

Why Don't We Self-Reflect on the Small Encounters? A Question Posed by a Japanese Student during a Multicultural Field Placement

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Abstract: This paper illustrates my (Yamashita's) critical self-reflection as a female social work student from Japan living in Australia while conducting my first placement in an organisation that provides refugees and asylum seekers with holistic mental health support. The self-reflective process on a small miscommunication enabled me to learn lessons and identify strengths as a future social worker by unpacking the influence of my own cultural background. The main implication of this paper is that, particularly in the multicultural setting, applying self-reflection and self-critique even to small encounters enables social workers to grow as professionals.

Keywords: critical self-reflection, refugee, cross-cultural practice, supervision

Working in a cross-cultural setting is exciting but complex and requires additional skills and knowledge for effective social work practice. Self-reflection is an important process for social work students and practitioners, especially those working in such a setting (Furman et al., 2008). Reflecting on their personal upbringings, cultures, and privileges both in positive and negative ways leads to improving their practice by developing critical consciousness. In this paper, I (Yamashita) would like to present the importance of applying the process of self-reflection and self-critique to seemingly insignificant encounters to achieve progress in professional development. This is a lesson learned in my first field placement, with my Japanese upbringing's value of harmonisation being a significant factor in the facilitation of this self-orientated learning.

My first placement as an MSW student from the University of Western Australia took place in an organisation that provides refugee survivors of torture and trauma with holistic mental health services. I was assigned to work in the community development team for three months. This was a privileged opportunity for me since I have been passionate about supporting refugees and asylum seekers since I was a teenager. When I was in high school in Japan, my world was turned upside down when a Burmese refugee guest speaker shared with students his experience of being jailed and tortured because of his engagement in democratic activities in his country. His speech also revealed hardships of settling in Japan as a refugee due to issues such as systematic and social discriminations. As a naive young woman, born and raised in an upper-middle-class family, I couldn't hold back my tears when listening to his story. I was shocked that I did not know about such pain and suffering being experienced by refugees and asylum seekers living in Japan; I developed a sense of responsibility and passion for supporting people like him and was inspired as an individual by his resilience and strength.

Meanwhile, I was worried about whether I could interact with people from refugee backgrounds in an appropriate way. This thought came particularly from the understanding that treating

refugees and asylum seekers with disrespect may result in re-traumatisation (Deljo, 2000). Kaplan (2020) addressed that this is because humiliation and degradation are widely experienced by refugees as the consequences of persecution and severe human rights violation. Furthermore, my limited experience of interacting with refugees and being unfamiliar with their cultural background were also reasons for my lack of confidence.

Prior to recounting my self-reflective story at the placement, I believe that it is essential to explain my background and main cultural roots. Now in my early thirties, I moved to Perth as an international student in 2018 from a metropolitan area of Japan. Although I lived in California, USA, for six years in my early childhood and enjoyed working in a multinational business environment in my mid-twenties, the experience of living in Japan for more than twenty years formed my core values, thoughts, and behaviour. My primary focus in terms of interpersonal relationships is to harmonise with others, which is said to be the value prominent in Japanese culture. In order to harmonise and maintain the connection with others, I unconsciously developed self-critical tendencies (Heine et al., 2000), which will be illustrated in the following narrative.

On Fridays, the placement organisation hosted women's gatherings to rebuild their self-esteem and to facilitate the healing process of females with refugee backgrounds. Part of my role as a student was to participate in this community group. An event occurred while I was providing participants with some refreshments. A lady from a Middle Eastern background approached me, looked at me, and pointed with her thumb to a bag of doughnuts which was close to where I was standing. As I immediately interpreted her non-verbal communication to be that she wanted some doughnuts, I gave some to her and was then about to throw the bag away. In a sudden move, she picked up the bag before it reached the bottom of the bin. I was surprised and quickly realised that the lady had wanted the bag, not the doughnuts. She then started to fill it with food to take back home. Her action hit me straight away, made me feel guilty, and I responded with an apology, to which she replied with her own apology, saying: "Sorry, my English is bad."

Several days later, I shared this story with the external supervisor during our meeting. Surprisingly, my supervisor (co-author Eltaiba) seemed to be impressed with the story and the fact that I had brought it to her attention. In order to have a rich learning experience, she encouraged me to explore my thoughts and underpinning values. Thanks to her suggestion, I was able to not only learn lessons for future practice but also identify my professional strengths formed by my Japanese background.

Lessons Learned

Looking back at the reason why I misunderstood that the lady wanted a doughnut instead of a bag, my assumption was based on my insufficient understanding of the refugee's situation, especially around food insecurity. I had a bias that refugees arriving in Australia are less likely to face food shortages because they receive sufficient financial assistance from the federal government to fulfil their physical needs. Seeing the woman act to take the food was surprising to me. When I talked about this with my supervisor, I became aware that people who go through refugee experiences will likely face food shortages even in a resettlement country. This was

confirmed by various literature. According to research conducted to reveal the food insecurity of refugees living in Western Australia, 70.5 percent of them ran out of food the year before, which was significantly higher than the general population at 5.2 percent (Gallegos et al., 2008). Refugees' food shortage is said to occur because of multiple barriers such as transportation, language, and the new shopping environment (Hadley et al., 2007). Sending money to family members back home and paying for health care costs due to not having health insurance further limits money available to purchase food (Nunnery & Dharod, 2017). Self-reflection on this misunderstanding allowed me to acknowledge my bias towards refugees living in Australia and understand more about their situation.

Furthermore, I have understood that being genuine is an important element in emotionally connecting with clients with refugee backgrounds. For me, saying "sorry" is a natural verbal reaction to build a relationship based on trust. This is because the practice of *sumimasen*, the Japanese expression of apology, has multiple functions and the exchange of *sumimasen* is the ritualised formula that facilitates and sustains everyday face-to-face interactions in Japan (Ide, 1998). This differs from the Western perspective which insists on protecting an individual's autonomy and defines apology as behaviour accompanied by justification and liability (Wagatsuma & Rosett, 1986). I had authentically and spontaneously expressed my feeling of sincere apology when I realised my misunderstanding. Upon seeing the lady's generous response with a relieved smile, I had understood that she recognised my act as genuinely caring and so recognised my willingness to maintain a respectful relationship with her. I came to learn that such an attitude is especially important for those who have experienced trauma as they are sensitive to surrounding people's emotional and cognitive states. Herman (2015) stated that a traumatised individual "scrutinizes the therapist's every word and gesture" (p. 139) as part of their defense mechanism. Social workers' genuineness is, therefore, an important quality to build an emotional bond with clients.

Identified Strengths

The biggest question regarding this exchange is "Why did I interpret this as a serious event?" This event can be seen as just a small miscommunication, which is neither a failure of the lady nor me. Nonetheless, I instantly blamed myself, thinking "What a terrible thing I have done!" and was conquered by feelings of guilt. The exploration of the rationale for feeling guilty enabled me to realise that this is greatly influenced by my Japanese background. From this, I found that the aspect of myself to question my internal framework can be identified as not only a personal strength but also a professional strength, an especially important skill in a role that involves service to marginalised and vulnerable people.

Unconsciously capturing the power imbalance between the lady and myself was the first reason why I felt guilty. I had realised that I was in the position to control the resources in the community gathering and able to influence her condition. Responding inappropriately to her request in such a situation made me feel uncomfortable, which led me to quickly redress such an imbalance by apologising. Yamagishi (2014) mentioned that Japanese people are apt to feel guilty when they sense disequilibrium in an interaction between oneself and others, which is suggested to be interrelated with Japanese culture. Being attentive to a power imbalance

between clients and social workers is an important skill. Japanese aspects of myself enabled me to unconsciously fulfil the Australian Association of Social Workers' (2013) *Practice Standards* requirement for social workers to "Critically [reflect] on the role of social worker paying particular attention to power imbalances" (p. 14).

In addition, empathising with the lady's feelings through the sensitivity I have developed in Japan was another reason for the feeling of guilt. When I realised that I had reacted in a way which is different from the lady's expectation and saw her non-verbal reaction, I thought that I had possibly made her feel hurt or embarrassed. I believe the Japanese literacy education, *kokugo*, greatly contributed to me making such an assumption. *Kokugo* focuses on in-depth identification and exploration of main characters (Takayama, 2018). Gerbert (1993) addressed that "*kokugo* textbooks often invite the child to imagine the feelings of another and to merge his or her identity with that of the character" (p. 161) whereas American textbooks facilitate the child to objectively analyse the situation. Almost 10 years of *kokugo* education enabled me to nurture a skill to place myself in the client's world and feel from her perspective by paying attention to detail. Empathy is clearly one of the central skills for social workers to build an effective therapeutic relationship with clients (King, 2011). Identification of the clear alignment between important skills as a social worker and my Japanese background made me confident to pursue this profession.

Conclusion

In conclusion, self-reflecting on seemingly small events, such as a minor misunderstanding, in the cross-cultural setting can expand and enrich social work students' and practitioners' learning opportunities to grow as professional workers. By reflecting on the minor miscommunication that occurred during the placement, I was able to gain valuable lessons about the experience of refugees and how to establish an emotional bond with them. Furthermore, I have identified my strength of being sensitive to power imbalance and others' feelings for my future role as a social worker. I appreciate my core value of harmonisation derived from Japanese culture as a positive driver for being self-reflective even in such a small event. Although social pressure to harmonise in Japan sometimes made me feel stifled, I have realised that my background provides me with advantages to practice effectively in the social work field. In order to be committed to lifelong self-reflective and self-critique processes, I would like to remain attentive to the potential significance of subtle errors in interactions, especially in the multicultural environment.

A couple of weeks after the event, I was packing up the venue on my own after women's group participants left. One lady came back by herself, saying in a low voice "May I have a plastic bag?" Learning from the previous experience, I immediately understood that she wanted a bag to take some leftover catering back home. I gave her a bag with a humble smile and an accepting response. After expressing gratitude, the lady filled the bag with food, pushed it to the bottom of her handbag so that no one could see it, and left the venue. This happened a couple more times on subsequent days with different participants. Realising that they were comfortable sharing with me their vulnerable aspects, which they may not be willing to show to others, made me feel more confident. I felt that they were starting to have a trust in me and that they considered our

relationship to be a safe space. For the very first time, I felt a sense of achievement as a practicing social worker.

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