

**Museum of the Peace Corps Experience  
Many Faces of Peace Corps**

**Personal Identity, Race, and the Peace Corps Experience  
Summary of Program Findings**

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On December 7, 2022 the Museum of the Peace Corps Experience and its Many Faces of Peace Corps initiative convened a virtual conference on “Personal Identity, Race, and the Peace Corps Experience.” This report summarizes discussions during the conference.<sup>1</sup> A video recording of the plenary session is available [here](#).

The conversation started and ended with reflections on the complex interconnections between culture and race. In his opening remarks, Jonathan Zimmerman<sup>2</sup> explained that before World War II westerners conceptualized differences among peoples in binary and hierarchical terms—either people were or weren’t civilized or people’s civilizations were primitive or highly developed. After the discreditation of race science and the Holocaust, westerners began talking about different cultures rather than civilizations. He noted that culture allows us to talk about differences horizontally without one culture being better than another, but that we tend to talk about cultures in undifferentiated ways that obscure tremendous diversity within our own and others’ cultures. Similarly, grouping people into different racial and ethnic identities obscures diversity within each of these groupings. By generalizing about cultures—for example that certain cultures don’t educate their girls—we set ourselves up as the arbiters of what these cultures are. Potentially, generalizing about cultures without recognizing diversity within these cultures can trap us into feeling that we have to be culturally sensitive to existing racial, ethnic or gender-based biases within different countries.

Albert “Beto” Whitaker<sup>3</sup> concluded the meeting by talking about the concept of cultural hegemony promulgated by the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who argued that social institutions acculturate people into the norms, values, and beliefs of the dominant social group. Social dominance is equated with whiteness because of the history of slavery and colonialism perpetrated by western countries. Beto observed that cross-cultural encounters and misperceptions are complicated by race and that identity is a moving target that changes in time and space.

These observations were amplified by the panel discussion and breakout sessions.<sup>4</sup> The following are key take-aways from these discussions:

*Culture more than color affects self-identity.* Panelists and participants discussed how the diverse cultures in which they grew up—African American, Asian American, Latinx, Indigenous, Irish American etc. and a mixture of these and other cultures – influenced their personal identities and their experiences with people of different racial and ethnic background prior to

Peace Corps service. They talked about how their encounters with diversity in other cultures during Peace Corps service impacted their own self-perceptions and broadened their perspectives on diversity within their own and others' cultures.

*Racial stereotypes don't hold up.* Participants' stories about their own backgrounds and experiences prior to joining the Peace Corps illustrated the fallacy of making assumptions about class, education, sophistication, and other factors based on skin color and ethnic background. Several mixed-race/mixed ethnicity participants talked about never fitting neatly into established racial categories in the U.S. or in their countries of service. One mixed heritage returned Peace Corps volunteer (RPCV) talked about pressure in the U.S. to choose one identity over another and having to endure racism directed at both Hispanic and indigenous people rather than feeling comfortable with her own mestizo identity.

*Context affects the interrelationship between race and culture.* Several black RPCVs talked about their strong black identity being challenged when they were considered white by black Africans because they were American. Similarly, some RPCV's with indigenous backgrounds weren't recognized as indigenous by host country indigenous people because of their American identity. In some countries Asian-American and Latinx volunteers were favored by host country nationals because of their more familiar cultural upbringing; in others, they and other nonwhite volunteers were subject to discrimination. For example, an Asian-American RPCV talked about encountering problems in Bolivia because she was considered Peruvian. Other examples of experiences with local biases include: a light-skinned black volunteer who didn't stand out as a foreigner by passing as Chinese but then was discriminated against in northwest China when locals thought she was Uighur; and a young female volunteer being called a girl instead of a woman because she didn't have children.

*Regardless of race, participants talked about gaining a greater awareness of privileges accorded them as Americans.* A female RPCV talked about being given a higher status than other women in the community in which she served—being included with the men—because she was an American. Another became aware of the privilege that comes with being a citizen of a country when she was treated as a foreigner in her host country. Peace Corps service strengthened some volunteers' ownership of their American identities while others talked about their discomfort with American policies and their unearned status as Americans. The White Saviorism critique of the Peace Corps rejects this perceived cultural dominance of Americans over others; but, as Zimmerman pointed out, the White Saviorism critique also is a generalization that doesn't acknowledge the growing diversity in Peace Corps and the consistently positive view of Peace Corps Volunteers held by host country nationals.

*RPCVs learned cross-cultural skills while serving abroad that help them navigate and communicate with others in multicultural environments.* Participants talked about learning to become comfortable in respecting individual and cultural differences and becoming more flexible in dealing with unfamiliar gender, ethnic, and racial biases in their countries of service. White RPCVs became more aware of the role of implicit racial and cultural biases in the US and other countries, and gained a better understanding of their own white privilege.

These take-aways added to the growing understanding of the interconnected impacts of race and personal identity on the Peace Corps experience and RPCV's lives after Peace Corps.

Questions that emerged from the discussion:

- What insights and opportunities for change do we gain or lose by making race biases subsidiary to cultural misunderstandings?
- How can we use the cross-cultural tools we learned during Peace Corps service to help address current divisiveness and conflicts in the US and around the world? [Third Goal]

As the conference closed, participants expressed a strong desire to continue this conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> The report summarizes points made during the plenary and breakout sessions (using notes provided by breakout session recorders) and draws on comments made by conference participants in chat, and responses to a post-program survey. The report was prepared by Evelyn Ganzglass, RPCV Somalia 1966-68 and member of the Many Faces of Peace Corps Advisory Team.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Zimmerman, RPCV Nepal 1983-85, and Professor of History of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Whitaker, RPCV Paraguay 1979-81, and NPCE Board of Directors, and Chair, Board Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Special Committee.

<sup>4</sup> The meeting and panel were moderated by Diane Hibino, RPCV Bolivia 1967-70 and Country Director/Bolivia 1993-96. The panelists were: John Fleming, RPCV Malawi 1966-68; Katrina Mathis, RPCV Guinea 1994-1996 and Peace Corps Staff 1997-2002; Ursula Pike; RPCV Bolivia 1994-1996; and Sorphorn Seng-St. Romain, Peace Corps Staff Cambodia 2013. Participants were welcomed by Patricia A. Wand, RPCV Colombia 1963-65 and President, Museum of the Peace Corps Experience. National Peace Corps Association provided technical support.