

Cultural appropriation transcript

My name is Elizabeth Wynn and I'm the Equality and Diversity Manager at the Babraham Institute, and today I'm going to be talking about cultural appropriation. Since I'm talking about culture, I think it's relevant for me to share at the beginning that I am white and English. Don't let the accent fool you. So this talk is definitely going to be through my perception. My culture affects how I relate to this issue. And also the Babraham Institute is based in the UK. So I'm definitely approaching this from a context of a Western audience.

As always, with these equality4success Bite talks, this is going to be a brief introduction to the topic. There's no way I could cover it in full, but the topics I'm going to be covering are what cultural appropriation is, giving some examples of the harmful effects of it, and finally, talking a bit about how you can avoid cultural appropriation.

When I do this series, if you've seen any of the previous ones I've done on topics like intersectionality or benevolent sexism, I like to start by talking about the history of the concept, where it originated, how the discussion around it and the thinking around it has evolved and how we've reached our current conversation on these sort of issues. I guess you can kind of call them equality and diversity buzzwords almost. When I was doing research on cultural appropriation, it was actually really hard. Unlike some of those other concepts and terms I mentioned, there isn't as clear of a history of the concept and the term. And I think that probably contributes to why cultural appropriation is used so broadly and perhaps why it is misunderstood and misused.

So when I was trying to do some research on this, one thing that came up a lot was this essay: Some General Observations on the Problem of Cultural Colonialism, which was published in this book, The Myth of Primitivism, Perspectives on Art. And this essay was published in 1978. I believe it didn't use the term cultural appropriation but as I said, a lot of articles about cultural appropriation credit this as one of the first academic articles on it. So as far as I was able to piece together, I think it's pretty fair to say that the discussion around cultural appropriation and the way this concept has evolved, it started in art history, which makes a lot of sense when you're looking at the history of art, you're looking at creation and influences are talking about how different cultures influence each other's art. That makes a lot of sense to me that it originated in that domain. So

that was probably in the 60s and 70s beyond that, then moved into post-colonial studies in fields like anthropology and sociology in the sort of 80s and 90s. And from there it jumped to popular culture in the twenty first century.

So when we're talking about cultural appropriation, what definition are we using nowadays? If you go to Wikipedia, everyone's, or at least my first stop for information, they use this definition: cultural appropriation is the adoption of an element or elements of one culture or identity by members of another, culture or identity. On the face of it, this doesn't seem like a problem at all, cultures interacting with each other is something that's happened throughout history. It's completely impossible to stop and it encourages diversity and enriches our understanding of other people and it enriches our experiences. So why is cultural appropriation something which is talked about in such negative terms, why is it recognised as a problem? For me, this definition is missing so much nuance.

So here's the definition from the Oxford English Dictionary, it was added in 2017, and they define cultural appropriation as the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs practices, ideas, etc., of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society. This gets to what I think is the key defining feature of cultural appropriation as opposed to cultural exchange, we aren't talking about an equal interaction here. Cultural appropriation happens when there is an imbalance in power. Cultural appropriation has real, tangible, demonstrable harmful effects. That's why this is an important concept and term to understand. This isn't an abstract idea. It's not something you should learn about in order to be the most woke or politically correct person. It's a very important and beneficial concept to understand because of the harm it creates.

So I'm going to move on to some examples of that. First of all, cultural appropriation results in the creators of the culture not being rewarded, so that can be in terms of credit, but also financial rewards. This is a classic example. The person on the left is Big Mama Thornton and the person on the right is Elvis Presley. Big Momma Thornton actually recorded Hound Dog first. It was written for her and it was successful, but in no way as successful as when Elvis covered it, which he did three or four years after her. So this is an example of a real financial benefit that Elvis got from culturally appropriating Big Mama Thornton's work.

As I said, this is a real classic example, this is from the 50s. I have a more recent example as well. Yoga. Yoga is based on practices which originated in South Asia, in the Indian subcontinent. When you do a search for yoga, these images that come up. It's difficult to tell the national or ethnic origin of the people represented here but it doesn't appear that there is anyone of South Asian origin here. And that relates, again, to the credit, but also the financial impact. How many, you know, YouTube videos or websites of yoga teachers do you see and what are their ethnicities? Who is getting monetary reward for teaching yoga?

Another example is promoting stereotypes. This can seem a bit abstract, but encountering stereotypes is a form of microaggression – and if you're not familiar with that term, I encourage you to look it up. Promoting myself, but that's another topic that I've previously talked about – and encountering microaggressions, studies have been done on this, it has a real negative effect on marginalised people's mental health. So an example of this. Katy Perry at the 2013 American Music Awards performed her song Unconditionally, I believe it's called, wearing a kimono and has East Asian dancers around her. And the topic of this song is, you know, this devoted love, this undying love. And this was rightly called out by a lot of people for perpetuating this stereotype of East Asian women as sexually submissive and East Asian women experience a lot of racialised sexual harassment and fetishisation. And Katy Perry is able to take off this outfit. She doesn't experience any of the any of the continuing effects, whereas East Asian women aren't able to remove that. That's a part of themselves.

Another example is penalising marginalised groups while rewarding privileged ones. You can find loads of examples of black women talking about their hairstyles, the fact that they get penalised in real terms, things like losing a job. So this is an article that was reported in the BBC. A woman was told that she had to change her hairstyle because it was unprofessional in order to secure a job, whereas there are plenty of examples of white celebrities who get loads of praise for having edgy or cool hairstyles.

With these harmful effects, I tried to focus on ones that are more tangible, where I could point to a financial or mental health effects that are more measurable. But if you do some research into this, you can find so many anecdotes of people sharing their experiences of how this sort of cultural appropriation causes them harm.

Finally, I want to talk about avoiding cultural appropriation. This isn't to say that you can never experience anything or share anything that is outside of your culture, but here are some tips I have for interacting with other cultures in a thoughtful and mindful way.

So I think the most important one is to consider the context. Think about what you're thinking of doing, does it feel respectful or does it promote stereotypes? Again, going to that power imbalance, which is a key component about what makes something appropriate as opposed to an equal exchange, does the culture you're thinking of borrowing from have a history of being discriminated against? Also, do some research into the cultural significance of the practice or item, for example, there was a trend a while ago for people at music festivals to wear feathers, these war bonnets that reference various Native American cultures, but they have real cultural and religious significance to the people that originated them. So it's not appropriate for someone outside of those cultures to wear them.

Explore your motivations, why are you interested in doing this? Are you interested in this culture or are you just following a trend? Also, think about will you benefit in some way, even if it's just, you know, some social cachet? Will people think it's cool, are you going to benefit in some way from this?

Another important thing is to give credit. Think about how you can reference or recognise the culture that whatever practice or item you're thinking about comes from.

And finally, on the financial side of it, support businesses run by people from that culture. So, for example, restaurants that are run by people from that culture or buying from a local creator as opposed to, you know, mass produced item.

Those are the main points I wanted to cover. This has obviously been a very abridged discussion, a real basic introduction to this topic. As I said, I have a couple of links I'll be tweeting out afterwards, which will give you some places to start finding out more about this. And now I'd like to invite everyone to move on to a discussion to share your thoughts and experiences and questions.