"WHERE ARE YOU FROM?"

BUILDING RELATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ACROSS IDENTITY DIFFERENCES[1]

Yabome Gilpin-Jackson

This article provides a framing, from the perspective of a black woman with a multinational (global African) identity, to understand everyday interactions that raise identity questions and dilemmas. The purpose is to propose transformative strategies for peoples of color, and new immigrants or refugees to the West, when faced with triggering interactions about their identities. It also provides insights to members of dominant social groups into the impact on socially-classified less dominant groups of the questions they may ask, without having sufficient context, about national origin or place of birth. My hope is to build conscious awareness of strategies for 'Relational Intelligence' when engaging across identity differences. I define 'Relational Intelligence' as an understanding of the impact of interactional choices made during interpersonal encounters across identity differences.

Why this title? Why this question?

Vignette 1: 1999

I had just arrived in Vancouver from war-torn Sierra Leone, via Conakry, Guinea, where I had taken refuge for about a year. I was relieved to be in a safe haven and in a place where I could return to university to complete my rudely-interrupted bachelor's degree. In preparing for my return to university, I took weekend computing courses. There was a South-Asian looking lady in my class and we had exchanged casual smiles. During our third class together, we ran into each other in the ladies toilets.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," I responded.

"Where are you from?" she queried.

I was amused and taken aback all at once, simultaneously wondering why she had asked while fumbling for an answer. It occurred to me that, while I had been curious about *her*, I had not thought it appropriate to ask questions of her, devoid as I was of any knowledge of her background. Finally, assuming she would not know where Sierra Leone was anyway, I answered, "West Africa". She retorted "I know you are from West Africa, but *where*?" In the exchange that followed, I learnt that she had met and married a Nigerian, and had lived in Nigeria for decades.

This, my first experience of being questioned about my lineage in Canada, has never left me. It was the first of countless times I have been asked the question, "Where are you from?". Sometimes the question feels like an interrogation, and at other times it feels like a bridge to relating. The frequency of being asked it, and the reactions it has evoked in me, have become important to my understanding of how to build relationship across identity differences. In this paper, I use my own

lived experiences to examine the impact of the polarities that I propose for defining 'Relational Intelligence'. These polarities are *connection* ('Relational Connection' or 'RC') on the one hand, and *disconnection* ('Identity Interrogation' or 'II') on the other. My inquiry is into the *transformative possibilities that may be uncovered at the intersection where worlds of identity-differences collide*. This inquiry is critical today because issues relating to global migration, diversity, inclusion and intersectionality are dominating the sociopolitical environment. The number of global migrants is currently estimated to be 244 million (The International Organization for Migration, 2018). This collective population is equivalent to the fifth largest country in the world, surpassed only by China, India, the US and Indonesia. A new form of global and relational intelligence is, therefore, required.

I start by outlining the qualitative analysis method which I have used to interpret and understand my experiences. I then provide vignettes of my experiences, and extracts from a social media conversation about the experiences of others, to create a storyline of the impact of being asked, "*Where are you from?"* and related questions. These vignettes form the basis for the literature review and analysis that follow to define 'RC' and 'II' in context, and for a discussion about choices and strategies for building Relational Intelligence. I end with a summary of the theoretical propositions that should be further explored. My medium for this inquiry is analytic autoethnography, as proposed and distinguished by Leon Anderson:

"The five key features of analytic autoethnography that I propose include (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis" (Anderson, 2006, p 375).

The Journey of my Inquiry from my CMR Perspective

Vignette 2: Fall (Autumn), 2013

"Mummy, I have a question."

"Uh-huh," I responded.

"What do I say when people ask me where I am from?"

I was momentarily lost for words, struggling not to conflate my daughter's question with my experiences. My mind flew back to sometime in the year 2000 or 2001, to my first sociology undergraduate class when my naivety about social identities and race was shattered. It was the class on race relations. Partway through, I had looked up to find that no one in my discussion group was looking back at me. I realized that, on the projected screen, my so-called 'social identity' fully classified me as an 'oppressed minority'. My reaction was laughter. My immediate thought was, "Who says I am an oppressed minority?". It was in that class that I gained awareness of my socially-assigned identity in North American society. I had been insulated from it because I had lived in a dominant black-African country since the age of five, and had only returned to the West for university as a young adult. My heart sank, even as I engaged with my daughter about how she was from both Canada and the country of our lineage and ethnicity, Sierra Leone. I was saddened by the realization that, by growing up in the West, she would not be shocked in her first sociology class. The constant interrogation of her identity had already taught her about the dominant social-views of her identity. I was equally saddened by the fact that, like me, because she was born outside Sierra Leone, she would not be considered to be fully from there when she visited or returned.

Vignette 3: May 2016

I was discussing my work with a senior colleague, whom I deeply respect. I noticed him looking increasingly puzzled as I shared some of my inner experiences, that have ranged from amusement to anger. I said, "At best, there is unconscious bias in the questioning". He responded, "I don't believe you are asked these questions in Canada because of any of *that*. It may be different, given racial politics, in the United States, but I think in Canada it's just about curiosity because of your accent. Canada is so inclusive, in my experience, and the average person doesn't know the difference between a black-African accent or a Caribbean

accent or your accent!"

I paused and took a breath. I noted my heart pounding, and heat rising to my neck. I was triggered and motivated to respond with an attack. After all, as much as I respected my colleague, he could not understand or explain my experiences. He was an older, white male, automatically afforded social privilege. What did he know about my experiences? Then I remembered being in a 'diversity' conversation with this same colleague and others. I remembered his outburst when another colleague, a mixed-race woman, implied what I had just thought. Visibly angry, he had said, "This is why I hate these conversations! I have no voice! No status in them!" In as much as I wanted to be heard and understood by my colleague, I realized that he needed to be able to listen to me without feeling judged for the privilege that was socially assigned to him. I took another deep breath as two other thoughts floated to the front of my mind. I said, "Okay, how do you explain a stranger walking up to me and saying "You're pretty. Where are you from?" when I haven't even spoken? How about my daughter, sons and nephews, second-generation Canadians with very Canadian accents? Why do they get asked the same thing?" He looked thoughtful and then said, "Wow, I never thought of that…I'm now thinking that people may, perhaps, be asking in an attempt at connection that can, in fact, be experienced as disconnection!" This was a pivotal moment of insight for me which has informed my subsequent framing of the Relational Intelligence polarities.

Vignette 4: June 2016

Since the encounter described in the third vignette above, I had been wondering if I had made up my responses about past encounters. I decided to check this out. I asked two of my older nephews, both of whom were young adults, "Hey, you know that whole 'Where are you from?' question? Do people ask you that?" They both answered immediately, "Yes. All the time!" I noted with despair that it had not been necessary for me to explain the question.

Vignette 5: March 2017

I was reviewing my journal of different II encounters, and recalled looking through my family photograph albums with a white, Canadian friend, with whom I have spent countless hours talking about all things identity: race, ethnicity, cultural differences, social privilege, and our personal experiences relative to dominant ideologies. I was undoing and redoing my braids as we talked, and I remember explaining to her how I did so. She pointed at one of my baby pictures and asked, "So, who is the white lady carrying you?" I responded, simultaneously realizing how much that photograph contradicts dominant narratives, "My nanny!" and we both laughed. What differentiated my interactions with her and with others whom I had experienced such ease when discussing identity issues? I realized, first, that I could not recall in any of our early interactions that she had ever asked me, "Where are you from?" or any other biographical questions, yet our identity differences naturally unfolded over time. Secondly, when I have had meaningful identity conversations across differences with ease, it seems that there has been an established relationship or connection of some kind in place.

Illustrations from the Experiences of Others

In keeping with the analytic autoethnography frame of dialogue with informants beyond Self, I started a social media conversation, inviting people to share experiences of being asked, "*Where are you from?*". The following three examples from that thread illustrate further the dynamics of these experiences:

Example 1: Social Profile - Black Canadian of Caribbean Heritage

"I get asked this all the time. I say, "Canada". People will continually reply, "No but where from originally?" I tell them that both my parents are also from Canada. They ask, "Okay but what is their background?" I then sigh and say my mum's parents are from Barbados. I worked once with a foreign exchange student from a very ethnocentric and homogenous country. She once described someone to me as 'Canadian'. I played along and asked, "Canadian like

me?" The answer was "No". "Canadian like our Asian friend over there?" I asked. "No", she said. It was clear that, to her, 'Canadian' meant 'white'."

Example 2: Social Profile – White Canadian of Irish Descent

"I get asked once in a while but not all the time. I reply, "I am originally from Ontario. But there's so much more to know about my roots". I don't get asked about where I am from originally or about my Irish descent.

Example 3: Social Profile – self-identified Planetary Citizen

Answer 1: "Denmark. Oh you want to go deeper?"

Answer 2: "Danish/Ghanaian. Deeper still?"

Answer 3: "Hmmm…..Danish mom, Ghanaian dad, born in Botswana, live in Mozambique with family in Barcelona. Still deeper? Not yet me?"

Answer 4: "Planetary citizen. I'm just here for this ride, on this rock floating through space. Is there more?

Answer 5: "Brother, sister….I'm just your family. Where I'm from does not matter. Where are we going, family? That's the real question."

Distinguishing 'Identity Interrogation' and 'Relational Connection'

Table 1 characterizes the distinction between those encounters I have experienced as 'II' and those that I would label as 'RC'. The II stance seems to come from a closed orientation with, consciously or unconsciously, assumed knowledge on the part of the questioner. I experience it when I have the sense that the questioner is seeking the 'right' answer. The RC stance, on the other hand, seems to comes from an open orientation, anchored in acceptance of my personhood, and my life experiences on my terms. *The RC encounter happens for me when I sense the other person is not trying to make my experience fit their assumed knowledge or sets of assumptions derived from social classifications.*

The emotional impact on me of an II encounter is typically characterized by the spectrum of responses shown in Figure 1. My trigger response is often amusement with underlying surprise: "Was I just asked that *again*?" I say to myself. This response often progresses to irritation with an underlying disorientation as the questioning deepens: "Why are you asking?". This disorientation may involve the felt experience of cognitive dissonance: "What do you want me to say? What are you *really* asking?". And, finally, my emotional response escalates to anger with an underlying sensation of being 'stuck': "I don't want to do this *again*!".

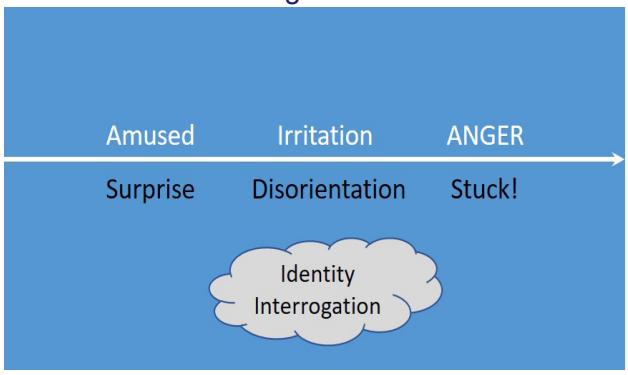
I might experience this continuum of emotional responses in a single encounter. More generally, my progression along it has occurred over time, as I have moved from being unconscious of my socially assigned status as a 'black, African, immigrant/refugee woman' to being conscious of the dynamics anchored within dominant ideologies and assumptions about identities. As Mensah (2014) asserts, racial consciousness grows on a continuum, and increases in magnitude over time for black

Table 1

Identity Interrogation – experience of being asked biographical questions by relative strangers	Relational connection – experience of being asked biographical questions in relationship and context
Stranger interaction	Relationship exists or is cultivated
Question out-of-context	Question asked in-context
Leading questions	Open questions
Implies and reinforces assumptions	Sets aside assumptions
Satisfies asker's curiosity	Mutual exchange and learning
Asker defines the other's story	Receiver defines own story
Creates disorientation and disconnection	Builds connection
Triggers a negative affective (disconnecting) response	Triggers a positive affective (connecting) response

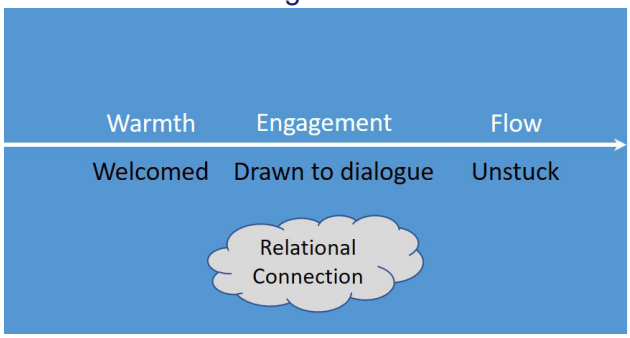
Africans with transnational identities who are from countries where racial dynamics are not dominant. This is because most black Africans are only sensitized to race, race-talk, and racism when they leave the continent.

Figure 1



In contrast, the RC experience is characterized by an emotional response of warmth, with a sense of being welcomed. I feel emotionally engaged with the person I am interacting with, so that I am naturally drawn into dialogue. There is a feeling of 'flow' and an underlying experience of being 'unstuck'.

Figure 2



As the opening vignette illustrates, II experiences can and do occur in exchanges between minority group members. Within such marginalized communities, however, the impact of them has sometimes been moderated for me because there is already a basis for connection to shared experiences. For example, being asked, "Where you are from?" by a member of another immigrant or refugee group (which immediately creates in me that sense of connection to shared experience) lessens the interrogation impact. Given dominant social structures, the interrogation experience has usually been more pronounced for me when my identity is assumed or amplified in interracial and intercultural encounters. Note also, and consistent with the intersectionality literature, the experience of social marginalization may be compounded for people with multiple social minority identities (Corlett and Mavin, 2013). For example, the experience of II encounters may be more acute, more frequent and compounded over time for global, black Africans compared to global, non-black Africans.

Possibilities for Transforming Identity Interrogation

The link between transformative learning – a fundamental shift or broadening of taken-for-granted worldviews or perspectives - and identity, has been strengthened in recent work. Illeris (2014) argues that identity is the right target area for transformative learning because it refers to self-identity development through the constant interaction between the individual and the social environment, including cross-cultural contexts and spaces (Fisher-Yoshida, Dee and Schapiro, 2009; Mezirow, Taylor and Associates, 2009; West, 2014). In addition, Illeris shows that self-identity lies at our identity core. The dissonance inherent in II encounters is that biographical questions posed by strangers are self-identity questions, not superficial ones. This triggers the 'disorienting dilemma' which is the first step of Mezirow's transformative learning process. The second phase of the transformative learning process is the emotional response (guilt, shame, fear, anger etc) and self-examination. Herein lies the possibility for a response that can lead to transformative learning. As Mezirow's foundational work and that of other scholars shows, self-examination of the feelings and emotions precipitated can be a powerful instigator for the transformative learning process (Cranton and Taylor, 2012; Dirkx, Mezirow, and Cranton, 2006; Kokkos et al, 2015; Malkki and Green, 2014; Mezirow, 2000; Yorks and Kasl, 2006). But how can these possibilities be accessed in shorter-term, emotionally-triggering interactions? As we know from decision-making theories, emotional triggers hijack responses and influence judgment and decision making (Lerner, Li, Valdesolo and Kassam, 2015).

Understanding Relational Dynamics

The American psychologist, Kenneth J Gergen, stated in a talk I attended that building flourishing relationships is attained through a series of micro-affirmations in relational dynamics. This is important because being welcomed into a relationship, free from constraints - or in cross-cultural encounters the specific constraint of another trying to 'place' one too quickly - creates affirmation.

Affirmation is critical, because it opens the door to mutually engaged participation (Gergen, 2009). But how can this be achieved when the II encounter is affectively experienced as a denial of affirmation? Further, over time, II encounters become 'microaggressions'. Microaggressions are defined as subtle forms of discrimination that occur in communication and everyday interactions such as "snubs, slights, and insults directed toward minorities, as well as to women and other historically stigmatized groups" (Lilienfeld, 2017, p 139 citing Sue et al 2007). The form of microaggression at play in II encounters directed at visible minorities is 'microinvalidation' or, in other words, communication that subtly excludes, negates or nullifies the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of color. For instance, white people often ask Asian-Americans where they were born, conveying the message that they are perpetual foreigners in their own land (DeAngelis, 2009). Research, albeit in its infancy, is showing that there is an impact on minority groups of continued microaggressions from, for example, II encounters. Mental health and wellbeing, and psychological toll have been noted (Torres-Harding and Turner, 2015). A study in *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* (Vol 13, No 1) found that many Asian-Americans cited the experiences of people asking them about where they were born, or telling them that they "spoke good English", giving them the message that they were 'aliens' (DeAngelis, 2009).

In my work on this topic, participants from socially dominant groups have often noted that they ask biographical questions with good intent. They say they ask to learn about different cultures and to broaden their cultural and global knowledge. However, in the field of interpersonal communication as well as in the anti-oppressive social justice literature, person A's intention can get lost in translation through the impact their words or actions has on person B. In this scenario, when the impact on person B is made conscious, person A typically reacts defensively, judging their actions by their intention only and, in so doing, discounts the impact on person B (Nieto, Boyer, Goodwin, Johnson and Smith, 2010; Wallen, 1992). Certainly, this cycle of 'good intent' resulting in the exclusion of awareness has played out in conversations I have hosted.

Transformative Choices in the Identity Interrogation Moment

Given all the above, what are the choices available in the interrogation moment which would support mutual transformative learning? Nieto et al (2010) outline several possible responses for both parties in the interaction: when practiced they form a repertoire of skills for responding to what they call 'incidents' - every-day, recurring instances that reinforce socially-assigned, oppressive categories. For those in socially disadvantaged groups, whom they call 'Targets', the possibilities range from actions grounded in the unconscious responses of survival (compliance with the requests) or confusion (a psychological defensive response), to actions grounded in the conscious responses of empowerment, strategy and re-centering. Nieto et al's conscious responses imply full awareness and understanding of the impact of the incidents, and are, therefore, of most interest from a transformative perspective.

For those with socially advantaged or dominant status whom Nieto et al (2010) call 'Agents', there are also possibilities for transformative choices. The unconscious response options are indifference (lack of awareness of the dynamics), distancing (self-blinding oneself from the dynamics) and inclusion (taking token actions to include those in marginalized groups). The conscious choices are awareness (being willing to acknowledge and accept the impact of incidents) and allyship (actively using the privilege afforded to their dominant status to take anti-oppressive action).

In addition to Nieto's strategies, I propose three more that Targets can employ to moderate II experiences.

1. Become aware of, and manage, trigger reactions to II encounters.
2. Encourage a shared examination of assumptions – for example, ask questions that invite critical reflection, and share personal narratives that challenge the dominant assumptions and narratives inherent in the interaction.
3. Reflect individually and with others on the benefits and learnings realized to build capacity for re-centering when the next II incident occurs.

For Agent groups, I also offer three additional strategies that will support a shift from an II experience to an RC experience. I have proposed these elsewhere as global mindsets for a world in which identities are no longer static or tied to national or ethnic origins (Gilpin-Jackson, 2016).

1. Start Blank! This means, resist the urge to assume the experiences and identity of the other based on previous knowledge and encounters, stereotypes and ethnic markers.
2. Let relationships come before curiosity. This means resist the urge to start an interaction with another with a biographical inquiry; rather, focus first on building connection and relationship. When the focus is on building relationship we allow ourselves to see the humanity of others and to get to know others without constraint. In this context, people's stories, biography and narratives will naturally unfold. This may be a radical thought and difficult to do in a context where unconscious identity interrogation is largely normalized and accepted.
3. Focus on a narrative understanding. For me, this means seeking to understand others on *their* terms, as well as to be understood on mine. Each of us is able to define our own identity narrative.

Summary and Reflection

In summary, I have arrived at the following propositions for building Relational Intelligence across identity differences which I offer for further exploration:

- **Proposition 1**: Biographical questioning about identity differences can evoke either an experience of Identity Interrogation (II) or the polar experience of Relational Connectedness (RC).
- **Proposition 2**: A pre-existing relationship is the determinant of whether biographical questioning evokes an II or an RC experience.
- **Proposition 3:** When biographical questioning results in an II experience, it can release the potential for Transformative Learning because of the disorienting dilemmas it presents.
- **Proposition 4**: The shift towards a transformational learning experience is dependent on the response-choice of the person experiencing identity interrogation.
- **Proposition 5**: A meta-shift in dominant social discourses is needed, away from a discourse of diversity and social inclusion as a mechanism for magnifying differences, toward a focus on relational narratives.

Analytical theorizing cannot claim generalizability. However, recent work documenting the experiences of people of color in the US and Canada seems to indicate a growing acknowledgement of the II encounter and its impact (see https://www.wherareyoureallyfrom.org; CBC's Deeply Rooted; and #thisis2016 on twitter and youtube). A next step might be to explore whether this impact is, in fact, a common experience among peoples of color, and to examine the nature of these experiences across and within like-groups as well. Further, principles for practice are required to determine the meta or institutional shifts necessary to transform individual and collective dialogues such that we can engage as social equals in everyday interactions. My hope is that these propositions will start the conversation about how we can promote Relational Intelligence as an antidote to the exclusion and social power-plays inherent in II encounters. This is required for our collective futures.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Yabome Gilpin-Jackson considers herself a dreamer, doer and storyteller, committed to imagining and leading the futures we want. She is a proud African-Canadian who was born in Germany, grew up in Sierra Leone, and completed her studies in Canada and the USA.

Yabome has been named International African Woman of the Year by UK-based Women4Africa and was the first ever recipient of the Organization Development Network's Emerging Organization Development Practitioner award. She also received the prestigious 2018 Harry Jerome Professional Excellence Award in Canada.

Dr Gilpin-Jackson has published books and chapters, and peer-reviewed journal articles in the field of Human and Organization Development. She has 15+ years' experience across the private, public and nonprofit sectors. She is currently in provincial healthcare as Executive Director of Leadership and Organization Development at Fraser Health in BC, a Principal at SLD Consulting, and Adjunct Professor at Simon Fraser University's Beedie School of Business.

Yabome continues to research, write and speak on the importance of holding global mindsets

and honouring diversity and social equaity in our locally global world. She is the author of *Identities*, a short story collection about global African experiences. She is also initiator, co-founder and Lead editor of *We Will Lead Africa*, a non-fiction anthology of everyday African leadership stories.

[1] This article is a revision and an expansion of a paper submission and oral presentation at the **XII International Transformative Learning Conference, "Engaging at the Intersections"** on October 22, 2016, titled: *Where are you from? Shifting Identity Interrogation for Interpersonal and Social Transformative Learning*. The original conference paper was one of 15 shortlisted from 178 submissions eligible for the **Jack Mezirow Living Theory of Transformative Learning Award (2016).** I thank Dr Frances Baldwin for her editorial review and commentary which greatly influenced the current framing of this work.

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