

Episode: *Author Interview: “Loneliness and Cultural Hyphenation”*

Guest: Julia Bhuiyan

Host: Tim Hoff

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[bright theme music]

[00:00:04] TIM HOFF: Welcome to another episode of the Author Interview series from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*. I’m your host, Tim Hoff. This series provides an alternative way to access the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Julia Bhuiyan, an undergraduate student at Harvard University studying chemistry and history of science. She’s here to discuss her painting, “*Forever a Work in Progress*,” in the November 2023 issue of the Journal, [Health and Loneliness](#). Julia, thank you so much for being on the podcast. [music fades]

JULIA BHUIYAN: Thank you for having me.

[00:00:39] HOFF: So, to begin with, what is the main ethics point of your piece?

BHUIYAN: Absolutely. Yeah. So, in this painting I illustrate my experiences with cultural hyphenation as a Bengali-American teenager. And the key ethics point I seek to highlight is the importance of recognizing and respecting complex cultural identities, especially in the context of adolescence and young adults who may be more vulnerable to feelings of isolation or loneliness as a result of their hyphenated cultural identities. So, my self-portrait incorporates the narrative behind it, and I wanted to showcase that cultural identity isn’t a monolithic concept, and experiences will differ person to person, even among those who share the same cultural hyphenation.

I think it is a very personal journey to grapple with how to balance multiple identities, practices, and beliefs to assimilate into or choose to leave behind or find a compromise on. And while this journey can be incredibly beautiful and meaningful, it can also just be so messy and so frustrating and isolating. Again, because of how unique the journey is, it can just feel so lonely at times. So, the key ethics point in my painting is the need to approach cultural identity, and more specifically, hyphenated cultural identities, with empathy and understanding.

[00:02:14] HOFF: And what do you think is the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to take from your work?

BHUIYAN: Yeah. So, cultural hyphenations and cultural identities at large, I find, are interwoven throughout many aspects of life. And one such aspect is one’s health and the treatment and care one would seek for their health. And for health professions students and trainees I wanted to depict in my painting the importance of understanding the complexities of cultural identity in order to deliver patient-centered care. By recognizing that individuals with hyphenated cultural identities may face unique challenges due to navigating multiple cultural influences, health professions students and trainees can aim to take into account the nuanced beliefs, values, and traditions of patients throughout their medical journey, whether it be goal setting on lifestyle changes or discussing different treatment options.

And in addition, I believe it's important for health professions students and trainees to understand the feelings of loneliness and frustration that can result from someone's struggle to balance values and expectations from various cultures. And by acknowledging and understanding these struggles, future health care providers can help give that supportive and inclusive environment that these patients need and help them feel heard and understood, which I believe is so critical to overcoming these feelings of isolation, especially as this can act as a barrier to effective health care.

[00:04:11] HOFF: And if you could add something to your piece or maybe expand on something that's already there, what would that be?

BHUIYAN: Yeah, I think one more important point I would add to the article is the importance of providing emotional or mental health support for those with cultural hyphenations. So, in my painting, I seek to portray feelings of loneliness and frustration and how this can impact one's mental well-being. Struggles with cultural identity and trying to fit into different categories is not easy, and it can take a psychological toll. So, while experiencing these conflicts with their identity, individuals may have to grapple with intense feelings of alienation or pressures to assimilate, all of which can contribute to stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions. So, I think it's incredibly important for health care providers to be equipped to recognize the signs of mental health challenges in these patients dealing with cultural hyphenation and for the medical community at large to develop and provide mental health support and resources for individuals navigating hyphenated cultural identities. [music returns]

[00:05:31] HOFF: Julia, thank you so much for being on the podcast today and for sharing your experience through your work.

BHUIYAN: Yeah, thank you for having me.

HOFF: To read the full article as well as the rest of this month's issue for free, visit our site, [journalofethics.org](http://journalofethics.org). We'll be back soon with more Ethics Talk from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.