

***Being Different: Preliminary Study***  
**The Interchange Institute**  
**2015**

**Goal of Project:** To examine the long-term effects – positive or negative – of having experienced a minority status as a child, especially the long-term effects on participants' experience with cultural difference as an adult, living and/or working across cultures.

**Participants**

- 65 adults, age 34-75, mostly women
- Mostly white; others black, Indian, Latina, Cree, Polynesian, biracial
- 19 US Americans; others from Austria, Belgium, Canada, Costa Rica, France, Germany, Ireland, Kenya, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland, UK, Venezuela
- Now living in US (n=19) or Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Kenya, The Netherlands, Oman, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, UK
- 15 currently living outside passport country; 33 had done so at some time in their lives, usually as an adult
- 82% recalled having had some kind of minority experience, or experience of being different from most of their community, as a child

**Method**

- on-line anonymous survey, sent to members of an international coaching group of colleagues and to recipients of a non-profit international blog

**Types of Differences Participants Remembered**

Participants were asked, "Before the age of 18, did you ever live for 6 months or more in a situation when you experienced yourself as different from the other people around you?" They could choose from a list of possible differences and/or add their own. Here is a summary of the types of differences participants remembered:

- Death in family (father, mother, brother)
- Social class (e.g., doctor in working class town; "last rung of the ladder of middle class;" sudden change in income)
- Parents divorced
- Parents' work status (e.g., dual career; stay-at-home dad)
- Special needs (e.g., sibling or parent disability; own illness or learning difference; parental mental or physical health)
- Family constellation (e.g., large family; only child; not having extended family around)
- Own sexual orientation
- Frequent family mobility
- Race
- Nationality
- Being from a non-local domestic region (e.g., from Cornwall living in London)
- Parent values (e.g., conservative in liberal community; laissez-faire parenting)

- Religion (e.g., Catholic among Protestants; Jewish among Christians; fundamentalist cult)

### **Reactions to Difference**

Some participants remembered their minority status as having been painful, frightening or shameful. For example:

- *My mother was very popular in town- so her death shocked many. People stopped socializing with us, and I was excluded from many "mother/daughter " activities. People never talked about it, but changed their relationship to me. People either pitied me or avoided the issue.*

Other reactions were mixed, even during childhood. For example:

- *We moved to Japan when I was 10. I'm euro American and white with blonde hair green eyes. People came up and touched my hair. Mostly I was uncomfortable with the stares and it was startlingly to be touched in public, sometimes scary. Then at times I liked the attention, I felt special.*

Participants were asked to choose from a list of adjectives about how they felt about this difference as a child, and, separately, how they feel about it now. Negative emotions (anger, shame, inferiority, sadness, worry, excluded) were more common in childhood than now. Positive emotions (pride, happiness, feeling special, lucky or superior, and sense of connection with others) were more common now than in childhood.

### **Participants' Reflections on Long-term Consequences of Childhood Difference**

A minority reflected exclusively on the negative consequences of their childhood experiences of difference. For example:

- *Growing up the way I did was a wounding process, never able to fully belong or identify with the majority - always an outsider.*
- *I was viewed with suspicion, an outsider, ergo: not to be trusted or included. This experience was new to me. I felt hurt, rejected, not good enough, not part of the "normal" way to be. I believe that has stayed with me in terms of a constant aloofness; trepidation and (outsider) observation when encountering new situations.*

More common were reflections focused on some growth-producing or enhancing consequence of their experience with difference, including increased empathy, social skills, cultural competence, career choices, linguistic skills and intercultural ease. Examples of each are below.

#### **Increased Empathy**

- *[Childhood immigration] I listen much more than I speak. People tell me that my empathic nature comes through so strongly, that they often entrust their deepest thoughts, secrets, wishes with me. I don't judge others for their differences. I've become rather blunted to the adrenaline of transitions.*

#### **Social Skills**

- *[Regional difference and parental disability] I'm comfortable with anyone anywhere - make others feel comfortable easily/quickly - conscious of making*

*everyone present feel included and heard - develop relationships very fast - horizontally rooted: networked around the world - perceptive re feelings of others - outstanding 'dot connector' which in practice means I can make sense of and anticipate direction.*

### **Cultural Competence**

- *When I was 13, my family moved from the US to France. I realized that my experience living as a Jew in a Christian society made me uniquely prepared to embrace cultural and linguistic difference. Once I bridged that international transition, it became my identity. I have now lived in many countries and love all the different ways that people live around the globe. I have often wondered whether I would have had this core cultural competency if I hadn't grown up "different."*

### **Career Choice**

- *[Growing up as a "motherless child"] Tuned in to being the "outsider" and how it may affect someone's performance- influenced me to get involved in diversity in the workplace and how "feeling different" will impact performance.*

### **Linguistic Skills**

- *[Growing up speaking a different language at home] gave me confidence in moving to [China]. It gave me a better understanding of the use of grammar in language, which makes it easier to learn a new language and makes it easier to understand foreigners speak English.*

### **Intercultural Transition Ease**

- *[Different in family size, social class and religion] These experiences of difference have sensitized me to questions of difference and have probably helped me as I settled into a new country to appreciate the benefits of being more peripheral and less central in a community. Lots happens on the edges and borders!*

### **Future Direction for Research**

Through participants' very thoughtful analysis of the immediate and long-term effects of having experienced difference as a child, this preliminary study will be used as the basis for a larger study of expatriates (currently or recently living outside their passport country).

### **Contact**

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