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George Walker, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

Where Are You From?

Editor's note: George Walker is the director of Diversity and Inclusion for Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. The following article was adapted from a presentation that he recently gave at The Conference Board's West Coast Diversity & Inclusion event in San Francisco. Diversity and Inclusion is now widely considered an important program for any company's HR function. A recent study at Harvard University was summed up thusly: "People with different lifestyles and different backgrounds challenge each other more. Diversity creates dissent, and you need that. Without it, you're not going to get any deep inquiry or breakthroughs."¹ Also, a 2017 study conducted by Cloverpop,² a decision-making database company, concluded the following:

- Inclusive teams make better business decisions up to 87 percent of the time.
- Teams that follow an inclusive process make decisions two times faster with one-half of the meetings.
- Decisions made and executed by diverse teams delivered 60 percent better results.

In our conversations, George challenges me to address the unconscious biases we all have, by being aware of them. In this article, he shows us, through the telling of his own story, how asking a few extra and more explicit questions beyond "where are you from?" can lead to a fuller understanding of the person. We all have unconscious biases in hiring and evaluating talent in the workplace. We'd like to

think that our awareness will lead to first impressions not being our last impressions.

Whether you have done much work with unconscious bias or not, you've undoubtedly heard the term, and because you are super smart you know what biases are and understand that we all have them, whether they are in the front of mind or not. Okay, let's lock this in for a moment as we dig into the question of "where am I from?"

Let me start with the quick version of my story:

I was born in the Republic of Panama and immediately put up for adoption. The circumstances here get really murky and I haven't really done much to learn more. As an infant, The Walker's chose me as their only child. From Panama, where my father had been in the military, we came back to the U.S. and lived in Grand Forks, North Dakota where I only recall having a teacher named Mrs. Stewart. Our family returned to Memphis, TN where each of my parents had grown up and met. My fast answer, when I am asked, is always that I am from Memphis. And, when I want to emphasize the fact that I am not to be trifled with, I might say, "don't get it twisted, I am from Memphis!" Or, if we are talking about BBQ, I definitely say, "who's in the kitchen? What's that you're calling BBQ? I am from Memphis." That's a point of authority you see, and I take it seriously.

But if that were all we were discussing today, we might just leave the conversation there and it wouldn't have probed much on why this is a question with such mixed outcomes. However, as professionals, what we understand is that there "could be" a *perceived* subtext to the question. Our histories are full of stories and some of them are not so pleasant. In the U.S., especially, and not because other countries don't have challenges with respect to diversity, immigration, and acculturation, the very notion that this question of "where" may seem loaded *because there is a disconnect between who we say we want to be and the actions and inactions that demonstrate who we are.*

Let me unpack that. In the U.S., historically, we express that this is a country meant to be open to all who would come and welcomed on her shores. I don't

have to remind you about the Statue of Liberty or any number of icons that clearly express the welcome of the U.S. And yet...yet...the suspicious reaction that many of America's most prominent sons and daughters receive is ubiquitous. "Where are you from?" Often it suggests that you are *NOT* from here.

In doing a little research, I found several comments on this question of "where are you from?" We know that often the question of the immigrant of several generations isn't about accent, or even cultural context, but solely about race and ethnicity. It seems okay in many quarters to question someone who isn't white about their validity in the U.S. There are many who care about issues of inclusion and are great practitioners of how to make others feel welcome. The most obvious micro-aggressive comments aren't uttered ... ever. *Ever?* And for those not as familiar, micro-aggressions are the indirect, subtle, or unintentional discriminatory acts against members of a group that is marginalized. A quick example is when we applaud girls for being pretty and boys for being strong. Got it? Girls can be both pretty and strong. Our notion of gender stereotypes is changing rapidly.

I was thinking about what I do, where I can make a difference. I had to make a real hard ask of myself in terms of how I ask questions of people and what I do with that information. Here, my friends, I'll invite you to think about your explanation, privately, as we explore together some of this "stuff" that isn't just black and white. Hopefully, we can unearth some of our deepest prejudices that continue to create walls.

When does "where are you from" mean "who are your people?" What assessments do we write about a person's worth based on what we think we know about the person's heritage and ancestry? When we are the questioner, what do our eyes tell and how much of it is correct? I started by sharing that I am adopted. While I don't specifically identify as Afro-Latino, as I age, my life without my parents, the ones who raised and loved me, becomes more sobering. I think a little more about genetics and health. I am noticing that I look like a lot of my Latino and Caribbean brothers and sisters. It also helps that I live in New York City (the Washington Heights/Harlem border in Manhattan) so I see a lot of people

who have hair like mine, skin that's my color, and I hear many who speak Spanish. When I was Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador, South America, I can't tell you how many times I was asked about my background, even after I said I am an American and my passport had been shared, metaphorically or literally. Now I don't mean to suggest that I was always irritated by the question, I wasn't. I was in another country and to some extent I took it as a part of being there. Sometimes you're more ready to challenge and some days, you just aren't. Even as I share this story, I can imagine that some of you are reading and thinking; I get that all the time and I live here in the U.S. I certainly know that there are people who have had to roll their eyes when it was clear that more was being asked in this simple question.

But, as I began, what about the times when we've done the same thing?

What about "where are you from?" sets up a dynamic of hierarchy, unintended, in positioning one nation over another, or perhaps a city or state, or town and village? In this way, in America, native peoples are often assumed to be the outsiders, or perhaps the way people of Mexican descent are treated as immigrants, when in fact, many of them descend from families that have roots that were crossed by what is the United States. The historical narrative of what American openness is supposed to have meant in the U.S., and particularly what other populations like Italians, Jews, or Irish have also struggled with respect to identity and the question "where are you from" is still being written. Some of it is basic as this question lands differently if your skin is dark, but that's not the whole story. Dealing with the racial undertones of the questions brings up all sorts of stuff, and just like every micro-aggression, it festers. For those of us who have been asked this question, it is that relentless beat that says, "you're not really an American or really from here." And, when you ask it of someone, what meaning do you assign?

So this feels heavy and perhaps you adamantly disagree with this notion of the question even being up for debate. Perhaps you say you carry nothing to the question. "Where are you from" is genuine curiosity, you might say, and a yearning to learn more about someone who might share an experience that is unlike yours. *Isn't there room in the question to be harmless, George? Can we*

not be dealing in micro-aggressions and bad behavior solely because we might be curious? When I first met the man who is now my husband, I recall being enchanted by a speech pattern that was not of native U.S. – speakers. We met in a Cuban restaurant and I saw him come in with someone I identified as Latino and another man who, while his skin was white, was wearing a poncho. We made eyes at each other and finally decided to get up and chat. We debate who spoke first, but since it's my story, you'll read it my way. I heard the soft lilt that came from his voice and I immediately said, "Do you speak Spanish?" Probably with the desire to impress, we exchanged pleasantries in Spanish enough to get beyond the basic, "Como estas?" Well, I think I asked, secure in our Spanish conversation, "where are you from?" and he said, Haiti. It was as if a car was screeching to a halt, I was confused and said, but don't they speak French there? And he replied, yes, and it is my first language but you started by asking me if I spoke Spanish and I do. And of course, he speaks English, and Haitian Kreyol and reads Portuguese. So fine, in this example, I was the one who had been embarrassed and then impressed. And, as I mentioned, we went on to have several dates after that meeting and on the 1st of December, 2017, we celebrated 17 years since our first date.

I learned a lesson that day, and since spending time with him, I have noticed that we have very different reactions to the question. His is usually to respond by first stating where he considers his home, his place, Washington, D.C. or New York City. Of course, I immediately look incredulously and say, you know that's not where that question comes from. His response, "if there is another question to ask, they should ask it." He simply doesn't react the same way nor does he hear the question or ask through the same lens I do. The subtext doesn't mean the same thing and I know a big part of it is that he accepts some of this curiosity as a part of his immigrant story and understands that his accent might be "interesting" to some. I was raised by black Southerners who had a healthy skepticism about integration because they had lived through the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed in our town.

So, I ask myself, does "where are you from" change depending on context? I think it does. We, each of us, have a role to play in this examination of our own

stereotypes and images. We push these assumptions forward in ways subtle and quite egregious. We must lean into an examination of what we ask and how it might be interpreted.

I mentioned that I claim Memphis, and I do claim her fiercely, until I recognize that some of the southern mannerisms and ways are no longer my ways or didn't serve me as well. I know that when I speak with my "folks" we drop into a southern drawl and twang that works so easily for us in "black speak." And yet, on a dime when we think it is not as effective, we've also learned to code-switch. I can still hear my mother when she spoke formally on the phone about business. Her voice went higher, her drawl less pronounced, and her diction was as crisp as a Macintosh apple.

I have heard Northerners, mostly white, with misplaced "R's" talk about diction classes that allowed them to smooth their final consonants and hesitate with just the right emphasis as to not be labelled "from" a lower class. The notion of *being from* is complex. It begs of us to think more concretely about what story we're writing of each other, *but also what we want to be said of us*.

There are a few simple lessons I want to impart:

- **Nuance and subtlety are everything:** Each of us has a task to root out our own bias. When we learn where we are triggered or could be making the space for others uncomfortable, we have to make choices in the types of ways we show up. Before we blurt out, "where you from," contextualize how it might come across and what might be the thing to which you want to know could be stated more concretely. I have used a combination of "how do you identify racially?" or "from where does your family trace its history?" These are much more direct and surprisingly much better received.
- **Name the issues:** When thinking about this question of origin, recognize that for many people it is a racially loaded question. Race and origin play a vital role in the U.S. context. In speaking of the black experience, W. E. B. DuBois coined the term, "double consciousness, in his 1903 book, *The Souls*

of Black Folk.¹ In it, he expresses the idea in this way: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

Finally, *meet new people*! It is not as an anthropological exercise but as an invitation to deeper human connection. We *need* each other *to know* each other. Our stories often have meaning because of things we have ascribed. In order to adequately engage in real questions and get a glimpse at authentic exchanges, we have to listen to what is being said, pause, think, and hear. And when we are asked the question with curiosity and openness, we have to share in meaningful ways, not with the assumption that the question is meant to goad or chide.

“Where are you from” comes with a few questions buried inside – “Who are your folks?” How much money do you have or can you afford it? Should you be here? Are you like me? Do we speak the same languages? Are we the same people? And these are just a few of the interpretations. In fact, when I was talking through this writing with a colleague, she said one of the difficulties about a topic like this is that it can be summed up in a few sentences, or maybe a paragraph or two. She wondered aloud with me if it really took a whole article. I loved that she said that because I knew it was a struggle I was wrestling with. I don’t want to hammer a topic beyond its usefulness and I know that real questions don’t get asked. They get buried in simplistic “go-arounds” and we don’t deal with what is hard about learning about someone without being offensive. I read an article by a Canadian woman who is of Chinese descent. She lists her responses to the question of why she finds “where are you from” offensive. This line really spoke to me:

“So what’s a more appropriate way to pose this question? Ask me what my background is. This question is far more specific and does not contain the unintentional negative connotations that come with asking, where are you from...”

Or better yet, don't ask me at all. My culture is part of my identity, and from having a simple conversation with me, you'll soon find that out. Ask me about my parents or where I grew up. Ask me where I consider home to be. Ask me where my heritage lies or what languages I speak."

I am from Memphis. I am so very proud of that. I am from the suburbs of a city and have seen white flight devastate the economic base of many of my childhood neighbors, probably more white than black. I also was able to get a great education in suburban and private schools. I am from a country where the language is Spanish and it sings sweetly to me when I least expect it. My memories remind me that *mis sueños son lindas* – my dreams are beautiful. Thank you for allowing me to share a part of where I am from.

Endnotes

¹ Paul Block, from an HBR article by Boris Groysberg and Katherine Connolly: "Great Leaders Who Make the Mix Work." <https://hbr.org/2013/09/great-leaders-who-make-the-mix-work>

² <https://www.cloverpop.com/hacking-diversity-with-inclusive-decision-making-white-paper>

³ W. E. B. DuBois, 'The Souls of Black Folk', 1903

About the Author

George Walker has worked extensively in social justice and philanthropic causes, as an employee and volunteer. In February 2012, President Barack Obama appointed him to be a member of the President's Board of Advisors on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), where he served until the end of the administration in 2016. George is a member of the American Leadership Council for Diversity in Healthcare (ALCDH). He was selected to serve as a German Marshall Memorial Fellow, representing the

U.S. and learning about transnational partnerships on a variety of issues while traveling to five European Countries. Professionally, he leads Diversity & Inclusion at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, New York, the world's oldest cancer care facility. This position serves as an institutional leader on diversity goals and programs for staff. A proud former volunteer of the U.S. Peace Corps, he served in Guayaquil, Ecuador. George is a graduate of Morehouse College (BA History) and The Divinity School, Duke University (M-Div). He is also a graduate of the Georgetown University, with a Certificate in Executive Coaching. He is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ (UCC). A native of Memphis, Tennessee, George lives with his family in New York City. He can be reached at gbwjr91@gmail.com.