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Identity Formation of Young Adults: An Oral History Exploration

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For the last five years I've attended this highly reputable institution, all the while trying to understand where I belong in a place like this. Coming from the same city that Trinity College is apart of, there are many juxtaposing views about Hartford and Trinity from those who attend Trinity and vice versa. While a majority of the students rarely ever leave the campus beyond its bold iron gates, Hartford residents may stroll through campus being that it is a more direct path from Broad Street to Zion. Their clothes are different; their walk is different; and their overall demeanor is one that represents city-life. There is an unspoken understanding between those who are apart of Trinity and those who are not, that is, "Don't stay too long, it'll compromise my comfort." I understand that these are strong claims that I am making. However, being one of those Hartford residents as well as one of those Trinity students, I been made aware of my role as either resident or student among different parties. I find myself on an unstable grey fence where my subjective perspective has been molded by confusion, difference, adaptability, and transparency. My reality has become one of different and separate worlds from how I grew up and how I was educated. And with my values held in my family and my education, I've been pulled in opposite directions when I was trying to comprehend what I value the most, what I cherish, what I believe in, what I live for, and who I am based on various components.

As a result, I wanted to understand in a better way how young adults develop their identity considering that there are so many factors that contribute to how individuals understand themselves, their surrounding environment and the world at large. While we are in the process of finding ourselves as young adults, the option of accepting certain

things and rejecting others is a process which is necessary and inevitable for our

development. However, are there social patterns which guide individuals towards

commonly taken paths? Is education one of those patterns? And if so, how affectively

significant are these social patterns to the influence of you and I, but also our brothers

and sisters, parents, friends, acquaintances, business personnel, judges, presidents,

etcetera? As I walk this campus during the last days of my undergraduate experience,

there's a subtle panic within me of what is in store for the future. But before I turn this

page and move on to the next chapter, I want to more fully understand myself- as an

educated individual, but also as someone who grew up apart of the struggle even when I

wasn't aware.

<u>Researched Theories on Identity</u>

Pierre Bourdieu focuses on the concept of social identity being embedded with

individuals of different social groups. This social identity can be described in an

individual's social capital, cultural capital, and economic capital that they are affiliated

with. But in order to become affiliated with a specific cultural and social capital, there

must be an individual *habitus* which is a convergent from a social *habitus* that is created

through the production of a common individual *habitus*.[1] This means that there must be a

legitimization of ranging social classes which can only occur when the positions of power

in different fields are distributed to the different capitals that are then received, assumed

and accepted by the mass. Bourdieu believes strongly that, "objectivist theory must take

into account agents' representation of the social world and, more precisely, of the

contribution they make to the construction of the vision of this world, and thereby to the

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[1]   Bourdieu, Pierre. <u>Structures, *Habitus* and Practices</u>. Educational Studies 309, Part II. 105.

very construction of this world."[2] It is through this vision of the world and the construction of that very world where people envision and legitimize the existence of competing *habituses*. It is here, where people begin to understand themselves and where they belong within these cultural *habituses*. Converging their experiences with those who are apart of the same social class as well as occupy the same cultural capitals, people find those who are like them and grow comfortable with them- abiding by a system of institutions which emphasizes the power of differences amongst the variety of social fields.

Gloria Anzaldua explains her theory quite differently, using her ethnic historical background and the significance of commerce to represent the stark differences between those who have power and control versus those who do not. It is through the understanding of who has power and those who are oppressed which have allowed me to make a connection of how people create their identity within a reality where the differences of people are not only represented through their race or social capital, but also through their cultural history. Anzaldua provides a clear and artist description of the Mexicans' and Indians' history which illustrates their unfair struggle to exist amongst a dominating European culture. The Europeans coercively expanded their land with the objective of expanding their power which created the border culture which she explains with the term 'hybridity'. It is through the American Conquest and the U.S. troops that colonized the indigenous people of America's original borderless land that brought division between different cultures, different social groups, and different powers. This has had an effect on the historical experiences of Mexicans, *mestizos, mestizajes,* and Chicanos(as) that we must be aware of when understanding the interactions between an

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[2]   Bourdieu, Pierre. <u>Social Space and Symbolic Power</u>. Educational Studies 309, Part II. 115.

oppressed group of people and their power-hungry counterparts. Anzaldua describes, "The infusion of the values of the white culture, coupled with the exploitation by that culture, is changing the Mexican way of life."[3] When understanding Anzaldua's perspective on her own identity as a Mexican as well as an American through her words, it makes me analyze my own identity as a hybrid individual who can identify with struggle and power.

Stacey Lee critiqued the marginalization of stereotypes especially among Asian-Americans. The misconception of the Asian-Americans as model minorities has led to a struggle of identity for those Asian-Americans who don't necessarily fit the preconceived mold of the model-minority myth. Within the panethnic Asian population of Academic High where Lee did her field study, she found that there was a division amongst the ethnic groups which is usually not identified; thus people are unaware of this divisive reality and its affects on the individuals which are associated with them.

> Asian students who shared a panethnic identity did not make up a single identity group but divided themselves into three identity groups: Asian, Asian new wave, and Asian American. Thus the Asian American students at Academic High divided themselves into four identity groups: Koreans, Asians, Asian new wavers, and Asian Americans. Each identity group had a unique perspective on schooling which influenced their experiences at Academic High.[4]

As Lee mentioned, the perceptions of each group is different when it comes to how they identify themselves as well as how they view school to enhance their future; this is compared to the assumptions which are made of them based on their physiognomy and ethnicity. Further on in her article Lee describes how each individual apart of these four

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3   Anzaldua, Gloria. The Homeland, Aztlan/El Otro Mexico. Educational Studies 309, Part II. 201.
4   Lee, Stacey. Behind the Model-Minority Stereotype: Voices of High- and Low-Achieving Asian American Students. Blackwell Publishing; Anthropology & Education Quarterly, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Dec., 1994), pp. 416.

groups was impacted by their peers as well as the dominant culture of American whiteness. The latter was something which they either strived for or harshly rejected not only as individuals but more so as a group, which directly carried weight as to how these individuals developed their own understanding of themselves and the world around them. With this understanding, we are able to recognize that an identity is also not simply just about a person's presumed ethnic affiliation. The people they surround themselves with and those peoples' ideology on identity and identification will also have a strong influence on how those individuals will see themselves. This also is implied with the weight of the dominant American culture and its affiliation with whiteness.

Authors of the peer reviewed journal Ethnic group, acculturation, and psychiatric problems in young immigrants have also explored the significant effects of acculturation on immigrants. Although they focus on the psychiatric effects of these immigrants, the study was still useful for my research because I was able to analyze acculturation and its psychological and social impact on certain individuals of America. When exploring their findings more in depth, I found that the social and educational aspect of strategically implementing the American culture as something that one needs in order to succeed within our nation affects an identity in very different and powerful ways. For first generation girls and second generation boys who migrate to America, acculturation has an unquestionable influence on their psychiatric stability and ultimately their identity. Acculturation is only one variable of hundreds which affect an identity; however, its indicative role on everyone who has gone through the American educational system allowed me to make the profound connection between identity and education.[5]

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[5]   Oppedal, Brit, et al. Ethnic group, acculturation, and psychiatric problems in young immigrants. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry 46:6 (2005), pp 646–660

In James Masterson's book <u>The Search for the Real Self: Unmasking the</u> <u>Personality Disorders of our Age</u>, he addresses the scenario where individuals will apply a "false self" as a defensive reactionary tactic in certain circumstances. He is specifically describing people who experience depression. This is relevant because there has been an increasing diagnosis of clinical depression for many people in the past few decades. And it is within Masterson's explanation of the false self during depression and the connection of one's false self to their childhood which I feel is significant to understanding one's identity as well. Although it is difficult to generalize depression on the American population, I believe it is safe to say that everyone at one point in their life has experienced 'false self' in the representation of their self when projecting a certain desired image onto others. Also, the effect of our childhood and the way we have developed into the young adult individuals that I am studying has a tremendous significance on our identities. However, because of the large amount of previous research already done on the subject of childhood development and identity, I won't focus for long on the factor of childhood development and its impact on adult identity but I wanted to make mention of it.

Barack Obama's autobiography entitled <u>Dreams from My Father</u> was a valuable source for my research project. Throughout his autobiography Obama explores many self-reflective issues which he struggles with throughout his life. Race, education, social class, social change, politics, regionalism, education, faith, truth, honesty, phoniness, family, unity, division, and growth are only some of the topics which Obama mentions as representational characteristics of himself and/or others who he encounters in his life. With my focus on the educational institutions having either a direct or insignificant effect

on my participants' identities, I found certain discussions that Obama had with elderly

individuals on education and identity very useful. While sitting down with a guidance

counselor when he was a community organizer Obama was told,

> The first thing you have to realize, is that the public school system is
> not about educating black children. Never has been. Inner-city schools
> are about social control. Period. They're operated as holding pens-
> miniature jails, really. It's only when black children start breaking out
> of their pens and bothering white people that society even pays any
> attention to the issue of whether these children re being educated.[6]

This had me consider the difference of experiences in education for different children

racially, socially, and geographically. The following statement also allowed me to

consider how strong the effect of education is on an identity- from when one is a young

child and rapidly growing (surrounded by their social environments and familial and

cultural capital) to a time of continual growth where there is more independence,

maturity, knowledge, and experience as influences.

> What had Frank called college? *An advanced degree in compromise…*
> The real price of admission. Leaving your race at the door. Leaving
> your people behind. Understand something, boy. You're not going to
> college to get educated. You're going there to get *trained*. They'll train
> you to want what you don't need. They'll train you to manipulate
> words so they don't mean anything anymore. They'll train you so good,
> you'll start believing what they tell you about equal opportunity and the
> American way and all that shit. They'll give you a corner office… tell
> you you're a credit to your race. Until you actually start running things,
> and then they'll yank on your chain and let you know that you may be a
> well-trained, well-paid nigger, but you're a nigger just the same…
> You've got to go [to college]. I'm just telling you to keep your eyes
> open. Stay awake.[7]

These two quotes allowed me to understand with more objective reasoning my

participants perspective when analyzing the influence that their earlier educational

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[6] Obama, Barack. <u>Dreams of My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance</u>. Three Rivers Press; New York, NY; 1995. 285.

[7] Obama, Barack. <u>Dreams of My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance</u>. 97.

experience as well as a their college experience (for those who it applies to) has had on their identity in extremely interpretational.

My final source of reference is a compilation of various essays entitled <u>The Oral History Reader</u>, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. This source was able to able to give me an understanding on how I would go about my process of collecting data and the term for this process, Oral History. Within this source, I chose two specific essays which have been able to help me understand oral history overall in a better way. The first essay is <u>Movement without aim: methodological and theoretical problems in oral history</u> written by Ronald Grele. Throughout this essay Grele explains that there is a significant "self-evidence importance" within oral history; however, there is skepticism throughout the professional department of history based on the fact that oral history is the search of memory rather than history. It is the truth behind the fact as opposed to the facts themselves.[8] Advice about having to understanding what I'll be evaluating, which must result in thorough research is provided; and the process of the interview, transcribing, and analyzing as a conversational narrative was clarified for me. This essay allowed me to know the questions that may be asked during my presentation and how to structure my research and interviews so that my analytical process could be most beneficial for myself as well as my listeners.

The second essay of this source is entitled <u>Popular memory: theory, politics, method</u>, written by the Popular Memory Group. This essay focused on "Popular memory" and the social production of memory, which consists of an Academic History or a public representation of history. The authors discussed the "historical apparatus",

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[8]   Grele, Ronald. <u>Movement without aim: methodological and theoretical problems in oral history</u>. From *The Oral History Reader*. Routledge, London, UK; 1998. pp. 38.

which are agencies that construct the public historical sphere and also control access to the publication.[9] This chapter provided me with yet another social outlook on how to analyze the representational history of individuals. Within their interpretation of their own oral history I analyzed whether they are able to indicate their awareness of the popular memory and if they are or are not apart of that historical apparatus.

Process

When tackling the issue of our developing identities within young adults, it wasn't enough to simply research the statistical psychological and biographical analyses and what previous studies have found when studying identity. Instead, I had to get more thorough with my research using specific examples of personal experiences, especially because each and everyone's identity is so personal and individual. I interviewed six individuals, myself included. Each one held their own by means of originality, sincerity, and being informative when exploring how they understand their reality, their world, and their perspective. Since I was also exploring the effect of education on their identities, I strategically picked three students attending Trinity College and three students who are from Hartford and are not pursuing a secondary education at this very moment. All ranged between the ages of twenty to twenty-five, which I felt comfortable categorizing as young adults. There were differences among all participants in where they were from, what social and racial background they are connected with, how long they've been in school, and what experiences they've gone through. However interestingly enough, there were common themes in what these six participants valued, worked towards, enjoyed and

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[9]   Popular Memory Group. Popular memory: theory, politics, method. From *The Oral History Reader*. Routledge, London, UK; 1998. pp. 75.

experienced. Even with them so different in how they developed their understanding of everything there were clear links which I was able to make. Yet, due to the fact that I would be interviewing individuals who each had unique and different stories, it does not mean that what I conclude will be representing a general public by any means.

<u>Family</u>

Family was a definite concept which appeared in everyone's oral history. Even with such a diversity in what their upbringings were like, the stress on family and its significance on each person's identity was understandably something of common value. Natalie, twenty-three and a mother of two stated at one point during the interview, "I'm dedicated to my family." Another participant Germaine, who identified himself as "an African American man" among other things acknowledged that one out of two of his priorities was also his family. All but one emphasized the fact that family was a primary necessity in their life. However, again each one had a different story when coming to the conclusion that their family was one of their main priorities.

Interestingly enough, a majority of the families that the participants came from didn't have fathers who had a dominant presence in their lives. And the reaction of this reality for those who grew up without a father ranged on different levels. Ashlei, a Trinity student, briefly mentioned the fact that her father was never really there. "My dad was absent for much of my life. My grandfather was kind of the substitute." However, Manny and Germaine understood that this had a definite effect on how they have emotionally and relationally developed as men. Germaine states, "Not having a father around. I really had no like older male figures to turn to when it came to growing up and trying to look for how to become a man." This especially affected Germaine in his teenage years, as he

alludes to feeling like he had missed out when it came to having a lack of male figures in his life while he needed guidance in developing into a young man himself. But when thinking back on his development and experiences, he believes it made him aware of familial dynamics, which he has now grown to significantly value.

> It made me aware of a lot of things. Also, I think the disappearance of any like prominent male figures in my life when I was growing up- I used to hang tough with my grandfather a lot. But then a lot of things that I didn't know about that situation.[10]

While Germaine became aware of these family realities at a more mature stage in his life, Manny was a young child when he began to understand the struggle that many experience in families. When pondering on his childhood, Manny admits to having been extremely depressed around the age of five or six because he understood his mother's difficult situation in raising three children without the positive support from his father.

> My childhood was very rough. Very rough. And I understand in a sense that my mother, I say my mother didn't care. Um, it was- she was depressed too. You know she was depressed before she had me… Her depression led up to my depression. Her depression led up to me feeling like it was my fault when I was younger. And my childhood- you know when kids grow up, you know you think about going to Disney Land, you go- falling on your knee, or uh riding that bike and you know maybe racing with your father or your mother- whoever it may be, because I know sometimes we don't have parents either. Or you know you try to think about positive things. I can recall every negative thing since I was 4 on. And my memory should not go that far back. You know and when my mom was going through what she went through, my sperm-donor aka father… used to tell me how bad of a person she was or what she was doing wrong. And you don't tell that to a 5 year old and I felt like it was my fault because I was born.

Since he was aware at such a young age, I believe it is one of the reasons why out of all of the participants who didn't have the advantage of having both parents together and actively involved in their childhood, Manny harbors his anger towards his father the most expressively. Being the oldest of his siblings and understanding the fact that his father

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[10] Interview with Germaine.

was not really actively involved, Manny felt as though he had to take on that father-role before he was even 10. "I felt like he wasn't a part of our life, so somebody had to. So I grew up really fast." Experiences throughout their childhood and teenage years within their familial life had great impact on who each of these participants would be and are now. While some would become strongly self-reliant (mainly the young men and Ashlei who were interviewed), everyone indicated that they relied on the guidance of some type of adult figure whether it be their mothers, grandparents or other roles models.

Role Models

As a result of the absence of the fathers in a majority of the homes, it was evident that my participants sought out others as their role models who would help mold them into the individuals they are today. Every participant identified people throughout their academic history to have a strong influence on the structure of their lives. Natalie remembers her 6th grade teacher Mr. Mahoney and how much she appreciated his kindness. At home there was a lot of unhappiness after her father was told to leave when she was about twelve, so Natalie like others found school and people within that environment very comforting for what they needed in order to stay on the right side of the tracks.

> I still think about him to this day. He actually took extra time out to make me feel good; he took out extra time to teach me throwing a baseball… He was great. And it's not just me. He had his children that he knew kind of needed him a little more. And I looked up to him a lot. And he used to talk about his daughters and going to school. And that used to intrigue me.

Every participant felt understood by those they were able to identify as their role models. However, although most of these role models were connected to my participants' school experience, they were all taught different ways of looking at their self and the world they

knew; and with that said it wasn't necessarily teachings of standard academic requirements that developed the participants' identity. The people who filled that void which my participants were searching for came from all levels of the educational system, such as principals, teachers, coaches, mentors, and bosses. Their focus was in helping the participants grow and develop their personal identity so that they knew who they were. This allowed them to be influenced less by tempting external pressures. And when understanding themselves better in this way it was easier to stand for their beliefs and values.

Germaine's high school principal Orlando Goldberg, was a "strong black man who cared about the welfare of black men and their education". Regulating in a predominantly Black and Latino neighborhood, Germaine remembers Mr. Goldberg as someone who knew about the home-lives of these children. "He knew how to talk and inspire us." Manny found direction in firm, highly structured men in a peer leadership group which he was put in when he was a young kid. Unlike Germaine and some of the others, Manny responded well to strong discipline and intimidation. He looked up to two men in particular saying, "They took on a significant role trying to help me and become a man moreso than a little 11 year old that needs to go watch Pokémon." When describing them he states,

> One of the individuals was um a very strong minded black man that uh helped me through. And um actually there was another one um who just left the military, who was a- Mr. Sullivan. Sullivan was a white man who was strict, stern, sit-up-in-your-chair. I just used to- I was freakin afraid of his ass. But like I uh- they whipped me into shape. They whipped me into shape.

So while Natalie responded well to the a little extra special attention which she needed in order to feel comforted and trust; Germaine responded to someone he could culturally

relate to; structure, order and intimidation were the factors that needed to be there for

Manny while he was developing into a man at the young age of eleven.

Ashlei emphasizes a lot of who she is on her ability to connect and help others in

need. In order to do that though, she understands that she must continue to educate

herself.

> Educating myself is definitely a big priority. Just because I feel like I
> can't help other people if I can't help myself, at least mentally because
> I can't reach out to people and inform and give them information if I
> haven't forgone that and you know taken those steps myself.

With education as her first priority based on how she wants to lead her life, the influence

of her role models and their stress for Ashlei to do well academically was a significant

factor in who Ashlei identifies herself to be. However, not only did her role models show

her the value of education, they also was shown how to open up her mind and think of

things that many people usually don't understand apply to our day-to-day lives. She

spoke about one of her role models specifically saying,

> There's a woman at St. Josephs, Shya Mala Raman. I took a
> vocalization class with her when I was in high school, it was apart of
> this CREC organization thing over the summer, and I kind of tried to
> keep in contact with her because she's mentored me a lot. She's kind of
> taught me about the world, and globalizing, and capitalism, and she
> was just a really strong person and I really appreciate her energy.

I, too, found my role model and mentor Marcia Morris teaching me things about

the world and it's realities which before I had met her I had never been aware of. For

example, I worked with Marcia in a non-profit, peace promoting, Quaker organization

called American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). Marcia was able to make me aware

on a larger perspective of global issues of exploitation and destructive discrimination; but

then she would bring it into a more narrow focus and speak out against the legislatures

not allocating money properly to improve to epidemic on poverty within our small and depleted city of Hartford. She allowed me to address different issues that I had never thought about before. And while working with her she gave me the opportunity to understand the issues I had to confront in order to know what I believed in on a political and social aspect; and when discovering my opinions on certain matters, I was able to establish myself on a social and political realm.

Tommy also was able to learn things about himself that he has continued to define himself by from his wrestling coach from high school in New Jersey.

> My wrestling coach, you know he was a role model. He showed me if there's something you want- you know because I wanted to be good at it- stay focused you know what I mean. He taught me how to be focused when you want something, you just try stay focused and just do what you gotta do, you know. And listen to him- he also taught me how to listen. Like I think I'm a good listener, you know. I don't think I know everything. I'll listen to anybody, no matter who it is, even from a bum on the street.

Tommy had someone to show him that through discipline, there are basic qualities in life that you can naturally have yet never utilize in a beneficial way. Here, Tommy was able to discipline himself by understanding what he could control through the guidance of his wrestling coach.

It was through these role models that my participants were able to gain a better, more well-rounded yet personal perspective on who they were. In understanding themselves in this way, they were able to look at their surroundings in a different way, understanding the factors of influence and the social norms. They were then more aware of the social realities which exist.

Learning of Social Discrepancies

It's evident throughout most of the interviews that education was more than just math, English, science and all the other standard subjects prioritized in an academic setting. Education most often for many of the participants was learning about the realities of social class and its large discrepancies. Manny went to a small prep school that he called "a little bubble". But when Manny attended Sacred Heart in Bridgeport the racial tension was quite clear. Manny mentioned that, "Sacred Heart was I would say 98.9% Caucasian. And the other 2% was known as the "tools" of the community. And those were the minorities. They were either athletic or all on a really, really good academic scholarship." The subjects of racism and social discrepancy become interconnected for Manny when he encountered his peers at Sacred Heart and the way they viewed the children which he was trying to empower within the inner cities.

> And you dealt with a lot of racism. But you saw it most when these volunteers that were trying to make a difference in quote on quote "the hood" or the other community went to these actual schools and how scared they were. They already had an idea in their head and how these kids were going to be. And it devastated me. I mean, I went to a prep school too. I went to a prep high school. But it wasn't as bad. I never would have imagined these little rich kids and their minds sets, towards these young kids. Let alone, I mean these kids are in school and not on the streets. Not bother them. And you can see the fear- you can hear them, talk to them- they're scared.

However, he felt very comfortable at his high school because the students didn't really focus on their social status but rather their hopes, dreams, and ambitions whenever there was dialogue. He compares the two experiences and how it taught him to look at himself within this world, but also amongst others different from him.

> Sacred Heart, specifically Sacred Heart. I didn't deal with that at my high school. You know, Watkinson was a close-knit community. You know, you really didn't see people talk about material wealth more so than what their ambitions were or how they can help. And that's something that Watkinson instilled in us too. We did a lot of community service within communities that needed help. But we were

> taught to understand that we're no better than them. We were just a
> little bit more fortunate.

With Manny experiencing this realization when attending Sacred Heart though, he was able to become aware of this reality and began to work towards uplifting those inner city children who had no control of how people from more privileged backgrounds viewed them.

Ashlei also became aware of this difference in social class, but had to experience it through her private boarding school that she attended when she was in middle school. Along with Manny, race (but also gender) was a factor of her experience admitting that, "It was almost embarrassing that I was the token black kid- and I was the only girl at that n 6th and 7th grade." However, the transition which Ashlei significantly struggled with but had to overcome quite quickly was the fact that she had to feel comfortable amongst other students who never had to worry about financial issues.

> I didn't have what a lot of the other kids had, like I came in on
> scholarship and a lot of kids that I hung out with, their parents were
> paying full tuition for them and several siblings in the same school…
> that part probably made me more uneasy than being black in that type
> of environment, just because I didn't have a lot of stuff that they had.

This was a learning experience for Ashlei that she had to confront directly. She recalls a time when her mother would tell her the social ways of the world, which she learned to become adaptable (as many other participants did as well when they became aware) to in order to communicate and survive amongst those who lived differently from her.

> I remember one time I got invited to go over a girl's house and my
> mom said, 'Listen, you have to know that this girl is going to have a
> huge house but you have to act like you have been around that. You
> can't'- because I remembered being socialized into feeling and or
> portraying that I was comfortable about being around this grand kind of
> a lifestyle.

Experiences like these were a reality that Ashlei was forced to understand when placed in academic institutions where environments of social and racial discrepancies were obvious, this included Trinity.

In my own experience I also was embraced with a reality in which I was not at all aware of when first attending a private high school in a neighboring suburb right outside Hartford. This was confirmed when I continued my education here at Trinity as well. When exploring this issue in my own interview I realized the shocking transition I experienced from public to private school and the social awareness I quickly encountered.

> I know that education isn't something that you just learn in a classroom from a teacher or a professor. Education is the experience that you have or the observations that you make. It's the understanding that you have to open your mind to when looking at the world. I was educated about the social dynamics or the social discrepancies, especially in Hartford and the surrounding areas when I went to high school I was- I went from HPS in Hartford to a private school in West Hartford and its just really interesting because I mean I can't really tell you anything I learned about my freshmen year- history even though I want to be a history teacher. I remember we learned about Mesopotamia. I can't tell you anything else but "Mesopotamia". But I can tell you I had a tall white, blond teacher who was pretty. I can't remember her name. I had a lot of white peers and they all came from privileged backgrounds.

Manny, Ashlei, and I were all put into academic environments that allowed us to not only view the reality of the social discrepancies, but experience them first hand. Through encountering these social realities, which children are usually oblivious to, we became more aware of the world and where we stand within it. As a result, we and the other participants understood that we had a desire to help others who either were unaware of this discriminatory reality, such as children, or others who were connected to us in different ways.

But while some understood this based on their experience in school, even those who didn't continue in a secondary education acknowledged their awareness to these social discrepancies. Tommy comments,

> It's the world and how fucked up people are. You know, how can there be so many rich people and so many poor people. You know, I mean I'm not sayin that I'm poor, but like people are fuckin fightin over for a piece of bread. They'll kill you for it. And then you got somebody that's choking themselves with bread.

Exploring the fact this large social gap existed, Tommy accredits his life experience as something that made him understand this better. "I think that it helped that I grew up in different areas. Like you know, I grew up in downtown Hartford. And then I grew up in like a nicer area in Jersey. And like I grew up in different areas- like I've been around. Both ways." Here, it's evident that people don't necessarily have to be in an academic environment and have school be the identifier to an extreme or subtle social hierarchy that exists all around us. Yet with its existence, my participants were able to identify these social discrepancies and how that made them feel.

Helping Others

Yet despite where the participants learned about the realities of social discrepancies- whether it was in academic institutions or different places that they lived throughout their life- it was the reality of these discrepancies themselves which inspired and mobilized all of them to prioritize in helping others. However, although all my participants hold a strong value in dedicating themselves to helping others, their views on what is the most effective way of going about this largely differs. Ashlei would like to focus on providing health services for those who are unable to afford it throughout the community.

I really want to give back to the community. I uh I'm a psychology major as well as an education major. And um I think it's important to especially having the experience I've had, to reach out to people and I want to work- I want to basically build on having a non-profit like available where people who need help psychologically can get help and not have to worry about the cost of it. Because for the most part now the only people who can get psych help are the people who are legitimately crazy or the people who have enough money to pay for it. And I want to change that.

While Ashlei wants to direct her focus on the healthcare services provided, Manny sees the solution in the political field where he can advocate for the less fortunate children of inner cities in order to promise them a better future than what their realities are right now.

I mean when you see such a political shift in the world- not in the world, but just in our country alone, you force change. You want change and just with that minor step, I do believe in change. Within my community moreso and every time I hear, "What do you believe in? What do you want to happen?" I see a better tomorrow for those kids that don't have a better today… Politically I hope to be an influence in that sense to be a voice for the youth. I already am. You know, they look to me in that light.

Manny believes that, "you can't help unless you have people in higher places helping". As a result, he would like to politically establish himself and grow as a politician advocating for the inner city youth.

Natalie and Tommy take different approaches to who and how they see their role in helping others. As a mother Natalie focuses solely on building a stable home effect that is influential and blossoming for her two children and fiancé. She works hard to practice what she believes in when providing a solid foundation based on the support of both parents being there for their children as they develop into young children.

I know what I'm doing is good right now as far as being a mom and focusing all on them… The most important thing overall, in my eyes right now would be, if you decide to become pregnant or having a baby or if you have a partner like in my heart right now the most important thing is raising a child with both partners. Like if that could happen I mean, you should try your hardest to make it happen or wait.

Although Natalie isn't direct in how she identifies herself helping others, her advocacy for a two-parent household is something that she shows through her actions and encourages throughout her community and other young mothers who often become the sole providers of their households. It's through her actions that Natalie shows her desire and work in helping others.

Meanwhile, Tommy takes a more marginalized look at the world and all of its corruption when talking about how he would like to help others. Like Ashlei and Manny, Tommy sees the necessity in establishing himself first before being able to assist others in their growth. This can only be possible if and when he is able to financially stabilize himself.

> Well I'd like to own my own business. Probably you know. And then be fuckin rich and do the right thing with the money. Not like everybody else. You know, help people. Do stuff that's supposed to be done. Not donate the money you know. I'd start my own charity because there's so much corruption in the world. That's how I feel about it.

Some focus on giving back to their community; others want to create a stable home environment for their family; meanwhile, others would like to work towards improving the conditions for the kids of the future. And although my participants all work towards the better good for different recipients, the theme of helping others still holds all of them rooted together.

Adaptability

However, in order for the participants to have the ability to make change and help others, they realized that there was a need for adaptability within themselves if they were going to be able to communicate with people in these different social spheres that they

had acknowledged before. With this being said, their skill of adaptability was also embraced for other more personal reasons too. For example, Ashlei had jumped from school to school before settling in at Trinity, "Like I did the public school; I did the Catholic school; I did the private elite boarding school. I jumped across a lot of social boundaries." As she encountered this throughout her younger developmental years, Ashlei mentions that, "being young and having to transition from one school to another and being the [the new kid all the time]- that kind of challenged me." However with this experience Ashlei has found it beneficial to who she is today and how she is able to interact with people from a variety of social classes.

> I would say I saw a lot of things growing up. I saw a lot of extremes. Um, I hung out with people a variety of different social scales. I hung out with the very poor and I hung out rather rich. I wouldn't say top echelons, but I'd say definitely wealthier people in society so. And I think it's just overall made me well rounded; and I don't know. I think also the fact that I traveled from school to school so much and was constantly being put to the test so much as far as meeting new people definitely helped me become a very outgoing kind of a person. I'm not really afraid of people at all, like I've had to meet and kind of fit in so many different types of groups of people that it's never really been a problem for me… The way I see it now is just I have I have different moods and I act and dress according to them. So I guess it's really just me now… It's become a method of self-expression now.

Through her different transitions when she was trying to find her own identity, it was through the variety of people she encountered and how she defined herself amongst them as well as to herself that Ashlei was finally able to come to a happy median of who she saw herself as and how she expressed herself externally.

Germaine had similarities in how he expressed his adaptability among different social settings as well; however, for him he realized that he shows his different sides almost unconsciously. He shows different parts of his identity to people in a way that fits the mold in which he's adapting comfortably to. This is because there is many social

statuses which exist that Germaine is able to mold in and out of when needed and to his own comfortability. He stated,

> Different people describe me different ways. With different people I probably show different sides of myself. Not necessarily purposefully, but I'm kind of a chameleon. It's an effect I've had since childhood. I can fit into different social networks pretty easily and switch in and out very easily. So it's not like I don't belong; it's not like I'm portraying something I'm not. I'm just able to change clothes and fit mold and hang somewhere else… I'll find my comfortable zone.

Germaine feels that he's apart of all social networks that he is able to adjust to, especially because this is something that he's been doing since he was a child. However, he will never extend himself in a way or in settings that he doesn't feel settled in. Understanding that people are judgmental, Germaine will only provide certain people an surfaced image of who he is. But in fact if this is the case, he tells me that those who he shows only the surface of himself to, will never truly know the real Germaine who identifies as a poet, a rapper, a caring person, the strong and silent type, the emotionless person, or the quiet and observing type. Germaine acknowledges that he is a man who only takes calculated risks; and he does this by understanding his surroundings and those who are present within those settings. Germaine will act accordingly saying, "I think I try to be whatever I have to be for the day."

Manny also understands this. Yet, he believes that there are places, people, and certain times in which 'a front' *must* be put on and a role must be played in order to get what he wants. Since he has a desire to pursue a career in politics he understands that appearances, confidence, and the way you hold yourself amongst different people is something that is necessary in order to succeed. "I'm very politically active. I work very close knit with a couple of politicians within my community, within New Britain with my

Puerto Rican side of the family who help me out in that sense. My priorities are to

establish myself." As a result Manny says,

> I embrace it. Everybody has to put up a front… It's like, do I really
> need to put on this character to get what I want; or can I be myself and
> achieve these same options? And that's a "No". It's a "No"… You
> know, in being yourself is a beautiful thing. As long as you're happy
> with who you are then that's all that should matter. But in this world
> it's not going to keep you floating everywhere… And I know I kiss just
> a little bit of ass, just sometimes but I'm not going to be a fake asshole
> either.

Finding his balance in how he portrays himself is seen as a skill and strategy to Manny;

and he believes he does this very well. With this understanding, Manny wants to use this

to his advantage for himself as well as the inner-city youth he speaks to and advocates

for; and not because he wants all the fame and glory, which he does imply would be nice

as well, but because it's what's needed for progression, success, and social mobility. So

while Ashlei and Germaine emphasize their adaptability among different social spheres

as being something which allows them to fit in but also keeps them true to themselves,

Manny sees his ability of adaptability as something he can gain from- for himself and

others.

Tommy on the other hand has acknowledged his adaptability, which he coins as

'versatility', as a method of protecting himself from others who try to take advantage of

people. As a result, he learned to become adaptable to others and how he interacts with

them.

> You just learn. I'm not sayin I'm not friends with them anymore but
> you just know where your trust point is, you know. What you can tell
> them; what you can't; or what you can do with them and what you
> can't do with them. I mean I still get along with them; I might still hang
> out with them but what I say or do around them is different. Or what I
> do for them, what I help them out with is different… Versatility- you
> can't treat everybody the same, but you treat them how they act. That's
> my philosophy.

Through his experiences, Tommy has been able to understand that he cannot trust others. "You realize you know, no matter how close a friend is, you can only trust them so much really. That makes me sad you know. People are selfish."

In building an understanding for others and the realities of selfishness, judgment, social discrepancies, etc., my participants have been able to develop an adjustment in how they interact, communicate and establish relationships with others. Their use of adaptability as self-expression, career-driven, and trust-based are only a few reasons why my participants resort to this skill of adapting. It allows them to survive and progress in a society where these skills are needed based on the social structure and realities of what they are aware of and exist among.

Throughout this experience of my research project, I found many difficult blocks and obstacles in my path. This is ironic because I see life to be very similar. But from each and every interview and transcription all the way up to the analysis and interpretation of all my participants' experiences, I was able to make one crucial synthesized conclusion. No matter where we are from, how much schooling we've had, what our familial circumstances have been like and are right now- no matter how we've learned our lessons, or the fact that we're still trying to learn those lessons- whether or not we're in relationships, what our politics are, or what we believe in… We want the best for each other. I began this project wanting to prove that it's too simple to generalize any individual based on their culture, their ethnicity, their gender, sexual preference, etc. I had claimed that, "I am too unique for that." However, throughout the process of my project, I found that there are so many more ways of looking at who we are as individuals as well as a community. Although unique, we shared numerous similarities despite the

difference in experience and education. But even in those similarities, we were still uniquely cut and molded with the influence of others as well as by our own choices, actions, and beliefs. We are so different, but only because we are meant to be. We are so similar, because it's our hearts which share the same compassion for others. There is a belief that most people are selfish, judgmental, and greedy. But within these six individuals that I interviewed, this was proven not to be so; because it's for and by others that we are who we are.