CULTURAL RELEVANCE AND BRIDGING THE DIVIDE:
TEACHING HUMAN BEHAVIOR IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED MINDANAO

Susanne Bennett, Ph.D., The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.

This narrative presents an American educator's reflections on teaching human behavior to master's level social workers in the conflict-affected Philippine island of Mindanao. In order to bridge the divide between Western-originating theories and social work as it is practiced in developing countries, attention must be given to the relevance of the content, the methods of teaching, and the needs and culture of the host country. For this teaching experience, the intersubjective process that unfolded in the classroom was transformative, enabling the creation of a culturally relevant course and a respectful student-instructor learning alliance. This narrative offers observations and conceptualization about the challenges and benefits of teaching internationally, and includes comments from the Filipino students who participated in the course.

From the airplane's window, I could see ponds of water and hundreds of tall, waving coconut palms–a welcome contrast from the crowds, confusion, and urban poverty of Manila, 700 miles away. Not knowing what to expect, I felt the tension rise inside me as we neared the Cotabato airport. I carefully placed the navy scarf over my head to cover my blonde hair in respect for the Muslim culture awaiting me. As we walked down the plane's steps, I could see dozens of armed military guards surrounding the landing site and, when we walked through the small airport entrance, dozens more Filipino faces stared at me, perhaps wondering what a white woman was doing in this location. My companion told me to move quickly to the car to take us to the site where I would be teaching "Human Behavior and the Social Environment" (HBSE) to 33 BSW-trained social workers on the Philippine island of Mindanao.

My two-week, cross-cultural teaching venture during May and June 2008 was one of ten courses offered by the Social Work Education Project (SWEP), designed to contribute to the multi-sectoral peace-building efforts in Mindanao. SWEP is the outgrowth of a partnership between National Catholic School of Social Service (NCSSS) of The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and Community and Family Services International (CFSI), a Philippine-based humanitarian non-government organization (NGO), with headquarters in Manila and an office in Cotabato, Mindanao. Aimed toward social workers who work with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) affected by Mindanao's recurrent conflicts, SWEP also has the support of a consortium of local Philippine universities and nonprofit organizations.[1] The goal of SWEP is to build leadership by strengthening the knowledge and skills of social workers who work in the conflict-affected areas of Mindanao (CFSI, 2008). After completing the two-year program of study, students are granted a Masters of Teaching in Social Work (MTSW) degree from Catholic University.

Excited about the opportunity to teach internationally, I volunteered to be part of SWEP and to teach human behavior. Initially, I felt secure in this decision since human behavior theory is of primary interest to me as an academic and clinician, and I had taught HBSE in some format for ten previous years. Yet as I immersed myself in both the content and context of this course, I realized how potentially inappropriate it could be to transport Western ideas to a completely different Southeast Asian culture. I struggled with doubt about the relevance of our familiar social work theories and how to present them in a culturally competent, useful manner. My first day of teaching in Mindanao confirmed what I had anticipated. That is, my abstract world of ideas had to come to life if these theories were to be germane to the real world of these students.

Fortunately, the students and I were able to bridge the cultural and intellectual divide between my detached academic theories and their community base of practice. This reflection describes the intersubjective, transformative process we underwent as a class. It is based on the idea that an intersubjective perspective—one that embraces wondering and not knowing, one that recognizes interpersonal dynamics of everyone in the classroom—is vital to the cross-cultural learning process. Intersubjectivity is a philosophical stance that proposes we all bring to relationships our subjective experiences based on our emotional histories (Buirski & Haglund, 2001; Orange, Atwood, & Stolorow, 1997). It suggests that relational experiences shape our capacities to establish empathic bonds and affect our desires to be known, recognized, and connected to others; all important factors in building cross-cultural relationships.

A mixed-method program evaluation is part of the SWEP project design, but empirical findings from this evaluation will not be available until the end of the six-year project. In the meantime, this reflection presents my initial impressions of teaching in Mindanao, shaped by the content and process of the course, as well as the intersubjectivity between the students and instructor. Included are the thoughts and impressions of select students who were invited to contribute to this reflection and who gave permission to include their words. As background, the following is a brief history of the socio-historical context of current conflicts in Mindanao and further details about the SWEP program.

Context of Teaching

Mindanao is the second-largest and most-southern Philippine island that trails into Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries. While Filipinos are generally Catholic, most of the country's 5 to 9% Muslim population live within Mindanao (U.S. State Dept., 2007); 20.44% of the 16.1 million inhabitants of Mindanao were Muslim in 2000, the date of the last national census (Philippine Census, 2005). Over the past 500 years of Spanish and then American occupation of the Philippines, Mindanao maintained its separate and varied ethnic identities, influenced by its Moorish history and indigenous roots (JNA, 2005). Due to its continuing quest for self-determination and independence from the Philippine nation, the island is rife with internal ethnic disputes and armed conflict. Yet, the history of this ongoing conflict dates back to the middle of the 15th century when the Spaniards tried to colonize the Muslims of Mindanao, known as the Bangsamoro people (Lingga, 2004).

When Filipino independence was granted by the U.S. in 1946 and Mindanao was annexed as part of the Philippines, the Bangsamoro people continued to assert their desire for a separate government (Lingga, 2004). In the late 1960s, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was established as a political and military effort to obtain independence. It is now the ruling party of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), established after a peace agreement that continued Philippine sovereignty over the Bangsamoro people. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is the largest separatist group that broke away from the MNLF to continue the struggle for an independent Bangsamoro state, and there are more radical splinter groups that have established a presence in Mindanao in recent years. Although outside observers sometimes assume the conflict in Mindanao is between

Muslims and Christians, SWEP students and scholars alike (Lingga, 2004) disagree with this view and report that the struggle is for self-governance. As one student summarized, "Absolutely, the Mindanao problem is not a religious conflict, [but others] maliciously injected a religious color to it some time ago." Further complicating these issues, Mindanao has significant poverty, poor local governance, and "national government neglect" (Frederico et al., 2007, p. 173), as well as land disputes, *rido* (family feuds), and ethnic tribal warfare (JNA, 2005).

It is out of this socio-historical context that the idea for SWEP emerged. In 2000, there was a resurgence of armed conflict between the MILF and the Armed Forces of the Philippines, which left close to a million persons displaced from their homes (Frederico et al., 2007). It has been estimated that at least 85% of these IDPs are Muslim (JNA, 2005). CFSI has been actively focused on providing humanitarian services to IDPs uprooted due to this conflict and other recent natural disasters. With funding assistance from the World Bank and others, CFSI has provided emergency aid to thousands of people in evacuation centers and has given attention to "literacy, livelihood, and food sufficiency" (CFSI, 2008) for communities throughout Mindanao. SWEP was developed to further address the needs of IDPs through the provision of advanced education for the social workers providing services in these conflict-affected areas.

Through private funding, SWEP was established to educate a minimum of 75 BSW-trained social workers from the conflict-affected areas over a period of six years. The 30-hour MTSW curriculum consists of ten courses, each of which is the equivalent of a three-credit, semester-long MSW course. However, the courses are taught in intensive two-week time blocks spaced over the two-year time period, which enables students to continue their employment and professors to continue their teaching schedules at their home university. The ten courses, approved by the NCSSS faculty and selected by the SWEP partners, are similar to those taught in the current MSW program.[2] The following

reflection is about the first HBSE course completed by the initial cohort of SWEP.

The majority of the students in this cohort called themselves caseworkers or community organizers, and about five of them were instructors in local BSW programs in Mindanao. Demographically, 28 of the 33 students in this class were Muslim, with the non-Muslim students representing a number of Christian faiths; six students were men; and the average age of the students was 29.3, ranging from 23 to 50 years old. It is noteworthy that about a third of these students had been displaced from their own homes due to armed conflict at some point in life. That painful life experience is what had motivated many to become social workers for their people.

The Class Process: Introduction to the Course

In light of the conflict endemic to Mindanao, theories relevant to the sociocultural context of these students were selected for this HBSE course, which was divided into three main focuses: macro-mezzo theories for understanding the social environment (conflict theory; systems theory; and chaos theory); (2) micro theories for understanding human development and behavior (contemporary psychodynamic and cognitive theories; and attachment theory and neurobiology); and (3) theories relevant to practice with conflict-affected populations (trauma theory and empowerment theory). Due to my review of a syllabus of one of the BSW programs in the Philippines, I was aware of the content students had been taught in order to pass the Filipino social work licensing exam. In contrast to this content—the work of classical Western theorists, including Freud, Piaget, Marx, Bandura, and Durkheim—it seemed wiser to expose SWEP students to contemporary theoretical concepts that might speak to their lives and work.

With this goal in mind, this HBSE course began with an opening class focused on getting to know each other's culture. Although this was the fifth course in the SWEP program, this was the first time the group had reconvened in four months. In an introductory

exercise where we reported "what's new," they shared recent events of their lives, and I was open about my family, my work, my life in America; all efforts to help them know me and feel comfortable. I wondered how the students were seeing and experiencing me, since I was the first white female to teach them (women of color and a white male had preceded me). I noticed people staring at me on the streets in town, leading me to ponder how differences—some obvious, others not—would affect our learning alliance in the class. In order to give theoretical weight to our relational introductions that first day, we explored how cultural differences inform who we are and develop our ideas and communication styles. I invited them to consider intersections, differences, and fluidity within and among cultural groups (Hutchison, 2008; Laird, 1998).

The second class introduced students to human behavior theories in general and how theories can inform a bio-psychosocial-spiritual approach to social work (Hutchison, 2008; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006).[3] We examined how we know what we know and how theories are socially constructed, influenced by time and socio-historical context. I urged them to critique all theories for their current usefulness and cultural relevance and invited them to question me. Yet, when one of the students questioned me about the existence of "post-modernism," I was reminded of my Western biases and had to stop myself from debating the issue. It is uncommon for Filipino students to disagree with a professor and the student, worried he had offended me, came to me afterwards to apologize. I reassured him that I welcomed his questions, but privately I felt concerned about how I could build a bridge from my abstract theories to the reality of these students' lives.

From Crisis Point to Turning Point

In the afternoon of our second day together, I felt something shift in the class. Perhaps it had begun the previous day and I had not realized it. It may have been when I admitted to the students how little I knew of their world and how we would be learning together about the relevance of this content.

Perhaps it happened when I was open to their efforts to show me how to wear my hijab, and I was comfortable with their friendliness and attempts to make me feel welcome. Perhaps the stage was set when I quickly perceived I must use my clinical skills to be sensitively attuned to their affect and implicit communications in order to understand their differently accented English. Or, it may have been when the class member questioned me about the relevance of one of the concepts and I reassured him it was permissible to question. There were probably many reasons—some known and others not—that bridged our connection.

In class three, I began teaching an overview of conflict theories (Gjerde, 2004; Goodhand & Hulme, 1999; Maxwell & Reuveny, 2000; Robbins et al., 2006), the first in the series of specific theories I had planned to teach. As I presented basic concepts about power and inequality, coercion and change, exploitation and the power elite, I saw these ideas transcend their Western origins and come alive for these students. Students related to the notion that "conflict is a struggle between individuals or collectivities over values or claims to status, power, and scarce resources" (Goodhand & Hulme, 1999, p. 14). They agreed that problems are created by disparities and struggles for dignity and life's necessities. I realized they were grasping the concepts that had been presented when they talked about ethnic group clashes for independence; the marginalization felt by Muslims in a primarily Christian country; the overwhelming poverty in their communities; how poor governance may have created the "rice problem" in the Philippines. The group work they completed led to thoughtful presentations about armed conflicts, corrupt government, and bartering for power.

I could personally feel the reality of conflict in their society. A killing occurred directly across the street from our classroom that morning (we could hear the shots and see the gathering crowd). Then two more killings occurred that night—at the same time and in the same block of the restaurant where we were having dinner. Altogether, six people were killed in the first few days of my stay in

Cotabato, and I could see the prevalence of machine guns draped across shoulders of young men as I was driven around town in a secure car with darkened windows. Although unpredictable violence also occurs in Washington, D.C., Cotabato felt different. My unfamiliarity with the culture and the knowledge that so many of these students had been personally touched by armed conflict and displacement, brought intensity to the classroom that I had not experienced as a professor in the U.S.

With our shared awareness of external conflict as a backdrop, the next full day's discussion of systems theories marked the turning point in this course. We began by discussing concepts of open and closed systems, boundaries, adaptation, and equifinality, and applied these concepts to family transitions (Friedman, 1997; Hutchison, 2008). Students created ecomaps of "typical" families in Mindanao, illustrating how the focal system of the family changes when one member of the family changes. They elaborated details of family displacement, the death of a parent or family member through tribal *rido*, the changing roles of women and men in their society, and the complicated dynamics of families with multiple wives; all examples of students teaching me, while providing a theoretical frame for understanding local family life.

The afternoon class focused on non-linear systems theory, or chaos theory (Bolland & Atherton, 1999; Halmi, 2007; Hudson, 2000; Warren, Franklin, & Streeter, 1998), and in light of the recent violence, the theory's name seemed appropriate. In this developing country, students are encouraged to value the scientific method. As Muslims, they follow explicit laws of the Qur'an; I wondered how they would respond to chaos theory's view of the world as ambiguous and non-deterministic. I first presented the theoretical concept of "the butterfly effect," which proposes that the smallest of events can create major unpredictable changes, creating challenges to scientific cause-and-effect predictions. In a country with firsthand knowledge of typhoons, tsunamis, volcanoes, earthquakes, and war, and with news of China's massive earthquake

unfolding as we spoke, this concept clearly resonated.

Next, I presented ideas that the world is *not* total confusion and chaos, that what seems to be chaotic is actually complex and self-regulating change, that there may be deep structure in the world, though it originally seems random (Hudson, 2000). We discussed the suggestion that "crises points" in life can be seen as opportunities for growth and that conflict can be viewed as part of a transformational process, from which something new can emerge (Goodhand & Hulme, 1999). Together, we realized this is a hopeful theory because it reframes the view that conflict is always disastrous, and it offers the suggestion that small changes or events—such as the direct intervention of a caseworker or the grassroots efforts of a community organizer—can lead to major and unpredictable changes.

My intuition that the students were gravitating to this theory was confirmed in their discussions and in the reflection journals they were keeping as an assignment. They were asked to discuss in small groups how these ideas were relevant to their work or their personal lives. They immediately began to talk passionately in Tagalog (their primary language) as they told each other stories of personal life chaos, of small events that led unpredictably to major life changes, and of crisis points that led to personal transformation. When I came by to listen, they switched to English and shared their stories with raw emotion: memories of loved ones dying in the war, of evacuation, of losing jobs, of personal upheaval. I had not anticipated the power of this exercise for the class, nor for me. I too was moved to tears as they told me of their lives.

That night, one of the students wrote the following in her journal:

> As a child, I grew up in the midst of armed conflict. I was full of insecurities. Most of the time, I felt so bad about our situation that an inferiority complex developed. The only thing that encouraged me to finish my social work degree was to escape

from the worst situation I had at that time. And I succeeded. It became a turning point to me. Later on, I realized that serving my co-internally displaced people is fulfilling work. It proved also that when you are doing good things for your people, you can be rewarded in many ways.

She also applied the concept of the "butterfly effect" to the armed conflict itself, saying: "The conflict in Mindanao was unplanned and no one expected that it could reach to more than three decades of armed confrontation between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Bangsamoro Liberation Fronts. . . .From the simple plan of invasion, the result is catastrophe." Echoing the words of several classmates, she added that chaos theory can "remind us not to be overwhelmed by the complex situations of the communities we are working with."

Coming Together

As the students relayed the turning points in their lives, I felt we had reached a turning point in our class. I no longer doubted that these theories were culturally relevant, or that we could bridge the cultural divide between us. I was reminded of the real value in experiential learning and in sharing narratives; this process freed them to explore more openly the usefulness of new ideas. The next class focused on contemporary psychodynamic and cognitive theories—which had been taught to them in college in classical incarnations—and we discussed what these theories have to offer *today* about the importance of narratives in people's lives (Berlin, 1995; Nurius, 1994; Wachtel, 2008). We examined Wachtel's (2008) point that professionals need to help clients create "narratives of possibility," as well as "narratives of explanation" (p. 273). The value of constructing narratives spoke to these students, who seemed to benefit from the experience of giving voice to the impact of Mindanao's conflicts.

The content on attachment theory and neurobiology (Shapiro & Applegate, 2000; Sable, 2000) was completely new; yet the theories again made sense to these students who were culturally relational, collective, and placed great value on family. Perhaps this is the reason students easily embraced the concept of "secure base," and how that enables exploration for adults as well as children. They seemed interested to learn that relationship quality impacts the child's developing brain and nervous system (Schore & Schore, 2008) and that resiliency is associated with secure attachment (Sroufe, 2000). They also recognized they had become a secure base for each other, as demonstrated through their collaborative learning process. This was particularly notable when stronger students rallied around those who seemed more reluctant to participate in English. The reticent students—the ones I feared might not understand—began to blossom when they led group presentations, to the applause of their supportive classmates.

The remainder of the course focused on understanding the impact of trauma on development and human functioning (Allen, 2001; Basham, 2008; van der Kolk & McFarland, 1996; Williams, 2006). Prior to this course, it was suggested to me that *some* Muslim leaders in Mindanao object to the notion of trauma because faithful Muslims do not frame difficult experiences as tragedies; they accept them as Allah's will. Furthermore, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a western diagnosis that has been the focus of debate in many international circles (Basham, 2008; de Jong, 2004). However, the stage had been set for discussing trauma through the previous presentation, which had emphasized the influence of secure attachment as a protective factor that facilitates resilience for traumatized persons. The students were cognizant of consequences of armed conflict, evacuation, and internal displacement on human functioning, particularly child development, and they appreciated the research that trauma has significant neurobiological sequelae that may be mitigated through relationships and appropriate supports (Alcock, 2003; Baron, Jensen, & de Jong, 2003; de Jong, 2002; Joshi & O'Donnell, 2003).

By the end of the week, they had told stories of family members having flashbacks

from armed conflict. Some shared that flashbacks were still happening to them. As a group, we discussed the importance of creating coherent narratives of trauma and empowering the strengths of the community to increase possibilities for transformation and post-traumatic growth (Almedom, 2005; Herman, 1992). We began to explore ways that local social workers were enabling clients to move beyond the traumatic effects of displacement to build viable communities in Mindanao.

Evaluation of the Course

During group presentations for the last class, students gave evidence of their abilities to integrate what had been taught during this intensive course. They performed role-plays illustrating theories and their application to social work intervention. Two groups acted out family scenes from an evacuation center, including the murder of a parent and subsequent trauma of the children, followed by social work intervention leading to changed functioning for the traumatized individuals. All five final presentations seemed to capture how the course came together, both relationally and cognitively, and demonstrated how these students could intervene in a professional manner grounded in contemporary theory and research.

The students' final papers further confirmed they comprehended the importance of evidence-based theory for changing social policy, for organizing communities, and for peace-building; all areas of practice for these social workers. One student wrote the following:

The continuous outbreak of war and the unpredictability of peace stability in Mindanao has caused havoc and wrecked children's healthy attachment patterns, let alone traumatizing them. . . Policymakers therefore need to be educated and enlightened about attachment theory so they can develop within themselves the conscience to legislate an "all-out-peace" policy that shall end once and for all the events of war in Mindanao.

Another student said that "having a grasp of conflict and understanding it may raise the consciousness of the people." She believed such awareness could enable others to

"contribute and participate in peace-building" and "to somehow address the underlying causes of conflict in one's own little way. I conclude that the 'little voices' of social workers can make an impact for social change."

Finally, students expressed how this course helped them better understand their social work profession. They acknowledged that theories taught in their BSW programs were "outdated and detached" from their work, which may explain why scores on the Filipino social work licensing exam are usually the lowest for questions about HBSE. One person said that when she learned that HBSE would be one of the required courses for the MTSW, she thought, "Oh no! It's a difficult and jaded subject." Yet she came to realize "how relevant and how exciting it was to study" human behavior. She said that she "found these theories very relevant to our social work practice in Mindanao. . . .as well as in my personal life." As a community organizer who works with some of the most challenging of social environments, this student said that learning new ways to understand her work "somehow uplifted my spirit."

Discussion of Teaching Process

The global expansion of social work education evokes countless questions about the universality of social work theories, the cultural relevance and transferability of Western ideas, and the challenge of adapting methods of social work education and practice from the U.S. to the local needs of the host country (Nye, 2005; Taylor, 1999). Clearly, these were the significant challenges I faced as a professor in Mindanao. As I prepared for my trip, I read the suggestions offered by others (Nye, 2005, 2008; Taylor, 1999; Tunney, 2002; Yan & Tsui, 2007), based on their experiences for the implementation of culturally relevant education in developing countries, and my own experience confirmed the value of many of their ideas.

Relevance of Content

Tunney (2002) stresses the importance of understanding and linking local needs and issues to core social work principles. In the

case of Mindanao, it was critical to recognize the long history of armed conflict and the need to develop theoretical grounding for social work interventions with conflict-affected populations. It was important to recognize cultural attitudes toward trauma and take into account the influences of Islam, in particular, and Filipino culture, in general, for finding a means to understand and cope with conflict and natural disasters. In linking needs to social work principles, Tunney points out the value of having students examine their own attitudes and how their interventions and values mesh with what is being taught. Highly relational, these Filipino students embraced theories that value the helping relationship and sensitivity to the needs of others, both individually and collectively. Yet they admitted sometimes becoming authoritative and hierarchical, rather than compassionate, when faced with overwhelming need and few resources. As a result, we spent time talking about ways of maintaining appropriate professional boundaries while still being sensitive to their clients' needs.

Taylor (1999) also offers useful advice based on her experiences abroad. She points out how "one quickly discovers that social work in most countries must be concerned with the struggle to exist" (p. 315). That was clearly the case in the Philippines, a country in which oppressive poverty was immediately apparent compared to Western privilege. She stresses the importance of emphasizing advocacy and empowerment, the use of extended families and social networks, the development of humanitarian care based on mutual aid and self-help, and "concentration on people's capacity to live in the face of seemingly overwhelming adversity" (p. 317). I found her comments relevant to both social life and social work in Mindanao. Indeed, CFSI's work in the Philippines fits this community-building model of practice.

While I share many of the observations noted by these authors, my own experience underscored the importance of seeing this teaching venue as a culturally unique situation, shaped by the needs of these individual students and their communities, as well as the interpersonal relationships between the students and myself. Although some general statements might reasonably be made about cultural differences between our two countries, such as the collectivity of Filipinos in contrast to the individualism of Americans, these remain generalizations. Variations and intersections of cultures in Mindanao, as in the U.S., make for individualized needs in the classroom. This observation led me to recognize the importance of avoiding assumptions about which Western theories and ideas are useful, based on cultural generalizations.

For example, a number of educators minimize the relevance of dynamic and developmental theories for social workers teaching persons in collectivist societies or working with Muslim clients (Hodge & Nadir, 2008; Taylor, 1999). This viewpoint fails to emphasize that Muslims vary according to the culturally influenced community in which they live, such as Muslims in Mindanao. Blanket statements about appropriate theories seem to dismiss major shifts in contemporary theory development, such as the relational, interactive bent of psychodynamic theory, or the wealth of recent research validating the significance of attachment relationships on the well-being of the developing child and the traumatized adult. In addition, critics of systems theory's emphasis on adaptation fail to recognize the contributions that chaos theory offers to expand our understanding of change within complex systems. The recent theoretical discourse about nonlinear systems seems particularly relevant to understanding the challenges that exist in the developing world.

Value of Relational Process

In reflecting on my particular class, I realize that careful selection of theories relevant to the needs of the students was only part of what made this teaching experience memorable. The educational context—that is, the way we all worked together—was perhaps more important than the relevance of the content itself. With that thought in mind, I resonate with Nye's (2005) comment about her cross-cultural experiences as an educator and clinician in Thailand. She says that "...'starting where the client is'—that core social work dictum—requires that we enter

our clients' cultural worlds and relate to them within their cultural systems, their values and ideals" (p. 53). The same statement can be made about effective teaching, both locally and abroad, but I would add one point: we can only relate to our students and enter their cultural worlds by carefully noticing the *intersubjective process* that is *continually* unfolding between us. This requires us to pay close attention to how the students' cultural world and ours mutually influence each other; how their subjectivities and interpersonal processes (as much as we can sense them) interact with our subjectivity and interpersonal processes (as much as we can be open to them).

This dynamic seemed constantly in action in the SWEP human behavior class. The students were exceptionally curious about how their cultural world and mine were interacting. They inquired about my personal and professional life at home; they watched how I responded to what they had to say; they wondered how I was being affected by the hot weather, the different foods, the new sights and sounds, the local violence; they were eager for me to feel welcome and comfortable in their cultural world.

Following their lead, I was also curious about them. I asked how they lived and worked and designed group exercises that gave them a way of sharing more of themselves and their culture. I was sensitive to their questions about my ideas and values, and noticed their affect as they shared personal reflections. I made split-second decisions about when to have small versus large group discussions, Tagalog vs. English conversations, when to revise an assignment or how best to apply a concept, based on what I perceived was unfolding in class. We were finely attuned to each other.

In addition to entering each other's cultural worlds, I tried to follow an "intersubjective frame for learning" (Bennett, 2002), which is similar to a relational, intersubjective approach to clinical work (Buirski & Haglund, 2001; Mitchell, 2000; Stern, 2004). That is, the instructor thinks critically about the implications of what is taught and frees students to ask questions and wonder about cultural biases embedded in the presentations and readings.

Students and instructor see themselves as mutual learners, rather than placing the instructor in the role of all-knowing expert. And finally, the instructor tries to stay open to personal knowledge, remaining aware of personal insecurities and uncertainties. By following this approach, the instructor encourages curiosity, affirms the students' experiences, and is attuned to both implicit and explicit communication about the students and the class dynamics.

By taking this approach, I recognized my limitations from the beginning and welcomed what the students could teach me about their culture and their lives. I tried to stay present to my insecurities, including my doubts about the relevance of the theories and my anxiety about the realities of armed conflict. I remained aware of my minority status, and I visibly felt the sense of difference that comes from being the only white woman in sight for almost two weeks. By going on a field visit to the rural mountains nearby, I exposed myself to overwhelming poverty unlike any I have seen in my many years as an American social worker. Listening to stories told by my students, I heard narratives of personal loss and community tragedy unlike any I have heard in all my years as a clinician. Yet I also saw signs of resilience and heard words of hope in the midst of what seemed to be insurmountable obstacles. Perhaps emotional availability to these feelings and experiences enabled my students to be available to me. Through our relationships and mutual openness, we came to appreciate what we could learn from each other and felt changed by that process.

Closing Thoughts and Implications

Two months after the teaching experience in this reflection, the signing of a long-anticipated formal ceasefire agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was cancelled by the GRP. Then the document that previously had been negotiated between the GRP and the MILF—the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain—was declared "unconstitutional" by the Supreme Court of the Philippines. These decisions essentially

placed the peace movement in limbo, because the constitution of the Philippines must now be revised in order to proceed with a peace agreement. Frustration with this recent turn of events triggered a pronounced increase in military action between the MILF, representing the Bangsamoro people, and the Philippine National Forces, representing the GRP. Since August 2008, this new wave of armed conflict has left hundreds of people dead and has destroyed close to 4,000 homes. An additional 703,949 individuals (146,570 families) have been displaced (Lingga, 2009), and they live in staggering poverty in evacuation camps throughout central and western Mindanao. Without doubt, the deteriorating conditions in Mindanao underscore the need for a program such as SWEP.

Despite the increase in armed conflict and the growing number of internally displaced persons, the first cohort of SWEP students completed their education and graduated with the MTSW degree from The Catholic University of America in May of 2009. A second cohort of students began the program the following week. I was fortunate to teach these new students from the beginning because the order of SWEP courses was rearranged, moving HBSE and generalist practice to the initial module of the program. Although I made minor changes in my syllabus for this second rotation of SWEP, I taught the same content and had similar emotionally charged experiences with the students and community. My repeat experience reaffirmed the importance of this program for training master's level social workers to practice in the conflict-affected areas of the country and, this year, I had fewer doubts about the relevance of Western theories to inform their professional practice. I trusted that being attuned to our intersubjective process in the classroom ultimately would help us bridge our cultural divide.

Over time, the longitudinal program evaluation will evaluate the effectiveness of SWEP from the perspective of the students, stakeholders, and professors. Yet empirical research is not necessary to confirm the value of this experience for me, both professionally and personally. As an educator, I had the advantage of clarifying my ideas and increasing my pedagogical skills through the challenge of cross-cultural teaching. I saw the value of having students apply theoretical concepts to their personal lives because it made ideas come alive within *their* cultural context. I witnessed the usefulness of experiential, collaborative learning for developing student skills through teamwork that supported students at different levels of ability. And, I experienced the benefits of cross-cultural disclosure to foster better understanding of how differences shape ideas and beliefs. Even in relatively homogeneous educational settings in the U.S., these pedagogical tools may help me attend more closely to cultural differences within the classroom.

In addition, participating in social work education in a developing country expanded my learning about the world and stimulated questions that might not otherwise have been considered. My curiosity has been raised about the influence of Islam on development and behavior, both how it sustains individuals faced with disasters and how it shapes one's identity within a society. The Mindanao experience, in particular, evokes questions about diversity within Islam regarding its practice in the Philippines in contrast to other regions of the world. I am left wondering how spirituality and religious expression are different in a collectivist, relational society, in contrast to an individualist society. Similar questions emerge about the universality of Western-originating theories, particularly attachment theory and trauma theory. Although the SWEP students resonated with these theories, unanswered questions remain about *how* attachments are formed in a society that is culturally relational and how early family relationships influence the resilience of a people who live with armed conflict. Hopefully, these questions will be explored through further study and future cross-cultural exchanges.

On a personal level, I am left with memories of an experience that was transformative. It is fair to say that my teaching experiences in Mindanao may have affected me as much as my teaching affected the students. Those experiences have broadened my world by giving me an appreciation of a

different culture, a first-hand view of global poverty, and a personal understanding of difference as a racial-ethnic minority for an extended period of time. I am grateful to have had these experiences and feel they have enhanced my skills, knowledge, and empathy as a social worker.

As I reflect on my time in Mindanao, I remain aware that my limited experience does not give me expertise about Mindanao specifically, nor about international social work education generally. Yet my experience has sensitized me to persons who are significantly different and, hopefully, it has enlivened my teaching in the States due to my new ways of seeing the world. I have learned that teaching content relevant to context is always essential but, in the end, it is the intersubjective process that proves transformative and bridges the divide between culturally different worlds. Upon final reflection, bridging that divide is both the challenge and opportunity of social work education, whether the cultural context is in the U.S. or 9,000 miles away.
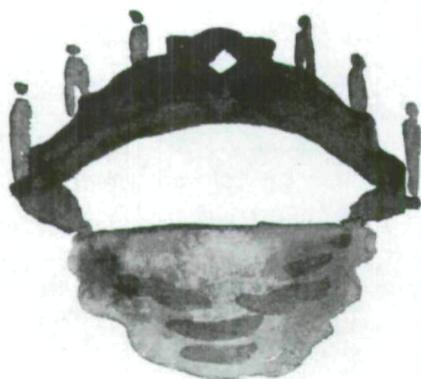
Additional Comment

References

• Alcock, M. (2003). Refugee trauma–the assault on meaning. *Psychodynamic Practice, 9*(3), 291-306.

• Allen, J. (2001). A developmental approach to trauma. In *Traumatic Relationships and Serious Mental Disorders* (pp. 3-19). Chichester, West Sussex, England: Wiley Press.

• Almedom, A. (2005). Resilience, hardiness, sense of coherence, and posttraumatic growth: All paths leading to "Light at the end of the tunnel"? *Journal of Loss and Trauma, 10,* 253-265.

• Baron, N., Jensen, S., & de Jong, J. (2003). Refugees and internally displaced people. In B. Green et al., *Trauma Interventions in War and Peace: Prevention, Practice, and Policy* (pp. 243-270). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

• Basham, K. (2008). Trauma theories. In J. Berzoff, L. Flanagan, & P. Hertz (Eds.), *Inside Out and Outside In: Psychodynamic Clinical Theory and Psychopathology in Contemporary Multicultural Contexts* (2nd ed., pp. 411-441). New York: Jason Aaronson.

• Bennett, S. (2002). Addressing homophobia and heterosexism in the mental health classroom: An intersubjective frame for learning. In E. Cramer (Ed.), *Addressing Homophobia and Heterosexism on College Campuses* (pp. 133-143). New York: The Haworth Press.

• Berlin, S. (1995). Constructivism and the environment: A cognitive-integrative perspective for social work practice. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services, 77*(6), 326-335.

• Bolland, K., & Atherton, C. (1999). Chaos theory: An alternative approach to social work practice and research. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services, 80*(4), 367-373.

• Buirski, P., & Haglund, P. (2001). *Making sense together: The intersubjective approach to psychotherapy.* Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.

• CFSI (2008). *Community and Family Services International.* Retrieved June 20, 2008, from, http://www.cfsi.ph/p_phil.htm

• de Jong, J. (2002). Public mental health, traumatic strews and human rights violations in low-income countries: A culturally appropriate model in times of conflict, disaster and peace. In J. de Jong (Ed.), *Trauma, War, and Violence: Public Mental Health in Socio-Cultural Context* (pp. 1-91). New York: Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishers.

• de Jong, J. (2004). Public mental health and culture: Disasters as a challenge to Western mental health care models, the self, and PTSD. In J. Wilson, & B. Drozdek (Eds.), *Broken Spirits: The Treatment of Traumatized Asylum Seekers, Refugees, War and Torture Victims* (pp. 159-178). New York: Brunner-Routledge.

• Frederico, M., Picton, C., Muncy, S., Ongsiapco, L., Santos, C., & Hernandez, V. (2007). Building community following displacement due to armed conflict. *International Social Work, 50*(2), 171-184.

• Friedman, B. (1997). Systems theory. In J. Brandell (Ed.), *Theory and Practice in Clinical Social Work* (pp. 3-17). New York: The Free Press.

• Gjerde, P. (2004). Culture, power, and experience: Toward a person-centered cultural psychology. *Human Development, 47*, 138-157.

• Goodhand, J., & Hulme, D. (1999). From wars to complex political emergencies: Understanding conflict and peace-building in the new world disorder. *Third World Quarterly, 20*(1), 13-26.

• Halmi, A. (2007). Chaos and non-linear dynamics. *International Social Work, 46*(1), 83-101.

• Herman, J. (1992). Terror. In *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence– From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (pp. 33-50). New York: Basic Books.

• Hodge, D., & Nadir, A. (2008). Moving toward culturally competent practice with Muslims: Modifying cognitive therapy with Islamic tenets. *Social Work, 53*(1), 31-41.

• Hudson, C. (2000). At the edge of chaos: A new paradigm for social work? *Journal of Social Work Education, 36*(2), 215-230.

• Hutchison, E. (2008). *Dimensions of Human Behavior: Person and Environment*, 2nd ed. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

• JNA (2005). *Joint Needs Assessment for Reconstruction and Development of Conflict-Affected Areas in Mindanao: Integrative Report, V. 1*. Pasig City, Philippines: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank.

• Joshi, P., & O'Donnell, D. (2003). Consequences of child exposure to war and terrorism. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 6*(4), 275-292.

• Laird, J. (1998). Theorizing culture: Narrative ideas and practice principles. In M. McGoldrick (Ed.). *Re-Visioning Family Therapy: Race, Culture, and Gender in Clinical Practice* (pp. 20-36). New York: Guilford Press.

• Lingga, A.S. (2004). Understanding Bangsamoro independence as a mode of self-determination. *Mindanao Journal, 27,* 3-12.

• Lingga, A.S. (2009). *Conflict in Mindanao.* Presentation on May 29, 2009, to Social Work Education Project, Cotabato City, Mindanao.

• Maxwell, J., & Reuveny, R. (2000). Resource scarcity and conflict in developing countries. *Journal of Peace Studies, 37*(3), 301-322.

• Mitchell, S. (2000). *Relationality: From Attachment to Intersubjectivity.* Hillsdale, NY: The Analytic Press.

• Nurius, P. (1994). Assessing and changing self-concept: Guidelines from the memory system. *Social Work, 39*(2), 221-229.

• Nye, C. (2005). Conversations with Suwanrang: The treatment relationship in cultural context. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 33*(1), 37-54.

• Nye, C. (2008). The delivery of social services in northern Thailand. *International Social Work, 51*(2), 193-205.

• Orange, D., Atwood, G., & Stolorow, R. (1997). *Working Intersubjectively: Contextualism in Psychoanalytic Practice.* Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.

• Philippine Census (June 08, 2005). New Mindanao groupings based on the results of census 2000. *Special Release No. 173.* Retrieved July 1, 2008, from, http://www.census.gov.ph/data/sectordata/sr05173tx.html

• Robbins, S., Chatterjee, P., & Canda, E. (2006). *Contemporary Human Behavior Theory: A Critical Perspective for Social Work.* Boston: Pearson.

• Sable, P. (2000). The roots of attachment theory. In *Attachment and Adult Psychotherapy* (pp. 3-26). Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson.

• Schore, J., & Schore, A. (2008). Modern attachment theory: The central role of affect regulation in development and treatment. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 36*(1), 9-20.

• Shapiro, J., & Applegate, J. (2000). Cognitive neuroscience, neurobiology, and affect regulation: Implications for clinical social work. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 28*(1), 9-21.

• Sroufe, A. (2000). Early relationships and the development of children. *Infant Mental Health Journal, 21*(1-2), 67-74.

• Stern, D. (2004). The intersubjective matrix. In *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life* (pp.75-96). NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

• Taylor, Z. (1999). Values, theories, and methods in social work education: A culturally transferable core? *International Social Work, 42*(3), 309-318.

• Tunney, K. (2002). Learning to teach abroad. *International Social Work, 45*(4), 435-446.

• U.S. State Deptartment (2007). Philippines. *2007 Report on International Religious freedom.* Retrieved June 30, 2008, from, http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90151.htm

• van der Kolk, B., & McFarland, A. (1996). The black hole of trauma: Traumatic stress. In *The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (pp. 3-23). NY: Guildford Press.

• Wachtel, P. (2008). *Relational Theory and the Practice of Psychotherapy.* New York: Guilford.

• Warren, K., Franklin, C., & Streeter, C. 1998). New directions in systems theory: Chaos and complexity. *Social Work, 43*(4), 357-372.

• Williams, W. (2006). Complex trauma: Approaches to theory and treatment. *Journal of Loss and Trauma, 11*, 321-335.

• Yan, M., & Tsui, M. (2007). The quest for Western social work knowledge: Literature in the USA and practice in China. *International Social Work, 50*(5), 641-653.

Susanne Bennett, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at The Catholic University of America School of Social Service. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: bennetts@cua.edu.

(Footnotes)
1. These include Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA), the Cotabato City State Polytechnic College (CCSPC), Mindanao State University (MSU), and Western Mindanao State University (WMSU).

2. Courses include Generalist Practice with Individuals, Families, and Groups; Generalist Practice with Groups, Organizations, and Communities; Issues in Social Development; Social Planning; Human Behavior and the Social Environment; Conflict Resolution and Peace-Making; Supervision and Consultation; Theories of Social Justice; Management of Non-Profit Organizations; and Program Evaluation.

3. Citations related to class content reflect the assigned and recommended readings for the Mindanao HBSE course.