Chapter 4
Psychological Essentialism: Diversity and the Religious Experience

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ABSTRACT

This chapter uses a case study, and supporting literature, to explore the function of Psychological Essentialism (the process of giving meaning to perceived “sameness”) in explaining tensions that often arise as we struggle to improve our understanding of diversity and inclusion in higher education, as well as in other social settings. The case study presented throughout the chapter was constructed as an amalgamation of experiences diverse faculty typically report while working on campuses struggling with recruiting and retaining diverse groups. It provides examples of experiences that occur on a range from malicious intent to those that occur, seemingly, without consciousness. The larger question is whether religious and social institutions approach essentialism and stereotyping differently, when it occurs. Seemingly, they do not. The conclusion of this chapter offers solutions for dealing with the barriers faced when attempting to create campus climates that are nurturing and supportive rather than hostile and exclusionary.

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That time
cool and clear,
cutting across the hot grit of the day.
The major Voice.
The adult Voice
forgoing Rolling River,
forgoing tearful tale of bale and barge
and other symptoms of an old despond.
Warning, in music-words
devout and large,
that we are each other’s
harvest:
we are each other’s
business:
we are each other’s
magnitude and bond.
–Gwendolyn Brooks

The following case study begins with a description of the career choices of a young, African American doctoral degree (Ph.D.) student, Cameron, who transitions from a graduate program into what he hopes will be a promising career on a campus that fits his need for academic work that takes place in an environment that also embraces social justice. He begins that career on a campus eager to move forward from the mistakes of its past in dealing with issues of multiculturalism. The question becomes whether the institution has moved forward in a way that is effective and inclusive, or whether it has moved forward in a manner that allows the campus to be viewed as progressive on paper, while regressive in reality. What is progressive in this context? It includes creating a campus environment in which multiculturalism is not determined by merely counting the number of diverse constituents on campus, but whether the environment is welcoming, equitable - offering equal opportunity, an environment that embraces diverse individuals and cultures as part of the continuum of the human experience.

Beyond the case study, the chapter shifts into a discussion of Psychological Essentialism, a concept that potentially explains why individuals are perceived as different and why those perceived differences are presumed to have meaning. Imagine two parents watching a group of children play together at a cub scout meeting. One parent is African American, the other is of European descent. The latter mentions how different the children are as they play. The former is confused by the statement.
The Promise for African American Male Students in Teacher Education at Marygrove College
Chukwunyere E. Okezie, Judy Alhamisi and Blanche Jackson Glimps (2016). Gender and Diversity Issues in Religious-Based Institutions and Organizations (pp. 137-158). www.igi-global.com/chapter/the-promise-for-african-american-male-students-in-teacher-education-at-marygrove-college/137672?camid=4v1a