Who Am I? My Cultural Identity:
Color the World Beautiful with Only Eight Crayons
Amy Lance

What if the only colors in the world were contained in a box of eight Crayola crayons? Getting along with other cultures might be easier. Scientists and anthropologists probably would not bother studying cultural interactions or making U-curved hypotheses (Cushner, Mcclelland, & Safford, 2003), but the world would be bland and possibilities probably limited. I imagine that my interaction with other cultures would have been just as limited if my mother never decided to move from Cullman, Alabama when I was one and a half years old. When we came to Akron, Ohio, it was as if my world expanded from a box of eight crayons to a box of sixty-four. The number of people or agents that helped socialize me expanded. Instead of learning through the world solely from my mother’s odd family, I learned from my mother and new step-father. I also learned from teachers and peers who had different racial backgrounds from me. These social agents helped form my cultural identity and make me the woman I am today.

The first school I attended was Findley Elementary. I remember that the school was in a very poor area. My mother was a struggling accounting student and my step-father had a work related accident which kept him from ever working again. Therefore, my family was also very poor. Eighty-nine percent of students at Findley today are economically disadvantaged. Because of this, we all learned that we had fewer advantages than average white people, and we had to work twice as hard if we wanted to be successful adults. But, seventy-eight percent of students at Findley also had to deal with what was perceived as being another disadvantage at that time—being African American.

For the first two years that I attended Findley, I was the only white person in the class. For the most part I made friends quite quickly. We would discuss the television shows that we watched the previous night. We also talked about television during class discussion. Unfortunately, the media was a major socializing agent for many of the kids that I went to school with. With the exception of the Cosby show, most television programs showed African Americans in an evil light. My first grade teacher wanted to show us otherwise.

Mrs. Rice devised a plan to have us draw pictures of ourselves. We would then hang all of the beautiful black faces on the walls of the classroom. But the catch was that since we were not white we had to color in our faces. I just dismissed this realizing that she wasn’t talking to me. After all most teachers seemed to forget that I was different from the rest of the class and because I wanted to belong, I wouldn’t say anything about my difference.

When I began Mrs. Rice’s task, I was so excited. It was like I was in the honeymoon stage of the U-curve hypothesis which theorizes that people go through four stages: honeymoon, Hostility, humor and home when adjusting to different cultures. (Cushner et al. 2003). In the honeymoon phase everything seems fresh and new with unlimited prospects. That is exactly how I felt when I started this project. I was creating new life on paper. Somehow this drawing would convey more than just my face. It would be a portrait of my whole identity.

I was very careful with all of the details. I made sure to color the tips of my hair yellow and my roots, or burnt part as I thought, brown. I colored my eyes green with tiny brown flecks and worked very hard on my nose and mouth. When I was finished I thought that I colored a pretty attractive girl. However the attractiveness was all exterior. If I included interior attractions, I might have drawn a book or a job.

My mother was the main social agent responsible for teaching me about being a woman. According to Cushner et al. (2003) there are twelve sources of cultural identity which includes gender, race and social status that influence and shape most people. Mainstream society might actually believe that my views on women were slightly warped. I thought that women were smarter and superior to men. My mom went to college and she knew everything. My step-father, on the other hand, had to quit school in the fifth grade and help work on the farm. He lived in Birmingham, Alabama, so he never met my mother until they both moved to Akron. At the time, schools
were segregated and my father had to walk past the white school to get to the ‘for colored only’ school. The education he received wasn’t phenomenal, and even though he had made it to the fifth grade, he was illiterate.

When my brother and I had homework questions we always went to my mother for help. I didn’t realize that this was abnormal until the first time I watched Poltergeist. The children were sitting around the kitchen table and the mother was in the room. They had a question, and rather than finding out the answer from their mom, they were going to “ask dad.” I asked my mother why on earth would they ask their dad when everyone knows that women are smarter than men. My mother told me that the world viewed women differently, and that the world typically believed that men were the smarter of the two sexes. I was stunned by this. I was happy that I at least came from a more forward thinking family. That is why I was surprised when my brother and I became teenagers. Although he is two years younger than me, my brother had more privileges but I had more responsibilities. My mother said that it was because he was a boy and I was a girl. I was absolutely crushed. My mother was telling me that everything that she socialized me to believe about being a women was a lie! In the first grade, however, I felt lucky that I was born a woman.

I would like to believe that this attitude showed when I took my picture to Mrs. Rice. However if she saw woman pride in the drawing, she didn’t say anything about it. Instead, she told me to go back to my seat and color my face.

I wasn’t completely sure what I should do. I only had a box of eight crayons, and none of the colors offered were adequate to color in a face. I wondered what color my brother would use on his face. Today I wonder, what color Shameka Collins would make her face. Like my brother Shameka is biracial. According to Cushman et al. (2003), she identifies herself with being African American only because people expect her to, much like my brother. However, she doesn’t feel black because in many ways she was raised to be white. But if Shameka said she was White, then she would be denying her African American side.

Would Shameka color herself black just because people expected it? How could she color herself and show both of her races at the same time? I was going through much of the same thing while coloring my picture. Although I am not a biracial child like her or my brother, I was raised in an interracial home like a biracial child. I believe that when I become a teacher I will be in a unique position to help children like my brother and Shameka because of my similar cultural background. Hopefully, I could help eliminate some of the confusion that they might face when trying to recreate themselves.

The only part I had left when recreating myself was picking out which color I would use. I remembered that practically every day on the playground another student would say, “I know why your (maiden) last name is White, because you are white.” I always knew this reasoning was flawed, but nevertheless I used the same reasoning when I decided to color my face. I took out the white crayon and started to color. The only problem was the white crayon didn’t show up on the white paper.

When I took my once perfect paper to the teacher, she told me to go to my seat and color in my face. I tried to color real hard, hoping that my sheer force would make the white show up. It did not work and when I took the picture back to Mrs. Rice, she once again sent me to my seat. After the third time of being sent to my seat, I became frustrated. According to the U-curve hypothesis, I was in the hostile stage. I didn’t know why my teacher just wouldn’t take my paper. It didn’t make sense to me that she kept on sending me back to my seat. I didn’t understand why she didn’t just take the picture like I expected her to do; I colored it after all. I decided that she just didn’t like the color so I withdrew the black crayon and began to color.

When Mrs. Rice accepted my picture, she wore a look of shock. I felt like I had done something wrong because Mrs. Rice requested a meeting with my mother. Another cultural identity model, the cross-cultural Interaction model, suggests that Mrs. Rice and I had been stuck in stage one, emotional arousal. According to Cushman et al. (p. 2003) people in this stage are aroused by unpredictable behavior in others and when their own behavior does not produce the desired results. I did not behave in the way she expected. And her behavior was lost on me. This was one of the only times in my life that I can recall that racial boundaries made it hard for me to communicate with others.

However, I can see where this kind of misunderstanding could happen to me again. When I do my field study at Lake Middle School, I am terrified that I might have the same problem Mrs. Rice had with me. The school is ninety-nine percent Caucasian and less than ten students in the district receive free or reduced lunches. Coming from an interracial impoverished background, this seems daunting for me. On the other hand, I should do great in a
typical class. I want to work in a poor school. I want to help students that are going through things that I have been through. I know that I could make a difference in a school with a mixed social class and a mixed racial background.

Mrs. Rice told my mother that I was confused about my racial background. Maybe she was right. My mother asked me why I colored myself black and she seemed satisfied with my answer. We even found the humor in the situation reaching the third stage in the U-curve hypothesis. We laughed at the way the black went onto the picture over the white, with neither color showing up well. We laughed about the things stubborn Amy does when she is mad. Then she told me not to worry about it.

My mother and Mrs. Rice never got along again. They both thought they were right. My mother thought that Mrs. Rice tortured me with the work, and Mrs. Rice believed that it was my mother’s fault that I was confused about my racial identity. By now both of the women have probably forgotten all about that first grade picture. And I can claim that I have finally reached the fourth stage in the U-curve hypothesis. I finally feel at home with that picture because now I realize that even though I set out to capture my racial identity on the page, I captured something even more important instead. I captured my cultural identity.

Somehow I managed to capture it with only eight crayons. Often I wonder how different my cultural identity would have been if we never moved away from Alabama and been exposed to the sixty-four colored box. I realize that if my step-father was not a major socializing agent in my life, I would probably be culturally insensitive. If we still lived in Cullman, Alabama, I might have automatically assumed that men were smarter than women. I might have even been stuck in the hostility phase when confronted with people of different races. I believe that I am an all around better person today and therefore, will be a better teacher because of the experiences and the people that have populated my life.

References