

# 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.

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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?’

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

**About the Author:** Tien Ung is Assistant Professor and Director of the Urban Leadership Program at Simmons School of Social Work in Boston, MA (617-521-3907; [tien.ung@simmons.edu](mailto:tien.ung@simmons.edu)).