Life History and Cultural Identities

Our life and family histories greatly influence how we choose to identify ourselves both culturally and socially. How we choose to identify ourselves culturally reflects on the teachings and pride with which we were brought up within that culture. With the many different cultures and mixes of them all, it is interesting to learn how people choose to identify themselves both culturally and socially and what influences why they choose to do so. I myself being of a mixed ethnicity, half Mexican (from my mother), a quarter Irish, and a quarter German or simply Caucasian (from my father), I choose to identify myself unequally, instead I tend to solely identify and have pride in myself as Mexican and try to ignore the rest. I chose to identify myself in this way because I was raised with more information and more of a cultural environment with more of a pride of being Mexican then being Caucasian. Therefore for my anthropological study I chose to research through interviewing different people with different mixes of cultures what influence does their families culture and what influence does being of a mixed ethnicity have on them and their cultural identity and how they evolve and feel in the world as individual people.

My data consists of three interviews. I first interviewed my close friend Guadalupe June Dohner-Chavez and her mother for my first part of research. June, like me, is of a mixed ethnicity being half Salvadorian and half Caucasian. June’s mother is full Salvadorian and emigrated from El Salvador as a young adult. Because
of her mother’s strong Salvadorian culture and the dynamic in her family between both her mother’s strong culture and her father’s support and push of it as well as his own culture, June has a great pride in herself and her two cultures and they make her feel stronger as a person and her values and beliefs. I then decided to extend my research and interview an additional person of a mixed ethnicity, a fellow classmate Chanin, who is half Caucasian and half Hawaiian, because I wanted to see if there were others who felt the same as June in sharing pride in both of their cultures and how it affects them as a whole, as well as doing a follow up interview with both June and her mother.

In my follow up interview with June and her mother, there was not much more information shared; it was more of just a revisiting and expansion of previous experiences and information shared. June further shared the experiences of her mother’s journey coming to America.

When she came over here she was only sixteen so she was very ignorant and naïve and she also knew no English. She came over here with a large group of people and along this long journey many people did not make it due to mysterious disappearances. She was blessed with meeting friendly people across the desert that offered a place to stay, some food, and water. While she was crossing over the first place she reached was California at the border near Mexicali, which is all desert and was disappointed at the dull and dry scenery. She expected this glorious scene with lots of green and opportunity and instead found herself face to face with a deadly desert (June Dohner-Chavez, 12/6/07).

It was not only very difficult for June’s mother to get to America but also first living here because of her being a minority along with the language barrier.

Being a minority she has experienced a lot of discriminations and when she first got here she experienced some pretty horrible things. When she got there she thought she was going to be able to make a lot of
money and unfortunately she had to work in the fields where she worked two jobs for hardly any pay. She barely had enough money to buy groceries and pay her part of the rent. Language was definitely a barrier because she wasn’t able to communicate with others sometimes and I remember having to translate for her until these last couple of years. However my mom does understand how important it is to know English and having learned it she feels more confident in being able to find a better job and makes her feel good knowing that she can speak for herself and doesn’t have to rely on others for support (June Dohner-Chavez, 12/6/07).

These experiences that Junes mother went through helped to establish Junes strength and pride in her cultures and have caused her to experience significant experiences as well the have furthered her strength and pride in both cultures such as the many different protests she and her father have participated in such as the Cesar Chavez marches in protest of the immigration laws and the driver’s license protest in Sacramento. These have all had a great affect on her and others around her because by appearance she looks very white however she is so deeply influenced by her American father and her Salvadorian mother that she has a great balance and is constantly working towards way to spread greater acceptance and understanding of other people and their cultures.

Chanin’s experience being of two different cultures is not as well rounded and balanced as June’s is. Chanin is half Caucasian, from her mother, and half Hawaiian, from her father. Her mother is not very accepting or supportive of her Hawaiian heritage she tries to suppress it. Chanin herself is proud of both her Hawaiian and Caucasian cultural identities; however she is somewhat alienated from both sides of her family because of her mixed ethnicity, appearance, and different lifestyles. When in Hawaii Chanin quickly gets re-immersed in the culture, she regains her accent or
form of language, pigeon. However while there she is alienated somewhat, she is called the “whitest dark person there” (Chanin, 12/6/07), and is treated differently because of the differences in the way she talks, acts, dresses, has her hair, being more educated, her physical appearance and other such lifestyles that differ from those of the people who live in Hawaii on a regular basis. In addition, when she is with her mother she is not allowed to really show any sort of pride or interest in her Hawaiian culture such as she is not allowed to speak pigeon around her mother at all.

The two cultures are very different in their customs and lifestyles. In the Hawaiian culture the people are very open, friendly, helpful and laidback. Whereas her mother’s Caucasian culture is much more closed. For instance, the difference in customs of funerals is very apparent. A Hawaiian funeral, as described by Chanin, was more like a party then what many would think of a funeral. At her grandfather’s funeral, on her father’s side, the family came together at the Beach and threw a party, no one cried. They just ate, drank, danced, and had a great time. Where as at a funeral on her mother’s side for her grandmother there was much grieving, crying, and remorse, quite the opposite of the Hawaiian funeral. Another difference in cultures is that unlike the very emotional out letting tendencies of Caucasians or “Americans,” Chanin’s Hawaiian counterparts are very closed with their emotions: “They are a very loving people but not very emotional” (Chanin, 12/6/07). Because of these very clashing differences it is hard to find a safe balance between the two cultures especially with the added suppression from both sides of the family and ethnicities, and therefore, unlike June, it is very hard for Chanin to be as open and proud of her cultures however she tries to keep her cultural ties and identity well intact.
Although June was supplied with more support and a freedom of openness and pride to have in both her cultures whereas Chanin’s was somewhat suppressed, both June and Chanin share a pride and knowledge in their cultures and recognize that they are both very important to whom they are as people. Through my research and study of different people and their different cultures and what affect they have on their lives I have found that no matter what, a person’s cultural identity is a large part of who they are as people and what their values, ideals, and ways of thought and living are. As with June and Chanin, being of a mixed ethnicity makes that pride and strength in ones self somewhat stronger because they can gain knowledge, lifestyles, customs, and pride from both of cultures and put them together into one strong identity and stance in the world. Through my study of these two different people with different cultures however sharing the same essence of a mixed ethnicity with one another including myself I realize that being strong and prideful in one culture is great to have however if I were to embrace my other culture as well, although ignoring the pieces I do not like, it would make an impact on who I am as a whole person and possible help change my view of the world as it does with June to where I can see a larger more wider vision rather than a form of tunnel vision. These studies and interviews helped support my thesis that a person’s cultural identity has a great effect on who they are as people and their feel and structure in the world.