especially during elections season. Another 40% of the study's participants stated that they did not experience political discussions growing up. They claimed it did not affect their decision to now discuss politics.

The response from the fourth major research question indicated that about 53% of the participants stated college loans as the sociocultural issue they care the most about, while about 27% mentioned gun control, 3% mentioned that police misconduct was the issue they cared the most about today. Others issues that were stated include; wealth disparity, educational inequality, racial/sexuality/gender intolerance, political corruption, and political polarization. The main point found in this part was the desire to push policies that will fix or work to minimize the effect of the sociocultural/ political issues that they cared about today.

The response of the individuals who participated in the study, indicated that for people to communicate better about difference, people need to listen more rather than just being concerned about their personal opinions, people need to be held accountable about their beliefs, people need to receive an education that allows them to become more informed about other culture. The idea is to correct the fallacies, biases, and prejudices people currently have in order to create an environment that foster communicating difference, bridge our community, and ensure we can live together in harmony.

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## **Appendix A**

### Interview Guide

How would you describe your cultural identities? Which identity is most important to you now and why?

How has your thinking about culture changed throughout your life?

How would you describe your political beliefs?

How have your political beliefs changed throughout your life?

What was it like growing up? Did your parents/other adult figures discuss social, political, or cultural issues? How do you think those experiences shaped your identities and politics?

If you had to state one thing that makes you different, what would it be? How does this difference play in your everyday life? Has this difference ever influenced your discussions about socio-cultural issues and politics? If so, please describe the time.

What's a social, cultural, or political issue that you really care about now? Why is it so important to you? What do you think about people on the other side of this issue? Have you ever had discussions with someone on the other side? How did it go?

Do you have friends or family who disagree with your politics? If so, how do you discuss these differences? Have they ever caused conflict? If so, describe the situation and outcome.

What are some of the socio-cultural or political challenges that you see facing the U.S. right now?

What do you think needs to happen to help people be able to communicate more about the difference?

### Appendix B

#### RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, call or write:

Institutional Review Board  
Eastern Illinois University  
600 Lincoln Ave.  
Charleston, IL 61920  
Telephone: (217) 581-8576  
E-mail: [eiuirb@www.eiu.edu](mailto:eiuirb@www.eiu.edu)

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

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I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

In addition, I agree to be audio-recorded with the understanding that these audio-recordings will be used for the purposes of this research study and transcribed using psuedonyms to protect my confidentiality.

I agree to be audio-recorded.

I do not agree to be audio-recorded

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date