

Me and the People Who Made Me

This installation is about my identity and the people who helped shape it. From the moment we're born, there are people and experiences that shape who we are and who we will become. We all have positive and negative experiences that shape our identity and how we see the world. It's important to check where we're heading, for sometimes it's something we can control and, other times, not.

The large canvas in the middle is composed of layers of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs of my darkest secrets and insecurities. These include secrets I have never told anyone about or events I don't even admit to myself. I wrote them all down, and soon the words themselves became this blob of paint. Doing this felt both liberating and cornering. There were times during the process when I felt calm and then there were times when I was at the point of breaking down.

They say, "Eyes are the windows into the soul." When first introduced to someone, the first trait you might notice are one's eyes. The eyes surrounding my canvas are the eyes of people who have had a huge impact on my life and changed me in one way or another. The biggest eyes are those of my mother because she has been the biggest influence in my life. We have had our "up and downs," but thanks to her I am who I am.

Although you probably can't read any of the words, the last layer says, "Like most people, I want to leave this world with no regrets. I can lie to most people in this world, but the one person I can't lie to is myself. I have known my past, so now I will know my future."

Leaving this piece, I want you to think about the people who made you who you are today. I also want you to mentally write down one thing you have kept within yourself. Move on from it as you walk away.

Joannie A.
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How Does Experience Shape Identity?

Joannie A.



My last name was taken away from me before I was born. I remember cleaning my room, and, as I was putting away my Barbie dolls, a spark of realization came into my mind “my mother’s last name changed to Dominguez, but my father’s last name is Rosas.” For the first eight years of my life, I was unaware that I didn’t have either of my parents' last names. I’ll joke about it telling my friends that I had two identities, but a part of me wonders if my father would have loved me more if I was a Rosas instead of an Amaro.

My parents broke up when I was three, but their fight has continued until October 8, 2018. Most of the time, if not all the time, I was put right in the middle of it. It usually started with my mother yelling at my father about how he never wants to help with the finances of my brother and I. Then my father would come back at mother that she’s the one who ruined everything in the first place. They would turn to me to see who I sided with, and most of the time I stood in silence or said something that would upset one of them. I was fine being in the middle of the crossfire as long as my younger brother wasn't dragged into it. My brother doesn’t even know his own father, which I have very mixed feelings about. The less he knows, the less he will get hurt.

Being involved in the aftermath of my parents separation, I am more likely to believe that pigs can fly than my parents can make peace with each other. I wonder, if my parents hadn’t separated, would I have been a different person now?

The Brain

My neural supercomputer¹ is such a weird organ. It remembers the lyrics to hundreds of songs but not mathematical equations or how to write in proper grammar for essays. It’s so weird to see that the difference between the brain and the psyche² is like the difference between the physical world and the mental world. In some cases, I can see the brain as this soul that controls the body. We’re all just walking brains in physical form. In the psyche, our personalities first needs to have a base of some sort. Some neuroscientists claimed that child development happens at the age of five. Whatever happens during these years could affect learning, health and behavior. These are the years of early plasticity³ which is the foundation for the architecture of the brain. Human development is the base of emotional and physical health and the base of our social skills.

One of the very first things our brains develop is sensory pathways⁴; these give the ability to see and to hear. According to Harvard University, this is why it’s easier to learn a language at a young age; starting our first year in the world, we develop language skills from our caregivers. As a child, my first language was Spanish, but I remember speaking primarily English to my father. My mother didn’t think Spanish was important for me, so she never went beyond the basics to teach me how to write or read the language. I was put into an ESL (English as a second language) program until third grade when my teachers realized that I knew enough English and

¹ Neural supercomputer- the human brain and comparing the memory system as a computer - a reference from howstuffworks

² Psyche- human soul, spirit or mind

³ Early plasticity- “how experiences reorganize neural pathways in the brain. Long lasting functional changes in the brain occur when we learn new things or memorize new information. These changes in neural connections are what we call *neuroplasticity*.” - <https://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/plast.html>

⁴ Sensory pathways- a route that nerve impulses follow when going from a sensory organ to a sensory area of the brain.- *What is SENSORY PATHWAY? definition of SENSORY PATHWAY (Psychology Dictionary)*

didn't needed any extra help. Nowadays I tell my mother to teach my younger brothers Spanish so they feel connected to their roots. Back then, every time I spoke Spanish to a non-family member, there was this sense of self-doubt or nervousness because it felt like I failed my culture. As a first generation of a Mexican-American, it feels like I have a responsibility to pass down my family's tradition to my kids.

As I look back on my first five years on this planet, my parents fought constantly in front of me because my father didn't have to take care of me since I wasn't legally his daughter. According to my family, I cried a lot. At one point my crying got so bad that my mother started crying herself because she didn't know what to do to stop me from crying. My aunts, who often baby-sat me, told me the one thing that stopped me crying was food or warm milk. I felt comfort, and it seemed that all my problems went away or it was a nice feeling tasting the flavors. I think my mother was truly in love with my father, and she tried her best to have this one big family image. I remember hugging my father's leg close to my chest while begging him to not leave. But it was too late because he had already started another family and had a child. Yet with my father, I felt I could tell him everything before I found his true colors.

The Turning Point

The first time I realized that I wasn't an equal in the eyes of my father to my stepbrother, I was six or seven. I remember running around the store at the mall, and I accidentally broke something which resulted in me having a long red scratch on my arm. My mother didn't see what I was doing, so when I came back, I was hiding my arm. She noticed the scratch on my arm and out of fear of being punished, I lied to her. I said that my dad brought me to his girlfriend's house and something happened. She was furious, but my mother and my dad's girlfriend never met, so I assumed that there was no harm. Then we were going to the restaurant my father worked at (in the mall), and my dad's girlfriend was nearby. She waved and said, "Hey! Mami!" Before I had the chance to say anything, my mother ran after her and they started physically fighting. I remember following them; my father saw through the window of the restaurant, and we were right front of the security station as well. Everything from there was like flashbacks. I remember a police officer holding my hand and walking in a long white hallway, and there I saw it. It was a room, but there was a glass window and I saw my father with his girlfriend and my step-brother in his arms and they were all looking at me. I felt so small and guilty about my actions. The officer brought me to a corner and I explained everything. He left me alone as I hugged my legs to my chest and cried, but not once did my father come to see me.

My mother is a tough woman, but the way she dealt with the break up not only affected my father, but my relationship with her also suffered. At the time, I didn't know that she was also hurting, and she had to play the role of both parents for my young brother and me. With my mother, I felt like I walking on a rope high up at 50 feet with books on my head. If I were to fall down from the rope or drop some books, my mother would make me feel worthless. We went through some hard times: my mother was jobless for three years, but my aunt took us in. My father wasn't required to pay child support since my younger brother and I didn't have his last name, so it was up to me to convince him to give us money. I remember having the phone on one ear and my mother's voice in the other. If I did without fail, my mother was pleased, but if I messed up on my words or if my father called saying I was faking it, my mother would pride my cousins. I remember going to the store with my mother and my cousin, and she told him to choose anything he wanted. She kept praising him, telling him he wasn't like me. I knew my mother loved me, that's why I wasn't scared of losing her. From time to time, she would say

things like, “I’m going to leave just like your father, so you can love me as much you love him. Just watch,” and, “You can’t do anything right. You’re just like him.” As I grew older, my mother and I argued more and more, and last year I did leave her. I went with my father for two months, but my mother never left my mind. When I came back, my mother welcomed me with open arms, and my aunts said that during my time away, my mother would recall all of the happy memories we had with each other. She would talk about me taking my first steps, running around the house in her high heels pretending to be like her, going to parks to play with my brothers, the way I would help her with my brothers, and the list goes on and on. I’m so grateful that she was able to find her own peace with my papa⁵. Naturally at first, my papa and I had a rough start because I was still connected with my father, but eventually we got close. If one of us had a problem with my mother, we told each other. He would pick me up from school or he would comfort me if I was having a bad day.

Overall, my parents played a huge role on shaping the early plasticity of my brain. So, who exactly is Joannie Sarahi? As a child I saw a bunch of high school movies and I saw how each main character had this certain role. For example, in *Mean Girls*, there were your nerds with big square glasses, the jocks who look drop dead “magnificent” and, of course, your main characters: the popular, “beautiful” girls who everyone wanted to talk to or be. At least in these movies, the personality of each character is seen so clearly. News flash: high school isn’t anything like that, or at least not in my school. I consider myself to be one of the outcasts because I was (and still am) socially awkward, taller than most people in my class, and more on the heavier side. Nonetheless, I enjoyed learning. There was something about it that made me feel excited. However, (and I know I’m going to contradict myself) I always had a hard time remembering. Most of the time, I would understand something instantly, but then it would take me forever to it implant what I learned into my brain.

Who am I?

I’m a hard worker due to the fact that I’m the oldest and the first generation. I do see myself as caring, hardworking, and patient with myself and others. I will admit that my mother was proud of me more, and I loved that feeling. Every time I got an award in my middle and high school years, I would show my mother. I worked hard to get where I am now, but this means that everyone expects me to be this great leader. I don’t know anything about leadership, and half of the time I wouldn’t take that role. Without knowing, I have built this reputation in my school and in my family. As a child, adults would say, “You’ll be someone in this life!” or, “You’ll do great things!” As we grow older and older, we tend to hear those words less and less. In my school, I also had teachers telling me these things. My mother and my Papa would even tell me that the only reason my father still wants to talk to me is because he knows I’m going to do great things in this lifetime. One would think that this is a confidence boost, but for me it is nerve-wracking. These people were saying all these things to the same girl who sucks at grammar, the girl who could barely ride a bike on the streets, the girl who could barely talk to new people, the girl who always felt weak inside. I couldn’t see myself as all these things. I saw myself as a pushover, shy, awkward, and emotional. I saw myself as a follower, not a leader.

⁵ Papa - my stepfather, but I see him as my real father.

The Two Identity Theories

There are two main theories of how our identity is formed. According to Erik Erikson's theory, identity is formed in a series of stages and the interactions we have with others. There are eight main stages, and each stage has its own particular dilemma. What I personally don't like about this theory is that it's claiming that it's either a hit or miss. If you don't pass a certain stage, then your Psychosocial Development becomes negatively impacted and impacts how you're supposed to act or be. However, Erikson does believe there should be a balance between stages



one to six. In addition, you're supposed to build off from each stage or revisit some, if not all.

Stage 1 starts from the moment we're born. From day one to year one is called the *infancy stage*. During the infancy stage, our personality is shaped by trust. It's up to our caregivers to show us trust by feeding, caring for us, etc. According to Erikson's theory, if this stage is successful, then the child, throughout their lifetime, will be able to develop trust around others, especially adults. If it's unsuccessful, then the child will develop a sense of distrust around others. I believe that it's important to show love for infants, but I don't think this stage would be the thing that decides whether or not they could trust people in their lifetime.

Stage 2 begins in our early childhood, between ages two and four. These are the years we start gaining a sense of independence. The words "no" and "yes" become familiar and there's a reason why it's called the "terrible twos:" this is when children are able to engage in *simple* discussions. It's the caregiver's job to allow the child to have that sense of independence. If the child passes this stage successfully, then they are left with a sense of self-confidence and control. Meanwhile, those who are unsuccessful may experience self-doubt. For this stage I think there should be a balance between saying yes and no. One can't expect a child to know all from right or wrong or allow them to eat ice-cream for breakfast.

Stage 3 is usually at the ages of four to six. This is the time when children begin preschool and develop more outside interactions with other children and adults. This is the time when kids sense a theme of power and control with others. This is the stage when Erikson really thinks there should be a balance. If the child passes this stage, they gain a sense of leadership, or in some cases, just plain bossiness. If this stage is unsuccessful, the child experiences guilt and self-doubt. This means they may be scared to take that leadership role or have a fear that they possible couldn't do something out of their boundaries. For me I could see some truth to this, because, as a child, I didn't wanted to show my opinions or ideas, so I simply went along what everyone else wanted to do. Even to this day I fear taking that role of leadership or express my own opinions because of my parents or wanting to simply fit in.

Stage 4 takes place in our elementary years. This is the time when awards are presented to us or the time when children realize that getting an A on an exam means you did a good job.

As the caregiver's job, it is important to encourage the children on their skills. If this stage is successful, then the child feels more confident, and they will succeed. If it's unsuccessful, kids may feel doubt about their ability to succeed. They may start calling themselves stupid or saying that they could never be great as someone they know. For me personally, my mother never really discouraged me, but because of me, high standards were set for my little brother. I would see him discouraged to try in school, and a couple times he told that he could never be as 'smart' as me or live up to my standards. I feel bad for him because my mother is always bragging to my family about how well I'm doing, but completely leaves out my brother. In a way it convinced him to give up, but I told him that he has to be great in his own terms. I told him that there's not smart or stupid, it's more like you try or you don't.

Stage 5 takes place during our teenage years. According to Erikson, this is the stage where teens develop a sense of personal identity. This is where stage 2, comes back because, during the years of stage 5, there is once again a sense of independence, like going to a friend's house or hanging out at the mall. As teens, we see what is important to us, which, in some cases, could be a battle between socializing or doing homework. If teens pass this stage, then they gain a sense of ego identity. For those who don't, they may end up feeling insecure and confused about themselves. Teens may feel confused on what to do or what route to take, or they may feel like they still have to depend on others. Which, in my opinion, I think it's perfectly normal to not know what to do in life. These are the years where, as teens, we should enjoy ourselves, but learn how to gain independence like getting a job or driving a car.

Stage 6 begins in our early adulthood. This is the stage of personal relationships. This could be with friends, family, partners and etc. Personally speaking, this could tie back to stage 1, but I feel like personal relationships would start in stage 5. If we're successful, then we gain a strong sense of love and are able to create long-lasting relationships. However, if we don't, then it's harder to build those kinds of relationships. They may have a hard time connecting with others or keeping up with old friends. They may keep to themselves. I can see this with my mother because she tends to keep to herself, and she would rather stay at home than go out with family and reconnect. I think that this is a stage that starts earlier, but I can see why they put this as early adulthood. It's easier to stay in touch or not argue about something silly because you're more mature.

Stage 7 takes place in "official" adulthood. The main focus of this stage is to build a sense of community. This is the stage where most adults are starting to build a family and their career. Those who feel accomplished so far with their lives feel like they have a purpose. Meanwhile, those who don't may feel unproductive and uninvolved with the people around them. They may feel that they don't have a purpose or a sense of where they should be in life. In some cases, they may feel unhappy with their lives. Some adults would purposely not start a family until they feel good about where they are with their careers. For me, I understand that there's a balance between work and family.

The final stage, which is stage 8, takes place in our senior years. This tends to be the time where we reflect back on our life. That's why some seniors may say things like, "Do what you love; don't focus only on the bad parts." Those who are happy with what they made out of their lives, gain this sense of satisfaction and wisdom. Meanwhile, those who don't, have this sense of bitterness and despair.

However, James Marcia⁶ pointed out that Erikson didn't include factors like gender, religion or culture. People's identities are going to be different based on where they grew up. Each family has a different set of "rules" or is raised differently. Marcia believed that people's identities are based on their values, goals, beliefs, and certain events. James Marcia's theory mostly applies to the young adult years. He broke this down in four categories: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement.

Diffusion is the stage where people may not know what they want to do. They tend to have low levels of exploration and commitment. Additionally, they don't have any real-life goals or an exact plan for the future. They mostly go with the flow or take it one day at a time.

People in foreclosure tend to have low levels of exploration, but high levels of commitment. This means that they have a life goal or they know what they're going to do in the future. However, this choice is mostly influenced by their parents or family. They don't tend to explore more options that are unknown to them.

Meanwhile, people with a moratorium identity are in the opposite end: they tend to have high levels of exploration, but low levels of commitment. They don't exactly have a solid plan like people with a diffusion identity, but that is only because they're still exploring their options. They may have an idea of what their goals, values, and beliefs are, but they're keeping an open mind.

Lastly, there are the people with an achievement identity. These type of people tend to have high levels of exploration and high levels of commitment. James believes that in order to get to this stage, one must go through the moratorium stage. These are the types of people who know what they want and how to get there. They know their goals, value, and beliefs.

James claimed that people could go through all four categories or go back and forth between each one. For me, I have personally been between foreclosure and moratorium. Foreclosure is seen to be more of what your family wants you to be and you simply follow it. If my mother and my aunts were all nurses, and if they were expecting me to be a nurse then I'd just be a nurse. However, a moratorium is like breaking the family's traditions and expectations of you, and you go explore other ideas you like, but you don't exactly have a full commitment to it. My mother and my father are both either cleaners or waiters, but my mother wanted me to do something "safe" and have a career where I'll get a good income. While my papa and my father told me to do whatever I wanted to do, but that I should advance from it. I guess you could say that I'm currently in moratorium because I'm keeping my options open to careers I may be interested in, but currently I want to work in the medical field and become a pathologist.

Ending Result

Our past and current experiences can really shape our minds to the people we are today. I even wonder if these types of events have a domino effect to where we end up. Coming from my own experiences, I didn't have the happiest childhood, but in a way, I debunked Erik Erikson theory of how I would have ended up. There are a bunch of 'underdogs' who are born with the disadvantages others may not have. Yet, for those who fit right in of Erik Erikson's theory, would their lives would have been different if they were raised differently? There are just so many little factors that can play into someone's life. Sometimes it's not the way someone was raised, but certain events that change their whole lives for better or worse. I guess this ties to mental health, which many people don't take seriously. When our body is physically damaged,

⁶ James Marcia - "influential theorist who expanded upon Erikson's concept of identity crisis and identity confusion"

our brain sends messages to certain cells in our body to heal the area. But what if we were mentally hurt? Will being mentally hurt affect our physical health? In my family, we don't tend to believe in mental health. As a child, I was told that it was all in my head. The first time I noticed that I needed help with my mental health was during my freshman year and I was at the doctor. Before heading there, my mother and I had a huge argument, and I was at the point of crying. As part of my yearly check-up, the doctor checked me in private, and when he asked about my family, I broke down and cried. I didn't tell him much, but he told my mother that I needed a therapist. During my first meeting with the therapist, she asked me a few questions and did a small test on me. My results were I wasn't depressed, but I wasn't too far behind. She explained it to me like this: "Imagine you're on a side of a cliff; if you fell off the cliff, you're going to feel the impact. You could either stay there or try to climb back up, however it's not going to be an easy climb and you might fall back down again. You, my dear, are couple steps of away from falling without realizing it." Unfortunately, I only had two meetings with her because my family couldn't afford it. However, I researched ways to cope and manage my mental health. I started meditating, drawing, and keeping a journal. I look toward the positives or the certain things that make me happy. I look into the people, the memories, and the events. I also took time to distance myself from my family, and I think that was for the best, for not only me, but for my mother as well. As much as I have a lot of bad memories in my past, I have more good memories with the people I love: I love seeing my mother happy. When she tells me some chisme⁷ about her work or her family, it makes us seem like best friends. Our relationship has definitely gotten stronger. She's very supportive and is always there for me. Then there are my little brothers who would call out my name and run to hug me every time I come home. And the experiences with friends and mentors where we could go from fooling around to talking about a serious topic. That's the way my mind heals itself.

I'm still exploring who I am. As I grow older I think I'll get a better sense of who I am. I think that identity can tie back into mental health. Both of these things can start from the moment we're born. We're all going to have both positive and negative experiences that will shape our identity and how we see the world. It's important to check where we're heading with ourselves, and sometimes it's something we can control and other times not. I'm proud for becoming the person I am because I'm Joannie Sarahi and no one else.

⁷ Chisme- a spanish word that means gossip.

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