# An Examination of Stories: How Cross-Cultural Communication Might Lead to Healthier Relationships and Peace across Cultures: A Case Study

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**Abstract**

*This study explored the seldom-analyzed topic of cross-cultural communication in rural areas of the Midwestern United States. Researchers asked Mid-westerners from the dominant culture to tell stories of their experiences with people from other cultures and how they felt about people from diverse backgrounds. Stories were vital to this study. People live storied lives that describe the human experience. Researchers attempted to assess the participant's experiences by critically examining their stories. Researchers examined the data using a structural framework that emphasized work in sociology, education, and the social sciences as well as theoretical perspectives rooted in critical theory and analysis, conflict theory and theories of enculturation and acculturation. Story transcripts were analyzed several times throughout the coding and categorization data process. Three specific influences: social stratification, media, and social pressures heavily influenced three emotional responses: fear, sensitivity and regret in participants shared interactions with people from other different cultures. The goal of this study was to critically examine the views and experiences of the dominant culture regarding cross-cultural communication with the assumption that more cross-cultural communication may lead to healthier relationships and peace across cultures.*

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural, race, communication, relationships, Midwest, experiences, stories

## 1. Introduction

Some portray the United States as a melting pot with a universal identity. This depiction however ignores the complicated, violent and tempestuous history of a country's legacy that is teeming with segregationist ideologies, institutionalized prejudice as well as latent and overt forms of discrimination (Omi 2001).

The United States' first naturalization law sought to limit the privilege of US citizenship to "free white persons" (Marable 2002).  In 1882 Congress began controlling immigration by forbidding admission to any person unable to care for themselves by enacting the *Chinese Exclusion Act*; the first law to target people by race or ethnicity. In addition, the early 20th century produced the rise of "Nativism" and invigorated the ideas of the Ku Klux Klan that now serve as the foundation of the modern "English Only" movement.

Despite these exclusionary movements, racial and ethnic diversity continues to grow in the United States. It is estimated by 2050, that 48% of the US population will be people of color (U.S. Census Bureau 2004) and by 2080 the nation's current majority will be the minority (Ekelman, DalBallo-Hass, Bazyk, and Bazyks S. 2003).

### 1.1 Purpose of this Study

Society is changing and societal change impacts experiences across cultures. This study investigated the impact of personal experiences across cultures in the rural Midwestern United States. Researchers obtained and critically analyzed participant stories to discern the impact that personal cross-cultural experiences had on their life.

## 2. Brief review of the literature

Cross-cultural or intercultural communication is defined as communicative interaction between culturally distinct individuals (Hall 1959). It also denotes interactions between cultural groups, nations or political affiliations (Roth 1999). Notwithstanding congruent thought implied that harmony is achieved through healthy cross-cultural communication (Hall 1959; Leach 1976).

Scholars from many fields emphasize the need to create and sustain cross-cultural relationships. Scholars such as Ting-Toomey (2010) wrote about *Multi-Dimensional Value Framework* Based in the social sciences this framework explained one of the significant social processes required to examine the field of cross-cultural communication as it pertains to disciplines such as education, the social sciences, and the humanities. Levine, Park, and Kim's (2007), work on "comparing the communication patterns across cultures by examining the interactions, influences and communication styles of diverse people" was significant because it exposed the communicative multiplicities that prevent healthy cross-cultural communication. It is nearly impossible to understand the solutions to complex communication problems without understanding the cross-cultural difficulties.

Kim's (2001) theory of *Intercultural Adaptation* focused on the ''stress, adaptation, and growth dynamics'' in an attempt to understand immigrant communication patterns and behaviors.

Simmel's very early contribution focused on the apprehensive theory that people from one group (dominant in group) generally opposed having to enter another group which lead to the "negation of the other party" and causing members of the in-group to more tightly unite (1909, p. 503). Hirji and Karim, (2009) expanded on Simmel's theories arguing against the notion that the Obama presidency ended concerns about underrepresentation and misrepresentation of minorities and for the need to further augment cross-cultural communication. Bolden (2004) also supports a humanistic approach arguing for the relevance of sensitivity in communication across cultures.

Keshishien (2005) looks at cross cultural communication from a different perspective arguing that economics are what primarily influences the operation of cultural activity and tendencies of communication. Storti (1994) wrote a fascinating book that chronicled communication across cultures. The book primarily focused on the business world but demonstrated the complex nature of communication in real world settings. Storti pointed out that cultural implication lies just below the surface of many cross-cultural conversations and simple communicative mistakes can break relationships.

The early work of Dewey (1922), who studied with Simmel, illustrates how intercultural interaction might lead to both segregation and unity: "the belief about superiority or being 'as good as other people', the intention to hold one's own are naturally our feeling and idea of our treatment and position" (p. 59).

Piller (2010) separated from much of the preceding research by studying dialogue and linguistics, by placing an emphasis on the function of language in cross-cultural communication.

Piller (2010) intersects language with the concepts of social justice and warns against using culture dissimilarities as a way to disguise the acquisition and preservation of power. Regrettably, according to Piller, the existence of cultural identity especially as it influences personal understanding and interaction is made obvious by the subtle ways in which people pre-judge one another.

Early Habermas (1987) argued that communication is an influential and effective instrument that pilots our life because it allows mutual dialogue between human beings. Dialogue, by definition, requires a free and equal relationship structured around an equal interchange of ideas and information.

There have been countless books written about intercultural and cross-cultural communications ranging from explaining the basic concepts of intercultural communication to improving intercultural communication through training, programs, and workshops. However, there has been minimal research specifically about cross-cultural communication in rural mid-western regions of the United States as it pertains to how participants reflected on their own experiences in a time of extreme political division throughout the United States. The stories within this paper are fascinating and enlightening and have the potential to assist in our thinking about cross-cultural communication.

## 3. Definitions for this study

### Culture

For this study "culture" is defined as a social paradigm consisting of sociological traits and commonalities specific to a group of people (Ekelman et al. 2003).

### Cultural pluralism

For this study "cultural pluralism" is when a subculture exists relatively free of prejudice and discrimination within a larger cultural paradigm (Johnson 2000).

**Racial discrimination**

In this study "Racial discrimination" is when people of color are subjected to inequitable treatment based on their perceived race (Johnson 2000).

**Ethnic groups**

In this study "ethnic groups" are a group of people that willingly migrated and acculturated into the dominant culture.

**Racial groups**

In this study "racial groups" are groups of people that did not willfully migrate to the United States but were forced to assimilate.

**Racism**

In this study "racism" was defined as ideology-based discrimination fixed in racial superiority and racial inequality (Better 2002; Johnson 2000; Kinder and Mendelberg 2000).

**Storytelling**

Storytelling is an ancient method of oral and written communication that allows people to process, resolve and coordinate the events of their life (Mittelstadt 2003). It allows for the exploration and explanation of human occurrence as it transcends cultural, socio-economic and ideological barriers (Durning and Glasson 2006).

**Stories**

Stories tie people together as they enlighten, guide and interpret life (Mittelstadt 2003). Stories initiate and perpetuate opportunities for critical thought as they nurture the meaning of experience and create personal connections (Mittelstadt 2003). It stands to reason that stories shared across cultures serve as cross-cultural catalysts for understanding one another. When a story is told everybody learns (Morreale and Pearson 2008).

## *4. The theoretical perspective that inspired this study*

Enhancing cross-cultural communication requires a new distinct way of thinking (Agneessens, Waege and Lievens 2006). In theory, storytelling across cultures ought to provide the opportunity for people to think about other cultures and perhaps remove barriers that serve to prohibit the enhancement of cross-cultural cognizance. Stories were vital to this study. Researchers attempted to assess the participant's experiences by critically examining their stories.

## *5. Methodology*

### 5.1 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative Analysis (QA) does not test a hypothesis nor are the questions determined by operationalizing variables. QA investigates complex topics in context (Creswell 2008). The consequential aspects of qualitative analysis focus on the quality not the quantity of the data (Denzin and Lincoln2005). The assumption is that all people have something to contribute and capturing the quality of the contribution through the process of qualitative analysis is essential to understanding (Crabtree and Miller 1992; Creswell 2008; Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

Researchers handed control of this study to participants by letting them tell their stories (Creswell 2008) by retaining a steadfast qualitative methodology (Carpenter and Suto 2008).

### 5.2 Case Study

A case study is an examination of the behaviors of a group of people that demonstrates the relevance of a theory or concept to actual circumstances. These stories are true, rational and logical and most often lead to humanistic answers or solutions. In this study, researchers critically examined participant's stories of cross-cultural experiences and how those experiences affected their beliefs and attitudes toward diverse people.

Researchers examined the data using a structural framework that emphasized work in sociology, education, and the social sciences as well as theoretical perspectives rooted in critical theory and analysis, conflict theory and theories of enculturation and acculturation.

### 5.3 Critical Theory

Critical Theory (CT) goes beyond simply cataloguing society; it analyzes through constructive critique. At it's core, CT is a discipline that attempts to unearth the conventions that solidify injustice (Freire 1970/1993).

### 5.4 Conflict Theory

In short, Conflict Theory (CFT) investigates and exposes colonialist power differentials embedded in society (Hardt and Negri 2000; Rancière 1999). Critical and Conflict theories are closely related; both emphasize the importance of social responsibility.

### 5.5 Acculturation theory

Acculturation Theory (AT) sociologically examines the communicative, acculturative and assimilative dynamics between groups of people (Chun, Organista and Marin 2003; Redfield, Linton and Herskovits 1936). All three lent themselves well to this study.

### 6. Data Collection

### 6.1 Demographics

Researchers interviewed willing members of the dominant society between 50 and 69 years of age with an established mean of 54 years. It was important to interview mature participants with a wealth of experience, living in or brought up in the rural mid-western US. There were 17 participants in this study, 11 men and 6 women. It was important to obtain the views of both men and women to allow for maximum participant variability. This sample was large enough to achieve the necessary depth for the study.

According to the 2010 US census (2011) nearly 70% of the region's population was born in the Midwest; nearly 85% of the population is considered non-Hispanic white and less than 10% of the population are considered people of color. Most of the participant's communities were sparsely populated with little ethnic or racial diversity and heavily influenced by a rural Midwestern mythology.

### 6.2 Interviews

After acquiring written informed consent, researchers reminded participants of the study's goals and objectives and that all information would be confidential and presented in an anonymous format (Creswell, 2008).

The interviews took place primarily in the homes of the participants and lasted about 60 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for accurate analysis (Creswell 2008). The questions were semi-structured and participants were encouraged to openly speak about their experiences discussing issues they deem important.

Participants were encouraged to speak at length about their experiences. **Interview questions**. a) Can you tell me any stories about your experiences with people from other cultures, races or ethnicities? b) Did you grow up around, associate with or see people from diverse cultural backgrounds? c) How did you feel about people from diverse backgrounds?

### 6.3 Ontological considerations

The data collection considerations were defined as idiosyncratic. The researchers felt it was necessary to capture the exact words of each participant as well as the exact meaning behind the words. The theory was to not extrapolate on the true meaning of the data and get as precise answer as possible.

Relevant data were contrasted and compared to each other and to the emerging categories throughout the process. Categories were continually revised as new data were analyzed. Prejudicial contexts and properties as well as variables such as gender, education, and socioeconomic status were avoided unless they became pertinent to the developing theory.

### 7. Data Analysis

### 7.1 Categorizing and Coding

Researchers established a research paradigm that focused on three analytical questions: "What are the data saying?" "What does the data mean?" and "In which category does the data most closely associate?" Coding advanced from open coding where all data were considered, to selective coding where relevant data were considered to axial coding where data were categorized before being reanalyzed and placed in narrative form. Researchers ensured accurate interpretation by constantly examining, comparing and contrasting data at every stage.

### 7.2 Validity and reliability

Transcripts were analyzed several times throughout the coding and categorization process. Data were reanalyzed throughout the categorization process. A final re-check of all data was carried out to make sure that everything had been accounted for and to ensure that all initial open-codes that were incorporated into each theme where appropriate.

### 7.3 Researcher bias

Because bias is human nature, the researchers consciously engaged in transparent discussions designed to mitigate personal opinions. However, it was the personal bias that enabled researchers to explorer and reflect on the emotions and opinions of the participants and reach a more profound level of understanding. Researchers guarded against selectivity by independently processing data and comparing outcomes at every step (Creswell 2008).

## 8. Significant Statements and Narrative

People live storied lives that describe the human experience. The narrative is the story of stories, a written account of connected events. In this study narrative writing is writing that tells a particular story. Researchers encouraged participants to relax and speak freely. Participants seemed forthright, engaged, uninhibited and eager to speak.

Narratives allow us the opportunity to make sense of the world around us through our experiences. Aristotle first identified a narrative as a plot to a story which also has a temporal meaning or events happening over a period of time. Other theorists define narratives as an experience and connection that is created for an audience. Narratives can be found in artifacts such as: short stories, movies, television or songs. They connect you to another time and place by conjuring up memories and fantasies.

The characteristics of a narrative are:

· Comprised of at least two events, either active (expressing action) or stative (a condition).
· The events are organized by time order. They may not be chronological but they relate to one another temporally.
· Includes causal or contributing relationship among events in the story.
· About a unified subject.

This short story meets the criteria of a narrative because it contains two events active and stative, temporal relations, and causal relations.

## 9. Themes

Three specific influences: social stratification, media, and social pressures heavily influenced three emotional responses: fear, sensitivity and regret.

### 9.1 Social stratification

Nine of the 17 participants said they rarely saw people of color or thought about issues of race and ethnicity growing up. Insulated from diversity, participant M-6 reflected on how even people from his own race were suspect in his community.

So I think the thing is I never had contact with anyone different from myself. I mean I grew up in a small town of less than 300 people. We thought that any town of more that 300 people was a big place, so we were very naïve about race and for that matter anyone outside our little um, sub culture.

Nearly all participants indicated that diversification was rare and that their daily routines occupied much of their life.
Life was easy. We threw bails and drank a lot. It is hard to talk about communicating across racial lines when race was a "thing" that I saw on one of the three TV channels we got. People from, I mean colored people (People of Color) were never in the language. We were kind of indifferent to the notion that others even existed; I guess we were colorblind.

Seven participants disclosed that they were not completely without diversity in their life but it was rare. Participant F4 explained,

So living in South Dakota and the Midwest, I knew very little about diversity or integration or people from different race groups; the biggest thing then was the Native American culture. I lived in the east part of the state so I mostly wasn't exposed to different cultures. I just didn't see other people from different races. I mean once in a while we would see somebody…uh but that was very infrequent…uh probably, maybe twice a year?

Nearly all participants revealed that they had little contact with people of color until they left for more populated areas. Some participants relocated to pursue post secondary education; others traveled for the military and some were seeking work opportunities. Participant M-5 relocated for his job but neither the opportunity nor the will to diversify himself occurred.

No, no I never saw different races living in the mid-west. It was all white. Of course we come from a smaller town. But when we moved here to a little bit bigger town, still a small town by most standards, then, then we started seeing different colored people. Well our kids did, but not many; it was still pretty small you see. Just maybe one or two in their (his children) class. Umm, If there was two…I think that was a lot. Until they (his children) hit high school, then classes were bigger. There was never any interaction with people of different colors from me though. I wasn't in school you see, because we, well, we never saw any other colored people, or I mean people of color.

Participant M-9 spoke about his difficulty adjusting to change after moving from the Midwest and then returning. He also explained his acculturation process and the need to feel comfortable around diverse people. He attributes his success to open communication.

I grew up in a small town right in the middle of the country. Let's see, I lived there for 12 years and then we moved to another small town for a couple of years after which we moved to Washington DC. Oh my gosh, was that a change in my life. At first I hated it, I mean, everything about it. It was so big. Before we moved I didn't know that so many people even existed. We were around people of color all the time. I felt like the Midwest at least where I grew up was um…lost. But what I realized after a while is that I would have missed so much if we didn't move. It was hard at first but when you start talking to people, you kind of lose track of people being different. I mean you know that they are different but it doesn't matter. At first I was scared to talk to people, but I found out that when I did they just talked back; it was really pretty easy. I really miss the different people that you get used to seeing.

The military is a diverse institution. Participant F-2 grew up a military child around people of color. The military requires people from diverse backgrounds to communicate and coexist. Being associated with the military changed her perception of diversity.

My parents were both associated with the military. They were both, especially my dad, around people of color all the time. I think they were mainly Black; I mean African American people. Mostly men, and they always seemed to get along really well. Everybody spent every day all day around each other and I think they got along well. I mean well enough to be invited to our house all the time. We had African American people over all the time. There is no question in my mind that being around African American people and being able to communicate with them broke down many barriers, at least for me.

Participant M-3 discovered that a willingness to communicate with diverse people builds cross-cultural cognizance. He spoke about how communication benefits everybody.

Just talking with people and getting to know them, well at least in my opinion is the key. I don't think, well I know that a lot of what we hear is nonsense. I learned that a long time ago. An Indian neighbor came over with a load of post to sell my dad. When he (my dad) paid for them, he (the neighbor) didn't have quite the right change, and he didn't understand English very good. Dad told him to just forget about it if he didn't have the right change, until the next time when he got post.  But he didn't understand that; he went home, and he-this was on a team of horses and wagon he did this-and, so he went home, and I think he brought a dime back to make it right.

## 9.2 Media

Like M-6, 8 participants emphasized that their only exposure to diversity was the media (Entman and Rojecki 2001). It is well known that the news media has been responsible for reproducing racism through unconscious bias, narrow personal perspectives and the often-unchallenged unquestionable sacraments of the news business (Entman and Rojecki 2001).

Participant M-2's media experience ranged from racial strife compounded by sociopolitical propaganda to legitimate current event information with little or no opposing opinion. M-2 explained it this way.

We weren't around a lot of ethnic groups or you know it was just a real white community. A really white state actually in them days. I can remember seeing George Wallace on the TV and how popular he was, especially in the south. I remember his passion and how he was so pro segregation. And I remember how he had such a huge following behind him for that. You know it was hard for us up in the northern states to see how that could be so popular because we were taught that, you know, we were supposed to be segregating and being close to the black people and stuff, but it was very different down south. I guess I didn't understand the difference. It was a hard time in America back then. I guess it still is, especially for the people of, the different color people.

The popularity of George Wallace puzzled M-2 causing him to question what he believed.

## 9.3 Social pressures

A couple participants spoke about how they were negatively influenced as a child. Participant F-1 had a memorable experience while playing with African American children.
When I was a little girl, and when I was about four or five, I met my first person who (that) was African American, and she was a little girl that lived down the street from my grandmother in Sioux Falls. First time I had ever seen someone who wasn't white, and we were playing, and I can't remember if we were playing jump rope or hopscotch, some old fashioned game outside, and my parents came outside and realized that we were playing with people of color, and they grabbed us by the hands and pulled us off and told us we could not play with them.

Participant M-1 grew up near American Indian people but only communicated because he and the American Indian children attended school together.

The following statement took M-1nearly 3 minutes to fully articulate.

I grew up close to um…uh…uh… an Indian reservation and uh…um…I personally uh…didn't have a lot of opportunity to have Indian friends because they weren't around much. I lived close to the reservation but I really don't remember a lot of communication. I mean we just didn't have a lot in common I guess. So we didn't talk much with many Indians. I guess it's kind of funny that we saw Indians but we really, well we, I guess we didn't or at least I didn't make a big effort to get to know them. I just never really thought about it. We seemed to have our friends, and they seemed to have theirs, at least that was the way it was outside of school. In school we seemed to play together. I guess it was because we had to talk in school. I think it was probably that. We needed to talk in school so we did.

### 9.4 Emotional Responses

Social stratification, media, and social pressures heavily influenced three emotional responses, fear, sensitivity and regret, from the participants.

**9.4.1 Fear.** Participant M-11 spoke about the lack of contact and how it related to fear. He also seemed somewhat remorseful about his limited contact with people of color.

I haven't been exposed to racism, not on purpose, but I believe it's just where I've been and what I've done. I haven't been faced with situations where I have had to come across too many different people. I hope that I wouldn't be afraid to have friends of a different race, but I've just not been put in that position.

Participant F-3 summarized what others said. She spoke about fearing the unfamiliar; connecting her fears to limited, but consistent childhood influences. F-3 was unsure whether her family's persistent racism would have existed in the presence of people of color.

When I was, well, a child and even an adult, I might as well just say it, I was scared because I didn't really know anybody who was Black or Indian or Asian. I don't know why fear would have been part of what I believed, but I guess it probably had something to do with what I heard growing up or maybe it was part of what I never heard growing up; I don't know. I heard the jokes and stuff; it wasn't like it was every day but it was um, kind of, ah, situational I guess. If there were Minorities around, I don't know if they (family) would have said the things they said. But I bet they would have been thinking it. I just never really got to know anyone from different races; I really wish I would have.

Participant M-2 spoke candidly about the root of his fears insisting that they stem from ignorance. He revealed that fear was entrenched in his community and closely linked to his religious beliefs.

I guess this is the place to just say it. I was afraid; I heard some things about the Native Americans that, I don't know, made me afraid. I remember when I was in church once, I must have been, oh in my early 20s, some of the people were talking. I remember this because I was at church, and we were baptizing my son, about how a family of Native Americans in town would do strange stuff, like sing around a fire and in the sauna (sweat lodge) and sweat and a couple of people were talking about peyote and smoking it in their peace pipe. Some of the people, and these were my friends, people I grew up with and went to the bar with, well some of them said that the Native Americans worshiped the Devil. Boy, we Christians, we don't want anything to do with that. I think that is what made me afraid. I don't know; it all seems pretty silly today, the devil and all.

Participant F-6 spoke candidly about her fears that manifest from stereotypes.

Well my experiences with people of color were interesting. I had opportunities to communicate with quite a few Indians and Black people. I should say that there were two families that lived near us that were Indian and Black; they were mixed race people. But I really didn't, I guess, well, what I guess is that well, I was afraid. What I knew about people, well what I thought about people, was that they were aggressive and would back me down. I guess I don't like that kind of confrontation. I can't argue with people when I don't know much about the subject.

F-6 feared speaking with people of color.

**9.4.2 Sensitivity.** Seven participants indicated that their childhood differs from today's experience. Participant M-1circumspectly spoke about his childhood.

I don't think that I grew up in a time of a great deal of sensitivity towards uh…uh...minorities um…I don't know that there was uh…much attention given to things like cultural sensitivity. It did not seem to matter um…well I don't know how to describe it, it just um…I think today we're just much more culturally aware of the um…need to treat everyone um…in the same fashion, and I don't think I grew up in that environment.

M-1 implies that society has grown more sophisticated disclosing that society is much more sensitive today. When people ignore the existence of another racial presence they are "consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or non-deliberately downplaying, ignoring, or oversimplifying them" (Sun and Starosta2006, p. 119) suggesting that there may be deeper issues.

**9.4.3 Regret**. Several participants spoke about opportunity and remorse. Participant F-3 spoke about feeling "comfortable" in her life and how that comfort made her feel uncomfortable. She also understood the value of personal growth through diversity and change.

I never really had the opportunity to speak with a lot of Native Americans or African Americans but I wish I did; it seems to me that talking with people is a good thing and good things are always good for building positive relationships. There have been many times, I mean a lot of times when I wish I had people around me that were different from me. I think one of the issues is that life for me has always been comfortable, well maybe comfortable is not the word I am looking for here, um maybe when a person grows up with the same thing day after day things get stale and you begin to feel as if you have no place to go. I mean growing is a good thing right? I mean, well it is nice to have people around that can offer more to an otherwise insipid sort of existence.

Another participant summarized "Not being exposed to different cultures was probably not a good thing if a person wanted to be culturally engaged."

## 10. Discussion

Despite overwhelming evidence some believe that social inequality no longer exists in the US and that addressing the issue is a waste of time and money (Giroux 2015; Pollock 2004) when in fact, over half of all Americans possess explicit anti-black feelings (Associated Press poll 2012). Addressing these important issues by having people tell their story could inspire enhanced levels of cross-cultural cognizance and lead to better cross-cultural relationships. This study examined this assumption by analyzing the stories of participant's living in the rural Midwestern United States.

Three specific responses emerged from the data: social stratification, media, and social pressures which in turn revealed three emotional reactions: fear, sensitivity and regret.

**10.1 Specific Responses:**

**10.1.1 Social stratification**. No two societies are identical; people vary based on gender, age, religion language and many other personal and cultural characteristics. These differences can lead to ideologies that result in conflict and segregation. Some groups that deem their cultures and conditions superior have historically suppressed aspects of other groups which has led to social inequality (Freire, 1970/1993).

This study revealed that segregationist phenomena are apparent in the Midwestern US and that social stratification survives in many forms. For example, the participants in this study rarely communicated across cultures revealing that they had little in common with other cultures. Several participants revealed that they rarely interacted with Native people despite living near Indian reservations. Another participant said that American Indians were completely "invisible" to her. One participant spoke about blatantly imposed stratification disclosing that her parent physically removed her from playing with African American children.

Kitayama and Imada (2010) revealed that cognitive tendency is solidified through consistent undertaking. People tend to communicate amongst people with whom they feel comfortable (Geiger 2003). Unfortunately, this occurrence contributes to homogeneous behaviors like those mentioned above. This study revealed that changing this paradigm is something that most participants would look favorably upon and that it could enhance cross-cultural communication. One participant profoundly indicated that the lack of diversity in her life was "so comfortable that it made her uncomfortable."

This study revealed that integration usually occurred after participants joined the military, sought educational advancement or gained employment elsewhere, which offered opportunities to share stories.

Critical theorists proclaim that social stratification is solidified when people reject the opportunity to share their stories (Freire 1970/1993; Sellers and Shelton 2003). For example, integration alone did not initiate a communicative process for every participant, some still chose to segregate. Perhaps they were unwilling to face the challenges of fear, insensitivity, and regret.

**10.1.2 Media.** To avoid diversification is to ignore the stories of others; something that the media, according to critical theorists, does by catering to the ruling classes and influencing perception as it both creates meaning and obscures the way we comprehend the world around us (Schnieder, Gruman, and Coutts 2012). There is virtually no way to estimate the daily influence that the electronic media has on people. The impact of media in today's society cannot be measured. It is simply everywhere, highly influential and limitless.

Many Conflict theorists view the conventional media as an institution that strives to increase profits while reassuring the realities of a responsive, highly intellectual, socially aware ruling elite by ignoring stories deemed "not noteworthy" (Luhmann 2000).

One fascinating example that emerged in this study revealed that the paradoxical rhetoric of the civil rights era was confusing. Some participants spoke about how the proliferation of social equality combined with the rhetoric of former Alabama Governor, George Wallace, during the 1960's and 70's played out on television leaving them unsure of what to believe.

**10.1.3 Social pressures**. Some people thrive while others struggle with the social pressures of today's society. Research indicates that social pressure is emotional and leads to cognitive dissonance and anxiety, which can either change or solidify behavior (Festinger 1957). Consequently, many people choose to remain comfortable with their current social condition (Caracciolo 2013). This study reveals that it is within this "comfortable paradigm" where stereotypes and prejudices tend to form.

**10.2 Emotional Responses:**

**10.2.1 Fear**. Critical theorists recognize that fear exists in many forms and impedes social progress. Participants in this study spoke about how internal and external fears created feelings that ranged from lasting stereotypes to guilt. For example, one participant felt that racism was a factor throughout her life and as a consequence she grew up fearful. Another felt that his fears were deeply rooted in community ignorance. A third felt fearful that people of color would aggressively "back me down;" while another felt uncomfortable with her feelings of guilt. Many participants chose to ignore people of color because of fear (Smithson1985).

Critical thinkers insist that one must remember that the distribution of power in society is not equal. In order to explore the commonalities across cultures one must not be afraid of receiving information from other groups, otherwise the structures that elevate people to power will ultimately subjugate some people into a state of desperation and isolation (Passini 2011). When people are unwilling or fearful of hearing the stories of others, the life experiences of others are no longer heard.

Fear influences attitudes. The fear of diverse people is often associated with stereotypes toward a particular group, which often translates into negative attitudes, avoidance and hostility (Skitka, Bauman, and Mullen 2004; Spanovic, Lickel, Denson, and Petrovic 2010).

**10.2.2 Sensitivity.** The participants in this study had a wide range of feelings. Some participants seemed to dismiss the insensitivities in their past claiming that modern society has evolved to be overly sensitive. Others admitted that they never thought about cultural sensitivity and that it was seemingly irrelevant within their life. But most participant's expressed feelings of regret. Discussions about race are uncomfortable often awakening issues of racial supremacy and feelings of guilt (Geiger 2003).

**10.2.3 Regret.** According to Cone (2004) people from the dominant society often avoid speaking with people of color because they do not want to feel emotionally uncomfortable while conversing about racial injustice. Critical theorists would describe regret as a way to hand over the blame of some event in which we strayed from our core values and morals. Many participants however, expressed regret over not diversifying their lives. The regret of a couple participants turned to sadness during the process of the interviews.

The Oxford American College Dictionary (2007), defines regret as, "feeling sad, repentant, or disappointed over something that has happened or been done, especially a loss or missed opportunity" (p. ll50).

It is not impossible for the dominant society to avoid people of color. The dominant culture possesses intellectual access to the world by controlling most of the economic, political, social, cultural and religious power in the United States (Giroux 2015). Consequently, they do not have to communicate across cultures (Cone 2004).

Perhaps the fear of losing control overshadows the need to reach out. When one group is thoroughly entrenched in its own cultural traits and concerned with the eradication of their customs, they may begin to engage in the process of self preservation with the purpose of protecting what they have rather than progressively restructuring and enhancing relationships with smaller cultures. The institution of isolation solidifies egocentric and stagnant ideals within groups.

## *11. Implications*

This study could heighten consciousness by inspiring storytelling across classrooms, cultures and political boundaries because stories told and heard create awareness, respect, and recognition (Haven 2007). Perhaps people will more closely listen to others as they consider issues of cross-cultural communication. Perhaps this study will illuminate the importance of the collective experiences and the emotional responses of those experiences.

Maybe this study will help teach people how to listen and obtain problem solving and conflict-resolution skills, after all, a key element of the storytelling process is affective listening. Maybe when we learn to listen better, we will begin to understand that narratives are what explain social and cultural difference (James 2003; Passini 2013).

This study might encourage a more accommodating view of people different from our self. Perhaps when we look more closely at and honor the values of others we may see something different from what we expected. This study may encourage people to induce a sense of curiosity in people as well as discourage prejudice.

Hopefully this study will inspire more research in the areas of storytelling and the process of initiating peace across cultures.

## 12. Conclusion

The United States will never be a perfect society; however, the expectation for being something better ought to be an obtainable goal. To strive for new ways of thinking, new ways of doing, and new ways of being are traits that can be found in all cultures (Gottschall 2012). It is imperative to critically think about and include the stories of all people in an increasingly mosaic society.

This study is not the cure for the world's cancers, but it does reveal that communication, perhaps through story, is one way to begin the process of building relationships across cultures. It does not embody the opinions or represent the positions of all rural Midwesterners, but it does tell a particular story.

It stands to reason that within cross-cultural communication lie the confidence and desire to solve important issues through cross-cultural dialogue (the telling of stories).

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