

Pondering Ethical Issues and Cultural Sensitivity When Working, Volunteering, and Traveling in “Developing Nations”

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Abstract: A conscious self-awareness may help travelers explore and adapt to another culture. In this paper, I attempt to demonstrate this self-monitoring process by sharing my reflections about some internal thoughts, conflicts, and ethical issues which I pondered while traveling, conversing, and researching in two Asian countries.

Keywords: social work; cultural intelligence; ethics; developing nations; Bangladesh; Cambodia

Background

Legacy of Oppression

The historical exchanges between wealthy nations and poorer nations were riddled with exploitation and suffering. Colonizers, who conquered and administered foreign lands for their own benefit, enslaved or otherwise subordinated populations, remapped the world based on Western greed and broke down societal structures, as well as altered cultures and human relationships within native populations. Colonization determined global relationships and left a legacy of challenges for those from wealthier countries who try to contribute in positive ways through their visits and work in developing nations.

More U.S. Americans Travel Overseas

Only 10% of U.S. citizens travel out of country each year, yet the trend has been increasing (Smith, 2008). In spite of terrorism and the economic plunges, international travel has become easier and cheaper. It's not just employees of international businesses, the very rich, church-sponsored missionaries, or students on study abroad programs who are able to travel, but more people from a broader cross section of society for a wide variety of reasons choose to move between continents (Furnham, 2010). This diversity of travelers offers the possibility of forging more interconnection that builds respect and mutual understanding or increases the chance for exploitation and misunderstanding, including church groups' moral tourism.

Travel brings people face to face with different

realities, worldviews and cultural symbols, and thereby often generates some level of stress (Smith, 2008). Though it has not been empirically shown that all people experience culture shock, there is agreement in the literature that encountering new cultures is stressful (Martin, 2010). For these reasons there are sometimes pre-departure orientations that teach students and employees sojourning abroad about the complexities and ambiguities of new cultural exposure and intercultural communication (Martin, 1980).

Cultural Intelligence

Intelligence in the context of one's home culture doesn't necessarily transfer to intelligence in understanding and responding in a different cultural context. Slawomir Magala (2005) discusses that culture is both the medium through which we accrue knowledge of the world and the shaper of that knowledge. The author stresses, “the meaning of culture as a language in which we express ourselves and through which we become aware of our ends, means and meanings” (p. 47). Some, who are successful at working, learning, and functioning in their own familiar culture, do not have the cultural intelligence to successfully adapt to another cultural setting.

Cultural intelligence (CQ) is a new construct defined as a person's “overall capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings” (Ang et al., 2007). Cultural intelligence involves appropriately interpreting others behavior in the new environment, respecting different cultural values and behaving in ways that are culturally acceptable. According to Earley and Ang (2003)

there are four components of cultural intelligence: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral. The metacognitive component involves high order mental processes that enable the acquisition of cultural learning. It involves skills used to understand a different cultural framework and take in information about that culture. The cognitive piece consists of the specific knowledge acquired about a culture's norms, traditions, and practices. The motivational aspect refers to the desire to learn about and adapt to a different culture so that one can direct one's attention and energies in cross cultural situations to do so. This motivation empowers people to reach beyond their comfort zone, confident that they can be successful in cross cultural exchanges (Ang et al., 2007). The behavioral component concerns having a sufficient repertoire of behaviors from which to choose adaptive behavioral responses required in the new cultural context.

Culturally Adaptive Personal Characteristics

Alongside the importance of cultural intelligence, the literature in the fields of international management and psychology suggest that the personal characteristics of new settlers relate to their successful adaptation in new cultural settings. According to Furnham (2010), successful expatriates have personal characteristics of stress tolerance, flexibility, communication skills, and cultural empathy. Mol, Born, Willensen, and Van der Molen (2005) found several personality factors associated with high job performance among expatriates including: extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, local language ability, cultural sensitivity, cultural flexibility, social adaptability, ego strength, interpersonal interest, and tolerance for ambiguity. Mol, Born, and Van der Molen (2005) suggest nine competencies that support employees' success in foreign countries: (a) adaptation skills, (b) an attitude of modesty and respect, (c) an understanding of the concept of culture, (d) knowledge of the host country and culture, (e) relationship building, (f) self-knowledge, (g) intercultural communication, (h) organizational skills, and (i) personal and professional commitment. The traits and competencies emphasized by these authors suggest that it is important to accept the validity of different points of view, hold an interest and respect for different cultures, and demonstrate a flexibility and

adaptability that stems from self-confidence and mature humility. It appears that the very characteristics that are needed for openness and adjustment to stay abroad are also those that are strengthened by cultural immersion.

Cross-Cultural Competence

The literature of social work and psychology refers to 'cross-cultural competence' as a necessary professional capacity for counseling and otherwise serving diverse clients. Cross-cultural competence involves knowledge of histories of oppression, cultural characteristics of different groups, and self-knowledge about one's own culture and ethnic prejudices, so that workers can justly serve clients through sensitive understanding and effective communication. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics and social work education emphasize cultural sensitivity in an effort to eliminate discrimination or cultural disrespect in serving diverse clients and to promote policies and societal changes based on social justice. Although cross-cultural competence is most often used in relationship to work across cultures within the United States, the term has application to cross-cultural exchanges abroad as well.

Hooker (2005) claims that there is a "Western mindset" which assumes "that there is essentially one way to live – ours. Anyone who lives differently just needs some time, and perhaps some advice from us, to develop properly." Perhaps a way of mitigating an ethnocentric mindset and developing cross-cultural competence is to monitor one's own reactions, feelings, and thoughts. Rather than focusing on the differences in the foreign culture compared to one's own culture, it may be helpful to question how one differs from the unfamiliar culture. Keeping the focus on oneself as being different and needing to figure out how to negotiate these differences, may lessen interference from personal biases while learning about others (Laird, 1998). Dean (2001) proposes the importance of a continual conscious awareness of our lack of cultural competence. Maintaining such awareness of "not knowing" would encourage an orientation to learn about those from whom we differ and critically increase self-knowledge. Knowledge about one's biases and values and "not knowing" paradoxically opens up possibilities for effective cultural exchange and adaptation.

Background information suggests that the constructs of CQ, culturally adaptive personal characteristics, and cross-cultural competence, may be derived and strengthened by staying alert to one's feelings and thoughts in the various cultural contexts. Conscious self-awareness that permits a traveler to be in touch with themselves and their new environment may slow down the process of arriving at conclusions, and encourage toleration of ambiguity and different realities. In this paper, I reflect on some internal thoughts, conflicts, and ethical issues which I pondered while traveling, conversing, and researching in two Asian countries. Other travelers' experiences, encounters, conversations, and thoughts will be different of course, but maybe this process of self-monitoring is a useful way to explore and adapt to another culture. Perhaps the process of questioning and wondering attempted in this paper will contribute to a dialogue about the uncertainty stemming from exposure to worlds in which different ways of doing, seeing, believing, and communicating are normative.

Observations, Thoughts, Conflicts

Before Take-Off

Issues popped up during the preparation stage even before my departure date. A nurse at the university health center reviewed the shots and medicine that I needed to help prevent illnesses such as malaria. I packed expensive malaria medication to protect me from this serious illness that inhabitants and long staying ex-pats cannot take, and hence must by necessity live at greater risk. Do I take a camera or not? Might people feel intruded upon or demeaned by being the subject matter for a white foreign woman's photo collection? Will these pictures be used in a helpful way that outweighs the possible slights that taking them might cause?

Internal questions arose after the declarations of others when they learned about my impending travels. Some questioned why I was going overseas to volunteer when there were people in distress and worthy causes in the United States. It might indeed be easier to encounter people of other cultures overseas than within our country where racial/ethnic oppression has spurred lasting debris of distrust, anger, and alienation. Was my trip to reach out really one of avoidance, a path of least resistance, a timid by-pass? It may be easier to work in a developing nation in some ways than personally

confront the distrust, anger, denial, and danger between the underprivileged and overprivileged in my home country. The battle lines are drawn more harshly here, perhaps, where persecution, oppression, and indifference have shaped our exchanges indelibly. I likely wouldn't be greeted with smiles, curiosity, and seeming interest and hospitality, but more likely tested and kept at a distance until some modicum of trust was earned. Such questions beg other questions about my own prejudices, character, and values.

Sometimes praise of me or my plans seemed to be at the expense of those I'd be visiting – as if the countries would be populated with “poor people,” one undifferentiated bland mass offering nothing of value or interest to someone from a “developed” nation. Simply revealing my plans seemed to put me and my soon-to-be hosts in a category of ‘other,’ so I began to distinguish those in my support network with whom I would share my experiences trusting that they'd be respectful toward me and all concerned.

I heard comments such as, “Oh, you are so gutsy.” “You always do good things in the world.” “I live through you and your adventures.” True, in part I traveled to Asia for the purpose of trying to contribute. In Bangladesh, I volunteered to research the sustainability of an international non-governmental organization's (NGO) program of teaching gardening techniques and nutrition information to rural women so that they can increase the productivity of their home gardens and provide more adequate nutrition for their families. In Cambodia I volunteered to visit the programs of a local NGO with the hope that I could lend my skills as a social work professor to help them advance their service delivery. But along with these good intentions I knew that I was also expecting to receive more than I gained from the experience. Call it enlightened self-interest, but it was self-interest nevertheless that motivated me. I also knew that good intentions, especially when combined with lack of cultural knowledge, can do harm. In response to the comments about being brave and adventuresome, I surely thought that I was going out of my comfort zone but also that the United States flushed with firearms, gross inequality of wealth, and epidemic violence against women isn't in my comfort zone either. Even the sincere, congratulatory well wishes from people who care

about me set off internal disputes.

The countries of destination presented particular concerns. I am a Jew embarking to Bangladesh, a largely Muslim country. Though there is a movement toward extreme fundamentalism in Bangladesh, it does not appear to be predominantly supported by the citizenry. Nevertheless, there was hardly, if at all, a Jewish presence in the country. In the past, two Jewish organizations were forced to shut down (Choudhury, 2009). So I wondered, do I keep my Jewish identity under wraps, do I lie if need be, am I OK with being untrue to who I am for a duration, what is the cost to me of staying in a country that might not want me, and have I internalized prejudice to the degree that I am volunteering in a country where I might be shunned?

Then there is Cambodia, a country that the United States bombed during the Vietnam war, creating the instability that assisted the Khmer Rouge to come into power. Our passivity in the face of this genocide, and sometimes our support to the Khmer Rouge, are shames on our nation. This happened during my lifetime; I carried this shame as a U.S. citizen as I thought about my pending stay in Cambodia. What would my emotions be as I communicated with Cambodians, and how would they respond to my presence?

The conflicts, value issues and questioning didn't stop at the border; they mushroomed while in Bangladesh and Cambodia.

Ethical or Unethical Behaviors?

I was rebuked by a savvy tourist who warned me, "Travelers should operate within the country's norms or not travel at all because they do harm." I admitted to overpaying tuk-tuk (a carriage pulled by a scooter/motorcycle) drivers up to four times the local rates. In these transport vehicles passengers sit in a carriage pulled by a scooter or sit directly on the scooter behind the driver. The traveler accurately noted that because tourists grossly overpay, these drivers follow tourists around moving away from possible local customers who need this transport as well, and often annoy tourists by their frequent solicitations. Furthermore, I knew from stays in other countries that paying significantly more for goods and services than what the local market

demands can unfairly result in higher prices for the local population and for travelers on a tight budget. Additionally, this overpayment does nothing to increase mutual respect. Locals, for one, might regard those who over pay as stupid, naïve and incompetent; or they may surmise that such overpayment reflects a leisurely life without any financial concerns. Tourists might mistakenly regard the exchange of smiles as no more than a confirmation of the goodwill between them and the driver/merchant.

From previous international sojourns, I remembered the resentment I sometimes felt toward tourists who readily paid even as much as 40 times the market price only to congratulate themselves on snatching an amazing bargain. Still, I succumbed to the desire to overpay these drivers, who often waited for long periods of time competing with other drivers for the occasional customer, and did so six or seven days a week. I was even more tempted to overpay in Bangladesh where I sat in a carriage while the rickshaw puller pedaled his bicycle in heat above 100 degrees Fahrenheit. I was so uncomfortable being a player in this blatant enactment of over- and under-privilege that I often tried to avoid the emotional queasiness by walking instead. This however offered no resolution because then I was in the position of denying the rickshaw puller the money my fare would have provided him. These daily transportation decisions, rather than becoming anodyne routine, were riddled with value dilemmas.

Respecting diversity and being culturally sensitive should not mean deferring to injustice. Seeing a man throwing a stone at a scampering dog, I shouted at him in anger. He stopped and that was the end of communication between us, perhaps one of the few communications between him and a white woman, and it wasn't pleasant. I carried food scraps with me and gave them to hungry dogs. Later I learned that one woman reportedly mentioned to another that I, as an American, am more concerned with animals than people. I know that my giving food to dogs doesn't diminish any of my attempts to help humans, but my actions could fuel stereotypes about the callousness of U.S. Americans. Where people are hungry, residents likely cannot afford the emotional overload of seeing animals as highly sentient beings. Still I believe that animal cruelty is universally unethical.

Class Dilemmas

My jump up the economic ladder just by roaming from one part of the world to another provided me with opportunities and responsibilities that I am not afforded in my own country. Of course, these come with complications. I straddled the back of a nurse's motorcycle as he drove to his patient's home in a remote rural village in Bangladesh. We climbed up ladder-like stairs to a bamboo house with a thatched roof raised off the ground by 12 foot posts. We sat on the floor of the unadorned porch across from the patient and his wife. Soon the porch became crowded with curious neighbors. The man's leg was so seriously infected from a snake bite that he could not walk. Without the availability of crutches, he could only scoot. He couldn't afford transportation to the hospital in Dhaka that provides free medical care for certain patients; and the consequence of not getting further treatment was dire. I was grateful to be able to pay for this man's transportation. Subsequently, I asked the nurse, "What happens to others who need hospitalized medical care but can't pay the costs of transport?" He responded, "Sometimes I cover the cost with my own money," but if sufficient funds are lacking, the ill person "waits at home to die." Obviously serendipity wouldn't always work, so I gave some money to the nurse to potentially cover two future transports. I returned to the city and bought some gifts and dined in a lovely opened-air restaurant overpriced for the average Cambodian. These expenditures on non-necessities, if channeled to transportation fees, might have saved additional lives. These choices, of course, are always present when I am in the States as well, but it is easier for me to ignore that I am indeed making such a choice. Here, unmet medical needs that result in physical disabilities and death are tied to human faces, real people suffering, not statistics about a distant population. This brings up questions such as, 'Is my enjoyment of a luxury dinner equivalent to another person's life?' And could I enjoy my meal with such questions clashing in my head?

In the United States we also have connected wealth to health, medical care, and the right to live. But in the U.S. my low middle-class living standard, combined with the exorbitant costs of medical care, preclude me from financially helping someone in such calamitous need. However in Bangladesh, I suddenly have the option of using my money to be

immensely helpful. And these responsibilities and opportunities stay with me to some degree after I return home, because I can't unlearn what I've learned – although the immediacy disappears, the memory dulls, distractions abound, and the recriminations for not doing more soften.

Jumping to Conclusions

Good intentions might not lead to good deeds. I noticed police pulling over scooter-taxis for reasons that were not apparent to me. A resident in Cambodia informed me that police pull over drivers of less expensive cars/vehicles in order to extort bribes from those lacking power to cause any repercussions. Similarly they impound carts that persons use for their livelihood and reportedly charge \$50 for repossession. This can be a fortune to a Cambodian, and it leaves the person without means of earning a living until s/he pays up. I thought I witnessed the prelude to such extortion, when I saw police direct a man pulling his empty cart to stop and wait along the side of the street. I gave the distressed man \$20. It was all that I had and yet it fell short of the presumed \$50 charge. Perhaps it lessened his financial burden and eased his emotional distress to know that someone cared. However, it could be that the police noticed and upped the charge. Who knows how the police regarded a foreigner's presence, and maybe as a result he was subjected to harsher punishment. Had I even understood what was going on at all or merely tied a piece of information to a happening that seemed to match? With all these unknowns and the possibility that I misread the interaction, my small kindness could have resulted in more anguish, so is it still kindness?

It's so easy to jump to conclusions when imposing one's own norms onto other cultures. It became apparent that persons communicated more subtly; it was necessary to read between the lines in a way that I wasn't used to doing in casual conversation. At the end of a work day the woman who served as my interpreter in a research project invited me to join her in a visit to the man who formerly worked as a cook in her parents' home. I had met this man earlier in the day and when introduced he hardly acknowledged me. My inclination was to graciously decline because I wondered whether she was acting out of polite obligation and whether he'd sincerely welcome me to his home. She replied, "I don't want to push you to come, but I want you to

have the choice." Thinking that I was taking the hint I said, "I am a bit tired so I will pass on your invitation this time." But she resumed saying, "I understand that you might not choose to come, but you should feel free to come with me." Not being sure about the signals, I responded, "I would like to accompany you." It was a guess, but a good one. We visited this man and his family who lived most humbly in one room and cooked on the floor in a storage room outside. Later, it emerged that the interpreter was delighted and reassured by my having joined her for the visit. Reportedly, she had discussed inviting me with her mother who opined that as an American I was sure to decline. This outing built trust and helped our working relationship.

Another example of the need to read between lines and get past engrained assumptions was when an interviewed mother stated that three of her sons had died. My response of "I'm sorry," was not translated by the interpreter. I insisted that she relate that apology which I assumed was empathic. Finally, after my third unequivocal assertion, she interpreted my retort to the participant, who did not respond to my sympathy. After the interview I asked the interpreter why she had repeatedly ignored my condolences. From the interpreter's perception, this mother, living in deep poverty, may be so overwhelmed with trying to keep her other children alive, that she likely feels relief that those sons did not survive to need what she can't provide.

Jumping to conclusions is easy to commit when dialogue circles about without resolution. One day, squashed in the back seat of a car with five employees of the NGO, we rode past a park the size of one square block. I had walked in that park a couple of times before and after bulldozers unexplainably came to widen and deepen the pond in its center. Now I had the opportunity to find out from residents of Dhaka who surely knew why this was being done. In response to my inquiry one passenger noted, "Bulldozers are being used to widen the pond." "Yes, but why?" I asked in an effort to clear up my confusion. "Because they are trying to make the hole larger." "There was just room for the path around the pond and now that land is being dug away," I asserted in bafflement. "Since there is not a lot of room for parks in Dhaka, we need a bigger pond." After one or two more attempts for clarification, I ceased questioning.

Needless to say I was as puzzled after this dialogue as I was before. Perhaps if I had been less curious or a better reader between the lines, I would have stopped inquiring sooner. Perhaps my questions gave offense and so were circumvented. Possibly this wasn't a politically safe topic. Maybe my fellow passengers didn't know but thought they needed to provide me with a response. I was left knowing that I didn't discern something about the culture that would have helped me to understand the process of our communication. Reminding myself that I am the one who lacks some cultural knowledge is a protection against judging others in my frustration.

Unearned Privileges

Many in developing countries might hold resentments toward the U.S., but generally individuals I encountered did not convey such sentiments or I didn't interpret their communications that way. Certainly I have experienced remarks, stereotypes and generalizations, but overwhelmingly I have been treated kindly, sometimes even with an unearned layer of attention and respect. At times my views or comments were considered seemingly with the assumption that I had competencies not yet demonstrated. This benefit of the doubt, unearned privilege, even deference, provided me with a boost, added to the pressure to perform, or caused me discomfort.

Being repeatedly treated this way over time may lead to or reinforce a sense of superiority. I certainly saw examples of "Westerners" acting disrespectfully toward the host population. Now in the minority, I pondered that the actions of one would stick to me as well. I couldn't help but feel embarrassed by association when a U.S. American grumbled about groceries being placed in a bag in a different order than she preferred; or drove an SUV fast in the rain skidding inches from a tuk-tuk only to roll down his window to swear in English at the soaking driver; or reportedly complained that "the maid" in the guest house had placed his laundered shirts on the wrong shelf.

The kindliness and respect afforded me had a particular disconnect for me in Cambodia given our heavy bombing of this country during the Vietnam war and our support for the Khmer Rouge long afterward. During the Nixon administration we heavily bombed this country which sought

neutrality. Some bombs killed and maimed civilians outright, some exploded years later. We also lent support to the Khmer Rouge who laid mines and maimed civilians by this means and others. (President Carter's administration covertly encouraged China to support the Khmer Rouge not wanting to do so overtly and be known for aligning with a genocidal force. President Reagan's administration backed seating the Khmer Rouge as the legitimate representative of Cambodia at the United Nations [Blum, 2000; Pilger, 1997, 2013; Vacon, 2010].) Persons with physical disabilities without benefit of prostheses were very noticeable on the streets of Cambodia. Too, everyone I spoke with at any length or depth had had family members impacted/killed by the bombing, war, and Khmer Rouge rule. Visiting an interrogation/torture center of the Khmer Rouge, Tuol Sleng, was a chilling experience. Complicated thoughts and emotions sprang from being accepted so well as a U.S. American and knowing how unjust our actions have been. These internal conflicts were magnified for me because, as a Jew, I could strongly identify with the parallels to the Holocaust of degradation, barbarity, and murder. While walking the streets of Phnom Penh I knew that I was a citizen, in this case, of a nation that was not victimized by genocide, but which had inadvertently or directly abetted it.

Conclusions

The concept of cultural intelligence suggests that it is important not to reach conclusions quickly. Whereas social and emotional intelligence in a familiar cultural environment aids a person to quickly focus on relevant information and make accurate judgments, in a cross cultural context fast conclusions and actions are often erroneous and unfortunate (Elenkov & Manev, 2009; Triandis, 2006). It takes thought, curiosity, openness, deliberation, questioning and time to understand relevant factors, motivation, nuances, behavior, and cognitions. This paper suggests the need for a running internal dialogue of questioning that involves back and forth glances between reflection upon oneself and one's own culture(s) and country in accordance with the dialogue, situations and observations present in the new cultural setting. Such a reflective process slows down a quick processing of information and decision making that has been born and developed in a different cultural context. Being slower to categorize, prioritize, judge, and act; tolerating not knowing; hovering in

ambiguity might be steps toward growing cross-cultural competence.

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