

**Passing it Down:
The Role of Cultural History and Ancestors in
Good Work**

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When reflecting on the factors that influence the quality of their work, most professionals focus on personal traits and conditions in their professional domains. However, in the GoodWork Project, we discovered a small subset of professionals who highlight the influence of their cultural backgrounds on their work. In contrast to the white, Anglo-Saxon professionals we have interviewed, a small group of African American, Asian American, and Jewish individuals derive a sense of purpose and motivation from their cultural histories. More specifically, the African American and Asian American subjects in this group feel responsible to their ancestors. The Jewish subjects see themselves as beneficiaries of a heritage of cultural values.

For the past nine years, researchers at the GoodWork Project have studied exceptional workers in a variety of professions. Through in-depth interviews with leading professionals, the GoodWork Project studies the psychology of those who strive to carry out work that is both excellent and ethical and the circumstances under which this dual sense of good work can be achieved. So far at the GoodWork Project, we have conducted interviews with approximately one thousand leading practitioners in genetics, journalism, law, business, higher education, theater, philanthropy, and medicine.

In order to explore the role of cultural factors in the work of our subjects and to compare the apparent demographic differences, we analyzed the interview transcripts in two ways. First, we randomly sampled 20 transcripts from each of the following groups: African American, Asian Americanⁱ, Jewish, and those who did not affiliate themselves with a specific racial or ethnic group. We chose these transcripts from the domains of genetics, journalism, law, business, higher education, and theater. In these randomly selected transcripts, 15 percent of African American subjects (three subjects of 20), 10 percent of Asian American subjects (two subjects of 20), five percent of Jewish subjects (one subject of 20), and none of the non-affiliated subjects (zero subjects of 20) spoke of their cultural histories. Second, we looked more broadly at transcripts from the larger sample and found additional subjects, mostly in the same demographic populations, who similarly cited a cultural and historical influence on the values they bring to their work.

ⁱ In our sample, the Asian American group includes people from India as well as the Far East

We selected 36 of these transcripts for closer analysis, an examination that forms the substance of this paper.ⁱⁱ

Responsibility to ancestors

The African American and Asian American subjects who speak of cultural history express their historical connection in terms that are strong and emotional. These subjects are painfully aware of the struggles of those who preceded them—their parents and grandparents, as well as their more distant ancestors. At the same time, they see themselves as beneficiaries of those struggles. They feel indebted to those in the past and take responsibility for carrying forward the work of their ancestors by continuing to improve the conditions of others who share similar cultural backgrounds or, in some cases, of an even more expansive group.

Case Study #1

Deborahⁱⁱⁱ is an African American woman who works as a career counselor at a community college. She has a strong drive to pursue social justice through her work, a commitment that stems from her experience as a black woman and from her conscious connection with black history.

She feels responsible to work for social justice so that the suffering of her ancestors does not continue into the future. “I walk with the history of black women. I don’t hear spirits, but black women talking to me. We’ve been abused. We’ve been mistreated, oh God...But my ancestors are here saying ‘we’ve got to right this wrong. It’s injustice. You’ve got to make sure that our children and our babies don’t go through what we went through.’ So that informs me in terms of the work that I do.”

Deborah honors her sense of responsibility by helping people of color secure and advance careers in the health field. Her work at the community college allows her to put her beliefs into material form. “I create programs to bring people into the work force, to help people move and advance in their careers...I know we’re helping people, that we’re making people’s lives better and you see it.” Deborah is also committed to challenging

ⁱⁱ Thank you to Heather Rebmann for identifying the phenomenon of cultural responsibility among our subjects and for conducting the initial research that led to this paper.

racist behavior when she sees it and started a group at work dedicated to confronting racism. In her work she strives to be “an agent of social change...to make the world a better place for people using education as a vehicle.”

Case Study #2

John is an Indian actor in his late twenties committed to “bringing the Indian experience to America or the Indian American experience to more Americans.” His passion for this work and the sense of purpose which he brings to it are fueled by his experience growing up as an Indian in a white American community and by his sense of connectedness to those who came before him.

When asked to whom or what he feels most responsible, he replied, “To my ancestors, to my parents and to my community, the Indian community... I represent my whole background and my grandfather, and all the struggles that my grandfathers and great-grandfathers all have gone through. I’m the result of their struggles, so I’m the result of all the good and all the bad they’ve done. I have to give respect to that.”

By pursuing his mission of breaking down American stereotypes of Indians through his work as an actor, John honors the opportunities that his ancestors have given him. “What I would like to do is—I don’t see too many faces like my own on the screen or on TV or on the stage. And I would love to be able to...put the face out there and make the world in America realize that we’re not just 7-11 owners, or we’re not just taxicab drivers; there’s a whole culture of young Indian American people who do a variety of different things and a lot of stories to tell.”

These professionals dedicate themselves to carrying forward their cultural legacies by helping others who share their cultural background (in the first case through career assistance for people of color and in the second case through representing a more accurate Indian American experience). Remembering their ancestors serves as a motivation to help others. A couple of notable subjects take this process a step further. For the following African American professionals, connection to their cultural histories

ⁱⁱⁱ All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

ultimately feeds a motivation to help all people through their work, not just a restricted group sharing salient characteristics.

Case study #3

Justin, an African American artistic director at a non-profit theater in New York City, has been very successful in his career and feels indebted to his ancestors for creating opportunities for him. “I feel a responsibility to my ancestors in a very tangible way. I descend from a line of people who spent their entire existence fighting for the right to be defined a human being, so just the fact that I get to define myself as an artist is the most extraordinary luxury, so I damn well better do something with that. I don’t have to wait here and go ‘I’m a human being, dammit!’ I don’t have to do that, whereas one’s entire existence was spent doing that. So I feel a profound sense of responsibility to my ancestors.”

Just as his ancestors created opportunities for him, he carries this determination forward by creating opportunities for others. Once he had his first hit show on Broadway, he turned his focus to helping others succeed. “I felt that sense of responsibility, that it wasn’t enough that I had accomplished, I had to then take responsibility for the rest, or for others... Once you get yours, you then have to create a structure where others can get what they need to get. It’s just a continuation of that agenda.”

Justin does not limit this agenda to black people, but sees beyond group definitions, and ultimately aspires to make a place for everyone in popular culture. “Probably twenty years ago, I would have said I feel a very specific responsibility to my race, but I think that’s redefined... it’s like owing a responsibility to empowering people. I think it’s larger than a race definition.” Through his work in theater, he strives to redefine popular culture so that it encompasses one larger humanity, rather than a humanity fragmented into narrowly defined groups of people.

Case Study #4

Mark, an African American male, founded and directs a successful non-profit organization aimed at increasing the educational and life achievements of inner-city black and Latino children. He grew up in a white family as an adopted child and went through

a period of time growing up when he felt that being black was holding him back. However, as he studied more about black history, he saw strength in his cultural origins and his identity.

Mark feels indebted to his ancestors for creating opportunities that allowed him to succeed. “I feel most responsible to our children and to our ancestors. So for everybody who laid down their lives to open up opportunities for me and for everybody else around I feel a very, very big responsibility.”

This responsibility has contributed to his sense of purpose and to his intense work ethic. Mark feels driven to educate children and to change society through the organization he has built. He wants to engage people in social change so that people are outraged by the injustices that are commonplace. He also feels compelled to work as hard as his ancestors had to work for freedom in order to achieve his mission of changing society. “I wanted to invest every moment that I had toward building this organization and hoping this organization would be what I believed it could be for society...I think that we do our ancestors a disservice now that we’ve gotten through this little bit part of this gate and now all of a sudden we go from fighting fire hoses and dogs to working nine to five.”

Although his organization is set up primarily to help black and Latino children, Mark recognizes that, ultimately, his responsibility to this community is not separate from his responsibility to humanity as a whole. “My purpose in life is to uplift the black and Latino communities...And when I was more evolved as a person, it was really to uplift every community. Now I’m ... resource constrained so I have to be more focused. But ultimately I believe that all humans deserve more than what we currently have.” His work with underprivileged youth is part of his larger devotion to “helping out groups within society become accepted, become fully human, become full participants in the American dream...full participants in their humanity. In our humanity.”

Beneficiaries of traditional cultural values

While a small group of Asian American and African American subjects in our study shares a sense of conscious responsibility to their ancestors, a second and smaller group of Jewish subjects shares a different understanding of how their cultural histories

influence their sense of purpose in work. They inherit traditional Jewish values that influence their choice of work and the meaning that they bring to it.

Case Study #5

Cindy, a geneticist describes how Jewish history has influenced her career as a doctor. “I’m Jewish and there’s just a big humanism streak in Judaism. Again, Jews feel that, as a race, they’ve been persecuted in the past. And that there’s a high benefit to doing good for other people and to social justice and to helping others. To helping the poor and the unfortunate and, to my mind, the sick would be in that same category... I don’t think it played any conscious role. I never thought to myself, ‘I’m Jewish, and therefore I should be a doctor.’ But I think it’s probably what shaped me.” She believes that the decisions she makes in her career stem from a history of values that has been passed down through generations.

Case Study #6

One Jewish criminal lawyer, Michael, became a defense attorney because he sees himself as an outsider and likes to take on power. He admires the Jews who fought back during the Holocaust and carries their values forward in his work as a lawyer by challenging people, taking risks in saying what he believes, and thinking through each issue on his own. “I think some of my values grow out of my kind of secular Jewish heritage and my upbringing. All of that was very important in giving me the kinds of values that I have. But, they are hard to define sometimes. I think one picks a profession that has those kinds of values...I think I selected this profession even though I think it was mostly unconscious and subtle. But I think the unconscious factors that pushed me in this direction were my need for fairness and my need for challenge, my need to keep other people honest.” Michael’s work as a lawyer has allowed him to make good use of the values he inherited from his Jewish ancestors.

The values that Cindy and Michael inherit from their ancestors inspires the passion and purpose that they bring to their work. Like the subjects who describe a responsibility to their ancestors, they contextualize themselves and their work in an

historical and cultural framework. Whether these subjects describe a responsibility to their ancestors or a generalized set of inherited cultural values, the connection between their personal values and their work is informed by their cultural histories. These subjects consciously draw upon a cultural framework that others take for granted.

Conclusion

Our serendipitous finding highlights the importance of considering the role that cultural history plays in the work of professionals as more minorities enter the elite professions and become leaders in the domains of law, medicine, business, science, journalism, and higher education. Furthermore, if the GoodWork model is to be applied in other professions that are not dominated by white Anglo-Saxon individuals, the importance of historical connection to workers is worth exploring.

The professionals in this paper may connect to their cultural histories for several reasons. First, it may serve in part as a strategy for successfully navigating professions in which they are minorities. Some professionals may look to those in the past as role models because they do not encounter as many exemplars with whom they identify among their professional contemporaries. Second, identifying with a cultural past may help people cope with negative emotions that stem from experiences of discrimination in their own lives and in the lives of their ancestors. Appreciating the struggles of their predecessors and the positive cultural changes that have occurred as a result of those struggles may give them the motivation to transform these negative emotions into positive action.

Finally, maintaining cultural roots is a strategy not only for overcoming the challenges unique to professional minorities, but also for navigating challenges faced by all professionals. At a time when market forces are increasingly powerful, pressuring professionals to compromise the traditional missions and values of their professions, cultural history can be a strong moral and professional guide. The role of cultural history for these subjects is an instructive example of the type of ethical guide needed for professionals to achieve good work in difficult times. Whether religious or secular, historical or contemporary, professional or more broadly cultural, the establishment of

ethical traditions on which to base work-related decisions may well be essential to the proliferation of good work.