

# REFLECTIONS

NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING



Includes Special Section:  
On the Making of Female  
Macro Social Work Academics

Monica Leisey, Editor

# REFLECTIONS

## NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING

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## NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING

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# Letter from the Editors

Michael A. Dover, Editor

**Abstract:** This letter from the editors introduces Volume 19, #1, the fourth issue published online at Cleveland State University. The editor draws on each contribution to reflect on the nature of the narratives published in this journal. Conceptual contributions to the literature in the helping professions from the included narratives are noted. A call for contributions to the Many Ways of Narratives series of the journal is issued.

**Keywords:** journaling; process recordings; human needs; narratives; meta-narratives; practice behaviors

Every narrative published in this journal makes a unique and substantive contribution to knowledge of practice within the helping professions. Each narrative also represents a methodological contribution to our understanding of the narrative process. Each is one example of the *Many Ways of Narrative* discussed in the series of essays inaugurated in Volume 18, Number 4.

The narrative by Jennifer Davis-Berman and Jean Farkas is rooted in a unique form of group work, namely a program for homeless adults that utilizes yoga. As is often the case with *Reflections* narratives, the authors reflect not only on practice but on their lives and the lives of those they worked with. This is a good example of a narrative where we encounter the unique voices of two authors, which are combined within one narrative. Each author comments on a variety of aspects of their work together. Finally, the two authors together discuss the lessons learned.

This narrative also illustrates how journaling can be a rich source of narratives. Journaling and the use of process recordings are much richer than the more discrete logs and practice records kept in this day and age of professional practice. After all, helping professionals have a perfect right, well established in law and ethics, to keep journals and write process recordings of their work with colleagues and clients, as long as no official records or client names or other identifying information are kept. When such journals or process recordings are written during work hours, it must be with the knowledge and consent of the employing organization, with arrangements being made as to where they will be stored. When they are written in the privacy of one's own home, they reflect the personal right of all helping professionals to draw on their professional

lives to write about encountering the personal problems and public issues which arise in practice and community settings. This kind of work is not only required by most accredited programs of professional education, but is also well established as the basis for case notes and narratives published in medical, psychiatric, social work and other professional journals throughout the development of our respective professions. Finally, it must be said, we all have the human right to think and write about our lives, both personal and professional.

The publication agreement signed by all authors submitting manuscripts to this journal contains the following author warranties (among others): that this article contains no libelous or unlawful statements and does not infringe upon the civil rights of others; that the author(s) are responsible for any individual or organizational names that are mentioned, as *Reflections* disclaims responsibility for references to individuals, organizations, facts, and opinions presented by the published authors; that the author(s) have taken care to ensure that the article does not contain any identifiable information about clients or patients except as pursuant to appropriate permissions and forms of informed consent as provided for in all relevant laws and codes of ethics, and that the author(s) content in no way violates any individual's privacy rights.

*Reflections* narratives should be consistent with both the letter and the spirit of this publication agreement. An abundance of caution can and should be used when writing narratives. After all, the essence of narrative inquiry is not necessarily to portray the exact nature of practice settings and client characteristics. Rather the focus is on the nature of the interaction, the meaning of the encounters, and the lessons learned. In some cases

this can be achieved via composite descriptions as well as disguised descriptions. The journal will consider publishing narratives where one or all of the authors are listed as anonymous. However, the manuscript must be submitted non-anonymously, so that the editors can confirm the identity of the author. Such authors will be supplied with a letter confirming they are in fact the authors of the published articles. However, even anonymously published narratives must meet the standards of the publication agreement. All authors should fully consider the ethics of their respective professions and the rules and regulations of the organization within which the practice was done.

Tien Ung's narrative on becoming a bicultural professional and Susan Weinger's narrative on ethical issues and cultural sensitivity when working in developing nations both contribute to a long tradition of narratives in this journal that are relevant to international social work and cross-cultural social work, broadly construed.

Tien's approach to culturally responsive social work practice reflects on themes such as cosmopolitanism, growing, gathering, reclaiming, teaching, translating, transposing, transforming, and transcending. This narrative portrays the paradoxical patterns experienced by bilingual and/or bicultural practitioners. Translation is not an exact science, especially when seeking to convey the meaning of something that was written or said. And this is even less the case when seeking to translate behavior from one cultural context to another. As Tien concludes, some things are beyond translation.

Her article is also an excellent example of how narratives in this journal can make important conceptual contributions to the theoretical foundations for social work practice and social work education. For instance, she distinguishes between being and doing. Doing so has relevance for how social work education conceptualizes competencies. It is not just what we do but how we do it that counts when it comes to practice behaviors that comprise competencies.

At the heart of her narrative is a moving account of her work from many years ago. But she also reflects on a number of theoretical issues which are important for social work practice. Amongst these

are how people have basic needs that are rooted in our relationships with each other, and the interdependency which they reflect. This journal portrays helping relationships in a day and age when the relationship between client and worker is often subordinated to measurements of outcomes, establishment of diagnoses, evaluation of program effectiveness, etc. Rarely is the nature of the relationship itself seen as important in its own right. Yet for two important and compatible theories of human and psychological needs, significant primary relationships and persistent caring relationships are basic needs, respectively (Doyal & Gough, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1980). Provision of relationship, even when limited by the boundaries imposed by the nature of professional practice and the nature of specific practice settings, can make an important contribution to addressing the human needs of clients, over and above the specific service needs addressed.

Tien's article and other narratives in this journal present practice behaviors which can and should inform social work education's formulation of practice competencies. Such competencies shouldn't just be dreamed up by the faculty responsible for designing the curriculum. They should be informed by the nature of practice in the field, as reported by field instructors or as derived from research rooted in practice settings. Arguably, as this journal re-publishes online the precious store of articles going back to the founding of the journal in 1995, the accumulated narratives can be mined for examples of practice behaviors and for accumulated practice wisdom that can enrich our practice and education today.

Susan Weinger's article draws on the concept of cultural intelligence. As is often the case with articles in this journal, she first firmly establishes the nature of the conceptual issues she wishes to consider, including as well culturally adaptive personal characteristics and cross-cultural competence in general. As is not always the case in discussions of cross-cultural social work, she recognizes the legacy of oppression and the legacy of colonialism and imperialism in setting the stage on which international travelers strut. She then provides a personal account of her visits to Bangladesh and Cambodia. Such visits produce many dilemmas rooted in culture, class and

privilege, something from which even social workers committed to cultural competence are not immune.

In the special section edited, compiled and contributed to by Monica Leisey, the journal for the first time uses a promising narrative technique: the collective biography. This work is the outcome of a retreat by a group of female macro social work academics. The method used seeks to present themes arising from the process of comparing the selfing of each member of the group, as it evolved from the pre-professional, the early professional education, and the later academic life of each participant. One need not be female, or macro, or a social worker or an academic to glean from this unique article some lessons to be learned. These include the role of early life values in the choice of career and during professional education, as well as how hopes rooted in those values are not always realized in one's subsequent academic career. The collective biography shows that this process is not an isolated experience but one experienced in various ways by these women working as social work educators and engaged in teaching and research at the macro level.

Tien's article also serves as yet another example of the multiplicity of forms which the narrative content at the heart of articles in this journal can take. She seeks to utilize a variety of types of narrative content, including folktale and fairy tales, and she draws on cultural idioms and metaphors, as well as on personal and professional narrative.

In the Call for Narratives page at the end of this issue, we once again encourage the submission of additional contributions to this *Many Ways of Narrative* series. Submissions can be made by registering or updating your profile to be sure that the author option is chosen. Then when you submit you will see an option to choose the special section on *Many Ways of Narrative*. I welcome inquiries about initial thoughts for how to contribute to this series. One thought: while this is one place in the journal where essays that don't have narrative content are welcome, why not consider writing a meta-narrative about the process of writing narratives, and narrative content within it?

Students in Renee Solomon's group work course

produced poems just before we graduated from the Class of 1980 at Columbia University School of Social Work. As Student Union President, I was privileged to read from these poems at the School's graduation ceremony. One began, "Oh process recordings, how I hate thee!" Could not a contribution to the *Many Ways of Narrative* series involve a narrative of journaling and of creating process recordings? How does this enrich one's life and inform one's practice? How can journals and process recordings themselves be the root of reflections that can be transformed into published narratives in this journal? Please see this series as sort of the *Reflections* equivalent of the Writers on Writing series in the *New York Times*. What can you write that will help others write narratives for this journal? Your contributions are welcome.

Come to think of it, would not the writing of a process recording itself be a good vignette at the root of a narrative for this journal? The practitioner could show herself or himself writing that journal, and share what went before, and what came after.

One goal I have set for my term as editor of this journal is to promote increased attention to the role of process recordings and other forms of journaling in professional education. The permanent section on field education will reinforce this. Please consider going back to your dusty notebooks or long-saved computer files of your journals and process recordings. Draw on them to write and submit narratives of your practice. I did just that (Dover, 2009). But don't do it like I did it. Instead, ask yourself: Oh, process recordings, what do you tell me today that I may have forgotten or never really learned, about myself, about my practice and about the world around me? Then share it with us.

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# Social Work, Yoga, and Gratitude: Partnership in a Homeless Shelter

Jennifer Davis-Berman and Jean Farkas

**Abstract:** This narrative explores the personal lessons learned about life and practice from YogaHome, a yoga program for homeless adults. The yoga program, taught in partnership by a social worker/professor of social work (Jenny) and a yoga teacher (Jean) with 17 years of experience, exemplifies the merging of social work and yogic practices, but also illustrates the evolution of these two professionals in their chosen fields as many of their traditional views, values, intentions, and expectations unraveled and led to a re-evaluation of their professional practices, transforming their personal perspectives on life. This reflection is based on the YogaHome program, originally planned as a six-week intervention that is still going strong after 16 months.

**Keywords:** social work; yoga; women's shelter; homeless; gratitude

## Setting the Stage

Jenny: I am a social work professor and clinician and have been a regular volunteer for decades at a large overnight homeless shelter in a medium sized Midwestern city. One of my research projects involved conducting interviews with shelter residents about their experiences with shelter life. Through these conversations, one of the most common themes that I heard was how chaotic it was to live in a homeless shelter. For example, one woman talked about how difficult it was sometimes even to have a conversation due to the noise level in the shelter. Sometimes, she said, she just had to cry.

Picture 75 or more women living in close quarters, sleeping (or trying to sleep) in a large room, bed to bed, tempers flaring, and fights breaking out over day to day occurrences. A large noisy common room with TVs blaring, is the only gathering place during the day. Illness spreads rapidly in these close living arrangements, but those that are sick lie down, spread out on top of two to three hard chairs, a coat over them for a blanket, or lie on dirty mattresses on the floor of the locker room. Poor health is the result of little or no healthcare, poor nutrition, no exercise, frequent accidents typical of a marginal lifestyle, and stress. As a social worker, I wanted to find a way to help lessen the stress of living in this setting. I began practicing yoga about three years ago as a tool to use in managing my own life-long tendencies toward anxiety and insomnia, so it seemed as if it might be helpful, even therapeutic, to bring this experience to women in the shelter. I asked Jean Farkas, a certified yoga instructor with long-standing experience in social

services, to partner with me in this venture. Jean has been my neighbor for years, and I have been in her yoga class, but we didn't know each other all that well at this time.

Jean: I have to admit I had a few qualms about doing this, but I trusted and respected Jenny and looked forward to trying something new. After all, a tenet of yoga philosophy is service, so I entered into this endeavor gladly and, I thought, with an open mind.

Jenny: I approached this planning as the “expert” social worker developing this program to improve the lives of these clients. Having secured permission from the shelter administration, a small room to use with a window and a door to shut out the noise, and a list of interested women, Jean and I were ready to embark on a six-week long yoga program. As a good social worker with an eye toward evaluating this practice, I was armed with my research instruments. I would measure depression, anxiety, stress...you name it; I was going to measure it and be able to show the effects of teaching yoga with this cohort.

Jean and I approached this program well prepared, envisioning six sessions with the same group of women, where we would teach breathing, relaxation, and stress reduction. We also hoped to teach participants techniques they could use after they left the shelter to deal with some of their life stressors. Part of this six-session sequence involved building on yoga stretches, poses, and techniques in order to improve flexibility, and perhaps to reduce pain and stiffness. Jean put lots of time and energy



into planning the classes, sequencing the flows, even developing ways the participants could modify the class to meet their needs. We were volunteers with a good cause and were bound and determined to make a difference!

### **Reality Sets In**

Jenny: The actual process that has occurred in this program has been far from our initial plans, as teachers, social worker, and experts. Expecting our first group to stay for six weeks just demonstrated how naive we really were about homelessness and shelter living. Some women did stay with our program for many weeks, but others were immediately housed or left the shelter. Sometimes a woman who was really enthusiastic about class one week was slumped over a table with her head on her arms the next, or out shopping because she had just received her monthly check. In this setting, there was no warning. From one week to the next, people were housed and those of us who cared about them grieved their departure and celebrated their success without them. We were in the ironic situation of rejoicing that these women had found shelter elsewhere, but were sad to see them go, and curious about their fate. Once residents left the shelter, they were no longer permitted to return. So, we never knew from week to week who would be in class or what their frame of mind or physical condition might be.

Jean: As a long time yoga practitioner, I am fairly flexible physically, and I know with the mind-body connection that a flexible body means a more flexible approach to life. Right! The “flexibility” needed to conduct each class in this setting stretched every part of my being. I quickly threw out any lesson plans, realizing I would need to react in the moment to whoever was in the class that day and whatever they were experiencing – sadness, anxiety, broken bones, asthma attacks, severe mental illness, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, hyperactivity, recent surgery, or pregnancy. Most days we had a mixture of people who could work on the floor on mats and those who needed to sit in a chair. I had to teach to both at once.

Here is a typical class: Angela is complaining of serious knee pain and sits in a chair. Mary complains that she can't breathe due to her false teeth. Christine is on a walker, but can do upper body movements. LaShawn with a broken foot and

nasty cold sits in a chair. Deena, a new student, is on oxygen due to COPD while her daughter, Angie, has serious back pain. The next week Deena and her daughter were in a car accident, in which Deena, who already had trouble breathing, broke some ribs and her daughter further injured her back. We never saw them again.

In any given class I might have anyone from a 22-year-old who, after a few shoulder rolls, collapses in exhaustion on her mat to an ultra-flexible former pole dancer who is double jointed, to a woman so harmed by drugs used to treat schizophrenia that she has impaired mind-body coordination. A benefit of yoga is learning to be more present in the moment. I was learning fast, because in these classes there was no other choice.

### **Merging Social Work and Yoga**

Jean: Every week we arrive a half hour early for class. Jenny is the one who goes out to the great room, makes the rounds, talking to anyone who has been in the class, talking up yoga to those who are new. Her ability to talk to people whatever their circumstance gives YogaHome a presence in the shelter and serves as class recruitment. I'm much more comfortable preparing the yoga room, putting out and cleaning the mats and talking with anyone who comes in early.

Jenny: In social work practice, we are encouraged to promote the client's self-determination and to try to begin to work where the client is. This has been one of our challenges in the yoga program. There have been days where we needed to start by talking about a woman who had died in the shelter the night before. No one was sure what had happened. All we knew was that she died in her sleep in a room with over 75 people. Our women were scared and sad. Another time, we tried to process the grief of a participant whose beloved pet had been euthanized because they no longer could provide a home. Other weeks, women were restless and agitated and wanted to talk throughout the session, or take phone calls. Sometimes, people were so stressed and depleted that they immediately fell into a deep sleep. We quickly learned to throw away the lesson plans we so carefully developed before beginning the program.

Jean: Many times we struggled with our own emotions. Here is a quote from my YogaHome



journal, referencing the euthanized dog.

YogaHome Journal Week 12: A husband and wife and 19-year-old daughter, Angel, have been with us a few weeks. On this day Angel has broken her arm.

Before class, Jenny does a taped interview with another participant, Debbie. Seventeen years ago, her brother was murdered. They treated her for depression at the time, possibly a misdiagnosis, which set her up for years of mental illness. She has now been diagnosed as bi-polar and is on medication, which is helping her. She described how she alienated her entire family, her mother, and her children. She says she tried to kill herself in front of her daughter and mother. She described the pain when her daughter said she could come live with her but never came to pick her up at the bus station.

At the beginning of class Jenny invites Angel to talk about her broken arm. It all revolved around the beloved family dog that a relative agreed to keep, but then euthanized. Angel got in a fight with the relative over the dog and her arm was broken in the struggle.

The pain in our little room is huge. It engulfs me so completely that I fear I can't pull it together to teach the class. There are tears spilling down my checks, not only for the missing dog, but the lady whose last 17 years have been hell. Finally, I invite the class to fold their arms around their hearts and feel the breath, breathing into our emotions and feelings as yoga has taught me. We do that for quite a while before I can go on. I share that I lost my beloved dog five years ago and how I still mourn for him. We do the downward dog pose in honor of dogs, and I share with them the Vanilla Shake, how my dog, whose name was Vanilla, used to get up from a nap and a shake would start at the tip of his long nose and continue down his spine, and roll down his long tail with a great shimmy of his butt. We all do that and laugh. We do the lion (a yoga pose

where you breathe in and then exhale while opening the eyes and mouth wide and letting out a lion's roar) and laugh at ourselves.

Jenny: I look to Jean as the emotional center of this class. Her emotions flow freely and seem to release in rhythm with our physical movement. As a social worker, I have been taught to manage my emotions around clients. At times during yoga class, the pain that I feel takes my breath away, but I often don't reveal this. My strength is reaching out to women, comforting and connecting with them through words.

Jean: I quickly came to appreciate Jenny as a social worker/therapist who had much more experience and knowledge about working with drug addicts and severe emotional and mental illness. In my usual middle-class yoga classes students come in with their crises, which may be serious – a dying father, going through divorce, a sick child, a difficult boss – but no serious mental illness or drug abuse, and no one who has lost everything in their life. I just need to be a good listener. This was much different. Jenny was able to recognize those who were on drugs, those displaying various mental illnesses, those who had been damaged by years of drug use. Although we had very few discipline problems in class, it was a great comfort to me that Jenny was there with her confidence, calm presence, gentle sense of humor, and compassion, which helped establish a safe atmosphere for class.

Jenny: During one session, I noticed from the pre-session questionnaire we asked participants to fill out that one of the women was suicidal. I took her out of class, talked to her, and asked her about suicide. She quickly began to sob, saying that she wanted to give up. Years of poverty, instability, and pain had taken their toll. A kind-hearted staff person and I talked to her, and she agreed to go to the hospital with the police. As I watched her get in the police cruiser, my own heart ached with the pain and suffering that so often goes with being poor. Another day, one of our participants said that she was already dead...well, she was really somewhere between life and death. She recounted an elaborate story about being hit numerous times with a Taser which had caused her near death. I remember glancing over at Jean to see how she was reacting to these delusions. I had worked with delusional

people before, but didn't think that Jean had ever experienced anything like this, especially in a yoga class. As we ended class with relaxation, our participant told us that she couldn't lie down because she would surely die. We told her to stay in an upright position and class continued.

Jean: This woman was a challenge for me. I initially believed her that she had been tased, but as class progressed it became increasingly evident that, even if she had been tased, she was also delusional. I just tried to listen to her comments and alter her positions and movements to reduce her fear of dying. During relaxation she quieted down and seemed content to sit against the wall and keep her eyes open but downcast.

Jenny: Seeing so much mental and physical illness as a social worker has been very painful. It seems like issues of illness and death are with us all the time. Shelter residents not only endure the indignities of poverty, they lead lives at very high risk for illness and injury. A woman named Vodka came to class one day using a walker. She was only about 40-years-old, but had one leg that was five inches shorter than the other. This had become a disability and was caused when her boyfriend at the time threw her out of a window, breaking dozens of bones in her body. I met another woman sitting outside of the shelter in a wheelchair with her foot bandaged and propped up. She had just had major surgery and was released from the hospital down the street to the shelter. I continue to be amazed and upset by how hospitals discharge sick and frail people to the shelter. Cookie was a diabetic with renal failure. A regular participant in our group, she was kind, open and caring. As she continued to deteriorate, she was put on dialysis. Unable to endure the rigors of this procedure, and without the ability to transport herself for treatment, she died shortly after leaving the shelter, alone in an apartment. Her death and the struggles to live and cope with illness among the homeless have led me to my next research project...looking at serious illness and death in the homeless. I guess that when I feel the pain of injustice, my heart tells my head to start working.

### **The Turning Point: Reflections on Gratitude**

Jean: Last Thanksgiving, after working with the shelter guests weekly for over a year, I reflected, as

is my custom, on all the things in my life that I am grateful for: my home, my relationships, family, a successful career, my retreat home in a nature preserve, good health, comfortable finances. Then it hit me – my students in YogaHome have none of these things. No home, no family, no money, poor health, no nature. No hope. No future. Nothing for which to be grateful.

Gratitude, however, is an important part of most spiritual traditions and is one of the ethical precepts in yoga. Indeed, studies show that gratitude practices help you sleep better, improve mood disorders, and enhance your overall health. Finding gratitude in life's challenges can turn negative thoughts to positive ones, can help you weather life's storms from a place of equanimity. Hmmm. This sounds perfect for our homeless women. It was a revelation for me to face the fact that I always end my regular yoga classes with a meditation on gratitude, but never do this at YogaHome. To ask people who have nothing to be grateful for to reflect on gratitude seemed like a cruel mockery of reality. But surely gratitude is not the purview only of those with abundance. I asked myself: Is there a way for those who have little, nevertheless, to find small blessings in their lives, which may turn their thoughts from negative to positive, giving them even brief moments of relief from want, fear, and depression? I resolved to see what we could do.

As I drove into the parking lot at the shelter for the first class after Thanksgiving I thought about whether I could bring up the topic of gratitude without seeming condescending. I had a moment of panic and thought I cannot do this. In a flash, I realized the barrier was within me.

Jenny and I had talked this over, so Jenny, with her greater group facilitation skills helped me bring this up. We asked what our participants did for Thanksgiving. Then we asked if anyone would like to share something about which they are grateful? Without a moment's hesitation they began to call out their gratitudes – “I'm grateful I got away from my boyfriend without being hurt, I'm grateful for another resident who helped me, I'm grateful I have a roof over my head, I'm grateful I am alive.” These comments were powerful and heart-felt. I realized that having suffered, gratitude is so much deeper than what most of us with our middle-class lives

have experienced. A bond of sharing in the class was created by this discussion which lit up the room. It was the best class ever.

At class the following week, one lady, present the previous week, said eagerly, "Can we tell our gratitudes again?" Once again people called out their gratitudes. "I have been clean for two months, I have been clean for two years, I am beginning to deal with my anxiety, I lost my baby girl last year and I am grateful I am now pregnant with another baby girl." They wanted to talk about these things. We cheered and applauded their successes. Now we always start class this way. Several of them say they are grateful for yoga class.

I felt profoundly changed. I had made an assumption about gratitude, looking at the world through my eyes, not theirs, and I had indeed robbed them of a wonderful opportunity. I was deeply, deeply humbled.

### **Lessons Learned**

Jean: I have learned some profound lessons about gratitude. Gratitude lies within everyone as a universal trait. Gratitude makes us feel good. It helps us step back and witness our lives. It is a positive thought, focusing on something good, not something bad. It is relative and can be adapted to any situation. If you have no home, you can be grateful for the shelter's roof over your head. If you have no healthy relationship, you can be grateful that you got out of a bad one. You can be grateful for every day you were not enslaved by drugs or alcohol. It is a useful tool in any group for enhancing self-esteem.

Jenny: Gratitude can be found in simple, everyday things we take for granted. Last Christmas, we gave away fuzzy socks at the end of a group session. Who doesn't like those kinds of socks? What woman doesn't own at least one pair of them? They are pure comfort and indulgence. What we were not prepared for was the gratitude shown to us for giving the socks. Since that day a year ago, we have ended each group session by giving a pair of socks to each participant. People still line up to get them, selecting their choice for the day with the utmost of care. Some of my social work clients have contributed socks and hand-knitted caps for the participants and Jean's yoga students have donated socks and gloves as well.

Jean and Jenny: As we reflect on life in the shelter, we now see things every week for which to be grateful. We see the resilience of the human spirit, the indomitable will to form meaningful relationships out of groups of strangers, of aid and comfort being given to those in need, of deep grief when a fellow resident dies. We see people seeking a greater quiet and peace by coming to yoga class, along with the courage to try something new and unfamiliar. We hear sighs of pleasure when tension leaves tight shoulders. When we watch these women interact with us as facilitators and with each other, there is no difference between them and us. They soldier on in the face of adversity, make friendships, they laugh and cry, they get angry and depressed and anxious, but so do we all.

Jenny: The real lesson for me is that as professionals we are trained to be non-judgmental, to treat our clients with compassion and caring, to welcome people with all their backgrounds, crises, and emotional and mental burdens. But as people, we bring to our work, our own backgrounds, beliefs, world views, and judgments. Buried in ourselves are assumptions we make about the experiences of others which guide our actions, no matter how hard we try. Those assumptions can limit our effectiveness in our chosen profession.

As a social worker trained to control my emotional reactions, YogaHome has filled me with both gratitude and humility. This group has taught me greater empathy and has allowed me to feel and express my emotions more freely. I am greatly humbled when I see and experience the courage and resilience of women who laugh, cry, yell, and love despite often dismal circumstances.

Jenny and Jean: We have learned to recognize appreciation when we see a former prostitute show the sweetest compassion to another resident who is crying. We rejoice with the two women who proudly show us the engagement rings they have given each other. We understand the depth of friendship when we see a woman break down in uncontrollable sobs when a friend she has grown close to in the shelter is placed and leaves the shelter. We join residents in cheering and celebrating with someone who has found a place to live.

What started out to be a six-week commitment has

turned into 16 months and we have no plans to stop. We have changed professionally and personally. This experience has led us to be much more aware and alert for our limiting beliefs and we are deeply humbled by what we have been taught by the women in the homeless shelter. What started as a desire to help and empower has become a personal journey for us, exploring our own sense of humility and gratitude as we unroll our mats, engage the group, and remain forever grateful for this experience.

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# Beyond Translation: Becoming a Bicultural Professional

Tien Ung

**Abstract:** Culturally relevant and responsive social work practice is essential to any social worker's professional identity, however, little has been written about how one acquires such a sense of self, professionally speaking. For the bilingual native, negotiating two cultures is an inherent way of living that directly feeds the essence of being and thus informs and shapes the practice of doing. This narrative illuminates the personal and professional experiences of its author becoming bi-cultural and draws on these experiences to offer insights about becoming culturally responsive as a professional social worker. The emphasis in this article is intentionally placed on the process of professional identity development since much of the literature on culturally competent practice is focused on the acquisition of knowledge, awareness, and skills. Wherever useful, the author also draws on the use of creative narratives such as ethnic folklore, cultural idioms, fairy tales, and koans to support the main ideas.

**Keywords:** social work; culturally responsive social work; Vietnam; tall poppy syndrome; professional identity

Culturally responsive work is a required component of effective social work practice. Indeed, cultural relevance has been a part of social work practice since its inception and was a central facet of Jane Addams' settlement house work. It could be argued that Addams' approach to engaging and empowering immigrant communities in Chicago forms the philosophical basis for what is valued as culturally responsive practice today – possessing a strong awareness of one's own privilege, having a deep sense of social justice, acquiring knowledge and understanding of “the Other,” and drawing on these assets to take action in service towards the Other.

It is also widely accepted that culturally responsive practice is informed by the social and political climate. Inspiration and support for the work done by Jane Addams, for example, was in many ways motivated by an attraction to diversity and cosmopolitanism at the time (Schultz, 2006). The idea that we should co-exist across our ethnic differences, bound by a shared morality was a worldview Addams adopted from her experiences with social settlements in London. The underlying challenge in cosmopolitanism however is rooted in philosophical infidelity in action. Poor execution to the principles of cosmopolitanism contributes to paternalism on one hand, and cultural hegemony on the other, mediated in part by the degree to which one can acknowledge and redress the role of power and individualism within social and interpersonal spaces. French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas delineates the basis on which knowledge and praxis is realized with respect to culturally relevant ethics

through a critical analysis of cosmopolitanism. In describing Levinas' philosophy, Beavers (1993) writes:

If the otherness of the Other is to be desired, then something must first present this otherness to consciousness. Levinas localizes the appearance of this otherness in the face to face situation. The face of the Other resists my power to assimilate the Other into knowledge; it resists possession, which would have the net result of silencing the voice of the Other as Other. Thus, the face of the Other silently wages the command, “Thou shalt not kill.” This means, in turn, that the face to face situation has an ethical dimension to it. This ethical dimension is not predicated to this event from a pre-existing ethical base, it is the very emergence of ethics itself. Responsibility is born in the face to face situation. It is always a personal affair. (p. 3)

Deconstructing and examining what culturally relevant social work is – along with all of its elements – must extend beyond the current focus in both practice and scholarship, which places a disproportionate emphasis on defining cross cultural input and output variables. That is, what factors are involved in culturally responsive work, and what end results are desired? More emphasis has to be placed on process variables examining, for example,

how culturally responsive practice evolves, and even more important, how one develops a culturally responsive professional identity. Tamm (2010) suggests that one's professional identity in social work is impacted by one's concept of self along with several work related factors. Within this framework, Tamm's work (2010) tackles important questions: How does work content and how do the subsequent work roles influence work identity? How does self-identity influence the development of professional identity? Finally, which contextual factors related to personal life stage influence the creation of professional identity?

However, the prevailing position in the literature currently emphasizes what one *does* rather than who one *is* with respect to culturally relevant work. Although unintentional, such an approach to culturally responsive practice seemingly privileges doing over being. This separation can also be reflected in social work education. For example, the Council on Social Work Education has articulated ten core competencies essential to the social work practitioner and has mandated social work programs to organize curriculum development and implementation around these competencies. Identifying as a professional social worker is one of the ten core competencies. Yet, among the six practice behaviors associated with this competency, none address cultural responsiveness. Rather, cultural mastery exists as a separate competency seemingly detached from one's professional sense of self.

This narrative draws on the personal and professional experiences of the author as a bilingual social worker to offer reflections about becoming a culturally responsive social worker. I will also draw on personal and professional insights about negotiating a bicultural identity to illuminate a process for the development of the worker's professional identity as a culturally responsive social work professional. I propose that the experiences of bilingual, bicultural workers offers much to the discourse about cultural relevance in practice, particularly with respect to how culturally responsive work evolves as well as what it involves. Unfortunately, far too often, the bilingual, bicultural worker is seen as a vehicle – a mechanism for transporting dominant discourse and thought to communities that are foreign but simultaneously near. Less common is for the bilingual worker to be

viewed as an expert whose experiences negotiating two cultures explicates a unique skill-set and insight that has much to contribute beyond translation. I conclude with implications for practice development.

### **Why the Mynah Bird Mimics Man**

In Thailand there is a well-known folktale about the mynah bird (Kaye, 1960). The mynah bird is from the starling family, regarded throughout south and eastern Asia, for its ability to mimic sounds, particularly human speech in captivity. The folktale begins with the life of a parakeet who was ultimately chased back into the woods and left to fend for itself, following an incident where the parakeet dared to speak its mind and not only contradicted man but also revealed man's dishonesty and deception. Consequently, he was chased from the luxury of living as one of man's pets, and exiled back to the forest to live among his own kind. Later when a new bird also with the ability to mimic, the mynah, comes to the forest, parakeet warns her only to *mimic* man; to refrain essentially from drawing on her knowledge to dialogue with man, for man loves to hear only his own thoughts repeated and is therefore disinterested in the truth or the wisdom of others.

The folktale on its surface is a story that explains why the mynah bird mimics man. Through a deeper analysis it is a story that simultaneously proffers many insights into Thai culture and politics, which expands beyond the scope of this reflection. I offer it here to invite the reader to consider what I believe to be one of the first dilemmas experienced by the bilingual worker in developing an authentic professional identity – finding an authentic voice in between cultures.

When I first graduated from Brandeis University, I was lucky to have been hired by the Department of Social Services (DSS), following a mandated hiring freeze in an effort to fiscally conserve. I was not yet 21-years-old, single, and without children. Yet somehow, which was not so apparent to me at the time, I was thought to be capable enough to knock on the door of a stranger, most often a mother, and evaluate her capacity to parent whilst investigating whether or not there was abuse and neglect between her and her children.

Perhaps it was the perception that my own

foreignness would mirror the foreignness of the clients on my caseload, most of them of color themselves (immigrant or refugee, Black, Ethiopian, Chinese, Italian, and Hispanic), that no one seemed to question my capacity for culturally relevant work. There was almost an unspoken understanding that even if these families were not of the same ethnic background as me, and even if theirs was not a language I could speak, that there was enough of a likeness, and I would just know how to be or what to do. For the families who were visually like me, it was more of a given I would know what to do and how to be. Therefore, it could not have been a coincidence in an office that was predominantly Caucasian – where apart from me, there was only one other person of color at the time, that in building my caseload the first few weeks, I would assume responsibility for most of the families of color in the office. However, I don't ever remember questioning it. I remember following along, determined to learn and be like others around me, doing the work. I do remember thinking, I had these cases because I am trilingual, can speak a couple of the languages inherent to a couple of families, and apart from that, was just like everyone else. I remember working very hard to be – just like everyone else, to be a good child protection worker, doing what good child protection workers do, where culture was not something that was often discussed.

By the end of the first month on the job, I was assigned to my very first Asian case – a family, of Chinese descent. My charge was to interview a mother and daughter about sexual abuse allegations made against the father. I am Vietnamese – fluent in Vietnamese and Italian. My boyfriend at the time was Chinese, and I worked in Chinese restaurants, where I was for all intents and purposes to everyone else, apparently Chinese...enough. I had also picked up some conversational Chinese as a consequence, which always helps. So in some ways, I remember thinking, this was OK – it's all good, no different from anything else I had experienced so far about who I was, and so long as I just did what everyone else does, it would be fine. No problem.

Yet, there was a lingering feeling inside of me, as I made my first visit to this particular home, rang the bell, and waited. I was quite nervous, more than usual, I remember and even today, I can hear the heels of this mother's shoes clicking on the uncarpeted floor, growing louder and louder as she

ascended on the door behind which I stood. While I was not sure exactly what it was at that time, I did recognize that something was, off – frankly, not quite authentic; that somehow doing all the things I had been doing, just like all the ones at the office, with all the others on my caseload, was not going to be enough here. I was not able to place my finger on it at the time, except to say I understood enough without knowing what it was I did not know, that something significant was hindering my sense of preparedness to engage and connect to the work with this woman. So when she finally reached the door, I said as calmly as I could, in a split second decision, “Hello Mrs. So-and-so, my name is Tien, and I am the worker assigned to your family from the Department of Social Services.”

Of course this sounds fine, except for the fact that Tien, that name, my Viet name, given to me at birth, was something that had not been used, even in my home by my parents, for the last 18 years, since my family migrated as war refugees to the United States in 1975 fleeing the fall of Saigon. In America, as part of immigration policy for Viet refugees at that time, we had to adopt Anglo names – to make it easier for us of course – to adjust to our new lives and our new home. So mine, given to me by a mother who spoke only French was *Jonquille*, or as we say in American English...Daffodil, and for the first several weeks at the DSS, all of my new colleagues, and my other clients knew me as Daffodil. I knew myself as Daffodil – that was what was on my naturalization certificate, my high school diploma, my Bachelor's degree. So inherently, even though I did not know it, for all of my life, up until that very moment, like the myna bird, I had been mimicking man – the American man, and yet, something compelled me on that day – with this woman, who is not even Vietnamese, to speak, for the very first time, my own word – my name, claiming my professional identity for myself, distinguished from the Ones who surrounded me.

### **Tall Poppies**

Tall poppy syndrome (TPS), a common idiom in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United Kingdom, refers to a cultural norm where people who distinguish themselves above others are to be cut back to size. Most would likely suggest that, rather than envy, the phrase is a call in varying degree for humility – a refrain from putting on superior airs relative to one's neighbor or fellow



citizen and derives in part from a collective belief in egalitarianism (Warrell, 2012). However, nowadays, the general sentiment that is associated with Tall Poppy Syndrome is one of pushing back, holding fast, and standing tall which derived in part from remarks made by Margaret Thatcher in 1975, “Don’t cut down the tall poppies, let them grow tall,” encouraging individuality as a mechanism for growth and well-being.

Re-claiming my name was in many ways a small victory in a larger war I did not realize I was in. In fact, I spent the next several years immersed in the belief that taking back my name somehow made me a pioneer in the community. Consequently, I truly believed that translating Western beliefs about parenting, and explaining to Viet families in particular how to navigate the social institutions that had become a major part of their lives, was in fact, excellent culturally responsive work. In reflection, what made it excellent were the ways in which I was valued and rewarded for it. Colleagues, supervisors, attorneys, judges, school teachers, psychiatrists, all of the professionals with whom I was involved as part of the child welfare system ostensibly regarded my work, called on my work, and asked for my work. I was featured as the lead story in Boston Globe’s Sunday Magazine in the late 90s as a result of my work.

The primary core of my professional identity was still driven by an effort to emulate those around me whilst, trying to help those who were like me be more like me – a model Viet-American who knew how to follow all the rules, and otherwise little about how to embody culture and support authentic identities in intercultural communications (Bennett & Castiglioni, 2004). My professional reputation defined my professional identity, and I became the Asian worker who could help other Asian and immigrant families establish “appropriate” (prosocial) ways of living in the community. I became quite adept at this – explaining the benefits of crossing over, and highlighting the consequences and costs of retaining cultural ties and identity. Essentially, I translated, albeit sensitively, the dominant way of life and being in service.

It did not occur to me the ways in which I was effectively socializing Viet clients to be more American in their ways – to fit into Western standards and protocols, to not be tall poppies.

While I listened to families and cared deeply for them, and while I truly cherished the ways in which we knew each other manifest in the familiarity of social and communication rituals foreign to those around us, I did not aim to learn from or collaborate with these families in service of their own needs and vision. Rather, I let them visualize through me while I lived through them the American dream. We were in effect, like two toddlers, playing safely and comfortably in total parallel – unengaged. Bennett (2004, p. 66) would call this ethnocentrism in the form of minimization, or the subordination of cultural differences in favor of similarities. According to Bennett (2004, p. 68), “the missing piece in Minimization, and the issue that needs to be resolved to move into ethnorelativism, is the recognition of your own culture (cultural self-awareness).” Cultural self-awareness generates insight and courage, in effect, to be a tall poppy.

I did eventually learn from work with a family why I was not a tall poppy. It is a case that I carry with me to this day, 13 years later in part to pay tribute, in part to be reminded about what not to forget, and in part, to heal.

I had been working at the DSS for five years and was recently promoted to a supervisory role. This meant less of my work happened in the field. I was asked by a senior manager to consult on a Viet case that was not in my unit. There was a baby, he said, born to a teenage mother who was gang involved, and struggling with drugs and domestic violence. It was not safe for her to care for this infant, who was currently being raised in foster care. Her parents were already caring for another one of her children, a three-year-old.

Under the new Adoption and Safe Families Act, it was necessary to engage in concurrent permanency planning for the infant – to begin discussions about adoption whilst simultaneously working to reunify and stabilize the first family. The problem, the reason he wanted me to consult on the case, was the parents were not strong English speakers, and given all the stakes involved, he did not want anything to be *lost in translation*. Right, I remember thinking, I am good at this – translating. This will be fine. No problem.

I went to the family’s residence, was respectful when I introduced myself as a Viet social worker,



bowed, took off my shoes upon entering the home, and thanked them for allowing me to come into their home. I accepted the tea grandmother made for us, and sat quietly, listening to grandfather share his perspectives about the case. I waited patiently and listened sincerely as he shared with me the family's immigration experience – *It was a very difficult time, we were all burdened, weary, and poor, unsure of what our future held.* You have worked hard to provide for your family, I reflected back to him to acknowledge their struggles and to reduce the shame of having lost his daughter to America.

This opened an opportunity for us to speak directly about his new infant grandson. *A son is to be cherished,* he said – *very fortunate to have a son.* I was silent, though I wondered about his granddaughter. As if he could read my mind, he continued – *Misty\* is a good girl. We have known her all of her life and will know her until she grows up, gets an education, and starts her own life.* Grandmother begins to cry at this point, and I look down but continue to listen to avoid shaming them as they emote to a stranger.

Grandfather goes on to explain that he needed me to understand their predicament, and to help others understand their predicament. He shared with me how old he and Grandmother were, how much money they make, what they have saved, how they have planned, and what they have sacrificed to take Misty in – to be sure that she will have a good life in their care. He explained that he cannot assure me of their health, not because of any medical problems, but rather because of their age.

He never mentioned the baby, but he did not have to. I recognized the cue and apologized to him, for burdening the family. I acknowledged how noble he and Grandmother were and how honorable they were, what a wonderful job they are doing to provide Misty with a good life. I shared that I would not want to put them in the position of having to choose between two children or care and provide less for any grandchild. *I am glad you understand* said Grandfather, *if we were younger, had more years to work, things would be different. It's not a matter of whether we want to, it is a matter of doing what is right for the children.* Grandmother nods and is still crying.

I prepare to leave and share that I will come again

and we can talk some more. I feel it is a good beginning. Grandfather says to me, *There is no need to come again. I have seen you and now I know, you are wise and young. You understand what has to be done. I give the baby to you, I trust in his future. I have no more questions to ask. I know all that I need to know now that you have come.* Grandmother is weeping now, and stands with me, takes my hand, kisses the top of it, and caresses my cheek with her own hand – a gesture of thanks and gratitude – of trust. It takes everything that I have, to refrain from crying. I bow to them both, and thank them for the delicious tea, which I never drank, and I leave.

Two weeks later, the baby died in foster care. They say it was SIDS, sudden infant death syndrome – something that does not exist, is not translatable into Vietnamese, I remember thinking as I prepared to return to grandfather's home...alone. The dread seemed to manually squeeze air from my lungs. On the drive over, I was numb, and felt hardened – it was the only way I could think of getting through the next part.

*Child, I am surprised to see you,* Grandfather said, *come in out of the cold.* Grandmother scrambled to make tea. I bowed, apologized for coming unannounced, took off my shoes, and thanked Grandfather and Grandmother for receiving me again. We sat down together with tea and Grandfather told me stories about Misty. I was not sure if this was just what he was accustomed to doing with child protection workers – to report out well-being, or if he was giving me time to gather my courage...save my face.

I listened gratefully and when he was finished, I shared the news directly. I wanted it to be quick but respectful. Grandfather, Grandmother, I am sorry to share that the baby has died – in his sleep, and then braced myself; after all, they symbolically left the baby to me. Grandmother wailed, and Grandfather cried silently. I am sorry I said, bursting into tears myself unable to translate my way out of this moment. I am sorry, I know you left the baby to me, there is nothing I can say or do. Forgive me, I cried. *Forget it child,* Grandfather said, *you are so young, you do not understand. Babies die, they died all the time in Vietnam, sometimes they are too weak. Don't berate yourself. You have helped my family. When you left the last time,* he said, *we*

*thought we would never hear again about our grandson – we buried him then. Now you have given us a chance to bury him and be with him again.*

At the funeral, the baby's mother banned any Departmental employee from attending the service. Grandfather and Grandmother insisted on my presence. I stood in the back, watching the family farewell this baby boy, stuck between two cultures, unsure now of which voice to assume – carrying the weight of grief for my entire office, while simultaneously bearing the shame for a diaspora of Viets who were hoping for a better life for their children – yet on that day, had only found loss. I looked at Grandfather as he prayed; I can still see his image today, and it dawns on me, Grandfather is a tall poppy.

I share this story not because there is something I know now 13 years later that I could have done differently. In fact, I know there was nothing I could have done apart from what was done. I share the story to offer what I came to understand on that day about what was missing in my professional work and my professional identity – the recognition that some things, many things, perhaps all things are beyond translation. That perspective, understanding, and solutions come from the Other; that essentially there are multiple ways to be in the world, and that the pathway to living cannot be dominated by one way of doing.

### **Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall...**

Fairy tales are a form of narrative that communicates meaning metaphorically and symbolically. Fairy tales have been used in social work in the classroom – to explore cultural constructions and foster cultural competence (Perry & Tate-Manning, 2006), as well as to help students understand disabilities (Pardeck, 2005). In treatment, fairy tales have been used with trauma survivors (Ucko, 1991) and children (William, 2010).

One of the more popular fairy tales in the United States is that of Snow White. I was even able to find a translation of the familiar tale in Vietnam last summer – *Nang Bạch Tuyết và bảy chú lùn* (The Follies of Snow White and the Seven Dwarf Men). Of course, magic is a central and distinguishing feature of any fairy tale. In Snow White, magic can

be found in the wicked stepmother's mirror – which possesses the power to see all things. Hoang (2002) deconstructs the meaning of the mirror, taking us beyond the idea of vanity and narcissism, and pushes us to rectify who we are, who we want to be, and whom we can tolerate being in order to ask the right questions of the mirror. He pushes us to really see ourselves.

This is not so easy to do. To truly *see* oneself. Kohut, father of self-psychology, postulates to truly see oneself is to obtain psychological integrity, which requires in part three things: the ability to see one's own greatness, the ability to see goodness in others, and the ability to see oneself in others. For Kohut these above all others form the basic needs of our very existence – to be able to love ourselves, to be able to rely on others, and to experience a sense of belonging and place. A full analysis of Kohut's thinking manifests in the metaphor of mirrors and seeing extends beyond the scope of this essay, though I do want to incorporate his ideas with elements of ecological thinking, particularly ecological interdependency, to offer a framework for professional development of a bicultural identity. That is, I am suggesting that one's professional bicultural identity is itself a product of the interaction between the social mirrors scaffolding our environments, reflecting meaning to us which we must interrogate and integrate with the personal mirrors we carry inside of us. Moreover, the degree to which we can find our own voice rather than mimic that of others, and to stand like tall poppies is intricately connected to this interdependent process of mirroring and seeing – experience and discovery.

I teach a yearlong social work practice course offered to first year graduate students. One of the challenges I find in teaching the practice course is I often sit in the room reaching for ways to connect to young people who are usually different from me, racially, ethnically, culturally. A dilemma I seek to resolve in my commitment to supporting their learning and professional growth, is knowing many of them, will be different from the children and families they are preparing so hard to be ready for, racially, ethnically, culturally. Honoring this difference becomes a central part of my learning objectives for the course. I purposefully introduce the notion of honoring differences instead of bridging them. I think people come to cross cultural work with the metaphor of bridging cultures too

often, and after 20 years in the field as a bicultural worker, I feel bridging is not the foundation of the work – certainly it is part of the work that evolves later, but it is not the foundation of the work. I fear if we begin bicultural work with bridging, we increase the likelihood the work is defined by best intentions rather than best and just practice.

I try to honor difference by introducing students to other ways of being. For example, I begin the first lecture in a foreign language – for about ten minutes, I speak Italian – which always comes as a surprise to the students – to look into my Asian face and hear Italian. I switch to Vietnamese for another ten minutes before I finally switch, to their great relief, to English. Over the years, I notice similar reactions to the experience – students panic, struggle, and ultimately innovate – find ways to push through the discomfort of not knowing, to endure, and ultimately to master.

During the in-class debrief, repetitive themes surfaced over the years. Mostly what students talk about is their discomfort. They articulate extensively, feeling out of place, sometimes thinking they were in the wrong place, other times feeling they did not belong. Some of them talk about feeling worried and afraid. Some even got mad and talked about having to fight the urge to get up and leave, while others questioned whether something was perhaps wrong with me – I may have been confused.

One key component to our debriefing is I don't try to defend myself or offer solutions or commentary. Instead, I ask them to think about what made it better. Other prompts I pose invite them to consider how they endured or how they saw themselves through the discomfort or confusion. In response, students have talked about connectedness – many of them shared as they looked around and saw others who *looked* like them, *looked* almost equally confused, afraid, annoyed, or out of place, that it brought them a palpable sense of safety. Finding physical likeness – being able to see something visually familiar somehow brought them a sense of safety despite being amongst strangers. Within this safety they discovered the capacity to move their dialogue from one of disparity, distance, and discomfort to one of competence and capacity. We talk then about the ways in which they prevailed – how they come together, how they reached out to

one another to find ways to reach out and communicate with me across power and difference – to extend and close the distance that separated us, them and I – to find – not so much common ground, but discovery – of what was possible between us in the context of our differences, not despite them.

An important insight I have come to value as a bicultural social worker is never to underestimate the power of what Kohut refers to as mirroring and twinship, the experience of having oneself reflected back by others and the power of being able to see oneself in others. Concurrently, as a bicultural worker I have come to also expect and anticipate the paradox involved in mirroring and seeing, in so much as what one sees or what gets reflected back may be at once true yet inaccurate. Lao Tzu wrote in the Tao Te Ching, “The words of truth are always paradoxical.” Finding a balance between seeing, knowing, and doing as a tool to manage living with contradiction then is an important component of bicultural identity. Though acquiring balance requires interrogation and not tolerance of our experiences; through interrogation the bilingual, bicultural professional can discover the right questions to pose to the mirror.

### **Hidden Dragon, Crouching Tiger**

Hidden dragon, crouching tiger is a Chinese idiom comprised of four characters meant to warn against losses accrued from underestimating another person's capacity, as talents can be hidden or unseen. This metaphor is relevant to the experience of bilingual social workers in the professional setting. Bilingual practitioners are valued singularly for their linguistic capacity; the experiences they endure and the skills they acquire navigating two cultures is customarily disregarded and left unrealized. When bicultural work is organized solely around forward translation, effective culturally responsive work cannot be done, and more importantly, models of bicultural practice cannot be discovered, tested, and implemented. Immigrant and refugee communities are left with little choice for mental health care and intervention, apart from what is created and designed by and for dominant populations.

This brings to mind a *koan* called “teaching the ultimate.” A koan is a proverb or a brief story intended to focus a person's practice of mindfulness or meditation. I want to share this koan as an invitation to consider with me what it means to



become a bicultural professional and to deliver effective culturally responsive practice.

### **Teaching the Ultimate**

In early times in Japan, bamboo-and-paper lanterns were used with candles inside. A blind man, visiting a friend one night, was offered a lantern to carry home with him.

"I do not need a lantern," he said. "Darkness or light is all the same to me."

"I know you do not need a lantern to find your way," his friend replied, "but if you don't have one, someone else may run into you. So you must take it."

The blind man started off with the lantern and before he had walked very far someone ran squarely into him.

"Look out where you are going!" he exclaimed to the stranger. "Can't you see this lantern?"

"Your candle has burned out, brother," replied the stranger.

This koan opens up so many possibilities to contemplate. On one level it pushes us to think about what it means to help – to intervene. It highlights for us that intervention is more than a one-dimensional concept and more than a linear process embedded in good intentions. It suggests to us interventions can, in and of themselves, be a paradox. For example, from a child welfare perspective – is it possible protection does not always lead to safety?

In this question and all the ones yet to have been asked, we must confront ourselves, our roles, and how it (our roles) and we (our selves) manifest in our helping relationships with the client. In so doing, we must question – who is the expert? Similarly, whose agenda is privileged and primary? Do we trust that our clients can find their way through the darkness, or do we give them a lantern whose light will inevitably dim and ultimately burn out? Do we have the willingness, and the capacity to centralize the Other in our therapeutic work – to elevate her in the process of change?

These are the questions bilingual practitioners face

regularly in their work, often without guidance, support, or the realization that such processes are being navigated and evolved as part of the work. The ties that bind the bilingual, bicultural worker living in two socio-cultural spaces simultaneously manifests a treatment ecology full of conflicts of interest and ethical dilemmas that are beyond the scope of this essay to deconstruct and explore. Meanwhile, the complexities of the work, preys on the bilingual practitioner, like a crouching tiger, ready to pounce at any moment. As the bilingual worker delves into the complexities of these working conditions, she develops a unique skillset and insights, from doing the work – confronting the conflicts and working through the dilemmas, which ultimately makes her a master of her trade.

This for me is likely the saddest paradox of forward translation – through the effort of translating words from one language into another, with ideas and concepts that often do not even exist in another language, bilingual workers develop a certain savvy which leads to an understanding deep within themselves that empowers them to make meaning that has powerful implications. Yet this expertise is left unrefined at best, and ignored at worst. Like a hidden dragon, their full potential and capacity is unrealized, hidden from and disregarded by the rest of the workforce – in effect, lost in translation.

### **Conclusion: Beyond Translation**

In this article, I have attempted to draw on multiple forms of narratives – folktale, metaphors, cultural idioms, fairy tales, as well as personal narrative, to illustrate what intercultural experts Milton Bennett and his colleague, Ida Castiglioni (2004) refer to as the embodied feeling of culture, or "consciousness as the giving of form to feeling" (p. 257). Through narrative I have tried to move the reader into the position where difference is – as Levinas would insist, experienced and engaged, rather than mastered or subsumed under a larger discourse of multiculturalism (Beaver, 1993). In this conclusion, I aim to begin a new dialogue about what is possible, relative to culturally responsive social work practice, if we can begin to shift our thinking beyond translation. To do so, I briefly begin with a summary of lessons learned and insights gained about shortfalls and constraints associated with a forward translation approach to practice and its empirical equivalent – back translation. As an alternative I provide a framework that builds on a



concept I coined – translation transposed, to reflect the expertise of the bicultural, bilingual social worker. A full discussion of the implications for organizational development to include developing capacity among managers and administrators who supervise bi-cultural workers will be reviewed elsewhere (Ung, 2013), and extends beyond the scope of this article. However, I will illustrate how transposing translation can lead to a more authentic culturally responsive stance when working inter-culturally. To this end, I draw on my experiences in the field of family violence as an example.

A common factor, that surfaces in thinking about culturally responsive work, is capacity. Veritably, the primary, and sometimes only capacity considered is language. Service delivery in this context is organized around forward translation, that is, using bi-lingual practitioners to translate models of interventions usually normed on monolingual populations. It goes without saying, there are the very real systemic pressures that underlie the earnest effort to achieve good outcomes through forward translation. The external political and fiscal influences on the work create an orientation to it that fuels a desire to make and distribute many lanterns. Focusing on language allows a detour from the complexities captured in the previous narratives, and enables a quicker route to making and distributing lanterns – in effect – the most efficient way to translate the dominant way of thinking, doing, and feeling to the Other.

Consequently, what gets overlooked is that a whole person, who originates from an entire country, with a complete set of values and a unique culture, accompanies what gets seen – which is linguistic capacity. Like the friend in the koan, there is no malicious intent, short sightedness, or even ignorance when one pushes their agenda or insists on teaching from their worldview. Indeed, there is often sincerity, and benevolent intentions. In some ways however, I think there is also an unchallenged assumption that the experience will be enlightening. Against this backdrop, ostensibly, the most efficient way to deliver a preferred service to an alien community is to dilute the difference, look for and assume commonality, and then, strictly speaking, translate it.

In the domain of research, there is an equivalent method that is highly regarded and outlines a similar

process – a technical solution often referred to as back translation used with ethnic communities – the linguistic equivalent of converting and calibrating dosage. In back translation, an instrument, or survey, written in English, is translated by two separate native speakers of a target language associated with a foreign population of interest. The first translator translates the original survey into the targeted foreign language, whilst the second translator translates the interpreted survey back into English. The method is intended to isolate and capture the precise meaning of the original source – the goal then is to mimic, to reiterate rather than to fully interpret. In this manner, back translation as a method for research, mirrors and reinforces forward translation in practice, and therefore ensures that culturally responsive work is organized around the act of translating dominant views rather than exploring difference in an effort to create new meaning, and by extension create culturally relevant and authentic solutions.

This is not how I like to conceptualize culturally responsive work. The critical questions that are lost in models of forward and back translation remain unasked and therefore unanswered. For example, what is the likelihood the light in the lantern will burn out? Will the experience be empowering? Is the intervention meaningful to the people who have to live with and experience the problem on a daily basis? Is it authentic? Rather, I suggest that culturally responsive work must start with an understanding of and a respect for bicultural work. Bicultural work like, Levinas (Beavers, 1993) reminds us, is about ethics and responsibility, which requires that we experience the Other, look directly into their faces, and commit to the relationship – in essence, commit to preserving the authenticity and dignity of the Other above all else. In this type of interdependent relationship, it is critical for each party to engage and not just to mimic one another, but to reach across power and difference, interrogating and integrating each other, so that each party is transformed because of their exposure to the other.

This is not the common tendency. When one thinks about bicultural work, there is an almost immediate propensity to locate it in bilingual people. People like me, who speak another language, come from another place. I want to invite the reader to consider bicultural work as a practice for which we are all

responsible. Such a stance to cultural responsiveness eliminates language as the *first* principle.

When I first came to academia as a full-time faculty member nearly seven years ago, I was privileged to hear Professor Jim Anglem. Professor Anglem is a Maori man who spoke to us about his identity as a Maori person and his experiences as a professional engaged in social justice work. He shared an anecdote about testifying before Parliament in New Zealand on the benefits of bilingual education that has stayed with me ever since. He described a moment when one of the members of Parliament asked whether he thought sustaining bilingual Maori education discriminated against the growing population of Asian migrants, specifically Chinese migrants in New Zealand. Professor Anglem shared with us one simple idea he reflected to the members of Parliament for consideration: “With due respect, the whole of China will not become extinct if we do not offer Mandarin in schools here in New Zealand which is the risk that my people face. Moreover, we will never do multi-cultural well, if we cannot do bicultural right.”

In a sense Professor Anglem urges us to focus on the core of the matter – to go back in reverse to move forward. Similarly, I propose that as we decentralize forward translation as the core of culturally responsive work, that we consider the idea of “*translation transposed*.”

By definition, to transpose something means to reverse or transfer the order or place of something. In mathematics, it means to move (a term) from one side of an algebraic equation to the other side, reversing its sign to maintain equality (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). From my experiences as a bilingual and bicultural worker, I believe effective work in diverse communities requires a similar shift – a fundamental transfer of the order of where we begin.

Rather than begin with a model developed by the dominant culture translated for the benefit of the immigrant, refugee, or marginalized other, we ought to begin with the immigrant, refugee, or marginalized other themselves, and gather evidence. Then in iterative fashion, defined by constant engagement with the Other, the evidence could be sifted, interrogated, and explored extrapolating

relevant themes and meaning directly from and with the community members themselves. Following the lead, essentially of the Other, yields unfiltered culturally relevant evidence that can be integrated into a model of practice – whether it be an assessment interview, an intervention protocol, or a survey for research that is culturally meaningful and authentic, reducing cultural arrogance and dominance in the model building process.

As I have mentioned briefly, the pathway of the bilingual, bicultural social worker is mired with conflicts of interests and ethical dilemmas – the organic and natural consequences and complexities of simultaneously living in two different worlds with varying, sometimes compatible, and other times completely contradicting values. Working for so many years under a model of forward translation, did not develop my capacity to manage these complexities or to see myself clearly and thoughtfully through the ethical dilemmas I faced almost daily working both intra- and inter-culturally. What I did learn however was to manipulate language in order to apply standards of care to a community of people for whom those ways of knowing and being in the world were usually foreign. I learned to do this in service of mobilizing families to targets and outcomes that, while important to the systems in which they were entangled, were not always so relevant and meaningful to their day-to-day living.

Take for example, the case of violence against women and children, a focused area of practice for me in my career thus far. Working from a stance of forward translation I drew on bodies of work that were heavily influenced by individualism and/or feminism. However, with Asian women and their children, these worldviews offered me few tools to explain what was happening to them, and to their families in ways that were meaningful for them. Similarly, models of intervention which are focused on individual empowerment and individual rights did not resonate or inspire such families to engage when their goals reflected underlying values associated with family preservation, interpersonal harmony, and spiritual determinism rooted in ancestral piety. Moreover, while it was true that in their situations, political and economic systems intertwined with cultural worldviews and converged in ways that constricted avenues to effective solutions, often compromising their safety, it was

not always accurate that they were submissive, helpless, and ignorant or unsophisticated.

To translate means “to change the form, condition, nature, etc. of; transform, convert; to explain in terms that can be more easily understood; interpret” (Random House Dictionary, 2013). In this case, transposing translation would mean that I reverse the order in which I begin to translate. So rather than transforming meaning of the dominant culture over to the women, I would transform meaning relevant to the women back to the service delivery system for the goal of identifying a culturally relevant way to engage and intervene. This stance, in other words, would require I ask the family to explain to me what healthy relationships mean to them.

I might ask them what healthy relationships mean in the face of conflict and disagreement. I might also ask them what violence means to them and what role they think violence has in intimate relationships and why. In so doing, I draw on their meaning about healthy relationships to inform a baseline or set of parameters and boundaries around what is acceptable relative to interpersonal dynamics in their home. I also learn about the role and nature of violence in their lives and in their worldview. Having this deeper and more culturally relevant understanding allows me to either create models of intervention that are more authentic to families or adapt best practices that I may know of from the field to meet their cultural worldviews. Consequently new possibilities and innovation emerge, rather than generalization of solutions to populations where they may not necessarily fit.

There is of course the very real position within this context that taking the stance I have proposed here – of not just beginning but favoring the narrative and norms of the Other, could lead to bifurcated positions, such that choosing one cultural norm over another could mean minimizing one cultural norm for another. In such instances, it is important to recall the lesson that all truths are paradoxical. Therefore while it is very true that I could be seen as minimizing the violence against women and children, another truth is that family violence, intimate partner violence, and violence against children is itself a manifestation of cultural violence, systemic racism, and institutional

oppression. So to me, addressing violence requires that we simultaneously uncover the cultural nuances associated with the roots of violence while we make attempts to engage around the manifest episodes of violence at hand.

In essence, becoming a bicultural worker involves understanding and transcending fear. To this end, Boorstein (1997, p. 71) offers a perspective in her narratives that sums it all up:

We have two kinds of fears. One is a fear that whatever is going on is going to go on forever. It's just not true – nothing goes on forever. The other is the fear that, even if it doesn't go on forever, the pain of whatever is happening will be so terrible we won't be able to stand it. There is a gut level of truth about this fear. It would be ridiculous to pretend that in our lives, in these physical bodies, which can hurt very much, and in relationships that can hurt very much, there aren't some very, very painful times. Even so, I think we underestimate ourselves. Terrible as times may be, I believe we can stand them.

Because we become frightened as soon as a difficult mind state blows into the mind, we start to fight with it. We try to change it, or we try to get rid of it. The frenzy of the struggle makes the mind state even more unpleasant.

The familiar image is a children's cartoon character, like Daffy Duck, walking along freely and suddenly stepping into taffy. In a hasty, awkward attempt to extricate himself, he might fall forward and backward and eventually be totally stuck in the taffy. Even children see a better solution. The best solution would be the non-alarmed recognition, ‘This is taffy. I didn't see it as I stepped into it, but I felt it after I got stuck. It's just taffy. The whole world is not made out of taffy. What would be a wise thing for me to do now?’

### **Acknowledgement**

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\*Please note that all names have been changed to protect the identities and confidentiality of former clients.

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

Susan Weinger

**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 open-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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# On the Making of Female Macro Social Work Academics

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**Abstract:** This manuscript explores the experiences of a group of female macro social work academics using the collective biography process (Davies and Gannon, 2006). The narrative includes remembrances that the authors believe shaped who we are as macro social work academics and the work that we do. The shared stories are presented in a chronological manner and include analysis of the themes we identified as being important to the development of each academic within the group. Themes emerged pointing to a common understanding of the experiences and perhaps a view of the world. This suggested something unique in the development and socialization of women who become macro social work academics.

**Keywords:** social work; macro social work; selving; academic; professional development; collective biography

In May 2012, a group of 12 female social work academics gathered to share stories and remembrances of the experiences they believed shaped them into macro practitioners. The gathering was pulled together by two senior faculty members. The women they invited had shared similar experiences of feeling different from other female social work academics. The differences seemed to be linked to whether the academics identified as either clinical or macro social work practitioners. The gathering was intended to explore the possibility that there was something inherently different and shared among female social work macro academicians.

The gathering was planned using the collective biography model developed by Davies and Gannon (2006). The approach provides a way to work collaboratively to explore through shared memories a common experience. The work is done through telling, listening, and writing the experiences – re-experiencing them in a way that allows the collective to “search out the ways in which things were made evident, fixed and apparently unchangeable” (p. 5). Through the process of remembering and sharing, it is hoped that participants are able to identify the process of becoming as it pertains to the collective, not simply to the self. Group members were sent selections from the Davies and Gannon book to read and were expected to become familiar with the method prior to the gathering.

Throughout the three-day process, participants had the opportunity to delve deeply into the well of memory, recalling their own experiences at different points in their development of becoming macro social work academics. Experiences were shared verbally and in written form. We began with pre-professional memories and moved to stage setting in the educational process, motivation for doctoral work, and finally life as a macro social work academic. We began with the sharing of memories, followed by a quiet period for writing the personal experiences from an emic perspective, and then ending with a reading and discussion of the stories. While all of the verbal sharing and discussions were tape recorded, this analysis of the collective biography is based on the written stories shared.

The stories were shared in chronological order, offering the opportunity to consider aspects of our development that, although thought to be unique, emerged as themes that rippled throughout the stories in unexpected ways, reflecting commonalities of experiences that surprised us throughout the process. We believe that our process has indeed identified what may be experiences and meaning-making that is unique to *selving*, “the way individual subjectivities are created and maintained through specific kinds of discursive practices” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 7), of macro academic social workers. Individual authors are not identified. The hope is that the individual stories will merge into an understanding of the collective

process.

The following narratives are the experiences of the participants as they were written during our collective biography process, except for the exclusion of explicitly identifying information. They are grouped in the order in which they were shared (pre-professional, stage setting, and academic life). The writings of 12 academics over a period of three days were quite extensive; hence not all the writings are reproduced here. What are shared are exemplars of memories reflecting the major themes that emerged.

### **Pre-Professional**

*These pre-professional memories include some of our earliest childhood memories of family and community.*

Early memories from events in the 1950s, 60s, and even 70s grounded me through life to respect differences. I grew up in a multi-generational household that respected the worth of every individual. We welcomed unexpected guests for lunch, dinner, or even overnight stays that could extend for weeks for a relative or friend going through “a bad patch.” I never heard my mother, uncle, or aunties say an unkind or judgmental word about anyone. There was a spirit of reciprocal generosity that formed the basis of our family values.

Family members shared a common value of mutual respect for people who are perceived by the dominant culture to be different – be it birth defect, injury, race, place of birth, or income level. For years, my mother, a junior high school science teacher, was also involved with teaching immigrant populations. Every Thursday after school, she would go into Boston and teach English at night to a diverse group of newly arrived immigrant men and women from various countries. I remember many an evening meal made by one or another of Mother's students that got sent home in gratitude: foods from Greece, Italy, Mexico, etc.

I was five and about to ride the public bus alone for the first time in a Southern city in 1946. I was too young to be admitted to the local public school, but my white protestant parents knew I could read and wanted me in school, so I was beginning first grade at the Catholic School. This third day, I was

beginning to travel alone as both my parents had to return to full-time jobs. I stepped up into the bus, feeling excited about school and like a ‘big girl’ to be able to go by myself. The bus driver, an older white man, stared at me with a hard face and said, “You know you got to get to the back of the bus.” Even at five, I knew exactly what he meant. I did not speak, and after swallowing hard, I, the child of white protestant working class parents, walked carefully to the back of the bus to sit with the Negro passengers. People there were kind to me over the next two years.

I was only afraid that my father, who met my bus coming home, might see me at the back of the bus and be angry. I understood the line the bus driver was laying down, and I knew in my heart that it would not be ‘right’ to say, “But I'm white.” While I did not know the word segregation, I knew injustice when I saw it; I knew from Episcopal Sunday School that God loved everybody equally, and I did not see why people could not sit where they wanted to – old people and young people. So I rode the bus for two years; people at the back of the bus talked to me and shared snacks. I stood up before my stop to get off the bus, and I never talked to my parents about the experience.

I don't remember what day it was, but I remember it was sunny and bright. I was lying on my stomach on the carpet in front of the television watching the newly elected Catholic President. There may actually be two memories blended together. When Kennedy said in his inaugural speech, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country,” something clicked on inside me. It was probably the first time I had glimpsed the feeling of patriotism in a personal way. Prior to that I had felt pride because of the election of a son of Kansas, Eisenhower, to the presidency, but this was different. It gained more power with Kennedy's announcement about his vision for the Peace Corps and what American young people could do for the world.

That day, with sunshine coming in the front window of the house, it was like some sort of clarity button got pushed inside me. I said to myself, “I must do that.” Right then, as he explained the Peace Corps idea, I knew that I had just added to the “plan” I had had since 3rd grade: go to college and then get a job

in something to do with art and architecture. I remember feeling the power and excitement of going somewhere and making a difference. I didn't tell anyone about this new next step in my plan, however, I felt great strength in the resolve to be a Peace Corps volunteer because my (Catholic) president said it was a good thing for me to do. That day, on television, he spoke straight to my soul in a way that created in me probably the most peace and hope that I had ever had in my life. It was almost a spiritual feeling of such certainty, and it was a feeling I have never experienced again.

I tucked my thoughts and feelings away and went about finishing high school and going away to college. I think I actually forgot my resolve until my sophomore year in college when a Peace Corps recruiter showed up on campus and the message from my President came flooding back to me. There was no question; Peace Corps was my destiny. I needed to join. I needed to make a difference doing something bigger than myself. Becoming a volunteer focusing on community development seemed to be exactly the right way.

It was summer – warm. The windows were open. I was small enough to sit on my knees at the kitchen table where we ate dinner. I remember wearing shorts, my hair falling in my face, and my mom trying to keep it out of the way of my food. My parents both smoked then, and I can remember the smell of cigarette smoke as the meal ended and our full attention turned to the news. I can remember Walter Cronkite's deep authoritative voice followed by the voice of Dan Rather reporting from the 'Jungles of Viet Nam.' I remember watching body bags and hearing the body count. I remember thinking about/hearing my parents talking about people they knew who were there and how difficult these news stories were to hear. I remember wondering, "How could it be OK to do this?" I remember thinking that this was killing and that we were told that killing is wrong. It was one of the Ten Commandments, and yet our country was doing it and doing it a lot. I could not make sense of how it was wrong and yet reported as if it was OK.

Her name was Rosa, and she was the funniest kid in the second grade. I was easily distracted and served as Rosa's greatest fan as she put on her comedy show during whatever lesson was taking place that

day. Rosa's general disinterest in the lesson was obvious, and my reinforcement of her behavior infuriated our teacher. Rosa wore oversized clothes and almost always smelled of pee, and, as a result, she was teased or ignored by most. For me, her spark transcended all, and we became playground buddies that year. While I was chastised for laughing with Rosa at the back of the classroom, Rosa was regularly made to stand in the corner. I was not. All was fun until teacher decided to call my mom in for that important parent-teacher conference. Her purpose was to confide concerns that other children would ridicule me because I only had "black friends." I don't know what disappointed and angered me more, the teacher's clear attack and even misinformation to meet her needs and further isolate Rosa or the fact that my mother even entertained the conversation. It was a conversation between white women in the South. I saw red and recognized that my mother should have stood up for what was RIGHT; that was my first thought at the age of seven.

I don't remember much about Rosa after that – by the third grade, she was gone. Thinking about her still makes me smile, but with a little bitter sweetness because Rosa was my first friend who was obviously being abused at home. I did not yet have the terms like "neglect" or even worse to describe Rosa's life experience. To me, she was just funny, interesting, and compelling, and I knew in my heart that the teacher did not bother to invite Rosa's mother to a parent-teacher meeting.

*Where is Rosa today? Is she even alive?*

Looking back on it, I now realize that my mother felt powerless when dealing with the teacher. As a child herself, she was a light-skinned Mexican American child in San Diego schools. She "passed" as a white child because she was light-skinned, and her own mother even insisted that she not speak Spanish so as to avoid being identified as "Mexican." Teachers were in a position of respect and power for my mother, even as an adult. On that day of the parent-teacher meeting, I can only imagine what was going through her mind!

I knew we didn't have much money, but no one where we lived did. You made do, got by – I wore hand-me-downs when necessary. Only people who

lived in big cities, like Aunt Jo in Chicago, had a lot of money. People like us had to work hard and work together to make it. When Dad came home from a union contract meeting talking about a strike, it felt OK – even while listening to Mom and Dad try to figure out how bills would be paid.

We were visiting Grandma and Grandpa that weekend. It must have been a holiday because Aunt Jo and ‘the kids’ were there also. I remember that we were in the living room and that the TV was on (the news). The issue of a potential teachers' strike in Wellsboro came up during the report of a garbage strike in a big city.

I remember Aunt Jo could not understand how public school teachers could be so selfish – it would put students behind, maybe even get in the way of graduation. I loved my Aunt Jo – spent many summers with her. She lived in a big house in a big city. She was beautiful and smart and sophisticated; I wanted to be like her, not a country bumpkin.

At the same time, though, this was my DAD. In my eyes, he was SO smart and he kept me safe – from what, I couldn't have said. Just – he was my DAD. So as the discussion went on (and even after it ended), I remember trying to figure out who was right, but they were both right. I remember feeling torn and not wanting one of them to be wrong.

My earliest memory of Orange Nehi was at my Dad's Union Hall. I think I was five or six or so. Dad would take me to the meetings. I remember Dad's active involvement in the union. I remember Mom packing his lunch while he was on strike as he went to the plant to picket. I remember talk of scabs and union busting and how the country had been built on the backs of the working man, who only wanted to be treated fairly and equitably. Often when the union would strike, we would close up our house, unplug our appliances, and take our small camper off to the mountains where we would primitively camp (no showers, restroom facilities, and often no running water) in Cherokee National Forest. My memories from that time are happy memories of playing in the mountain stream, biking, and finishing chores. The impact I think that had on me was an understanding that my dad – and my whole family – was “fighting” and sacrificing for the greater good, for fairness, for rights, and that the

worker was equally important to the “bosses.” I thought it was fun, but the message of fight and sacrifice stuck with me.

Shortly after starting 9th grade, very aware of stirrings for social justice and an end to segregation, someone I respected invited me to a youth group that met sometimes at a church near my house. She did not explain much, but said that both white people and Negroes would attend, and that all were concerned about “civil rights.” I wanted very much to go, but knew my father would forbid it, so I lied and told him and my mom that it was my own youth group meeting with a few other people about a youth project. Discussion at the meeting was a bit slow to start, but moved quickly to be inspiring and electrifying – and it was my first opportunity to join in singing “Freedom Songs.” I felt wonderful after the meeting and went upstairs and out of the Church to walk the few blocks home. I was stunned to see a man standing in the dark in a big raincoat and hat (looking a bit like Humphrey Bogart). My father spoke to me and said we had to get home. When we arrived he yelled and yelled at me that I was not to have any part of such meetings, that I was not to betray his family, that I was to ‘stay with my own kind,’ and told me to go to bed and we would talk in the morning. I don't remember if I spoke during the whole episode. I went to bed and to sleep, only to be awakened about 2:00 a.m. by a knock on my bedroom door. The door swung open and my father stood with the lights from the hall behind him. He said in a different – but still loud – tone of voice, “I don't agree with you. I will never agree with you, but you will live in a different world than I did – and it is good that you think differently.” He slammed the door, and while we never spoke of the incident again, he never stopped me from engaging in civil rights work.

I took my first job at the age of 15 at one of the two drugstores in town. The owner/pharmacist was a friend of my family, and my grandma had worked at the other one for many years. My primary job was to help customers, mostly older folks, find what they needed in the store. Many of them weren't used to finding things on their own – they often didn't know formal names for the things they needed, and some couldn't read. We cashed checks on Fridays for many people – sometimes we gave them an advance if it was an emergency. One customer used to come



every week. He was old and wore overalls, no shoes; he was always very dirty and he smelled bad. Sometimes I had trouble understanding what he said. Each week, he came and requested \$2 worth of his “heart medicine.” The pharmacist told me that this man doesn’t have a car, that he gets a ride in “off the mountain” to pick this up every week.

I would ask, “Why doesn’t he just get the full prescription and save the trip?”

The pharmacist would answer, “Because he can’t afford it.”

I would ask, “Why doesn’t he just charge it?” (Lots of people charged their medication.)

He would answer, “He doesn’t want to be in debt – by the way, never offer to charge it. You will offend him.” This was one of my first real lessons in respecting the dignity of another person, even when your “good intentions” are begging to get in the way. I learned lessons from many people in that job; I saw abject poverty, severe physical and mental illness, and illiteracy. I saw people come in just to socialize, to talk about their “pains” and to gossip. They received help and support in a community gathering place that held no stigma. My eyes opened wider to the lives of people who were my neighbors, but whose lives I really knew little about. I am sure these experiences formed the basis of my thinking about social justice and human dignity.

One memory that I have is the Martin Luther King Birthday celebrations each year. We had a parade in my neighborhood. I especially enjoyed watching Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech later in the evening after the parade. I think this is when I began to connect the outside world (outside of my bubble) with the struggle that people of color had in their lives.

I asked my father, who grew up in rural Mississippi in the 1930s, about Dr. King. He simply smiled and said “Dr. King was a great man.” Daddy never spoke about his life in rural Mississippi or his transition to D.C. in 1941. I often wondered how he and my mother were able to purchase a house in a predominately white neighborhood in 1966. According to my dad, this was a big deal for

“colored” folks. Again, this was somewhat of a paradox for me. I heard Dr. King speak about so many obstacles for people of color, e.g., racism, prejudice. Yet I wondered, “How did my dad get through plumbing school? How did my mom get a scholarship to George Washington University in 1952?” She was the valedictorian of her high school class, and she also spoke fluent French. I am sure this was helpful, but nevertheless, she was still a woman of color. It seems that the experiences of my parents were not the norm. I am sure there were others who were also succeeding, but based on what Dr. King was saying, in general, people of color were not doing very well in many aspects of their lives.

We often camped at Elkmont Campground in the Great Smoky Mountains. On our early camping trips, we simply camped in the back of our pick-up truck. I always remember the excitement of pulling up into the campground. One trip, Mom got our campsite assignment (Mom always handled the “business” of the family) and jumped back into the truck so we could go look at the site. When we got to it, it was a bad site (meaning no shade and nowhere for kids to play) and wasn’t close to the river. On the way to the site, we passed many open sites along the river, but Mom was told that the river sites were not available. She said that we were going back to get a different site. Apparently the rangers in the station wouldn’t give her a different site because we didn’t own a trailer and river sites were reserved for trailers only. I remember her being resolute that we would get a different site. I knew she was angry, but she was measured. She went over to the pay phone and called the park superintendent. A little while later, the ranger came out and said a campsite had opened up on the river for us. A couple of years ago, she told me that when she had gotten in touch with the superintendent, she stated that she and her family were being treated unfairly because we could not afford a trailer and that the park was created to serve all people, not just those who could afford a camping trailer. The park superintendent agreed with her and called the ranger station, and we were allowed to pick from the river campsites.

Another time at Elkmont, when I was about 12, my brother and I wanted to swim in a great swimming hole that was close to vacation properties that had

been included in lifetime leases when the Great Smoky Mountain National Park was created. The lifetime leases were held by some of Knoxville's most wealthy families. My brother and I would stand on a bridge in the park and see kids jumping off a rock ledge into this great swimming hole nearly salivating, but we knew then that the swimming hole was off limits for campers. One afternoon, Mom and Dad told us that we were going to swim in the good swimming hole and that we would get to walk up the river and jump river rocks to get there. I was so excited! So we trekked up the river, jumping among the rocks and wading through shallow pools. The rapids were strong at times, so we had to be careful. I remember feeling happy. When we arrived at the pool, Mom took a seat on a rock in the river and Dad went with us to climb onto the rock ledge and make sure it was safe. Once Dad jumped in and made sure all was okay for us, he gave us some instructions about where to jump and went to talk to a ranger who was motioning for him. My brother and I jumped off the rock ledge over and over and over. Later I found out that some of the vacation property residents had called the park rangers because we were trespassing. When the ranger arrived and talked to Dad, he asked Dad how we had gotten to the swimming hole. Dad informed him that we had walked up the center of the river and had not been on the vacation property. The ranger tipped his hat at Dad, smiled, and then told the women who had complained that we were not trespassing because we had come up the river and the river was not leased property. My brother and I swam, played, and jumped off the rock ledge all day. Throughout the week, Dad spread the word in the campground about how campers could access the swimming hole. Later that night, I remember Mom and Dad talking about how a number of poor farmers and mountain people were not able to secure lifetime leases and that the families in the vacation cabins were granted special privileges because of who they were. I was proud of my parents and I was struck by how sad people must have been to lose their land.

*These early memories evoked strong emotional responses for writers and listeners alike. Experiences that reflected some of the discursive practices at work in the process of our individual selving emerged as themes that were influential in the development of our understanding of the world.*

*Four major themes emerged through the discussion and later the analysis of the written memories: Respect for differences, personally experiencing the value of justice, the visceral awareness of social injustice, and the paradox of living in a world that does not reflect the values taught and embodied by our immediate family.*

*Valuing and respecting differences is evident in both the rural context of the pharmacy and the lived experience of the multi-generational household in an ethnically diverse neighborhood. Justice as a value personally experienced is shared by the personal responses to the speeches of President Kennedy and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. It is also embodied in the memories of childhood experiences of camping and listening to reports of killing in Viet Nam. When these two values, respect and justice, seem to be dismissed as not important to the greater society, the recognition and encounter of the paradox seems to have been essential to our development.*

### Stage Setting

*The collective biography process had been planned to include a stage setting discussion and a discussion about our motivation for doctoral work. The memories of these two sessions were similar enough to combine them into one category: stage setting. These experiences span lived experiences from our entry into the work force, post baccalaureate degree, to our desire to enter a doctoral program in social work.*

In 1979, I graduated from college with a BA degree in Psychology and a minor in Special Education. Six months after graduating, I had not found a job, so I went back to school and completed the requirements for a teaching certificate in Special Education. This seemed like a natural fit since Special Education had been my minor in college and teaching school was valued as a "good job" with status among the African-American community. After completing the certification process in 1981, I got my first teaching position at an elementary school in a small rural town in southwest Georgia. I remember the position as being advertised for a resource teacher in the special education program to provide instruction for children with intellectual disabilities. Upon my arrival, what I found was a self-contained classroom of five- and six-year-olds,

some with physical limitations and some had intellectual challenges. All of the children had failed kindergarten and/or first grade, and it was pretty obvious that no one else wanted to be bothered with them. The first couple of days I was there, the children sat quietly and just stared at me. A few months after working with the children, I began to see that the intellectual disability that they had been labeled with was not the issue, rather the real issue was lack of socialization skills (it is important to note that the children primarily lived in abject poverty; none of them had been in a structured environment prior to coming to school, and their parents had no more than a 9th grade education). I began to ponder the question, "How did these children get into special education?" I started asking questions of my fellow teachers who had had some of the children in class prior to my coming and my principal, who was a member of the community, about the children's entrée into special education; they all just kind of glazed over my question. Instead, they responded, "The children are not able to handle a regular classroom." I then decided to review the children's cumulative records, and that is where I learned the shocking and very sad realities about each of these young people's fate. The cumulative records had missing or incomplete documents on all of the children: no Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for some, unsigned IEP's by parents for others (a few files only had the child's last year report of grades). Essentially, the children had been targeted by the system to fail, to never have a chance at a fair education. I literally gasped for air! I experienced a range of emotions: disbelief, sadness, anger; for a moment, I even felt helpless. Once I was able to collect myself and focus, I began to ask myself what could I do to help these children. I thought, if I could just talk to the parents to find out what they knew about this process, then possibly I could help to change the situation, but, the question was: "How could I reach the parents?"

I began a note writing campaign to the parents, requesting to meet with them. I would pin the note to the children's clothes before putting them on the bus to go home. While I felt this was a long shot, I thought it was all I had. Weeks passed and no one responded, and finally one day after school, I had a parent and her teenage daughter show up; it was at that time I started to believe there was hope. I

began meeting with that parent on a regular basis to explain the special education law and the importance of an IEP. After some time had passed since my meeting with the parent, my principal found out what the meetings were about and forbade me to continue; but I did not stop! This resulted in being transferred to the middle school.

At the beginning of the next school year, I arrived at the middle school to a class of 7th and 8th grade students with intellectual disabilities. After the first couple of weeks at the new school, it became clear to me that I was out of my comfort zone; working with 13-, 14-, and some 15-year-olds was not my strength. So, I stayed as long as I could bear it; this was tortuous. Finally, one Friday afternoon at the end of the day, I realized that I could no longer do this, so I wrote a note stating I was not coming back, placed it in the desk drawer, and never returned. I had made a decision that the only way I was going to survive was to leave. Afterwards, I was scared that the school district would come after me because I had signed a contract, but my survival took precedence.

As I look back, I can see a theme happening here where choices I have made stemmed from the economic reality of the labor market. Just as when I graduated from college and there were limited job opportunities in the field of criminal justice that led me to graduate school in social work, there were limited opportunities in macro social work upon graduation with an MSW. Many of my friends did not have jobs and took anything they could get, regardless of the field of practice they specialized in school. The public child welfare agency (DSS) was one of the only "games in town" – the jobs were plentiful, the pay and benefits were relatively decent, and so that's where many of us went. I saw it as a "stepping stone" to administrative practice down the road. I became a Child Protective Services (CPS) worker thrust into a role I knew nothing about. I had never even taken a clinical course on working with children or families, and I was terrified of screwing families up worse than they already were.

I soon realized that no matter how hard I tried, there was actually very little I could do to help keep children safe, and that the system itself was unbelievably screwed up. I found myself



questioning everyone and everything in the agency about policies, procedures and why things couldn't change. Maybe because I was so outspoken or maybe because the powers that be thought I might be a liability with families (given my stellar clinical skills), the day my supervisor walked into the office, packed some boxes and walked out, I was told to move into her office as the new supervisor. Now I was terrified for a whole different reason, but at last, I was now in a place where I could begin to make a difference! From there, I kept moving up the administrative chain and, with each move, had more opportunity to make changes, even if it was only one small battle at a time.

After a while, I knew I needed some research to guide me, but could find little readily available and had little time to look for it. So the idea of going back to school started to grow within me more and more.

After I received my BA degree in Sociology, I wondered "What am I going to do now?" I knew that I wanted to help others. I had studied about all of the many social problems in my sociology courses. I decided to work with the homeless. I applied for a "Life Coach" position at the House of Ruth. This is a well-respected homeless shelter for women in Washington, D.C., which is my hometown. The job title was Life Coach. I worked the 4:00 pm-12 midnight shift. This was exciting! I never worked at night before. My parents were outraged. They were so worried about my safety. Of course, I had to call my parents periodically during my shift to address their concerns.

I remember one social worker specifically. She had just graduated from Columbia University School of Social Work. I was so impressed. I really looked up to her. I wanted to be like her. I also began to feel that she was doing the type of work that I would like to do. I did not feel that I was having the impact that I envisioned. I did not realize that I was "doing social work." I also learned from observing my colleague that there are a specific set of skills involved with helping others. I wanted to be like my colleague. I wanted to learn more about the helping process. I applied to Catholic University School of Social Work. I remember being so proud of myself when I received my acceptance letter. I knew I was on my way to achieving big things – so

exciting!

Another set of memories surround my realization that many social ills were essentially ignored in my religious experience. In college and seminary, I was learning about family violence. What I learned confirmed what my mom had anecdotally noted on many occasions – that our southern Appalachian county was one of the worst counties in the state for domestic violence and child abuse. It began to dawn on me that I had never heard this discussed in church, and I was in church ALL the time, essentially every time the doors were open. The minister and the Bible study leaders talked about sin, but it was of the personal variety – drinking, sex, dancing, cursing, etc. The emphasis was on punishment and repentance in the form of a jeremiad, but not once did any religious leader from my childhood or adolescent years denounce family violence. How could we not talk about it? If this was impacting so many people in our community, why was the church silent? The more I thought about it, the more I realized that the unspoken rule was that what happened in a family was private and was entrusted to the man, who was viewed and religiously endorsed as the head of household. Not only was the church silent, but it also was complicit in the social problem.

I walked into the auditorium and found a seat in the middle and began looking around. The room seemed filled with what seemed like hundreds of pretty, young twenty-something women and a few young men. I didn't see women like me. I felt old and out of place. I began doubting my return to school. How would I manage? There was so much information already – what if I was the only person in the room without prior social work schooling? They accepted me without a BSW, but maybe they had made a mistake. I realized that I didn't really know what a social worker did, or what social work was...I was probably in the wrong place...

I don't really remember much about what happened during the morning long orientation, except for the welcome from the Dean. I remember that he began by defining social workers – he said that they were change makers. That they work to end social injustice and move the world towards fairness. He talked about the many 'isms' in our world and the work that we would be prepared to do through the



program. Oh, I thought – so that is what I am! I am a social worker! And, I realized, I had found a home.

I am so afraid to speak up in class. Every class is a new assessment opportunity. Is this an instructor who lectures a lot? Thank God! I can be invisible; no attention will be focused on me. Oh gee, this class grades on participation and the instructor calls on people. Don't make eye contact! Look down. Hide behind someone. My stomach hurts; I feel so fearful. Am I shy? Is this abnormal? Geez, that student is so smart! Why couldn't I have said that? I'm so stupid, there's nothing I can even think to say.

And now [Ann McConnell] has asked if I'd be her research assistant on her dissertation work. She's even gone to bat for me to give me field credit for the time I'm doing those life satisfaction surveys in the community. But what do I really know about collecting data or even about research? I've got to confess. I can't even sleep at night for worrying about this. She is not going to want me to do this if she finds out how ignorant I am. What am I going to do?

It is the day of our appointment when I'm supposed to meet with her to tell her whether I'll do it. I could be sick! I am so afraid she'll find out how stupid I am. I drive to campus in a panic and am at her office door early – too early. I go into the restroom and hide until it's time.

And as I sit down, I see *The Gerontologist* and the *Journal of Gerontology* on her credenza. God, she is smart! What a clipped, even, precise, direct way she talks. No southern accent, no hesitancy. She will never understand. But I have to tell her the truth. I can't dupe her.

I blurt out, "First, I need to tell you something."

"What's that?" she asks, eyebrows slightly raised.

"I'm not sure I'm smart enough to do this. I just don't want you to think that I know what to do." There, I've said it. Oh God...

"That's exactly what I said to my advisor. We all feel that way," she says matter-of-factly. "Now, let's talk about our working together." She stops, looks

at me.

I am dumbfounded – relieved. I would cry, but I never cry in public. "Okay," I say, and we begin our planning together...

Before my Hebrew Prophets class one day, the professor brought in a newspaper article that discussed biological differences between straight and gay men. He then wondered aloud about what such scientific findings meant for the Christian church and community? How were we to take in that information given that the stance of the church had been to denounce homosexuality? He then read a quote attributed to Karl Barth, that when interpreting the Bible, we are to "Hold the Bible in one hand and today's newspaper in the other." Around the same time, one of my college suite mates had stated that all homosexuals go to hell. Though we shared similar religious roots, I could not agree with that. I couldn't understand how a God who we claimed to be all-loving could condemn someone, particularly if his or her sexual identity was not a choice but a biological reality.

My first-year field education placement in 1970 was with the Pasadena, California Public Schools. It provided a remarkable opportunity to observe a multiplicity of macro forces at work that affected students, parents, teachers, the School Board, and the whole city administration of Pasadena. It was the first year of federally court-ordered school integration in the country using cross-town bussing ordered by Judge Manuel Real as a remedy for racial discrimination in the Pasadena Public Schools. When we arrived, the community was in social and political turmoil. Teachers were unhappily being re-assigned to different schools after spending long, often comfortable tenures in certain posts. Students were confused and afraid, and the School Board was embroiled in a recall election.

This was not set up as a "macro" field placement. It was a school social work placement organized as a Student Unit for six students – four second-year and two first-year students – and led by a full-time field education faculty member known regionally as a school social work practitioner. The Unit was structured traditionally to offer MSW students practice experience with individual students, student groups, and family groups. There were weekly Unit

meetings and individual supervision. It was a collegial and high-functioning Student Unit with outstanding mentorship.

I did all the required interviews and process recordings, but I felt these interventions were quite off the mark in terms of identifying causation and problem solving. I was far more interested in identifying and understanding what the external forces were in the social and political environment that brought the city to this crisis, what systemic and social policy factors were at play to help turn things around, and what research was being done to help document interventions that worked and those that didn't.

Poverty is not the story of someone else.

I returned to the graduate school to complete my master's degree. My primary interests were on feminization of poverty and welfare reform in Korea. The previous public assistance system covered only children and elderly adults who lived below the official poverty line, categorized as the deserving poor because they were considered not able to work. After the national economic crisis, the public assistance system in Korea was expanded and restructured to include the so-called "undeserving poor." This refers to the working poor, aged 18-64, who were able to work but lived below the poverty line. For the receipt of public assistance benefits, they were required to attend government-supported job training programs or show work participation. There were extensive discussions on the welfare reform and the appropriate poverty line in policy and research domains.

I was working on the master's thesis, examining the effectiveness of the workfare program under the new anti-poverty policies. When I was busy collecting data from working-poor female program participants, one of my best friends called me. She was my childhood friend, and we went to the same middle and high schools before college. She told me that she was getting divorced. She started to tell me about her stories, which were totally new to me. Her mom was a victim of domestic violence for a long time. One of the big motivations for her early marriage was that she wanted to escape from the abuse in her family and start over with her new family. However, her husband was financially

irresponsible and he did not take care of her and their baby. Even when she was pregnant, she lacked food and nutrition most of the time. She tried to work part-time to support herself, but it was not enough. She finally divorced with custody of her baby. With her limited education, career history, and young child, she struggled and had a very hard time making ends meet. Eventually she found a job and worked as an office secretary. Her earnings were slightly over the poverty line, but she needed to be on welfare to receive other public benefits such as child care subsidies. Her employer was considerate enough to understand her status and agreed to only officially report part of her earnings and instead pay the remaining amounts in cash directly to her. It was very confusing. I was a graduate student who was studying the public assistance system and proper poverty line for working poor families. I met many clients and working poor families in social work fields and research projects, but my friend's hardship hit me very differently. My friend was not a free-rider. She did not mean to deceive the system. She was a hard-working mother living just above the poverty line, but the existing anti-poverty system could not deal with her continuous difficulties. It was frustrating, very frustrating to me.

I'm sitting at the edge of the swimming pool at the Girl Scouts' Camp Daisy Hyman in the spring. I have my feet in the water and it feels relaxing and refreshing. On one side is the director of Catholic Charities and on the other side is the Director of the Mental Health Association. We have a big jug of white wine between us, sipping out of the jug because we didn't bring glasses. We had just spent the day at the camp in a retreat hearing from two male social work professors about how to run our agencies more efficiently. This retreat had been sponsored by the United Way, and I was the chair of the United Way Executives Association, of which we were all members.

It was twilight and very peaceful, but I felt exhausted by the stimulating day and from everything that I had been doing to "go after" the United Way money in the 42 United Way offices in my region of my state-wide agency. I had been mesmerized by what I had heard during the day. These two men made it sound easy to organize an agency and evaluate its programs. It was so clean

and neat and controllable, and I had just come out of messy politics, hard decisions about staff, and all those different United Way proposals.

Sitting there with the refreshing water between my toes and two of my closest professional colleagues in the city, I decided that I didn't want to run an agency anymore. I wanted to know what those two professors knew. I wanted to learn from them and then teach folks like they taught us. I blurted out to my two friends, "I don't want to do this anymore. I'm going to get me a Ph.D." Both of them responded, "I'll drink to that!"

I felt relief. I had found my way out of confusion, exhaustion, and uncertainty. Soon, with the help of a Ph.D., I would really "know" and teach others.

In my reading, I came across a conceptual model that seemed to fit all of the pieces together such as stressors, role performance, mental health outcomes, and mastery. At the same time, I had just received a pre-doctoral fellowship from the American Sociological Association. Dr. Len Pearlin, the famous sociologist at the University of Maryland who actually developed the Stress Process Model, would be my mentor during my doctoral program. Wow! I was so scared and afraid. Am I smart enough to converse intelligently with this phenomenal scholar?

Dr. Pearlin embraced me. It turns out that he had a friend who passed away from sickle cell disease. He was excited about the journey that we would take in terms of applying his model to women of color. This was a pivotal point in my development as a scholar. During our weekly meetings, he encouraged me to think about the broader implications of my research questions. What about funding from National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH)? What about the policy implications of my research? How will this affect the implementation of the Sickle Cell Disease Control Act? These were very challenging questions, and I was using my brain in ways that I never had before.....and I liked it.

When I was working at a community development and affordable housing nonprofit, I always looked forward to meetings and programs sponsored by the City's Community Development Alliance. The

organization consisted of affordable housing developers and community development corporations that worked within and across neighborhoods and was anchored by the City's office of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC). These LISC folks thought big, and conversations centered on neighborhood and systems level interventions to impact low-income households. It was exciting for my 26- or 27-year-old self. One spring, LISC sponsored a presentation by Bill Strickland, developer of the Manchester-Bidwell Training Center in Pittsburgh, an art and vocational training program in an industrial area of Pittsburgh. I was filled with such hope and energy during the presentation. What struck me most from his slide show (literally, he brought in a box of slides) was the way he viewed those who took part in the programs at his center. He put water fountains in the public spaces and filled the space with fresh flowers. He seemed to view this as an intervention itself. This was a stark contrast to what I was seeing at my organization. Clients were discussed disparagingly. Even though there were legitimate cost constraints that dictated house design and interiors, client choices and requests were often ignored with little to no explanation as to why. At the time, much of my job was fund development. The way we pursued, discussed, and treated our current and prospective funders was in stark contrast to the way we approached those we served. I was left with the question of what would happen if we treated people like they deserved flowers? What would happen if larger scale interventions institutionalized the inherent worth of every person?

As a community specialist for the County Planning Department in 1979, I suggested the County conduct a Family Impact Analysis to assess the facts from the residents' point of view. I wanted to give the farm workers a voice. However, I was branded as "biased" in favor of farm workers. From my perspective, they needed a constituency – support from public or private decision makers and awareness from the rank and file county employees that the farm worker families were clients too, but powerful global actors were determining patterns of land use and the fate of workers. Public employees and developers considered all developers, financial institutions, public officials, and the Catholic Church to be neutral cost/benefit actors. Where was fairness? Equity?



Once again, I went scurrying for more knowledge. I went into Los Angeles to find a weekend seminar or some certificate program that would help me understand the politics of local land use but found nothing. I went to the School of Urban and Regional Planning, and the Dean said they have no short-term program, but if I wanted to consider the Ph.D. program, I would find what I wanted. So I applied, was accepted, and awarded a full-tuition fellowship, and I was on my way.

I walked into the kitchen. My mother had just finished her phone conversation. She said, "It's your cousin, Bernard...he is in the hospital again...his sickle cell." I was very sad about this, yet I felt an enormous sense of curiosity. I thought to myself, "How do you cope with episodes of pain, the disruptions in life?"

I asked Bernard after he was released from the hospital. He said, "I really don't know how I deal with the pain...it has become a normal state of being."

I then started to think about women. How do they cope, especially with being mothers, wives – roles that they are expected to perform? How do they perform when they have a condition that brings on unpredictable episodes of pain? I started to look at the research and I did not find much on women of color. I remember Bernard saying that stress seemed to bring on the painful episodes. I became consumed with the studying about the concept of stress (especially the biological or physiological aspects of stress).

*Most of the shared written stories were in this section. Recollections of the beginning of the journey to social work seemed to focus on lived experiences of value paradoxes, potentialities about one's "fit" with the profession of social work, and growing confidence in one's abilities. From wondering what it would be like treating clients as if they deserved flowers to realizing that poverty was not a problem that only 'those people' experienced to observing the reality of underserved children in public schools, the felt need for more knowledge as a response to the problems experienced was common. Returning to school for an MSW and then a Ph.D. seemed firmly grounded in the belief that education would provide a way to respond*

*competently to the value paradoxes encountered. Knowledge would provide a way to efficiently run agencies, respond to inequalities, and confront value incongruities. Schools of social work provided supportive space and mentorship for exploration and study, encouraging the belief that it was possible to find ways to move towards a more just society; it was possible to make a difference as a woman.*

### Academic Life

*The last area of discussion focused on the experiences of the collective biography members in the world of academia. One important note about this section is that while group membership spanned the life cycle of an academic (from new assistant professor to professor emeritus), the majority of offerings in this section are written by those who have been academics long enough to gain tenure.*

Social Worker or Academic? During our retreat, one of the participants asked this question. As we were getting ready to set forth for our next writing exercise, I decided to focus on this question. As a social worker, I do not see myself as a social worker OR an academic. It does not occur to me to differentiate the two, and I don't! I would never consider engaging in research without informing "change" and "practice" as a goal.

Furthermore, I see social work research, in the end, as an act of social justice as we define and refine social thought that is informed and oriented to change and ultimately liberation through knowledge and progressive ideas. In recent years, I have come to think of my work as that of human rights defense – the right to health care, housing, quality education, and so forth. I have come to think of human rights defense as a result of my macro practice orientation. I draw upon both my formal training and practice knowledge. Call me idealistic, but human rights are exactly why I chose social work, and that's why I continue to choose academic social work. It is just impossible for me to differentiate social work or the academy – I do both.

In the past nine months, since my transition into faculty life, it seems to have gained momentum. I have always been proud of calling myself a macro social worker. To me, macro social work is social work. So, when I walked into my first meeting at



my new university ready to embark on teaching future macro social workers, I felt slapped in the face when our Associate Dean announced at the faculty retreat that the macro social work program was in danger of disappearing. This has set into motion a host of feelings that move beyond the normal fears and anxieties of being a new junior faculty member. As someone who easily sees many sides of an issue, mostly at once, I am used to feeling like an outsider of sorts. Entering into a faculty position, I am feeling excitement, doubt, and insecurity. Senior folks tell me that this is normal, but now, the additional understanding that, as a macro faculty member, I am likely to experience further marginalization is unsettling. But, macro social work *is* social work. As I try to absorb information from all of the voices sent in my direction in my short academic career, I struggle to hear my own. What does success look like for me? What does integrity look like for me? What are my values, and how do I adhere to them without letting others' experiences cloud my own vision of what is right? Mostly, how do I get through each day of this early career without letting the anxiety of constantly being put into someone else's box separate me from myself?

After I moved to the U.S. and began to pursue my professional career in the different cultural context, I have lived with the label of minority, foreign-born people of color. When I found myself unconsciously feeling pressure that I should work harder than others, I recognized that I belong to a minority group. I tend to be more responsible for what I do, so that my behavior and work would not give negative impacts or misunderstanding on Asian women. I used to be sensitive to gender issues and patriarchal hierarchy in the past, but probably not so much now. No, indeed I am still so, but in the interplay of gender and race, the filter of race seems to come first in my professional work. I may be preoccupied to work as a foreign-born minority and do not have room to feel a gender lens yet. Not clear, constantly changing. I knew I would continuously battle race and gender biases. It's not easy, therefore, I feel I should address them in my personal and professional agenda. I believe my little steps would contribute to reducing the subtle exclusion of minority women. It will be one of the ways that helps the next generation of minority women meet a brighter future.

I have spent the last academic year overworked, overwhelmed, wallowing in what I perceive is the demise of macro practice at my school, anger at the corporatization of my university and the academy in general, sadness over the loss of how things were when I first started this profession as my second career, and wallowing in career indecisiveness.

I don't like being a "wallflower," so I feel torn between reframing my outlook and making the best of the new reality, or leaving the academy and starting the consulting business that has been monopolizing my thoughts lately.

No one in my school has "gone up" for full professor in six years. The Dean is getting a lot of questions and pressure from the new president about what's going on and why the Associate Professors aren't moving forward. I'm getting pressure from the women full professors that it's time to do this. The reality is that none of us think we can make the grade in this new paradigm that has evolved before our eyes. We are a strong, successful group of excellent teachers, researchers, and organizational citizens (probably to a fault), but most of us do not have a track record of large amounts of federal funding and a "gazillion" publications written using large datasets with the highest level of statistical wizardry. We are all afraid of the humiliation of being found "not good enough."

For me, I always thought that this final promotion would be part of my career trajectory, so yes, I'm torn and confused. When I think about what would be involved to move forward, the cost-benefit analysis that I have done in my head, and the daughter that I would have to keep telling, "Sorry honey, Mommy has a lot of work to do again," it hardly seems worth the price. [Amy] says it's not worth it, don't do it. But I can't shake the feeling that I'm copping out or that the junior faculty I'm mentoring would see me as a loser. So the internal battle continues, not only for me, but for my associate professor colleagues as well who are caught in what feels like limbo or a "time/paradigm warp."

As I sat and listened to the conversation this afternoon about being an academic vs. social worker, I found myself becoming frustrated. This dialogue underscores what I am seeing/feeling about

my current school. I became a social worker because of my commitment to change, bringing change to systems that were unfair and unjust. My decision to pursue academia spun from my experiences in those unjust systems that are referenced here. I wanted to generate knowledge building among students, teaching real world applications grounded in theory. The goal was to teach students how to use their knowledge and information learned in the classroom to fight injustices. I also wanted to use my knowledge to explore, examine, and develop initiatives that would empower those most affected by these injustices.

Now, it feels like my desire to continue in this vein is being challenged by those who are in power, those who are running the institutions. So, I pose the question: What does this mean for me as an academician? Do I conform to their way or do I go? If I go, what happens to that commitment I made to bring about change? If I stay and move in the direction that the “powers that be” are enforcing, then I would have to give up a part of my authenticity just to remain in an environment (academia) that I perceive is hostile, lacks understanding about knowledge building, and is being driven by money. Do I lose that part of myself? This is really hard; I really like being in academia, but I also remember the words spoken by my father about integrity and being true to yourself. So, again, do I give up that part of who I am that enjoys teaching and examining, exploring phenomena that are important to me to satisfy the whims of academia, or do I remain true to myself and continue with the work that fulfills me?

I am in the Dean's office. It is annual evaluation time, a time for dealing with metrics that seem to change from year to year. I had spent little time on this report, simply providing the “facts” when in other years I had enjoyed creating a rich narrative about my activities and accomplishments. While sitting through the discussion of my accomplishments this year, my mind wandered to earlier years when the preparation of the report, while not much fun, really helped me to focus on my work and my worth. I felt a certain amount of pride about being able to report to my superior about how I had spent my time during the year.

This year it was different. The process and the

conversation went well, but I knew that I did not provide the most thorough or thoughtful report. I provided the information that was required and no more, because it didn't seem to warrant more than that. I was frankly surprised at the tenor of the conversation. It was pleasant and there was no pressure, no questions, and very little critique. In the midst of the conversation I began to consider that it might be going well because there are no real expectations of me.

Have I become irrelevant? I don't feel irrelevant until the Dean seems to say that our curriculum is not good and is in great need of revision because our students are not graduating with the needed skills. “Besides,” he says, “When you retire, there will be few faculty able to support our current curriculum.”

I wanted to stand up and stamp my feet, “What do you mean that our students don't have the needed skills?” Our MSW graduates are working all over the state, and our doctoral students are doing some wonderful things in lots of different arenas of social work. I am proud of what we have accomplished, but I kept trying to see this from his perspective. Our curriculum might be considered non-traditional and perhaps very different from what he or new faculty were exposed to in other programs. It was developed from the ground up based on what the faculty thought was needed to prepare students for the work. Had the times and expectations changed so quickly to make a curriculum with great outcome measures and results useless?

I left the session deflated because it did not appear that there was any assumption that a new faculty might be asked to teach something that would require them to learn before teaching it. It felt like the expectations for them around teaching had become minimized, just like it appeared that the expectations for me around funded research were minimal. I was a “short timer,” and had minimal usefulness; more precisely, I left feeling irrelevant. It was like the last ten years of my research and scholarship no longer counted. It no longer counted in the very context where material had been developed and tested to be sure it was relevant for the students and the communities or academic environments where the students would practice. I felt like giving up. Getting angry would not help. It was then that I realized that irrelevance may just

have a type of liberating effect. What I was doing may not have any importance in the current academic milieu; however, no one was stopping me from doing what I believed in, and what gives me great pleasure, so according to one of my beloved mentors, I'll just "keep on keeping on."

We sit in the conference room as the subcommittee of a standing committee. Monday mornings are always meeting days, and I usually dread them. The one good thing is that once noon arrives, we are done and the week will have officially begun. The Dean holds up a piece of paper with a clever-looking chart on it and announces that it is only a draft of the proposed dashboard produced by the Provost's Office.

"Dashboard?" I think, "Where had I heard that word before...and recently." My spouse had rushed in from the hospital just last week. When I said hello, he had headed for his computer and said, "I need to put this on the dashboard before the end of the day." Dashboards seemed to be a rage – if you can simplify all the products into a pretty one pager, then all's right with the world. My skepticism dripped...

"What's a dashboard?" one of the other faculty members asked; this brought me back to the meeting with a jolt. The dashboard was passed around, and it had the usual expectations covered, but one young faculty member asked, "But where are the books?"

The reply was quick, somewhat dismissive, "Oh, textbooks aren't scholarly and books aren't refereed publications."

There was a long silence during which the young faculty member looked stunned, even confused. "But when I was hired, we were the School that wrote the textbooks that other schools used."

No one said anything, then the Chair switched the topic to other business. It was there that I realized how far things had come. The value of what I had been doing was not only lessened, it had been erased. I toyed for a moment with the possibility that I was being erased too – vacillating between how freeing it is to be released from the shackles of mattering in the system to the ultimate humiliation

of being obsolete. The irony of it all is working feverishly to do what I thought I was supposed to do and finding out it was totally disrespected within the very system I had worked to please, and since I had persisted in defining myself by how much I could "do," there was the frightening possibility that I had no idea how to separate my "being" from my "doing." I didn't even drop off the dashboard. I had not made it onto the dashboard!

Run away as quickly as you can, but you are a southern woman, do it with grace for God's sake! Hang on to the tattered threads of your integrity and get the hell out!

*Reflected in the writing of these experiences, life for those who were tenured female macro social work academics is currently not living up to the unspoken promises of the social work education system. After finding a home for the recognition of social injustice, the realities of being part of the system of social work academia no longer feels congruent to the hope once felt in academic homes. Providing the education once sought – how to affect systemic change – no longer seems valued within social work academia. Feelings of discomfort and of not belonging have returned, ironically within the place that once felt the most congruent with strongly held beliefs.*

## Discussion

The continuing themes identified in the written narratives from the collective biography process seem to indicate that there were some discursive practices that shaped and continue to form the experiences of these female macro social work academics. Pre-professional shapings were often grounded in values traditionally expected of social workers: social justice and respect for differences. Experiencing the disconnect between what the world should be and what the world is appears to have left an indelible mark and perhaps began to develop a lens through which those paradoxes were highlighted and upsetting.

Personally experiencing the disconnect between what ought to be and what is continued as the women moved into adulthood. Social work's history and the language used within MSW and doctoral programs provided the hope and expectation that change was not only possible, but

supported by other social workers and social work academics. Movement towards doctoral education was based on the recognition that knowledge was needed to continue to strive for change. There was a sense of hopefulness as eyes were opened to possibilities.

Ironically, the hope of being the source of change, extending knowledge and sharing it with students, has often resulted in feelings of otherness and not belonging. The values of social work have not always been experienced within social work academia where the focus is not necessarily on preparing for change and shaping change agents, but on furthering the goals of the academy regarding grant money and preparing individuals for the workplace. Critically important to these macro social work educators is finding the value in what they believe in, even if the systems in which they operate do not always project those same values.

The stories also make explicit the intersection of gender, class, and race. In the early stories, these positionalities are linked with power resulting in change making. Whether it was a mom demanding fair treatment or a woman of color recognizing the importance of her history, each woman seems to have linked her own inherent power to making a difference. Later stories, those of more senior faculty, exhibit a different experience of power. Power is no longer linked to making change in one's community, the academy. Academic survival is dependent upon using one's power to meet the demands of the market – not in change making.

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# REFLECTIONS

## NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING

*An Interdisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal Published by Cleveland State University School of Social Work*

### General Call for Narratives

*Reflections* utilizes narrative inquiry as its core focus. *Reflections* narratives convey interpersonal interactions, witnessed events, and felt experiences. This narrative content is placed within the expositional context of a well-told story that helps readers discover new ways of thinking about the personal, the professional, and the political in our lives. *Reflections* narratives contain narrative content, such as distinct moments of interaction, which are portrayed in vignettes. Vignettes are then placed in the context of an engaging story (exposition). The author may then reflect on that story and share conclusions. Often, however, the narrative stands alone, in a way which is often powerful. *Reflections* narratives are valuable for education for practice. They also often contribute to theory and research. Narratives can make conceptual contributions via reflections that draw on relevant literature and address unresolved theoretical problems. However, authors are not required to include such content. Such narratives still contain reflections of intrinsic value. *Reflections* narratives contribute to empirical knowledge about practice in the helping professions. *Reflections* does not publish research results or literature reviews, but does publish narratives of the process of research. Please see Volume 18, Number 4 for the first of our Many Ways of Narratives series about the nature of *Reflections* narratives. Additional contributions to this series are sought and can be submitted to the Many Ways of Narrative section.

### Call for Narratives for Special Section on Field Education

*Reflections* has a permanent Special Section on Field Education. In Volume 18, Number Two, we published a Special Issue on Field Education. The Special Section continues this tradition of publishing narratives relevant to field education. Denise Goodrich Liley of Boise State University is Associate Editor for Field Education and can be reached at [dliley@boisestate.edu](mailto:dliley@boisestate.edu). All helping professions have field education components, where students, during their formal academic training or shortly after graduation, carry out supervised professional practice with a learning component. As part of this training, they often write process recordings, logs, journals and other accounts of their practice. When client content is appropriately disguised and combined in composite form to protect confidentiality, such experiences can produce powerful narratives. The process of field education supervision is also one which can stimulate valuable narratives. Please submit such manuscripts directly to the Special Section.

### Open Special Section Calls for Narratives (See Website for Current List)

Interprofessional Collaborative Practice and Education

Jayashree Nimmagadda, M.S.W., Ph.D. & Judy Murphy, R.N., Ph.D., Co-Editors (Rhode Island University)

Family of Origin: Implications for Practice

Lloyd L. Lyter, Ph.D. (Marywood University) & Sharon C. Lyter, Ph.D., (Kutztown University), Co-Editors

Southern African Reflections on Social Work and Social Justice

Otrude Nontobeko Moyo, M.S.W., Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

*Submissions of any length – from short narratives focused on a single vignette to longer stories with multiple portrayals of interaction and references to the literature – are welcome (within the range of 1200-8000 words). Be sure to check the author box when you register or if you are already registered, edit your profile to check the author box. Then click User Home, Author, and you will see a submission link at the right. For special sections submissions, choose the correct section when you submit. For feedback, even on an early idea for a narrative, please contact the relevant special section editor or the editor, Michael Dover, at [reflections@csuohio.edu](mailto:reflections@csuohio.edu).*

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