

# Foundation Field Internship and Identity Formation

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**Abstract:** Foundation field internships present social work students with the opportunity to understand the intersection of their identities, to better serve vulnerable populations. We develop the professional use of self through several processes which aid in this understanding: identity formation, recognizing intersectionality, and cultural humility. At the University of Texas at Austin, students are able to reflect on their internship experiences with their cohort during their Social Work Practice course. I was able to hone my social work skills and strengthen my concept of identity as I worked at the Refugee Services of Texas (RST) for my foundation field internship. During this experience, I learned the best way to serve clients from various cultural backgrounds who interacted with me in certain ways due to my racial identity. Since I was one of two African American women working at RST at the time, I was challenged to address racial biases. Unfamiliar with these types of interactions, I began learning, accepting, and embracing my identities while being authentic to myself and clients. The acceptance of my unique identities and improved client interactions, ultimately increased my learning and growth as a working professional.

**Keywords:** foundation field internship, internship, refugee services, refugees, asylees, displaced people, social work, identity formation, intersectionality, cultural humility, sociocultural membership identity, identity negotiation theory

Identity formation, understanding intersectionality, and cultural humility are descriptors that encapsulate my foundation field internship at the Refugee Services of Texas (RST). As a MSW student at The University of Texas at Austin, RST exposed me to diverse cultures and powerful one-on-one client interactions. Dallas was the first established RST office in Texas; later services expanded to neighboring cities including Amarillo, Austin, Fort Worth, and Houston. RST strives to serve refugees, asylees, and displaced people as they integrate into their new community. This agency provides an array of services to clients such as Employment, Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA), Counseling and Wellness, Resettlement, Survivor of Trafficking Empowerment Program (STEP), Immigration Services, Medical Case Management, and Social Adjustment Services (SAS).

During my internship, I worked in SAS providing case management services to six clients. After receiving a client referral, I would explain the agency's services, my role as an intern, and conduct a needs assessment. My main responsibilities were to assist clients when they needed to apply for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Medicaid, and set appointments for the client and their family members at the Refugee Health Screening Clinic (RHSC). Case notes documented in the online Refugee Management System (RMS) maintained information about the services, which each client received; the Refugee Data Center (RDC), an official government website, contained client personnel records. Following each client visit, I documented case notes in the online system. Finally, since I am a proficient Spanish speaker, I shadowed and facilitated the Cuban orientation programs, where clients learned about RST

services and resources in Austin.

While working at RST, my interactions with clients challenged and later strengthened my identity formation. According to Cole & Levine (2014, p. 8), social identities “designate the individual’s position(s) in a social structure.” Within the social structure, various cultural factors and social roles influence the individual, which may cause one to feel pressure to exhibit certain identity “molds” (Cole & Levine, 2014). I can recall a specific meeting with an African client, where he assumed I shared a similar social identity, language, and belief system because of my racial identity as an African American. During this meeting, an interpreter was present and informed the client that I could not speak his language; the client seemed disappointed that we could not connect in this way. As defined by Ting-Toomey (2015), identity negotiation causes conflicts between personal identity and the negotiation of a sociocultural membership identity during interpersonal communication. I had a direct experience with this conflict as I wanted to share a similar social identity with my client, to establish trust and build rapport, causing me to negotiate my own identity membership.

Speaking with my field instructor, during weekly supervision, helped me to grapple with this conflict. Over the course of the semester, I learned to acknowledge the fact that although others may identify me as African American, I had little knowledge of my ancestor’s cultural origins and heritage in Africa. Thus, I learned more about myself. I have realized my African identity is rooted in a history of oppression, discrimination, and forced labor; my American identity is rooted in an era of opportunity, striving for integration, and racial equality. Both identities have informed my actions, attitudes, and personhood; with this perspective in mind, by the end of the year, I proudly told my African clients I was born in the United States with American nationality and African ancestry. Therefore, field instructors can assist social work students by unpacking and helping students to accept their identities in order to best serve racial/ethnic minorities in the communities, which they will work.

In addition to my identity formation at RST, I had to learn to accept my intersecting identities when working with clients who had preconceived notions regarding African Americans. One semester I worked with an Arabic client, who misunderstood our meeting time and arrived at RST an hour early. His anger caused him to use a racial epithet towards the secretary, when describing me. Overhearing his language, hurt so much that I cried at my desk feeling embarrassment and shame. Crenshaw (1991) coined the term intersectionality and stated that women of color are often marginalized by both racism and sexism. I felt these forms of oppression as both my race and gender caused the client to view my performance, abilities, and level of competence in a negative way.

The impact of this interaction led me to discuss the instance the next day with my social work cohort. My cohort members cried, hugged me, and offered support after hearing my story. One classmate stated, “I wish clients could see how awesome you are, as I do.” Unfortunately, I am aware that being a minority in the workplace can put me at a disadvantage, as clients may assume that I am incapable of helping them simply based on my appearance. As a result, social

work educators can initiate conversations highlighting students' intersecting identities in class. Nash (2008, p. 2) defines intersectionality as "the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality." Moreover, intersectionality emphasizes an individual's experiences of identity and oppression (Nash, 2008). Utilizing an intersectional approach to learning, social work educators can prepare students to have open and honest conversations with clients that may treat them differently based on their identities. These conversations would create skills students could use with clients in future social work settings.

Finally, cultural humility is the ability to focus on the other rather than on the self, while respecting another cultural background and experience (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013). Exhibiting this cultural respect during my foundation field internship allowed me to connect with clients on a deeper level. During my undergraduate career, I majored in Spanish, as I saw the language as an opportunity to respect the culture and values of a historically oppressed group. Speaking Spanish with clients bridged cultural gaps and helped them to feel valued and heard, since they could speak a language that was familiar and comfortable to them. Incorporating cultural humility into my social work practice became an important skill when addressing the needs of different ethnic groups. Reading and researching different cultures is a great way to gain a deeper understanding; however, having interactions in person was even more insightful. Social work students should aim to strengthen their cultural humility skills to create safe spaces for clients to feel respected when seeking social services.

RST was a positive cultural experience for me and a perfect fit for a foundation field internship. I learned about identity formation, intersectionality, and cultural humility. Social work students will have the opportunity to form deeper connections with clients after recognizing their own identities and realizing they may be rooted in power, privilege, and/or oppression. Although forming one's identity is a lifelong process, social work educators and field instructors can promote this growth in class and during supervision. Overall, RST became a new international home for me. Most importantly, it taught me to be proud of my intersecting unique identities. This was the best way to be my authentic and professional self with my clients. Conclusively, social work students, educators, and field instructors can work together to make foundation field internship an experience of immense learning as well as professional and personal growth. This approach will help students when working with vulnerable populations, so that they may adequately assess clients' needs after having a better understanding of their own identities.

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