



Growing Up African-American, Christian, and Female **The Dichotomies of My Life**

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Abstract: In this paper I explore the roller coaster ride that has been my life. This was not a roller coaster ride that left me dizzy and sick to my stomach, it has done something quite different. The ride has left me clear-headed and stronger in terms of the way I look at the world and how I fit into it. Living with dichotomies for most of my life has created in me a character that is unique, and therefore I am eager to share it. I have always looked at myself as a Zebra, an animal that lives in constant duality; black and White. Being an African-American, Christian, and female, athlete, I always found myself in situations where I was very different. I had to deal with those differences the best way I knew how, the way my parents had raised me. They would always tell me to “be strong” and “always remember who I am.” Whether I am in school, hanging out with friends, or on the basketball court, I must always remember the values that have been passed down to me through those who were responsible for helping me to become a part of society.

&When I look back at my life to date, all I can do is sigh. I am not sighing because I am relieved that that portion of my life is over, I am sighing because I wonder how I ever did it. It was not until I got older that I realized that the way I grew up was very different than the way experienced by others that I know. Granted, that statement could probably apply to almost anyone living herein America, except for those who live mundane and uneventful lives. However, my life has been anything but mundane and uneventful. My life has been full of dualities and dichotomies, various divisions between two contradictory parts.

In this paper I will explore the roller coaster ride that has been my life. This was not a roller coaster ride that left me dizzy

and sick to my stomach, it has done something quite different. The ride has left me clear-headed and stronger in terms of the way I look at the world and how I fit into it. Living with dichotomies for most of my life has created in me a character that is unique, and therefore I am eager to share it. I have always looked at myself as a Zebra, an animal that lives in constant duality; black and White. While I will address the issue of being a black girl going to school in an all white community, there are other situations in my life that I will address where I stuck out like a fly in a bowl of cream.

Looking retrospectively at my life, and the way I was socialized, I realize that every moment has led up to the person I am now. Peter and Brigitte Berger define **socializa-**

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tion as “The process through which an individual learns to become a member of society.” I look at this process as the internalization of the societal norms. Whether an individual grows up on a farm in Kansas, or in New York’s inner city, the values and norms they are taught as a young child will affect them throughout their lives. The way they are socialized will affect the decisions they make, the careers they choose, the majors they decide on in college, friends they make, etc. The largest influences an individual has in their lives are their **significant others**. These are people who are closest and have the most influence over an individual. Edwin Sutherland, who is most well-known in criminology, developed the theory of **Differential Association**. He attributed the way someone learned values and behaviors to how close they felt to their significant others. He said that there are four things that will determine how much of an effect your significant others will have on you: the frequency in which you see someone, the duration of time you spend with that person, the priority they have in your life (i.e., how important they are to you), and how intense your experiences with that person are. All of these affect how much an individual’s significant others had to do with their socialization. This is called **primary socialization**, the adults and social groups that are primarily involved in an individual’s life at an early age. **Generalized others** are those people in a person’s life that may not have had a direct impact on an individual’s life, but have indirectly impacted her or his life in some way. This may include people on television, sports stars, of even a person’s pastor at church. For instance, in the movie *Billy Elliot*, Billy aspired to become a dancer because he watched Fred Astaire on television dancing. Although Billy did not personally know Fred Astaire, he had an impact on Billy and what he aspired to do. While Fred Astaire would be considered a generalized other to Billy, his father and brother would be considered

significant others to him because they are in his life everyday and are constantly influencing him.

In order to understand me and the way I have been socialized, one must first know where I am from, and where I have been. I will attempt to set up my **social location** to give context to my life. I was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1981. I was born to a mother, father and an older brother. My mother was of African-American decent and my father of Native American and African-American decent. I come from a long line of reverends, pastors and deacons, including my own father who is the assistant pastor of my church. From the day I was born, I was in the church. Religion, Christianity to be specific, was always being stressed in my family. Although my parents did not “shove” religion down my throat, it was understood by my brother, my younger sister, and me that we were expected to be in church on Sundays and live as “good Christians” should the other six days of the week. According to Erik Erikson, in the first stage of life, a child learns to either trust or mistrust the people in their lives. Well, since I grew up in the church, to where I attribute much of my early socialization, I learned to trust the other church-goers, and the things that I was learning in church. Religion has been and remains a very large part of my life.

Beside religion, athletics was something that was also very important to me at a very early age. Ever since I was in first grade, I have been involved in soccer, basketball, track and any other recreational team sport parents put their children in at an early age. The only difference was, I was really good at all of the sports I played. That may also have something to do with the fact that I grew six inches in Kindergarten, an act so unprecedented that the physicians in my doctor’s office gathered to discuss it. Needless to say, I was always treated as “the athlete.” The theory of biological determinism comes into question here. Was I in-

volved in athletics because I was tall and fast and therefore everybody expected me to play sports; or, did my physical stature make me better at sports—so therefore I played them?

I showed musical ability at a very young age, and my parents were always trying to get me to take lessons. Although I refused to take lessons, I continue to play several different instruments by ear.

I went to school in Brookline, Massachusetts, for thirteen years: grades K-12. Brookline is a predominantly white, middle- to upper-middle class, Jewish suburb of Boston. Although it is considered a suburb, it is surrounded by Boston on three sides. Growing up in a Jewish community, with mostly Jewish friends, I was unable to see the societal implications that these had until I left Brookline to go to college. I realized that not many people in this country grow up knowing what the Torah is or knowing what a Bar Mitzvah was. To put things into perspective, most people I talk to who went to schools in the suburbs of Boston go to two or three Bar or Bat Mitzvahs (the rights of passage ceremony for Jewish kids when they turn thirteen) on average. I went to fourteen. Needless to say, I was and still am very knowledgeable about the Jewish culture and traditions.

After graduating from Brookline High School, where I was very involved in Drama, athletics and received good grades, I went on to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. After four years, and not graduating because of a late major change, I took a year off to participate in a non-profit organization for ten months. Now I am here at UMass Boston finishing my degree. I hope that this brief background on my life will provide a better context for the exploration that follows.

BLACK GIRL...ALL WHITE SCHOOL

When I started school in Brookline, Massachusetts, I was only six years old. I

started at the John D. Runkle School. All of the elementary schools in Brookline are K-8. I was too young to fully understand what impact being one of the only black children in my grade would have. I was in the Metco program. The Metco program was a program developed in the sixties that bused children from Boston, giving inner city youth an opportunity to get a better education in surrounding suburbs. It was recognized that the schools in Boston were far inferior to the schools outside of Boston. They also noticed that this negatively impacted the African-American community in the sense that the kids in the inner city did not receive the same educational opportunities as other kids. This is a very competitive program, and parents who want their kids to be involved must put them on the waiting list practically on the day they were born in order to insure that they get into the program.

In the Kindergarten my friends were Angel, Suzy, James, PJ and Rich. They were all African-American and some of them lived in Brookline and some were in the Metco program like me. My significant others at the time were my father, my mother and my brother, who are all people of color. Because the people closest to me were people of color, they are those I felt most comfortable with at school. To be completely honest, the only other white kids I was friends with in Kindergarten were Zach and Mitchell; and I was only friends with them because we were in the Camp Fire program together. I do not remember having any self identity problems at that young age. However, when I went to the Baker School in first grade (another elementary school in Brookline) I started to become more aware of who I was as an African-American. I started to notice that my skin color was different than the rest of the kids, my hair was different and I used different words and sayings than the other kids did. I was interested in rap music, while they were interested in Rock and Roll. Although I noticed all of these differences, I was never made to

feel that I was much different than the other kids in the early years of elementary school.

The only time I ever felt any different was when I thought that my friends David and Craig called me a “N---r.” After many meetings with teachers and parents, it turned out that he was actually calling me “Chicken.” I felt really out of place for that one week, but after everything was cleared up and I realized that my friend David was not a racist, I felt ok. My teacher in the fourth grade, Mrs. Henry, was a teacher that had a great impact on my life. I would consider her one of my significant others in elementary school. She was African-American and showed me that I was beautiful and special no matter what skin color I was. She also taught me that **race** did not matter when judging someone’s character (an idea that I later realized was shared by Martin Luther King Jr.). I looked up to her a lot, and she had a great impact on my life while I was at the Baker School.

Seventh and Eighth grades were the grades that I started to realize what it meant to be African-American in an all white school community. It was then that I learned that there was something called “tracking.” “Tracking” is when certain children are placed in certain classes according to what the teachers believe that student will achieve or not achieve. The children who are placed in the lower level classes get easier curriculum and are not expected to learn at the same rate as the other children. The seventh and eighth grade math teacher at Baker was known for putting the African-American students in the lower level math classes, and it turned out that many of the Metco students at Baker were in the lower level math classes. When I went to seventh grade the math teacher tried to do that to me. When my mother realized what was happening, she came to the school to complain. One day after school, my mother and my math teacher stayed in the classroom for about two hours and talked about the situation. After two hours of waiting in the hall-

way and hearing my mother and my math teacher in a heated discussion, my mother came out and informed me that I would be moving to the more advanced math class. I was able to excel and received good grades. This is an example of **institutionalized racism**, systems set up that are inherently racist. When I noticed that most of the Metco students (there were approximately twelve in the seventh and eighth grade) were in the lower level math classes, it was then that I started to notice the racism that was deeply ingrained in the school system.

Looking back at my elementary school and my high school in Brookline, I realize that these are two places that **social reproduction** existed. The social reproductive theory looks at “how the class structure is reproduced from one generation to the next.” In the book *Aint No Makin’ It*, Jay MacLeod says that schools are the **social institution** that is mostly responsible for social reproduction because so much is learned in school, and children get many of their influences from school. Although this theory deals with the class structure, I will look at how the structure of **racism** and racial subordination is also reproduced in schools, specifically Brookline High School.

At school we were taught a very eurocentric curriculum. It was an education that focused on the contributions Europeans and European-Americans have made to this world and country. I remember one day coming home and saying “Paul Revere is one of the most important men in American History!” Whenever I said things like that my brother would always respond “Oh my gosh, we have to get you out of the school system.” The truth is, all school systems have eurocentric curricula. It is true, we learned about Black History during the month of February, but it was as if Black history was not a part of American history. This may lead some African-American kids to feel that the history of their people was not as important as the history of White people, thus devaluing their experience of

being Black in America.

In high school, a student made the comment "Most Black people that go to this school are in less advanced classes, while the students in the more advanced classes are mostly white and Asian. You can not argue with that...it is a fact." The statement he made created so much outrage amongst the African-American community at the school that the whole school spent a whole week "engaging in conversation." We called the week "Can We Talk?" The whole school gathered in small groups to talk about diversity. I understand why the school was upset about the comments the boy made, but I also could not stop thinking that he was correct. The majority of the less advanced classes had more African-Americans than the more advanced classes; but why? Was it because of the tracking system that had been in place in Brookline elementary schools?

I started to notice that this school system, like many others, were actually duplicating society, where more people of color are working low paying, menial jobs. There were, however, a large contingency of Black students in upper-level classes. Being one of the students in the upper-level classes, it was shameful for me to look at the situation and face the reality. The kids in the lower level classes (white kids and black kids) will not get into the same colleges or have the same opportunities as the kids in the upper levels. If they do not get the same educational opportunities, they will not get the same kinds of jobs or have the same kinds of careers. This is one of the ways schools reproduce society.

The teacher of my African American Studies class in my senior year explained to the class that black people in America suffer from **internalized racism**. This is to say that Blacks in America have internalized the racist and prejudiced views that have been imposed on them in society. By internalizing these ideas, Blacks then start to act according to the way society views them, the way

society says they are supposed to act. My teacher was right, but he was only half right. Black people are not the only people who have internalized racist views, white people in America have too. The whole notion of **white privilege** is one of the ways Whites have internalized the racist ideas. As long as Whites in America believe that they are people of privilege over everyone else in America, I do not believe that anything will ever change. It will not be until Whites in this country understand that just because they are white does not make them privileged. Everyone in this country deserves the same opportunities as everyone else.

It was obvious that my seventh grade math teacher believed that African-American students were not as capable of learning as the other students. The decision she made to place the Metco students in lower level classes may have a lasting effect on somebody's life. The students placed in less advanced classes were predestined to be low achievers, thus fulfilling the **stereotypes** about them—as in the case of the kids of color at my high school. Stereotypes are generalizations made about a certain group of people because of certain patterns attributed to them. Growing up, I was not fully aware of the situation I was in. I represented a totally different culture, and was socialized with kids that represented a culture different than my own. Becoming aware of my own race, and where I fit into society, was one of the best things that could have happened to me. It helped me in a way that I was able to develop a very acute social conscience which allows me to look at society with an open mind. It allowed me to live my life without psychological and physical borders.

The psychological borders were broken when I realized that the color of my skin does not make me inferior, and I should never be denied anything because of it. The physical borders were broken when I physically left Boston to go to school in a community much different than my own. One

question that I have is whether or not the experiences I had growing up caused me to have false hopes, or is the optimism I have about racial equality real? I would like to think that the optimism is real, but that is something I will figure out as I start to explore the real world.

GIRL IN AN ALL BOYS WORLD

I have been involved in sports since the first grade. In Brookline, the recreational sports are co-educational, so I have been playing with boys from a very early age. I was tall and athletic even as a young child so I always preferred playing with boys. I remember the girls on my soccer team would run away when the ball was kicked to them, while the boys would charge at the ball; I preferred the more aggressive style of play.

It was at a very young age that I was labeled a "tomboy," a girl who likes to do "guy" things. During my time at Baker, I would play football with the boys in the winter and basketball in the spring. My mother insisted that I was losing all of my **femininity** (if I even had any to begin with). She always told me that "boys don't like girls who can beat them in basketball." To this day, it does not upset me that my mother would say something like that, because at that age, it is true. I also had crushes on all of the boys I played with, and in the sixth grade I confronted one of them. He told me that he would just rather be friends. Whether or not that had anything to do with my playing sports, I do not know; but at that time I thought it did. However, I did not care. I continued to play sports, was the star of my seventh and eighth grade basketball team and won every single gym award at my eighth grade award ceremony. My mother tried to make me a "normal girl." She tried to encourage me to wear dresses and skirts, she would do my hair really pretty, only to have me come home by the end of the days with it disheveled. I tried some-

times to please her, but I felt like I was not being myself.

Sadly my mother passed away the summer before I was to enter high school. I did not have any problem being a tomboy in high school because the stereotypical "jock" is always cool and popular.

College was where I really had to confront being a tomboy in my social life. Like in the elementary, I had crushes on all of the guys that I played basketball with. They were not turned off by the fact that I could beat them in basketball; they actually thought it was kind of cool. My **feminine** qualities were also something that I became more aware of in college because it was a much different social situation than elementary school. I was oftentimes the only girl playing basketball in a sea of guys, and that did not make me feel uncomfortable because I was accepted, but in a different way than before. I was accepted as a female playing basketball with a bunch of males. They applied **double standards** to me, rules that apply to some people that do not apply to others. For example, a foul committed on me would be respected while the same foul committed on someone else would be overlooked. The fact that I was female playing with all males would sometimes have the opposite effect. They would sometimes play defense on me really tough and say that if I wanted to play with the guys I needed to know how to be tougher. They called it "teaching me a lesson."

The **emotions** that I exhibited during a basketball game would not be considered feminine. The confidence I felt and the aggressive nature in which I played (although I was always much smaller than the guys I play with) are not looked at as feminine qualities. I was not passive, petit or docile when I played, but rather I was the opposite. Although I feel this confidence and aggressiveness while playing the games, I realized then that it only lasted while I played basketball. Afterward I would go back to my more feminine qualities. This is the du-

ality that I live in. Sometimes I can be a complete tomboy, and at other times I can be the stereotypical “girl.”

Like the understanding I gained from being one of the only Black girl in an all White school, there is a respect and understanding I gain from oftentimes being the only woman playing with all men.

CHRISTIAN GIRL...SECULAR WORLD

The last duality I would like to explore is being a Christian in a secular setting. Going to school in Brookline for thirteen years, I did not struggle with being religious. It was not a struggle for me for three reasons. First, because many of the people in Brookline are Jewish, therefore we share some of the same morals and beliefs. Second, everyone knew that my father was the town juvenile probation officer and is a reverend; therefore they did not want to engage in anything that he would not approve of. Third, I went to church and was very much involved and I did not want to engage in any act that God would not approve of.

The trouble came when I went to college. I was in total **culture shock**. The college **culture** was one that was totally different than the one I had known my whole life. There were people doing drugs, having casual sex, and engaging in other activities that I never could have imagined—things that I only saw on television. Needless to say, I was completely naïve. It was hard for me at first, but I knew that I did not want to be *that* girl who grows up in a religious household, then goes to college and “sows her wild oats.” The **peer group** that I hung out with always wanted me to “step out of my box” and experience new things, but I still resisted telling them I liked who I was and I liked my values. At first I felt really out of place at UMass Amherst, but when my friends started to respect me and the way in which I was raised it became much

better. Through my experiences at school, I was able to see what it would be to live a secular life, and can respect people who do.

All of the above experiences with duality I have had in my life have made me the person I am today. Being the person that oftentimes stood out in situations, has built a very unique character in me. Being an African-American, Christian, and female, athlete, I always found myself in situations where I was very different. I had to deal with those differences the best way I knew how, the way my parents had raised me. They would always tell me to “be strong” and “always remember who I am.” Whether I am in school, hanging out with friends, or on the basketball court, I must always remember the values that have been passed down to me through those who were responsible for helping me to become a part of society.

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