

## **Class Assignments that Promote Openness to Diversity among Undergraduates at Predominantly White Universities**

**Jill K. Walls**

Ball State University

*Abstract: In this paper we provide two concrete examples of class assignments, developed by the authors, which challenge students to think more critically about themselves, their cultural values and beliefs, and the “invisible forces” that shape their perspectives. We include samples from students’ work and our reflections to demonstrate the types of outcomes instructors might see if they utilized similar assignments in their classes. We emphasize the importance of diversity-focused assignment for programs operating within the broader context of a predominantly White university and provide suggestions for expanding our assignments to promote cultural competence among students planning to work directly with families and children.*

Recent studies utilizing nationally representative survey data suggest that a significant proportion of freshmen begin their college careers with limited exposure to diverse populations and perspectives (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Bates, Aragon, Suchard, & Rios-Aguilar, 2015). It is not uncommon, for example, for first-year students to come from relatively homogenous communities, which can lead them to hold ethnocentric worldviews, minimize cultural differences, and lack an awareness of their own biases (Sandell & Tupy, 2015; Eagan et al., 2015). To prepare students for careers in a global society, many colleges and universities require coursework related to diversity as part of their undergraduate curriculum (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2016). College provides students with an opportunity to explore diverse perspectives and, in some cases, exposure to information that challenges their preexisting belief systems about others and themselves. As a result, the college years can be transformative for many young adults; previously constructed identities and belief systems, based on one’s cultural background and upbringing, can dramatically shift (Torres, 2009).

As teacher-scholars in the fields of family studies and child development, we are responsible for preparing our graduates to work directly with diverse families and professionals in their future careers. Transformative learning theory provides a useful framework for understanding the goals and potential utility of our class assignments because of its emphasis on broadening one’s perspectives through critical reflection. It is theorized that transformative learning begins with students’ lived experiences and develops from that reference point (Mezirow, 1997). The concept of *frame of reference* is defined as “the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). From this perspective, we assume that our students’ frame of reference when learning new content is rooted firmly in their family of origin experiences (Mezirow, 1991). The assignments described in this paper encourage students to think deeper about their frame of reference pertaining to family life practices and reflect on their assumptions and preferences. Both assignments were developed with a consideration for the broader contexts in which we both teach – predominantly White universities.

*The Standpoint Paper – Developed by author 1*

This assignment was developed for *Family Relations*, an undergraduate introductory family studies course that focuses on family dynamics and interactions across a variety of contexts. I assign this paper within the first three weeks of class because it aligns with the second textbook chapter titled

“Social Status: Sex, Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Social Class” (Seccombe, 2015). Prior to this assignment, we review the concept of social stratification and discuss how power and privilege shape experiences and opportunities within each category. Approximately 20 minutes of class time is devoted to reviewing the instructions, providing students with concrete examples, and responding to questions.

The term *standpoint* comes from Feminist Standpoint Theory, which traditionally has been used to understand and validate the perspectives of individuals in historically marginalized groups (Harding, 2004). For the purposes of this assignment, the term standpoint is defined as one’s unique perspective of the world, and specifically of family life. Your standpoint guides how you think things *should* be and how you evaluate people and situations around you. The primary learning objective for this assignment is for students to gain a greater awareness of their beliefs about one aspect family life and an understanding of how those beliefs are shaped, in part, by their social identities. In addition, students are prompted to think beyond their personal experiences to speculate about how their beliefs might be different if they were members of other social groups. I have found that students from all backgrounds benefit from this assignment and the self-reflection that it requires.

The standpoint paper assignment is a two- to three-page paper about the effects of their social identities on their beliefs about one specific aspect of family life/relationships. First, students must identify their location in two social status categories (e.g., gender, race/ ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or family structure). After identifying two social status categories that are salient to them, students explain how their position in those categories has shaped their beliefs about one topic related to family life. If students have a difficult time selecting a topic, I offer the following questions to get them thinking:

- When is the right time to start dating, get married, and have children?
- Should couples live together before they get married?
- What is “good” parenting?
- What is appropriate discipline?
- Is divorce an acceptable option for unhappily married couples?
- Under what conditions should mothers work outside the home?
- How should couples divide housework and childcare responsibilities?
- Should same-sex couples be allowed to marry/ raise children?
- What are the essentials of a healthy relationship?
- How should important decisions be made within families?

Common topics chosen by my students include beliefs about same-sex marriage, premarital sex, parenting practices/styles, and cohabitation. For example, one student wrote about how his sexual orientation (homosexual) and religious affiliation (Christian) shaped his beliefs about homosexuality and same-sex relationships.

Lastly, students are asked to speculate about how their beliefs might be different from a different standpoint. For example, a male student could discuss how his beliefs about maternal employment might be different if he was born a female. I have found that when students consider a standpoint other than their own, the unique influence of social identities and how they are tied to power and privilege become even more apparent. Papers are assessed with five criteria in mind: (1) identification of two social status categories, (2) description of one’s beliefs about a family life topic, (3) explanation of how social statuses shape beliefs, (4) speculation about a different standpoint, and (5) quality of writing.

*Is a Bath Just a Bath? Activity – Developed by author 2*

The baby bath time activity proceeds in a series of three phases and takes one 75-minute session to complete. This activity is introduced during the second week of an upper-division psychology course on Multicultural Children and Families. There are typically 30-40 students enrolled in the course. At this point in the semester, students have completed an introductory reading from Meredith Small's (1998) book, *Our Babies, Ourselves: How biology and culture shape the way we parent*. The primary learning objective of this activity is for students to recognize how culture shapes the most basic interactions we have with others, and to reflect upon how their own daily lives are influenced by embedded cultural values, mores and expectations.

On the day the activity takes place, students are placed in small discussion groups of approximately 4-6 students. In this first phase, students are given a discussion guide (Appendix A) and a baby "bath guide." The bath guide is taken from a popular American parenting website, "The Bump" (<https://www.thebump.com/a/how-to-bathe-baby>), and presents, in great detail, advice for parents on how to bathe their young child. Students spend time answering questions about the guide and the American values that might lead to the creation of such a guide.

Following the small group discussion, I show a short video clip from Margaret Mead's work that is available on YouTube (Bathing Babies in Three Cultures; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnvqdDBSY0k>). The video provides an opportunity to observe baby bath time in the United States, New Guinea and Bali. Although the footage is dated, it provides an interesting point from which to begin a large course discussion about the role of culture in shaping daily interactions and how cultural values are embedded in these practices. The American bath time depicted in the film is remarkably similar to current day practices. The bath practices in New Guinea and Bali, are, perhaps not surprisingly, quite different from American practices, which allows students to see and reflect upon how such a basic activity can be carried out in such diverse ways. To draw out these points, I then lead a large group discussion after the presentation of the film. In this classroom discussion, I have two primary goals: One is to allow students to come to an understanding of the role of culture in their own lives, and to draw their awareness toward how cultural biases can be difficult to detect. In discussing the guide as a larger group, I try to guide them in seeing parallels to their own experiences and expectations about bath time, which they are sometimes resistant to recognize. A second goal is to get students to recognize how cultural values and parenting goals guide behaviors that parents engage in with their children, and that this happens on a daily basis through simple interactions between parents and children.

## Conclusion

It is our hope that through active participation in these assignments, students' meaning structures will be broadened such that they will be more willing to accept/respect deviations from their own beliefs/practices, with a deeper understanding that 1) their own perspectives have been shaped by their unique and personalized experiences, 2) not all people have had those same experiences, and 3) variations in cultural context will naturally lead to variations in human beliefs and behaviors. We acknowledge that one class assignment might not be the ultimate transformative "trigger," but perhaps one of several assignments that collectively broaden students' perspectives over the years.

## Appendix

### Appendix 1. Discussion Guide for the “Is a Bath Just a Bath” Activity Is a bath just a bath?

Cultural Variations in Bathing Infants Instructions: Review the “Bathing Guide” that is from a popular parenting website in the US. Then, gather with 2-3 others and share your reactions to the guide. Nominate a note-taker in your group to answer the questions, and a spokesperson who will report back on what was discussed in your group.

1. Briefly share your initial reactions to the guide.
2. Analyze this Bathing Guide for evidence of cultural values. Discuss and answer the following questions;
3. Thinking of Meredith Small’s Introduction, what aspects of this guide relate to basic biological necessity vs. what relates to “culturally driven directives”?
4. What does this guide say about “American” parenting?
5. How do you think people from, say, a non-Western society might react to this guide? Why?
6. What values do you think are being subscribed to in this guide? What type of parent-child interaction is being encouraged? Support your answer with examples.
7. Is this similar or different to how you remember being bathed as a child? Explain and similarities or differences. Is this how you would expect to (or do you) bathe your own child?
8. If you had to use 1-2 words to describe American bath time, what would they be?

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