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Critical Cultural Analysis:
Perspectives from a Kazakh, an Italian-Canadian, and a Finnish-Swedish-American
AND
Reflection on Cultural Realism & Identity and Culture & Instruction

Jonathan Lehtonen

Pennsylvania State University

Professor Sharon Childs

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Part I. Critical Cultural Analysis

In June, 2014, I interviewed two very gracious members of the Penn State community, whom I will refer to as Dania and Pietro, in order to stimulate my own thinking and growth as an intercultural being. Dania is an international undergraduate student from Kazakhstan,¹ and Pietro is an IECIP instructor and a PhD student.² All of us have experiences of comparing our own cultures to the cultures of others, so therefore Kumaravadivelu's (2008) concept of cultural realism can help reveal our growth in global cultural consciousness. According to cultural realism, comparing cultures is a key opportunity for "critical self-reflection," which "helps one to identify and understand what is good and bad about one's own culture, and what is good and bad about other cultures" (Kumaravadivelu 2008, p. 164-165). The result is a process of "deeper cultural transformation," because, "In understanding other cultures, we understand our own better; in understanding our own, we understand other cultures better" (p. 165).

When I triangulated our life stories, I observed that Dania, Pietro, and I share a degree of self-awareness of personal cultural growth. One difference, however, between my interviewees and me is the emphasis we place on religion. Religion certainly played some role in their upbringing, but they did not indicate that it was a major influence, whereas I shared many details about my Christian upbringing in my APLNG 804 Cultural Autoethnography. For this analysis,

¹ Dania is from Ekibastuz, a coal-mining town of about 125,000 in an isolated desert region of eastern Kazakhstan. She is in her mid-twenties, speaks Russian, and is of Kazakh ethnicity. Dania speaks Kazakh as well, and English is her third language. She earned a BS in computer hardware in Kazakhstan, after which she moved to Philadelphia to study English at UPenn for two years. She has been studying in the US for four years, funded by the government of Kazakhstan. Dania is now entering her third year at Penn State, majoring in Information Systems.

² Pietro is a PhD student in the College of Education at Penn State, where he is researching ESL assessment. He grew up in Toronto in a family of Italian immigrants, and he studied part-time during his 20's to earn a BA in Italian from the University of Toronto, where he also earned an MA in Italian. After this, he completed a TEFL program in Italy and taught English there for a while, and he later earned an MA in Applied Linguistics from UMass Boston. He is now 37 years old, and overall has a balanced profile of practical teaching and theoretical research experience.

therefore, I will focus mostly on comparing our consciousness of how family and socioeconomic factors have influenced our identities as well as our intellectual growth.

A. Dania's Family Life and External Culture: Collectivism vs. Individualism.

Our perceptions of our families and surrounding cultures help reveal deeply held social values. Dania's experience reflects a form of collectivism that was surprising to me. My own family experiences have demonstrated elements of both collectivism and individualism, and I would argue that the United States harmonizes major elements of both, which I will explain later.

Before interviewing Dania, I believed that Kazakh culture trended towards collectivism, which I thought implied close ties to one's family and to one's local community. When I asked Dania about her community involvement, she replied that she did not know much about Ekibastuz, which has a high crime rate, so she spent much time at home for safety's sake. She also explains that poverty causes the need to depend on one's family. Due to this collectivism, Kazakhs show a deep level of kindness towards family, friends, and guests. For guests, she stated, "we give you the best." However, a major difference she noticed is that Americans tend to be kinder to strangers in public. In Kazakhstan, it is "very weird" if you smile in public, and "if you say 'hi,' people will say very angry words." I was surprised that this form of collectivism did not strengthen the bonds among community members.

To me as an American, it seems individualistic to associate only with one's own family. I thought collectivism implied that "It takes a village to raise a child." In America, we often see the nuclear family unit as the main care-taker of children, but the real life practice is that "villages" work together to raise children. I, however, I considered my nuclear family unit to be rather individualistic, because I felt influenced mostly by my mom, who did not work outside the home. I never went to daycare, I never played organized sports, and only as I grew older did I

become more involved in extracurricular activities at school and church. Nevertheless, my family could also be called collectivist, like Dania's, since we had strong bonds amongst ourselves. Comparing our families gives me a more nuanced picture of collectivism and individualism, which is an illuminating but imperfect binary for describing social reality. My conclusion is that there is a big difference between familial collectivism and community collectivism.

Dania's reflections help me to see evidence for American community based collectivism, since she is undergoing cultural transformation as a result of witnessing American volunteerism:

My mentality has changed. I started to think about volunteering, like, working for *free*. This is like, a crazy idea, right, in Kazakhstan. It is *not usual* to work without being paid. So yeah, I want to do something for free, for people, to help people, and I changed my mind, actually. My goals and dreams were so narrow, like—*Now I dream big!*

Contrary to the idea that the US is primarily individualistic, Dania reveals community-level collectivism in the US. I myself have done volunteer work ever since high school. On the other hand, Dania has observed a low degree of family-based collectivism. The practice of retirement housing is unheard of in Kazakhstan. "I was shocked," she states. "I could not imagine my mom sitting in a governmental house, when children don't care about their parents." It is "not normal" to treat elders this way in Kazakhstan: "We are more attached to our parents."

Dania thus gives evidence for the negative side of so-called American individualism. It makes me wonder how I will treat my parents when they are older. Dania's high valuation of her family makes me wonder how I can reach out better to relatives who are not an important part of my reality. However, according to Dania, among Kazakhs, "We always care what people say around us, what society will say, what our brothers, friends, and family will say." In comparison, she states, "Here in American, people just do what they want to do." I think this is often true. In America, we have more power to cut ourselves off from toxic relatives, as my family has, with minimal social consequences, and we create new social networks with non-family members.

In post-Soviet Kazakhstan, the fact that people are so close knit in their own families and not very open to strangers (with the exception of guests) is greatly ironic, since the utopianism of communism was intended to unify society. At the same time, it is quite ironic that in the USA, with our dog-eat-dog form of capitalism, many people do feel a general good-will towards strangers in their communities. Despite our “shocking” individualism concerning family cohesion, I believe the US is somewhat collectivist in terms of broader community engagement.

B. Pietro’s Family, Canadian Culture, and the Desire for Independence

In my interview with Pietro, we did not explicitly discuss individualism and collectivism, but his family life sounded similar to Dania’s. Pietro’s parents were immigrants from Italy living in Toronto, Canada, and his family was close-knit, just as many families are in Kazakhstan. However, a major difference is that Pietro experienced the common phenomenon of dissociating from one’s parents’ culture during adolescence but coming to respect it more during early adulthood—this is known as a “U-shaped” trajectory that Kumaravadivelu (2008, p. 3-4) expects his own children may experience. In contrast, Dania grew up embracing the strength of her family’s collectivist structure, and she would have been encouraged by the dominant Kazakh culture to view her family in this manner. I believe Pietro’s dissociation from his family during adolescence was due to two main causes: the dominant culture of Canada placed pressure on this kind of family structure, and he also acted on his individual preference to be more independent.

This duality of internal and external influences on identity is theorized by Matthews (2000, pp. 71-72) through the metaphor of “the cultural supermarket,” by which individuals develop their identities in a dialectical process involving both the deterministic impact of a social environment and the agency of individuals to select cultural practices. Having many options in

the diverse “cultural supermarket” of Toronto perhaps sparked Pietro’s desire for independence, but at the same time he still made choices about what to put in his “cultural shopping cart.”

Pietro explains that while some adolescents in immigrant families feel proud of their cultural heritage, he felt more inclined to hide it. He discusses the impact of his socio-cultural environment: “50 or 60% of the people that live in Toronto are not originally from there... But, of course, I think there is this expectation that—and a sort of valuing of the dominant culture, more of an Anglo culture, that I associated with.” As a result, he experienced a deficit identity, theorized by many scholars, including Marshall (2010): “For quite some time I considered it [home culture] more of an impediment than a cultural resource.” In addition, Pietro states, “While craving independence, I was sort being expected to fit into these family roles, which I don’t think I fit, which I definitely rebelled against.” Thus, both the dominant culture and his desire for independence factored into his rebellion against his inherited culture.

Pietro’s experiences contrast with mine, because I never experienced a deficit identity or a desire to break away from my family, even though my parents are immigrants from Finland. However, it is possible that my parents themselves, due to the experience of immigration, have struggled through cultural identity issues due to feeling criticized or rejected by their parents. I grew up in a pluralistic environment in the K-12 schools I attended in Columbia, MD, so I felt that my Finnish heritage was interesting to me and my peers. At the same time, however, I had the social advantages of being white, having a middle-class lifestyle, and speaking English as my first language at home, so I also could easily identify with the dominant culture of the USA.

Though we had different childhoods, one similarity between us is that as adults, Pietro and I have sought a deeper connection with the cultures of our parents. I studied abroad in Finland in 2009, and to this day I still study my parents’ first languages, Finnish and Swedish. In his 20s, Pietro majored in Italian at the University of Toronto, where he began to “reconnect”

with his background, and he moved to Italy after graduating with his MA: “I started to connect beyond just a family. I started to connect to a country, other people my own age.” As adults today, Pietro, Dania, and I all maintain strong connections to our parents, but due to differing factors.

C. Socioeconomic Status, Travel, and Intellectual Growth

Both Pietro and Dania invoked socioeconomic status as an important factor for their identity formation. Pietro stated, “There is in everything that we do, from school to media, a valuing of particular practices that represent a white middle-class way.” He cites middle-class ideas of “vacations” and “ideas of playtime” as experiences that he did not have since his parents were busy working. Similarly, Dania states that people in her hometown do not travel due to poverty, and now after living in the US, she considers Kazakhs to be narrow-minded as a result:

I don't want to say bad things about my culture, but they have very...narrow minds about their lives. They just work...I think it's because of money, lack of money, and their life so simple, just job and day offs. That's it. They don't travel, they don't do fun things, and their children usually do the same things. It's so pity, and I feel so bad about it, because I was a part of it, and I used to do the same.

In contrast to Pietro and Dania, I had many travel opportunities that definitely broadened my perspective, and it was my family's middle-class status that enabled us to take many vacations. Although my parents did not buy me a lot of the hippest toys, since they definitely did not buy into the stereotypical middle-class cult of conspicuous consumption, they did save enough money for six trans-Atlantic flights to Finland as well as many wonderful domestic vacations. I also traveled around Maryland and West Virginia to go camping countless times.

I far too often forget that my middle-class experiences of travel gave me the chance to grow culturally and intellectually from a young age. Dania and I are actually both quite similar concerning our level of curiosity about the world, since as a child she was very interested in

reading about other cultures. Her environment, however, was not as conducive to stimulating and rewarding her curiosity, as mine was. Sadly, I think I have a bias against people who I perceive as culturally “narrow-minded,” but I forget that people’s harsh life-circumstances often deaden their sense of curiosity and ability to experience wonder. I think it is important to have an aesthetic sense for the sublime and the beautiful in artwork and in nature. However, I forget that my sensitive side has not been scarred by poverty, abuse, disease, or wartime terror and sorrow. I am reminded of the intellectual benefits of my stable, American middle-class suburban upbringing, especially the benefit of travel that Dania and Pietro did not experience until later in life. I am reminded that travel is a privileged means for developing global cultural consciousness.

Part II. Reflections on Cultural Realism & Identity and Culture & Instruction

The following reflections synthesize many of the thoughts and discussion posts I have generated throughout the summer while taking APLNG 804. Below is a more cohesive picture of how I now theorize culture and teaching.

A. Cultural Realism and Identity

I take cultural realism to imply an open-source theory of how cultural identity is formed. I use the term “open-source” as an analogy to computer software that is constantly being modified and updated by the public. Realistically speaking, no one knows the best definition of culture, and no one knows the best ways to describe particular cultural groups, even one’s own. Nevertheless, we are all constantly contributing to the open-source code of what it means to be culturally aware, because each person can contribute to enriching the cultural growth of others.

Kumaravadivelu (2008, p. 165) defines cultural realism as awareness of our collective experience of “culturally growing” through “critical self-reflection” that responds to cultural

difference. Concerning this growth, I believe none of us will ever arrive at some ideal level of “intercultural maturity.” Different kinds of plants grow in different ways. Some grow higher, some grow deeper into the earth, and some grow sideways. They all are beautiful in their own ways, but the main aspect in common is that they are all changing. Similarly, all global citizens are constantly learning about the mystery we call culture through a process of self-reflection.

Gandhi and Nehru, for example, grew culturally in different ways through comparing Eastern and Western ways of being, with Gandhi arriving at a stable sense of self-identity while feeling open to all cultures, but with Nehru feeling a sense of hybridity, feeling uncomfortable locating his identity anywhere in particular (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, pp. 165-69). Neither experience of interculturality is superior, even though Kumaravadivelu (2008, p. 169) expresses a preference for Gandhi’s “combination of rootedness and openness” (Young, 2001, pp. 366-67). In contrast to Kumaravadivelu, I believe people can still flourish even if they feel uncertain and hybrid in their identity, and they can still make great contributions to the world, as Nehru did.

I believe all teachers should model this process of growing as global cultural beings, especially in the way they can positively express interest in the cultures of their students, and research demonstrates this kind of teacher posturing to be successful in the classroom (Yoon, 2001, p. 506). I see the classroom as a place of dialectical synthesis. Kumaravadivelu does not mention Hegel’s dialectical idealism, but cultural realism is similar to the Hegel’s idea that history is a progression of Spirit recognizing itself as Spirit, or in other words consciousness developing consciousness of itself as consciousness (Redding, 2014). As history progresses and as globalization expands its reach, humanity’s consciousness of itself grows, demonstrated in each individual’s increasingly comprehensive exposure to the rest of humanity. This process is happening perhaps at an unprecedented rate today in the 21st Century, and teachers can model for

students how to approach globalization with a critical, yet open-minded attitude that facilitates self-reflection, rather than violence, when they encounter differences in others.

B. Culture and Instruction

There are two main aims to balance in the classroom: to make the course content unfamiliar enough so that it challenges students, but familiar enough so that it does not discourage them. It is like weight training. If the weight is too light, exercising with it will not stimulate much growth in muscle strength, and if the barbell is too heavy, you might not be able to lift it at all, and as a result become demotivated or even injured when trying to lift it. Understanding cultural differences, like any learning task, is difficult and sometimes painful, so teachers need to be aware of how all course content is imbued with cultural values and resonances. Because course content always embodies cultural values, I believe that both ethnic and socioeconomic achievement gaps in the US can be largely accounted for due to the difficulty of adapting to the cultural ways of being of the white middle-class. To remedy achievement gaps, teachers need to practice culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010),³ which is an application of cultural realism because it acknowledges how students and teachers are undergoing cultural growth.

Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development is an important theory for framing my argument, because it refers to how "a more competent person collaborate with a child [or student] to help him [or her] move from where he is now to where he can be with help" (Miller, 1993, p. 379). Since I assume all course content to carry cultural valences, there are innumerable opportunities for teachers to help students develop new levels of intercultural competence, by using what is culturally familiar to introduce what is culturally unfamiliar. Culturally responsive

³ I define *instruction* to be the planned course of study, whereas *pedagogy* refers to theories and methods about how a teacher interacts with students in the classroom, but there seems to be a lot of overlapping usage (Rodriguez, 2011).

pedagogy is one side of the balance, which helps to make course content more familiar to students. The other side of the balance involves introducing an appropriate level of “strangeness” in the course content, which I will explain later.

One of the most compelling examples of culturally responsive pedagogy is using African American rhetorical figures, such as signifying, as a scaffold for teaching other literary figures. Carol Lee (1993) successfully built rapport with African American students by first enhancing their awareness of the rhetorical figure of signifying, which some of the students already knew since it is used in everyday speech and jokes. Next, she built upon her students’ knowledge to introduce them to other forms of figurative language that are commonly taught in the US English curriculum. Gutiérrez & Rogoff (2003) demonstrate how to sensitively and realistically apply similar culturally responsive methods for teaching any cultural group.

While it is pedagogically sound to use culturally familiar material as scaffolding, sometimes it will be difficult or impossible. The second piece to my theory is that education needs to help students learn how to deal with the unfamiliar. The point of Vygotsky’s (1978) theory is to understand how students become able to perform tasks apart from teacher scaffolding (Miller, 1993, p. 379-384). Both in and beyond the classroom, encounters with the unfamiliar are inevitable, and people are not going to be adapting to them personally. This may be a bit extreme, but Kumaravadivelu (2008, p. 193) cites the position of Shirley Brice Heath and Leslie Mangiola (1991, p. 37): “we want to urge teachers to make schooling equally strange for all students and thus to expand the ways of thinking, knowing, and expressing knowledge of all students through incorporating many cultural tendencies.” For example, learning Standard English is always going to be somewhat of a “strange” experience for speakers of other languages and dialects, and Gay (2010, p. 84) and Smitherman (2006, p. 142) agree that “the debate has never been about whether or not African American students are to learn Standard

English.” The main thrust of these scholars is that the education system would be more equitable if students in dominant positions (i.e. whites and middle-class students) were given more intercultural challenges, to be required to adapt culturally just as much as non-dominant students are expected to adapt.

I would like, therefore, to propose a non-rational theory for appreciating the Other that might be applied in classrooms. I fully agree with Kumaravadivelu identification of teaching global consciousness as a 21st century imperative, but one of my few objections is that “critical self-reflection” seems so cold and hyper-rational. What might be the roles of emotions, such as love, and other non-rational abilities of the human mind for developing intercultural awareness? Ideally, I think it is a great accomplishment in growing culturally if someone can accept the differences of the Other without needing to rationalize those differences according to one’s own worldview. So much of education defines understanding as being as rational as possible, but why do we have to always contextualize new information with what we already understand? Why should we try to seek a (Western) rational, anthropological explanation for different cultural practices? Sometimes we will never be able to make logical sense of certain cultural practices. Alternatively, can cultural understanding be accomplished through means other than rationality?

Overusing familiarizing strategies might make students think they can only appreciate something if they can relate it to something they already know. In fact, it might even be disrespectful to try to generate superficial similarities between Self and Other, for the sake of making course content easier for students to comprehend. The most effectively well-educated students, in my opinion, do not need a constant reminder of why material is relevant to their daily lives. Similarly, I believe the most culturally mature students will not need constant reminders of how people from other cultures actually have a lot in common with them. Mature students will either generate their own unique comparisons and contrasts, or they may have the

maturity to accept and appreciate differences that they genuinely do not understand. In the absence of context, the differences of the Other can still pierce into our deepest imaginations even if we cannot relate that difference to anything at all in our experience. Encountering very different, hard-to-understand cultural practices is sublime, for the experience transcends reason.

Very few students, however, have achieved this level of cultural maturity, so scaffolding with culturally familiar material is necessary for most teaching situations, but I believe teaching might be more powerful if it aspires to help students transcend the tendency to always relate new information to what one already knows. As I have shown, my overall theoretical position is that to acquire the type of global cultural consciousness outlined by Kumaravadivelu (2008) requires both rational and non-rational psychological faculties. Actual methods for how to apply my theory in the classroom is an area for further research. Some of the greatest challenges in life will transcend the reasoning abilities of both us and our students, and we can certainly still live rich lives even if we do not understand everything.

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