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I'm Half Turkish - Dancing Bears and Marble Stairs

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I’m half Turkish

Dancing Bears and Marble Stairs

This article explores some of my life experiences as a person of mixed culture.

Key words: Mixed culture, Turkish, language, appearance, name, colour, class.

My name is Cemil, you may or may not have already guessed by now that it is Turkish.

Now you may wonder how to say my name? You may know, but you may guess along the lines of Kemil or Chemil? I can tell you it is pronounced phonetically as Jemil.

Jemil? That’s an Arabic name you may think. If you haven’t met me try imagining what you think a 42 year old man (yes it is a male name) called Jemil looks like? What would you expect?

What assumptions have you made (if any)? What language would you expect me to speak and what religion would you guess I am?

If I tell you that my mum is English and my middle name is Roger does that change anything?

I hope this gives a sense of the questions and assumptions I face on a daily basis.

I feel blessed by the richness of my mixed experience, my dad being Turkish and my mum English. I have also felt some tensions too.

I am fair skinned in appearance and often perceived as monoculturally white-English, I may not fit within conventional stereotypes of what it might be to look Turkish. My cultures are important to me but I struggle to know how to describe or label myself. I often feel invisible but I feel part of a growing mixed demographic which is supported by census data (Jivraj, 2012). Within this census demographic there are a growing number of people who do not fit within cultural parameters as defined by it (Smith et al. 2010). Problems of self definition and census are alluded to by Fernando (2012), Crane (2013) and Flores-González *et al.* (2014). This research suggests the complexity of capturing cultural life experiences in labels. I often wonder which box to tick on ethnicity questionnaires and opt for the “other” category, reinforcing my invisibility. I am mindful that extreme forms of “other” were used during apartheid in South Africa (Moodley, 2003). The growing mixed population along with issues of definition highlighted here support the relevance for the study of the mixed experience.

I recently completed my dissertation for my MA in Counselling (Egeli, 2015). It was based on my experience of coming from a Turkish-English heritage. I will share extracts of my findings from my dissertation and hope to bring awareness to some of the issues I have faced, highlighting an aspect of a mixed experience which I feel has been overlooked in counselling research. I used an autoethnographic style and adopted a creative approach to writing my study, weaving narrative and vignettes together with some analysis (Humphries, 2005). My writing is an attempt to bring my felt news from my world to you, the reader (Ellis, 2004).

Language

I remember hearing a haunting tape reel of a conversation I had with my English grandfather. I must have been about 3-4 years old and I was struck at how foreign I sounded. I had an accent. At that point I realised I was an immigrant. (Feb 2014)

I spent my early childhood growing up in Turkey, the only person I spoke English to was my mum. She had been afraid that I was going to lose my English language and I wonder if I absorbed some of those fears. Turkish was my first language but English was my mother’s language.

On returning to Britain I did not continue to speak Turkish and lost my language. This gave me a sense of loss but also personal failure which was easy to forget when in England. No one spoke Turkish, there was no need, it was not seen as relevant. People would say that I was better off learning French as it was more global. That hurt. I am not French.

I feel gagged by the lack of ability to express myself in Turkish. I have a fantasy that I can argue eloquently and angrily in Turkish, but I can only make myself partially understood in broken words... (Sept 2014)

I was visiting London, a Turkish lady had a small child who was running around. I could understand every word she said to her child, things my family had said to me. The child came running over to me talking and I could not respond. She shouted at her child to leave me alone, I smiled and nodded. I wanted to say something smart or funny, a casual colloquial comment but couldn't. I wanted her to know that I knew, but I couldn't say anything. My biggest fear was being wrong, being an imposter, a failed Turk. (April 2015)

I spent many summers in Turkey listening to family and friends, understanding conversations but not being able to join in. People would look to my dad for a response. I could not speak for myself, I was embarrassed. I knew what they were saying but I couldn't say it back. I had moved from being a fluent bilingual child, to being silenced and verbally debilitated.

I remember sitting on a wall by the Izmir sea, chatting to a stranger in broken Turkish. We talked about politics, philosophy and the difficulties of life (economics!). He spoke only Turkish and I could understand most of what he said. I could also make myself understood albeit in a broken way. It was a beautiful unifying moment for me. I felt linguistic acceptance. I tried to explain what happened to my Turkish family. I had to get my dad to do it. (Sept 2014)

My grandfather wanted me to learn and bought me some text books which still sit on my bookshelf. I felt I had let him down. Somehow I could speak to strangers but not to family.

I watched my two young sons using self-directed speech as they played with their toys. It became apparent to me that when I was 3 I was doing this in Turkish, by the time I was 5 it was English. I had been thrown into a new world and had to negotiate linguistic differences. Burman (2008) recognises how learning language can involve emotionally highly charged and conflictual situations recognising the emotional significance of language tied in with cultural and national identification. In my case I was transported from one place to another. I had been taken away from my Turkish home and my grandparents who were like parent figures. My dad for that period had to remain in Turkey due to military commitments. I had suffered a loss of my Turkish life and a separation from my Turkish family who I loved. Language was a big part of that loss and grief (Priven, 2008).

The way a person uses language is an observable aspect of their cultural identity (McLeod, 2009), language proficiency playing a role in identity development (Phinney *et al*., 2001). Aydingün & Aydingün (2004) suggest that the links between Turkish identity and language are particularly strong and are symbolic of the culture. My own identity was tied in with my language and was gagged by my new dominant culture. I have felt attracted to and torn between two languages which have held different meanings for me, I have also faced self doubt not feeling I can speak either of my native languages well enough (Firmat, 2005).

Freely (2014) observes the Turkish language has emotional undercurrents which the words conceal. Whenever I hear Turkish, it sounds musical; I get it. I hear the inflections. I understand something beyond the words and it is that something I cannot always respond to verbally.

I took my violin to Turkey last time I went. A local bar had a crowd of people every night and a resident band that played Turkish music. I knew I could play along so I asked to play and without any rehearsal or any previous formal instruction of Turkish music I joined in...Something opened up... here I was on stage with a Turkish crowd and a Turkish band...my family were there too. I got a burst of adrenaline and language did not matter, I was communicating in Turkish music...time stood still and I was in a bubble of Turkishness, they let me have a solo, something was flowing through my fingers, I could play this, here I was connecting with an audience. I was flowing and in that moment saying everything I had ever wanted to through music...Turkish music. (April 2015)

Appearance

You don't look Turkish. ***You are not what I expected.***

Two phrases I am continually experiencing throughout my life.

Some people make assumptions of me based on my skin colour, my name as they hear it on the phone and as they see it written down. I always explain that I am half Turkish and half English. A lifetime of being half and not whole.

After recent surgery a nurse came to take my blood pressure..., he said to me , "Now I am going to say to you something people have said to me all my life... You don't look Turkish." I wanted to give him a high five and hug him. It was so refreshing to hear that. He knows, he understands. He had an Italian dad and an Italian name. He told me that throughout his life people had told him he did not look Italian. He had red hair. His comment is so healing. There is someone out there like me. (Feb 2015)

I appear outwardly fair skinned and white. This means that I do not get visibly recognised as a person with a mixed cultural heritage. It feels as if my heritage is constantly examined and questioned, when people find out about my heritage I feel them look at me for signs of difference.

"Hey white cheese, you fancy getting a tan on my boat?" shouted the Turkish tour guide at me. I felt a rage build up in me, who the fuck was he to call me that? I felt like pushing him into the sea. I swore at him in Turkish. I remember being in Turkey at the beach and a group of teenagers were laughing at my white skin, "you look Scottish" they said. On my last visit the manager of a restaurant refused to accept that I was in any way Turkish. He was younger than me. I had trodden those streets before him. I had grown up there and he was telling me that I wasn't Turkish based on my skin tone. How could he? (Oct 2014).

People seem to form physical expectations of me based on my name.

I met a colleague for a chat about work; she had assumed I was Welsh because of the spelling of my name. She couldn't see at all that I had a Turkish background. (May 2015)

I remember working with a journalist from a national newspaper. We had spent much time on the phone. She came into the office and declared: "I thought you were an Arab boy!" similarly when I met a famous comedian, he declared, "I thought you were an Asian lad, I left my Asian jokes at home!" (Dec 2014)

Last night I ordered a curry from a new take away, the Asian owners did not believe I was Cemil (Jemil). They thought I was having a laugh, on the plus side they had added different spices to my curry make it more authentic. (Nov 2014)

“You are not what I imagined” said someone at work. I am angry! What does he imagine? Who did he expect? How dare he! (Dec 2014)

Being fair skinned has caused me some anger and confusion. It has rendered a part of me as being invisible and as a result I have struggled to feel valid as a person of two cultures. The assumption has been made on both sides that I don’t “look” Turkish. This may have triggered initial internal conflicts about my external appearance (Katz, 1996). I then carried this through to my teenage years and perhaps experienced some identity diffusion, in the sense that I felt bewildered. I met a half Turkish woman at university who was envious of my fairness, to me it felt like femininity, something that was an aspiration of Turkish women but to be a real man, I needed a sun tan. Even my mum hadn’t chosen to marry a pasty white English looking person like me. In my teenage years it began to irritate me more. I became more aware of my paleness and as I met more and more people who kept telling me I do not look Turkish, it was a message being reinforced. I held onto the fact that Atatürk, founder of modern Turkey, (Kinross, 1964), was blonde haired and blue eyed.

I think I feel angry about this as it is about perceptions from other people I face on a daily basis, but I wonder why I feel so angry, perhaps I believe these stereotypes myself? It’s the not being enough, not living up to expectations. As I do not appear obviously foreign, that seems to give license to people to say anything they choose. As I may appear English they perhaps feel they cannot offend. I am repeatedly reminded of my ambiguity. Would people say you don’t look English? (Feb 2014)

In a similar vein Fouad (2001) describes herself as an invisible minority. One of her central struggles has been negotiating the conflicting expectations of other people’s attributions of cultures.

“I feel oppressed by your anti-oppressive stance!” I remember saying this clearly whilst attending counselling training on anti-discriminatory practise. Assumptions were being made by people about what it means to be from a different culture. I felt

discriminated against by some forms of anti-discriminatory practise and rhetoric. I did not feel included within it. I wonder if there could be a more covert racism within the counselling profession which does not necessarily apply to visible difference? (July 2016)

Yomtoob (2014) talks of within multiple identity locations and is hurt by misrecognitions which occur through stereotyping. Hector (2004) experiences being Latino and white, but being perceived as white which delegitimized him as an ethnic minority into having no voice other than white. I often have no voice other than an English white male whereas inside there is a Turkish person who is not validated by others. I have not consciously ever felt as fully English as many people repeatedly tell me I am.

...our visit to Turkey was coming to an end so me and my brother went to a local cafe to get some fresh lokma (doughnuts). The owner refused to serve us, making an excuse about not having change. I told my dad and he took us to see the owner. They confessed they had not wanted to serve two English youths. My dad was angry, he shouted at the owner, "THEY ARE TURKS!" ...this was all the validation I needed. (March 2015).

Name

I have a Turkish name and whilst that was special it was also isolating. I often have to explain my name when meeting someone new. I sometimes enjoy it, it's an ice breaker but there is also predictability to it.

People have perceptions of me based on my name. When they meet me I may not live up to expectations. On paper they often see the C and believe my name to be either Welsh or Polish, on the phone they think I am Asian or Arab. In some instances my name is also seen as being female.

I remember shortly after 9/11 I was corresponding with people in New York. As the dust settled from the awful attacks, there seemed to be a new hostility. I became acutely aware of having a Muslim name. Someone asked where it was from and I *joked, it's one of those silly European names. I was feeling a tension I had not felt before. (March 2015).*

During my counselling placement, I felt that some potential clients couldn't see beyond my name. I felt that I was being discriminated against because of it.

People are judging me...they don't know me but are making a judgement based on a name. When I go to A&E in agony, I don't give a shit who treats me, I just need help with my pain...how much help do these people really want? Fuck counsellor/client ethnic matching, who knows who anybody is? (Sept 2014)

Khosravi (2012:66) remarks that names have strong ethnic and religious connotations and within Sweden there has been anti-Muslim sentiment. She talks of assimilation through "performing whiteness." These are sentiments I have felt in regards to my name, however my actual "whiteness" has been part of my struggle.

I get an Eid card every year from my MP who has probably assumed I am Muslim.

I started my counselling training level 3 and the tutor commented... "*Is that a new name you have? You appeared hesitant saying it." I have had difficulty saying my name. I cannot say it in England with a Turkish accent so it gets morphed or Anglicised into sounding phonetically different. (Oct 2014)*

My name has given me some visibility. It has been important in constructing a cultural sense of who I am (Dion, 1983). Kim & Lee (2011) state that naming provides important information about ethnicity, kinship and gender. In my case it has not helped provide that information to people all of the time. The perceptions people have had of my name have conflicted with the perceptions of my physicality (Pilcher, 2015). On the phone some people do not believe I am English, in person they do not believe I am a Turk possibly fuelling my identity conflicts.

...I was doing temporary office work at a gas company, I often encountered prejudice on the phone, people questioned my English and the ability to fill in forms, my team leader took me to one side and said, " Can't you get a proper name?, Why don't you call yourself Jimmy or something?". I left shortly after that. I felt I couldn't complain as I was just too English. (Feb 2015)

Class

Things were different in Turkey; I would see things that I didn't see in England such as dancing bears in the street. I remember the shock of extreme poverty and seeing children selling bubble gum, labouring and begging.

My Turkish grandparents were wealthy, they had fine things, marble stairs and palatial homes… we would spend many evenings at the tennis club in the heart of the fuar (park) in Izmir, I can smell the jasmine hanging in the cool evening air...it was where the monied people of Izmir hung out...I remember visiting my grandfather's factory and the workers treating me like royalty.

I began to realise my working class English grandparents would have been in a different social strata in Turkey. As I got older I felt more and more ill at ease with the way working people struggled in Turkey. (May 2015)

We moved to England where life was financially tougher. Conflicts between my cultural experiences and class were interconnected (Ballinger, 2010). As my countries changed, so did my class. I wasn't sure what my status was and it was confusing. Turkey was more of a developing nation yet my personal experience was one of wealth, this contrasted with my more modest, working class English situation within a more developed country. In cultural terms my Turkishness had less cultural capital (Bordieu,1986) within England. Economic capital did not translate into cultural capital (Liu, 2013). This could be due to what Carter (1995) describes as the inferiority paradigm, which is the belief that groups other than Europeans were inferior, and is rooted in colonialism. Modood (1997) talks about the idea that there is a British civilised norm which marginalises other groups. I felt my Turkishness was seen by some as culturally inferior (sometimes described as barbaric) and as a result assumptions were made about my class and status. I felt confusion and conflict between my English working class self and my Turkish bourgeois self. I often wonder if this has helped fuel my sense of not being English enough.

In Turkey I had been a spoilt, golden haired little prince but back in England I was a skint ginger kid with a funny name. (April 2015)

Implications for counselling

I was recently invited to watch a movie with a mixed cultural social group in Manchester;

The lights dimmed, the room hushed and the film began. A sweet Turkish film called "My Grandfather's People". It had a strong resonance for me exploring ideas to do with belonging and Turkishness. It reminded me of my own family and there was something deeply nostalgic watching the Aegean landscapes from my childhood form the backdrop to the film. I felt a deep sadness but also a sense of community and belonging with strangers. I was sharing in something unspoken. An immigrant experience. (March 2016)

Within this group I felt Turkish enough. I wonder if that was in part my own ongoing resolution to myself. In being open to my own experiences (Rogers,1961) I feel that I have a better understanding of my own diversity and what that has meant for me. Perhaps in so sharing my stories, I may be able to call a response from others (Moustakas, 1990) to explore theirs or in the case of this article, you the reader.

This paper explores some of my process. I hope it can help you remain open to the varying possibilities of cultural experience and possibly help you see beyond some of the limiting discourses and stereotypes that define people's identity and lived experiences (Diamond & Gillis, 2006). This may be helpful to your counselling or therapeutic work.

This leads me to ask questions of potential ethnic matching with clients and counsellors (Alladin, 2002; Cabral & Smith 2011). I wonder where I may fit in this discourse. Would I be considered English or Turkish enough to work with clients? Would judgments be made on my appearance? I wonder what being culturally competent may mean in light of my mixed experience. As a counsellor I also wonder how much I need to disclose about my cultural background to clients who may be forming assumptions based on my name.

Moodley (2007) calls for multicultural counselling to be re-framed within a fluid third space where a multiplicity of cultures can converge calling for the inclusion of white people as multicultural clients. Fouad (2001) wrote that we need to acknowledge there are many people who are products of multiple worlds and cultures; cultural diversity is not just about visible ethnicity. There are gaps in counselling Literature about this experience and if we are to support the growing demographic of mixed people we need to understand more about their experiences.

I may appear what some people consider to be English and that hasn't always been helpful to me. Just because I am white it does not mean I cannot have a diverse multicultural background. In essence, the way I appear (either in person, on the phone or on paper) is not necessarily a reflection of my experience. Our clients may experience this too.

Assume nothing

Guess if you want to, speculate as you might, but don't assume.

If you see my name written down; don't assume I am Welsh, Norwegian or Italian.

Don't assume I am not.

If you hear my name spoken; don't assume I am Black, Arab or a Muslim.

Don't assume I am not.

If you see me face to face; don't assume I am White British, English or a Christian.

Don't assume I am not.

Challenge your expectations, your presumptions, your assumptions.

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