

“I Need to Learn from You”: Reflections on Cultural Humility through Study Abroad

“I Need to Learn from You” is a quote from Quinn, a study abroad student.

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Abstract: As cultural competency standards in social work education increasingly emphasize the importance of humility, social work programs must create opportunities for students to practice it. Study abroad has been an effective way for social work students to develop global awareness and an implied cultural humility. This article provides the author’s own reflection, which is interspersed with the reflections of five social work graduates who she interviewed about their experiences living, studying, and working in a “Majority World” context (Alam, 2007, p. 1). Study abroad provides unique opportunities for prolonged discomfort and disorientation, which helped each of the participants to solidify their place as learners in relation to those they help, to interrogate power imbalances in systems and relationships, and to develop greater empathy and respect for practices other than their own.

Keywords: cultural humility, study abroad, social work education

Opening Reflection

In an opening scene of *Narcos*, the sensationalized Netflix series about the rise and fall of the infamous *narcotraficante* Pablo Escobar, the camera pans a sprawling city in a valley surrounded by beautiful mountains with the caption, “Bogotá, 1989” (Brancato, Bernard, Miro, & Padilha, 2015). In the summer of 1989, I was a 20-year-old college student in Bogotá, Colombia, living with a host family and studying Spanish and Latin American politics. While I did not have the language to describe it at the time, the experience of living in Colombia in 1989 as a white, middle-class, North American student helped lay the foundation for the development of my cultural humility. Continual reflection on that experience informed the way I later practiced as a social worker and the way I practice today as a social work educator.

Nearly 30 years later, with IRB approval from my university, I sought the reflections of five graduates of our social work program who had studied abroad—sometime between 2006 and 2017, during and/or after college—on their experiences with cultural humility. During the course of the interviews, the graduates chose their own pseudonyms, which are used in this reflection.

I wanted to understand how undergraduate social work students’ experiences with humility may have shaped their approach to social work practice with diverse individuals, families, and communities. The process of interviewing graduates and having them reflect on their experiences, which spurred a reflection on my own experiences, showed the utility of qualitative interviews to the ongoing project of culturally humble practice. What follows are the reflections of those students, interspersed with my own, on how work and study abroad in a developing world context, or “Majority World” as termed by the activist Shahidul Alam (as cited in

Gonzalez, 2018), were integral to their growth as culturally humble social work practitioners.

Cultural Humility

Social work educational and professional standards for culturally relevant practice have moved away from the earlier and more static concept of cultural competence and toward a more fluid concept of cultural humility (Fisher-Borne, Montana Cain, & Martin, 2015). As social work educators, we expect our graduates to understand power and privilege, use the theoretical lens of intersectionality, and engage clients as experts in their own experiences (Council on Social Work Education, 2015; National Association of Social Workers, 2015). Integral to the concept of cultural humility is the idea that there is no “endpoint” (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015, p. 171). As social workers, we are continually in a state of learning from our clients, reflecting critically on our own culturally nuanced assumptions about the world, and engaging in ongoing self-assessment.

Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) originally described the concept of cultural humility as a continual process of self-reflection and critique of one’s own cultural assumptions. As further elaborated by Fisher-Borne et al. (2015), cultural humility acknowledges power differentials between provider and client. According to this concept, any cultural misunderstandings that arise between practitioners and clients are not due to a lack of knowledge on the part of the practitioner but are due to the attitudes of the practitioner. To be culturally humble practitioners, social workers must engage in continual self-reflection, hold individuals and institutions accountable, and work to correct systemic power imbalances, including their own in relation to the people they serve (Fisher-Born et al., 2015). It is not enough to be aware of one’s biases; one must take steps to correct them.

Hook, Owen, Davis, Worthington, and Utsey (2013) looked at cultural humility in therapists as perceived by their clients and found that humility was important to clients when addressing their worldview. The authors concluded that better training of practitioners was needed to help them develop a humble stance and that openness rather than superiority led to the development of a trusting alliance. These findings resonate with the values and ethics of social work education and practice and highlight the need for experiences that make students uncomfortable (Schaub, 2009), allow for the emergence of “disorienting dilemmas” (VeLure Roholt & Fisher, 2013, p. 55), and foster the critical reflection necessary to help them grow into culturally humble practitioners.

Disorienting Dilemmas

In 1989, I was a student in a small liberal arts college in the Midwest which had a robust study abroad program and was affiliated with a consortium of colleges that had programming in faraway places. The consortium believed that countries in the developing world received the same bad press as communities of color in the United States and that countries and communities should not be defined by these narratives. This standpoint helped explain why the consortium offered a study abroad program in Colombia during a time when people in the United States associated the country either with drug violence or the affable commercial coffee icon Juan

Valdez, neither of which offered anything close to an understanding of the country and its people.

At the end of my sophomore year, I packed my bags, flew to Miami to connect with students from other universities, and then flew to Bogotá, Colombia, where we were greeted late at night by our host families. I can still see my host mother and aunt happily craning their necks from the front seat of the car, talking a mile a minute while I sat between my host siblings in the dark of the back seat, catching maybe every fifth word (from my semester of Spanish language class), and thought, "Um, what have I done?" Fortunately, this was before cell phones or the internet, so there was no way to call for help. I was there to stay.

Humility through Lived Experience

I knew very little about Colombian society when I set out. In fact, I was colossally uninformed. My education started the moment I entered my host family's apartment and met Leidy, an indigenous woman my age, who slept in a small room off of the galley kitchen, spoke Spanish as a second language, and was domestic help to my divorced host mother who was raising two teenagers while working as a secretary for city government. I expected none of these things. The stereotyped and romanticized narratives I held of Latin American family life, which persist today in some social work texts, were disrupted by the reality of divorce, a female-headed household, and domestic help for a large, urban, middle-class family. With the exception of domestic help, this mirrored my own family structure back home. This experience set the stage for the healthy skepticism of static categories that I currently infuse in teaching about social work practice. This reflection on my initial ignorance and miseducation resonated with that of Montana, who had studied abroad in Mexico as a college student in 2006 and several years later worked in Africa on sustainable agriculture projects:

With Africa, I went over there saying, "I'm going to change these people's lives. I'm going there and they are going to benefit so much from me being there." You know, like ego. I had no idea what I was doing. That was the farthest thing from the truth . . . No, I was the one who was changed by being over there . . . It's humbling and it's necessary to experience because as Americans we are so superior in our thought . . . We sometimes need a wake-up call, and I am grateful for those wake-up calls I've had.

As Gammonley, Rotabi, and Gamble (2007) wrote, "When students open themselves to lessons from people they might have considered less sophisticated, less resourced, and less literate than themselves, they begin to see how much we have to learn from social work practice in the developing world" (p. 116). In 2019, social work students and new social workers still struggle to take what Pitner and Sakamoto (2005) call a "one-down" position (p. 689), whereby they suspend judgments and assumptions based on their own cultural worldviews and see that clients are experts on their own experience. As the student body of social work programs becomes more diverse, this may shift, which is something we have seen at our satellite campus, where the majority of students are older, working full-time, raising families, and share some of the struggles of their clients with racism, poverty, and addiction. Still, they are learning their social work history, philosophy, values orientation, knowledge, skills for planned change, and

practicum experience in a US context.

Jasmine, a heritage Spanish speaker who studied abroad in Mexico in 2017, credited the experience of living and helping on a farm in an indigenous community with her culturally humble approach to social work practice with Latino farmworkers in the United States. A short rural homestay had been an important component of her study abroad program:

You're like, "What does farming have to do with social work?" Whereas I'm able to connect that with [my agency], where a majority of the people that walk in work on the mushroom farms. If I hadn't seen how hard everyone worked out in the fields, there's no way I would understand how hard they work. When they come in, I try to get everything done in that one session because I understand that they don't want to come back again. They're tired. It's physically demanding. It's long hours. It's hard work. I don't think that if I hadn't seen and done that [harvested corn] in Mexico that I would understand.

The first morning in Bogotá, a Saturday, my host mother took me grocery shopping, which marked the last day I lived as a vegetarian. Having checked the vegetarian box on my application, I had not realized how expensive it was to eat as a vegetarian in Colombia. My face flushed when I saw the prices and my host mother trying to do the math to accommodate my privileged diet. I told her that I'd mistakenly checked the box, which initiated me into a world of meats I'd never explored, such as beef liver. When my host mother placed Nescafé instant coffee in our cart, I also learned Colombians could not necessarily afford to consume their popular exports. This reflection on my initial shame and ignorance later helped me to resist the temptation to draw conclusions about clients based on my limited perception of their experiences.

Quinn, who spent two years (from 2013 to 2015) as a Peace Corps volunteer in Peru, described her own experiences with shame, discomfort, and bias. Quinn described the complicated emotional effects of the *machismo* she witnessed, particularly as it impacted the women in her family. Living with her host family for two years, Quinn said she grew to respect her host father's place in the home, as well as the purpose *machismo* served, despite how it challenged her personal and professional beliefs.

I really had to pick my battles because there were so many things I didn't agree with, and it almost became funny like, "Oh, what's Quinn going to say now?" But certain things like *machismo*—they knew where I stood—and I would've never ever said anything to my host dad because that would just be completely disrespectful, and I wouldn't want to disrespect him in any way, and he was really good to me. But I don't agree with the way he treated my host mom, and the same with my host brothers. With my host brothers, I could leverage with them a little bit and joke around with them . . . because they weren't the head of the household.

In addition to living under different cultural norms, Quinn described the impact of living with fewer resources. In her reflection, Quinn felt that living with fewer resources made her more flexible and humble as a social worker in a US context, where the majority of clients were living

in substandard housing with limited resources. As an MSW student, Quinn understood that the humility she had developed through study abroad helped her make more unbiased assessments of her clients' living conditions.

After living in Peru, if I walked into a home that the average social worker wouldn't necessarily deem sanitary, to me I would be like [it's not that bad] . . . In that sense, I feel like less phases me and I'm a little more flexible . . . Yesterday we took a quiz [in the MSW child welfare course], and it was talking about home visits and unsanitary conditions and how a skilled social worker would know that just because a house is unsanitary doesn't mean the child is necessarily being neglected, whereas an entry-level social worker, someone that isn't necessarily a social worker but working in child welfare may be like, "A kid can't live in this."

Like Quinn, I grew very close to my family during the four months I lived in Bogotá. We spent a good deal of time at night watching Colombian TV on a small landing between the bedrooms where everyone piled in to watch, including my host sister and her boyfriend, who watched casually between make-out sessions. Or strumming the guitar and singing songs of peaceful change like Mercedes Sosa's "Todo Cambia." These two were very moved by the violence happening in their country, but mostly by one another. One popular sitcom we watched had a character from the United States who was always botching his Spanish. To the delight of us all and the canned laugh track, his favorite refrain was "*¡Es mucho más mejor!*" which is akin to saying, "It's much more better!" It was the first time I'd seen a white, North American male character on screen, goofily disoriented by another culture and language.

Humility through Learning a Language and Other Cultural Practices

Several graduates described how learning the language of their clients (Spanish) created a more personal connection than using an interpreter. Jasmine felt that she was able to connect with her clients and build trust by speaking their language: "If the interpreter is talking, it makes it a little awkward. I think it shows a willingness to speak their language so it's not just like, 'Okay, you need to speak mine.'" Quinn echoed this disruption of the power differential manifest in language with her description of how speaking Spanish levels the playing field and helps workers take the "one-down" (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005, p. 689) approach:

I say, "My Spanish is not perfect, I need to learn from you. There are probably some words that I might need you to help me with." I would always start off like that, so then people would feel okay correcting me or like, "Ah, what's that word?"—and I would describe it . . . I feel like it brings us to the same level in a way, but not only that, it's comforting for some of my clients to know I speak Spanish.

Learning another language was integral to cultural humility as described by Amanda, who had studied in Mexico in 2006 as a college student and then returned there in 2008 for her MSW, staying on for six years to work. Amanda, a bilingual caseworker in the United States, credited her Spanish fluency with the ability to see clients "a little bit more through their eyes instead of [her] eyes." She believed that one could not separate language from culture, so speaking her

clients' first language was integral to culturally humble practice:

I think that's what a lot of people may miss . . . even if we just think about how our culture affects the way we speak in English. For me, it's really not something you can dissect. They're completely intersected, so by learning language, I think it opened up a door which was a new way of thinking, because those cultural nuances are embedded in the language . . . For me, it's given me a different lens in the way I see American culture and in the way I see the world.

When I was homesick one night and tiring from translating language and the world around me, I started tearing up at the dinner table. As was my cultural custom in response to public displays of sadness, I excused myself to go to my room. Within minutes there was a knock at my bedroom door where the family had assembled to coax me out. They explained that in their culture, when someone is crying, they need to be with other people—and preferably be distracted from their woes. They took me down to the living room and invited the neighbors to come in, turning up the stereo and breaking out the *Aguardiente*, Colombia's powerful anise-flavored liqueur. That was the night I learned how to shed my stiff *gringa* skin and, among other things, move the lower half of my torso to the rhythm of salsa. This moment that felt so emotionally risky to me allowed not only for greater connection with my host family, but the ability years later in social work practice to navigate a much broader range of emotional distance and closeness that the diverse families I worked with possessed.

Both Quinn and Amanda spoke of intervening with other professionals they worked with who did not understand a client's practices. Quinn's description conveyed a knowledge stance, but also a stance of "not knowing for sure":

I had a student two weeks ago. He just left, but he was Mexican—parents from Mexico—and he would constantly wear a sweatshirt [in summertime] . . . All of the people I work with are like, "How can his mother send him to school like this? He's going to get sick." And I'm like, "Well, guys, honestly it could be cultural. I know in Peru—well it's South America but close—unless it's 100 degrees, kids are in sweatshirts and hats and gloves, and it's just this belief if you're cold, you're going to get a fever."

Amanda touched on the need to intervene with co-workers who might not be tuned into cultural differences and were instead "coming from an Anglo perspective . . . very well-intentioned, but you don't know what you don't know." She described the more subtle, negative interactions she picked up between other providers and their diverse clients as "nuances," but nonetheless powerful.

An example that comes to mind—I was interpreting for an IEP meeting. This parent was terribly overwhelmed, completely confused in this process, and the school psychologist, instead of saying, "I'm starting with some strengths, and look, little Susie is this, this and this, but we're concerned in this area. What do you think about that? Are you seeing that at home?" It was just like, "Well, your kid's got this problem." I don't think most parents would like to hear that accusatory tone, because for that Latino parent it's, "You're the

authority, you're the teacher, you're the professional, so you're here and I'm down here." So the parent just felt really small and didn't contribute, and that's a nuance . . . that psychologist didn't realize how small that parent was in that moment, and it was something as simple as, "You know, your kid's got this problem," but those are the nuanced pieces that I'm talking about.

For Jasmine, whose parents were from Colombia and had raised their children in the United States, having Spanish professors who were Mexican was a validating component of her study abroad education. Growing up in suburban southeastern Pennsylvania, Jasmine had never encountered teachers who looked like her. In school she learned Spanish from teachers who had learned it as a second language and inadvertently shamed students like Jasmine who spoke Spanish at home.

I never saw anyone who was Latino in—I don't want to say a place of power, but a place like as an educator or as a principal. All I saw around me was "The Latinos are the cleaning people" . . . sophomore year I was always fighting with my teacher because she studied in Spain. She thought that was, like, the way to speak. I was like, "No. Mm-mm." Then I would get all the markings right, all my papers right. I would get As. But I would say a word that was Colombian slang or something. She would just be like, "No. No, to you." What do you mean, "No?"

Humility through Experiencing Alternative Sociopolitical Systems

For each of the graduates I interviewed, studying abroad exposed them to the value of practices at the mezzo and macro levels that were different from (and often stigmatized) practices in the United States. For some, these stemmed from decolonizing pedagogy and practice (Crampton, 2015), which was a conscious effort to reclaim indigenous practices and resist the destructive beliefs and practices that came with the colonization of countries in Latin America and Africa. For Sydney, studying abroad in a German university known for its global focus piqued her interest in *Buen vivir*, a social philosophy in South America based on environmentalism, self-determination, and the cultural rights of indigenous people (Merino, 2016). Sydney hoped to study this as part of her field experience and planned to use her Spanish-speaking skills to do so. Sydney also linked her interest in *Buen vivir* to understanding how to develop supportive, sustainable communities. She offered her nascent understanding of the concept:

Buen vivir is a kind of *going back to* for these particular countries because they were colonized at one point—they're going back to ancestral practices of connecting more with the earth. They actually—I think it's either in Ecuador or Bolivia—they've given Mother Nature a voice in the constitution . . . trees are considered an entity, like human beings.

In the classroom of a school nestled on a hill in a middle-class neighborhood of Bogotá, my own education in cultural nuances continued. Our Latin American history professor was a proud Colombian and Marxist who explained the challenges to a government that did not have the weapons to fight the drug cartels and how income inequality had helped set the stage for the cartel and paramilitary insurgency. While the majority of my professors in the United States had

been left-leaning, I had never been taught by a self-identified Marxist or from the perspective of someone whose history did not at some base level valorize US capitalism. Our Spanish professor was a smart, attractive Colombian woman in her late 30s who wore tight pencil skirts and stiletto heels, and explained to us how much she loved herself and the male catcalls she would get on the street, an image that challenged my steady diet of 1970s and '80s feminism. This representation of female strength broadened my culturally determined lens and challenged the notion that there were scripts for how strong, smart women professionals *should* look, act, and feel.

For both the graduates interviewed and for me, the act of learning from experts who were not from our own cultural, social, or political contexts was a key component of developing cultural humility. This process prepared us as social workers to defer to the expertise of people who were often disenfranchised as members of racial and ethnic minority communities in the United States.

Promoting Culturally Humble Practice and Study Abroad

According to the Institute of International Education (2017), the number of US students studying abroad has more than tripled in the past two decades. The literature on study abroad is nearly unanimous in its assertion of the positive effect international study has on social work students' professional identity development, global awareness, critical self-awareness, cultural sensitivity, commitment to social work values, and multicultural counseling competency (Boateng & Mercy Thompson, 2013; Gammonley et al., 2007; Greenfield, Davis, & Fodor, 2012; Kim, 2015; Lindsey, 2005; Moorhead, Boetto, & Bell, 2014; Ross, 2010; Voss et al., 2017). Implicit in the literature is the assumption that these outcomes are good and necessary for effective, culturally humble, and emancipatory social work practice.

When social work practitioners and academics forefront the *cultural* in cultural humility, we may inadvertently downplay global economics as a contributor to *cultural superiority* for social workers in the United States and much of the developed world. That the survival strategies of poor families are stigmatized by society is a well-documented phenomenon (Hansen, Bourgois, & Drucker, 2014; Hirschl, Rank, & Kousi-Appouh, 2012), and many social welfare texts incorporate critical thinking about class to address it (e.g. Chapin, 2017). However, much of this content is at the cognitive versus affective level, which can inadvertently limit students' ability to transcend their biases (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). Experiences that put developed-world students as guests into developing-world contexts offer them an otherwise inaccessible experience as outsider-learners. When Amanda described the difference between "recognizing" struggles and "empathizing" with struggles, I believe she was reflecting on this very experience:

I feel like maybe the piece that was missing [from the social work curriculum] was the ability to empathize as part of cultural competence. I think that sometimes we look at it as recognizing how to sit, how to talk, how our interactions might look different, how our language might look different based on being culturally competent, but aside from recognizing, I think there's a degree of empathizing that gets overlooked. Recognizing is different from empathizing with how a family could or could not be struggling, and I

think when I was able to truly empathize with those differences, that was where I felt an elevated richness to my understanding of cultural competence.

The reflections in this narrative reveal the potential of study abroad experiences to serve as a springboard for culturally humble practice. My first job in social services was as a housing advocate in a homeless family shelter in East Boston. My clients came from Mexico, Chile, Guatemala, Vietnam, Cambodia, and the many neighborhoods of Boston. Living under one roof and sharing a kitchen gave plenty of opportunity for conflict that often broke down along cultural or racial lines. From my experience in Colombia (which preceded my social work degree), I felt open to the many ways of living and knowing that my clients brought to shelter life. In one incident, residents were put off by a Mexican family's week-long use of the kitchen counter to make homemade cheese. In my role, which was to find residents permanent housing, I worked hard to translate between cultures and systems, helping residents consider the value of practices that differed from their own. I continued this translation when residents moved into local housing units and landlords were not accustomed to having tenants who had government subsidies, lived in multi-generational households, and/or did not speak English.

As an MSW-level social worker, I continued to work with diverse families, many of whom were Spanish-speaking and adjusting to the laws and systems of the United States. My experience as an outsider-learner in Colombia prepared me to meet clients where they were and not where I expected them to be. It also helped me extend beyond professional boundaries that discouraged the acceptance of food or hospitality from families, especially on home visits, a practice that helped build trust and reciprocity in my relationships with clients.

As an educator of undergraduate social work students, I try to teach the value of discomfort and discomforting experiences. Whether counseling students to study abroad or to take an improvisation class to fulfill their art requirement, I consistently reflect on the value of that discomfort to my own social work practice. As a faculty member at a large public university, many of our students cannot afford to study abroad. I have tried to promote and develop affordable opportunities, even if they are to study abroad *at home*, by immersing students in the diverse immigrant communities of our region. Finally, I seek opportunities to model cultural humility as a lifelong process.

Reflections of graduates who have studied abroad offer social work educators guideposts to build educational environments that nurture a student's desire to connect meaningfully with diverse clients. Study abroad enables students, once they are practitioners, to *join with* clients and address the power differential in the helping relationship, to envision and practice alternatives to US social work practice, and to have greater empathy. Reflections also suggest that experiencing the discomfort of being a cultural and linguistic minority helps set people on a path of lifelong self-reflection, another hallmark of cultural humility.

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