Same, Same - But Different: The Development of Cultural Humility through an International Volunteer Experience

Jean Schuldberg, Ed.D, MSW/LCSW
Professor
MSW Program Director
School of Social Work
California State University, Chico, 400 W. First Street, Butte Hall 519
Chico, California 95929-0550, USA

Nicole S. Fox, MA
Department of Sociology
Brandeis University, MS 071
Waltham, Massachusetts 02454, USA

Celesta A. Jones, PhD, MSW
Professor
Director - School of Social Work
School of Social Work
California State University, Chico, 400 W. First Street, Butte Hall 511
Chico, California 95929-0550, USA

Patty Hunter, MSW/LCSW
Associate Professor
Field Education Director
School of Social Work, California State University, Chico
400 W. First Street, Butte Hall 529, Chico, California 95929-0550, USA.

Michele Bechard, MSW
Social Worker
Butte County Children Services, 11 Heartwood Court
Chico, California 95928, USA

Lenette Dornon, MSW
Shelter Coordinator
Northern California Youth and Family Programs
2577 California Park Drive, Chico California, 95928, USA.

Stacey Gotler, MSW
Senior Social Worker
Shasta County Children and Family Services, 500 Hilltop, Apt. 256, USA.

Holly M. Shouse, MSW
Child Protective Services Social Worker IV
240 Natoma Station Drive Apt. #258, Folsom, California   95630, USA.

Madison Stratton, MSW
1089 Windsor way, Chico, California   95926, USA.

Abstract

Within the social work profession, respect and humility for cultural difference is paramount. Cultural competence in social work education curriculum focuses on increasing cross-cultural knowledge and practice skills. Cultural humility suggests that equity and social justice issues must be examined within and outside cultural experiences, and that in doing so this reflection will invite self -awareness and evaluation on how culture impacts practice. This study was designed to investigate the development of cultural humility of graduate social work (MSW) students through an international cultural experience in Bangkok, Thailand. It explored the benefits and challenges of a short term volunteer experience and the impact of this experience on students' personal and professional development. Volunteer placements in social service settings provided students the opportunity to compare and contrast international social and community services with those offered in the United States. Post analysis of self-reflective journals suggested that short- term cultural immersion experiences may be an effective method for increasing cultural humility among student participants.

Key words: cultural humility, volunteerism, cross-cultural experience, international social work

1.0 Cultural competency in social work curriculum focuses primarily on increasing cultural knowledge and practice skills, with less emphasis on student self-reflection and self-critique. The concept of cultural humility adds this dimension by requiring the individual to examine equity and social justice within and outside cultural experiences (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). Reflection invites self-awareness and evaluation on how culture impacts practice. As Reynoso-Vallejo (2009) states, "cultural humility deals with understanding whereas cultural competence with knowledge" (p. 68). Our understanding of reflection is enriched by Paulo Freire's (1999) conception of praxis that involves a recursive process of action and reflection.

In addition, cultural humility emphasizes the commitment that as professionals, self-reflection is ongoing and continuous for practicing awareness and understanding of culture. Within the social work profession, respect and humility for cultural differences is paramount. Core curriculum within social work programs, mandated by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), emphasizes coursework and content on diversity, equity, and social justice (CSWE, 2008). The standard in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (2008) provides specific attention to cross cultural knowledge, skills, and leadership. It is imperative that social workers gain greater knowledge and understanding in culturally appropriate practices.

In light of the dynamic trends in social work, this study was designed to investigate the development of cultural humility through a short-term volunteer and cultural immersion experience in international social service settings. Five MSW students and one post one-year MSW graduate participated in a two-week intensive cultural and volunteer experience in Bangkok, Thailand. The following areas were investigated in this study: 1) participants' identification of the differences and similarities of the roles of community and social services in Thailand and the United States; 2) participants' understanding of the complexities of ethnocentricity, which support the development of cultural humility; and 3) the benefits and challenges of a short-term international volunteer and cultural experience.

2.0-Review of the Literature

2.1 California Demographics

The site for the international cultural experience was chosen due to the demographics of the region served by the University. The State of California is unique in the nation for an extremely large culturally diverse population; over half the population is non-Euro-American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The foreign born population in California is 28 % compared to the 11.8% of the entire U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). California is home to the largest Asian population in the U.S. with 13% of our community Asian versus 4.8% in the U.S. as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). There are approximately 247,595 Hmong individuals in the United States with approximately 91,224 residing in California. Fifteen to 20% of all Hmong people in the U.S. reside in Northern California (Hmong National Development, Inc., & Hmong Cultural and Resource Center, 2003). The Iu-Mien population in the U.S. is approximately 35-50,000, with the majority residing in California; thirteen thousand of the U.S. Iu-Mien community resides in the Northstate (Schuldberg, 2005, United States Census Bureau, 2010).

Most of the Hmong and Iu-Mien people in the United States came from refugee camps in Thailand prior to their closure in the mid 1990s. Thus, many aspects of the Thai culture are similar to those of the Hmong and Iu-Mien people.

2.2 Service Learning/Volunteering and the Development of Self-Awareness

In recent years, research has explored the integration of service learning volunteer programs and curriculum. Sternberger, Ford, and Hale (2005) define service learning as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (p. 77). These service-learning opportunities are particularly popular in the field of behavioral and social sciences (Joseph, Stone, Grantham, Harmancioglu, & Ibrahim, 2007).

Incorporating service learning opportunities into curriculum has been shown to increase student self -reflection, interpersonal skills, as well as course content skills. The integration of reflection in the education process is paramount for student professional growth and personal development (Jacoby, 1996; Sternberger, Ford, & Hale, 2005; Sullivan, 1999). Gaining practical experience from engaging in service learning activities and applying skills in a "real-world" setting allows students to connect theory and practice (Joseph et al., 2007).

Volunteering can bring challenges and rewards to individuals; volunteers have reported experiencing a sense of community, self-awareness, and social responsibility as a result of their volunteer experience (Joseph et al. 2007). For some volunteers, the experience involved community, teamwork, satisfaction, social issues, and self-fulfillment. Volunteering has been associated with self-realization, empathy, a desire to help others, traveling, cultural similarities and differences, and opportunity (Skoglund, 2006; Wymer & Starnes, 2001). Cultural humility and the opportunity to learn about cultures different from one's own are often part of the service learning process (Sternberger, Ford, & Hale, 2005).

Along with positive experiences, realizations regarding stress and challenges have been highlighted in the literature. A qualitative study conducted about the stresses of volunteering in a hospice setting yielded insight into challenges that volunteers may face in their work setting (Dein & Abbas, 2005). Stress was described as more prominent in the beginning of placements and focused on the unknown and unfamiliar aspects of the experience. Stress was reported to decline as volunteers became more comfortable with the volunteer setting. Coping with stress was related to age and life experience; the research indicated that coping styles/strategies may improve as one ages (Dein & Abbas, 2005).

Service learning experiences yield insightful and meaningful experiences for volunteers. Research supports the premise that service learning complements education and life experience by providing hands-on, real life interactions and environments (Sternberger, Ford, & Hale, 2005). Service learning is associated with growth and development in personal, cultural, and educational realms (Dein & Abbas, 2005; Sternberger, Ford, & Hale, 2005; Skoglund, 2006).

2.3 Service Learning and Volunteering Abroad

Recent research on international service learning has focused on study abroad programs. Studies suggest that integrating an international service element produces more in-depth learning for students. Pisano (2008) conducted a case study of the experiences of students participating in the International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership (IPSL) program in Ecuador. Service learning was revealed to have provided growth in knowledge, cultural awareness, values, and the development of career options.

In a study conducted in Australia, Devereux (2008) noted that service learning outside the country contributes to long-term change in student's growth. However, Devereux cautioned, "At its worst, international volunteering can be imperialist, paternalistic charity, volunteer tourism, or a self-serving quest of career or personal development on the part of well-off Westerners " (p. 358). Devereux related the importance of partnering with communities to ensure a mutual understanding of the needs that are relevant to the community. Volunteerism without this collaboration may only benefit the volunteer's personal growth, while not addressing the areas most beneficial to impact change for the partner (Devereux, 2008; Lough, 2009).

Student learning through service learning and volunteer experience increases when characterized by "meaningful role taking, support, reflection, intensity and reciprocity" (Lough, 2009, p. 472).   Students gain increased knowledge and awareness of poverty, power, and social justice challenges, and "…international social work field placements are to be 'transformative' in ways that lead to respect for diversity and strong commitment to social justice" (Lough, 2009, p. 475).

2.4 Values: A Shift in Perspectives through International Experiences

The literature on students' assessment of personal, professional, and societal values and shifts during and after international experiences is well documented (Ford & Ericson, 2003; Lough, 2009; Pisano, 2008).   Ford and Ericson examined changes in attitudes and perspectives of BSW students during an international educational experience in the Netherlands. Students who had traveled for the first time, according to a pre and post survey, perceived themselves as having greater respect and empathy of others' viewpoints, increased skills in compromising, making ethical judgments, and in turn, taking action. Further, students who had traveled abroad previously rated being able to communicate their needs more effectively over the course of the international field experience. Ford and Ericson also found that a significant number of students shifted their perspective regarding social issues due to the influence of their international exposure.

Gilin and Young (2009) confirmed students' increased awareness in social issues and the ability to view practices in the United States from a new lens after an international experience. One student who participated in a program in Italy from the study stated ". . . we can often hold onto our misconceptions without even knowing it. . . In social work . . . often times we are told to put aside or dispel our myths when working with the unknown. How much more real does this resonate inside of me than ever before!" (Gilin & Young, 2009, p. 43). The development of values was also identified in a study of BSW and MSW students' experiences in a study abroad program in Scotland (Lindsey, 2005). Students reported insights and changes of personal values and beliefs. In addition, students examined the relationship between their own personal values, the values of the other country, and the values of social work (Lindsey, 2005).

2.5 Service Learning Impacting Views of Privilege and Power

For several decades, social workers and scholars have evaluated the process by which individuals develop an understanding of privilege and power (Cagle 2010; Latting 1990; Perry & Shotwell, 2009). Educators have found service-learning programs, volunteer experiences, and international fieldwork as sites where critical consciousness develops (Rosenberger, 2000) in regard to a multitude of injustices, including racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, and ableism. The process of educating students for the field of social services and education includes the facilitation of self-awareness, cultural humility, and interpersonal skills (Bender, Negi, & Fowler, 2010; Chau 1990; Segal, Gerdes, Stromwall, & Napoli, 2010). International service learning experiences provide a forum for this development.

2.6 Trends in International Social Work Education

Historically social work has been considered an applied profession and subsequently the emphasis of its baccalaureate and masters level programs have been on preparing students for practice (Healy, 2001). An increasing globalized and complex world that includes technology and reduces barriers for dialogue and exchange allows for social workers to acquire a worldview of social issues that cross cultural boundaries. International or transnational social work is a growing trend in social work education and opportunities for international field placements continue to emerge (Carrillo & Mathiesen, 2006). As the literature indicates, outcomes reveal a greater understanding of cultural diversity and mutual respect and provide a forum for the development of collaborative, international relationships (Engstrom & Jones, 2007; Lager, Mathiesen, ,Rodgers, & Cox, 2010; Mathiesen, & Lager, 2007). The use of international opportunities for students in the field of social work represents only a fraction of social work education and academic literature.

Weiss (2005), through an analysis of common themes of social work values in social work education, examined the perspective of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2004) to determine whether there is indeed a commonality to international social work education, theory, and practice. The research indicated that although aspects of social work are global, some are context-contingent. Social work is a diverse field and thus local culture and global concerns shape practice and determine the focus for social work education (Holtzhausen, 2010; Weiss, 2005).

According to Askeland and Payne (2006), international social work education has had a tendency to "allow powerful cultures to dominate less powerful" (p. 731). With the prevalence of the spoken English language, and a reported international appeal of American culture, attempts by Westerners to broaden the scope of international social work education may inadvertently perpetuate this power imbalance (Askeland & Payne). Askeland and Payne caution that international social work education may encourage homogeneity and assume universal knowledge that is applied to all cultures. This may lend to a lack of recognition or even negation of the indigenous cultural values and practices in educational and practice settings (Askeland & Payne, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2010; Yip, 2005). The universal application of the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) can result in challenges when cultural variations and interpretations conflict (Healy, 2007; Holtzhausen, 2010).

International social work education can facilitate the sharing of locally relevant practices with internationally recognized theory and practice. This allows social workers to "crystallize their wisdom" (Yip, 2005, p. 603) from the local culture while integrating practice from Western countries. This creates an opportunity for a rich and broad perspective in social work practice. Greater research is needed to gain insights into the benefit of the different models being used to provide social workers with a broader worldview, including volunteering abroad, short term and long-term cultural immersion, and international field practicum placements. Analysis of these various models and their long-term benefits for social work practitioners worldwide, could lead to development of greater transnational collaboration and enhanced social work education preparation to meet the needs of our global community.

3.0 Background

3.1 The Host Program

Cross Cultural Solutions (CCS) is an international, nonprofit organization that has provided opportunities for individuals and families to volunteer abroad in 12 countries since 1995.[1] This comprehensive program provides housing, country cultural meals, cultural experiences including field trips, language lessons, cultural lectures and activities, and placement and supervision in volunteer sites. The cultural and volunteer activities are tailored to the group and meet the needs of the host community. The organization also collaborates with social work programs to provide internships that meet the requirements for field practicum.

3.1 A Project Preparation with CCS and University

The CCS Bangkok, Thailand program was evaluated nine months prior to this volunteer experience; one of the professors facilitating the project met with the Thailand Program Manger in Bangkok. Following this first contact, communication with the New York office of CCS occurred on a weekly basis to solidify student volunteer placements, cultural activities, and site visits. CCS secured the placements that included primary/middle schools, day care centers, and an older adult comprehensive program that provided residential, medical, and social services. All of the placement sites are considered social service delivery programs in Thailand. The placements provided students direct practice and matched the School of Social Work focus areas of family, children and youth, gerontology, and mental health. The students were supervised by the CCS Thailand Program Manager, who holds a degree in nursing, a master degree in counseling, and has extensive work with the Peace Corps, social services, and regional non-governmental agencies (NGOs). Additionally, three social work faculty who participated in this project provided daily supervision for the students in Thailand.

Daily field trips were facilitated by CCS and included meeting with social workers, administrators, and faculty at Thammasat University School of Social Administration, Thailand Health Administration, and Bangkok Municipal Social Services. Cultural trips included visits to an agricultural collective, the palace, a lecture and interchange with a Buddhist monk, temple visits, and other cultural sites in the region. Additionally, the host site provided in-house lessons in Thai language, massage, cooking, history, and culture. The international studies program at the university was involved during the entire planning process to assess logistics and factors related to students engaged in programs outside of the United States. The students participated in this program as a volunteer experience and did not receive university credit for participation.

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[1] Cross Cultural Solutions (CCS) name used with permission. CCS provides comprehensive programs that serve the needs requested by the local communities. For information on international opportunities including the *Intern Abroad* program for social work, see http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org/

The faculty did not receive any payment for facilitating the program prior and during the experience in Thailand. Additionally, the students and faculty participating in this program were responsible for all expenses including airfare and the CCS program fees. The students participated in multiple fundraising activities that helped to reduce the individual costs of the program. The program occurred during the winter break of the university academic schedule when no university classes were in session.

4.0 The Research Study

4.1 Participant Profile

The participants in this study were enrolled in or completed a masters program in social work. During the participation in this volunteer experience, they were not enrolled in any courses or practicum. The participants ranged from 23-35 years of age. Four identified as Euro-American, one as Mexican American and one participant identified as Middle Eastern. The gender ratio was five female, one male. All participants had previously traveled outside the United States; two had previously been involved with an international volunteer program.

4.2 Data Collection & Sampling Procedure

The University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study and all participants completed an informed consent. Participants completed a demographic form that requested information on age, gender, ethnicity, and undergraduate and graduate major and/or degree if applicable, and previous volunteer and international experience. Each participant completed a set of four questionnaires, (four to seven questions in each) prior to the trip to Thailand, one per month from September to December 2009.

During the two week placement in January 2010, while participating in the vounteer placements and activities in Bangkok, the participants were asked to select ten writing prompts to respond to from a list of 15 options. The purpose of the prompts was to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences in their volunteer placements. Self-reflection is crucial for understanding cultural and social realities other than one's own (Komins and Nicholls, 2003). Genor and Schulte (2002) have documented the importance of self- reflection in cross-cultural educational experiences.

The writing prompts in this study provided an opportunity for critical reflection and a tool with which participants could begin to explore their beliefs and assumptions regarding race, ethnicity, religion and culture, and assimilate their experiences. , Coyne, and Negi(2008) have suggested that "self-reflection may be a social process that binds the individual to others in a self/social transformational manner" (p. 74). Providing participants the opportunity to self reflect often leads to action, more self-reflection and consequently an opportunity for continued critical analysis and growth. (Furman, Coyne, & Negi, 2008).

Two weeks after returning to the States, the participants responded to a final questionnaire that contained a series of 10 questions. The participants in the study chose code names and/or numbers to maintain anonymity. Each questionnaire and prompt required approximately 15 minutes to complete. The responses to the questions were coded and analyzed twice, once by the participant/researchers and once using the computer software ATLAS.ti. The participants in this study were invited to become co-researchers, evaluating the data and collaborating with the analysis and writing of the outcomes. Thus, this study exemplified the qualities of participatory research.

4.3 Data Coding & Analysis

The participant responses to all prompts before, during, and after the short-term volunteer program in Thailand were imported into the computer software program ATLAS.ti. ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, allowed for line –by-line coding for prominent themes and trends (Muhr, 1991). To avoid extending an existing theory or hypothesis, we drew on multiple literatures, creating analytical codes that guided us. This proved to be an ideal method for analytical evaluation as it allowed for participant agency, as it was the participants' experiences and writings that guided the central findings of this study. Therefore, this asserted that participants were experts in their own experience.

5.0 Limitations

This study was limited in that it consisted of six participants that completed reflections on the preparation, duration, and post experience of volunteerism and cultural immersion. This was a two-week volunteer experience in one country.

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The country was chosen due to the demographics of this specific region, with a goal of increasing understanding of the regions' community as well as gain skills in cultural humility. Due to the home region of the participants, country of volunteer activity, and that the participants were graduate social work students, this data might not be generalized to participant experiences in other fields of practice or settings of volunteer experience.

6.0 Findings

The data from this qualitative research study revealed rich content that addressed the areas of research. It is important to note that there were intersections and overlaps in these areas, which will be discussed below.

6.1 Differences and Similarities in the Roles of Community and Social Services in Thailand and the United States

The participants' insights addressed community and social service programs, and delivery in both countries. Their reflections also revealed increased awareness of their own professional development and broadened perspective of fields of practice. The prompts for the participants' reflections in this area included: What did you learn about Thai social services? What are the similarities/differences with the values, form of delivery, etc. in the United States? How will this experience impact your work as a social worker? What social justice issue did you become aware of? What are the variables involved? How is this similar or different to the comparable issue in the United States? Describe your day in your placement including the staff, participants and consumers and the type of work you are assigned to. Include the interactions – verbal and non-verbal.

6.1 a Fields of Practice

The responses to prompts indicated that the overall international experience of cultural immersions and activities, and the volunteer work, led to the discovery of areas of social work the participants would (or would not) like to practice. For example, one participant stated that after understanding the challenges of being in a new environment, s/he now had an interest in working with immigrants and persons learning English as a second language (ESL). The inability to speak the Thai language led to increased insight into the difficulty of providing services in one's home language (English) in Thailand, as well generalizing this insight to the difficulty to non-English speakers who immigrate to the United States. One participant related, "If foreigners to America are in need of social services, I feel it is especially important to be sensitive to the difference, cultural norms, and non-American ways of living." These insights seemed particularly poignant as the region served by the University includes refugees from Southeast Asia and immigrants from South and Central America. Thus, consumers of social work services may include varying cultural groups.

More specifically, participants learned of previously unaware interests and skills in working with specific populations such as elders, children, adults, and those with health challenges. One participant wrote, " I thought that the children would be the most rewarding aspect of the teaching experience, but to my surprise, working with the teachers was even more rewarding." Additionally, participants reflected how impressed they were with the majority of Thailand's social services and, in turn, developed an interest in pursuing a greater understanding of the policy and implementation of corresponding social services in the United States.

6.1b Buddhist Philosophy and Daily Lives

The participants related increased understanding of the Buddhist teachings through a group meeting with a monk who is an educator at a United States university on a bi-annual basis. The students discussed the integration of Buddhist philosophy and related activities in the daily lives of the Thai people. This was exemplified by multiple discussions of the "high level of generosity" of the Thai people they came in contact with, even those who appeared to have very little material goods or opportunities. Participants indicated understanding that the practice of Buddhism in all aspects of life was the foundation of how social services were delivered. They also became aware of the integration of religious space and ideology into the everyday practices of social services. This included the collectivist perspective and was noted numerous times in regard to the care of older adults, universal health care, and communal living.

6.1c Diverse Roles of Community and Social Services

Participants repeatedly (25 times total) commented on the significantly different care of older adults and younger children in Thailand in contrast to the United States. As one participant stated, "In the United States the older generation is often seen as a burden on the younger generation. Although this is not true of all individuals in the United States, it is a difference that one can see in the services that are implemented for older adults in the United States versus Thailand." This difference was also noted in regard to childcare; the day care centers are an institutionalized social service in Thailand.

Thirty-seven times the participants addressed the implementation of universal healthcare in Thailand. Their references included not only the difference between the two countries in providing (and accessing) social services, but also the contrasting ideologies. One of these differences was related to the Thai perspective of collectivity. This view regards the well being (physical, spiritual, and emotional) of society to be the responsibility of all Thai people. A participant stated:

It's amazing to me that a developing country where toilet paper cannot be flushed has the means to provide free health care to its citizens. The United States, a world power, struggles in accepting a health care plan that allows all of its citizens to have access to free health care. In some ways Thailand is more progressed than the United States in how they handle their social justice issues.

The responses noted access to healthcare for all people; participates reported realizations that some social services and social processes can be more efficiently conducted in Thailand than in the U.S. Participants reflected on how they were told at a young age, and assumed, that because America was one of the richest and most powerful countries in the world that the U.S. must have achieved that power and wealth by conducting business efficiently. However, during and after their trip to Thailand, they related an increased awareness that some systems outside the U.S. provide social services much differently than the U.S. and that these may be more efficiently delivered.

6.1d Social Services Needs Across Cultures

Comparison of the United States and Thai social services was common and many similarities were noted. For example, the methamphetamine epidemic is prevalent in both countries. Additionally, Social workers in the Thai social services that the participants visited expressed similar challenges with poverty, substance abuse, mental health, homelessness, immigration, "monopolized prescription companies," domestic violence, and child abuse. Participants also noted the low number of social workers employed by Bangkok social services and that although health care is universal in Thailand, in comparison, domestic violence is a more recent policy issue in Thailand. The role of social workers was noted by one participant in a statement that " wherever you go in the world, social services and social workers are both valued and undervalued . . . ."

Participants discussed multiple times the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Code of Ethics (2004) in regard to human rights and dignity, social justice, professional conduct, and cultural or country specific ethical challenges. This awareness was related by one participant who stated, " I suppose the deeper social justice issue is whether it is morally right for a visiting culture to dictate the codes of ethics in another country." The transnational value of ethics in social work was noted by another participant who summed up the view of m any: " I am grateful for the opportunity that I have to enter a dynamic and exciting field such as social work, where ethics and social justice are tenets of practice."

6.2 Understanding the Complexities of Ethnocentricity and the Development of Cultural Humility

Through this international volunteer experience, the reflections by the participants indicated an increased understanding of individual versus collective cultures. This area was addressed forty-seven times in the reflections, with a focus on the universal healthcare in Thailand. As discussed previously, the participants focused on the differences in ideology with the collective well being of the Thai people as being the prime force behind universal health care policy (Selway, 2011).

The prompts in this area included: What aspect of the Thai culture was the most surprising? What seemed the most familiar? What did you learn from the Thai people you met? What global issue did you learn about that you had no previous knowledge? What were your thoughts/feelings about the issue and new knowledge?

What was the greatest challenge in communication? Described an interaction with your supervisor. Describe a cultural norm that you are unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable with. What political event/issue did you learn about that you had no previous knowledge? Describe an experience in your placement that was unexpected and provided insight into the culture. Describe an event that included introduction to the spiritual aspects of the culture and discuss your views on this experience.

6.2a Increasing Cultural Sensitivity

Participants openly discussed their reactions to differences and conscious efforts to avoid judgments. One participant related, "I was reminded to stay in touch with my humility. Communication can occur despite language barriers" while another stated, "I learned that I am able to suspend judgment about behaviors I saw in Thai people engaging in that were contrary to my values." It was noted 17 times that with enhanced understanding of a specific aspect of the culture, the participants' sensitivity and openness to new experiences also increased. As participants became more in-tune to the Thai culture, changes in behavior occurred.

Within the agency settings, the participants' interactions became more centered on the needs of the consumers, and, in turn, they noted that they gained greater knowledge to better inform their interactions. This cyclical, dynamic interactive occurrence increased open cultural exchange and decreased participant anxiety. Two participants summarized this idea by stating, "I think that seeing a different culture reinforces the view that one cannot assume they know something about someone based solely on the culture they are from" and "international experiences could take place in almost any area of interest as long as respect and communication are demonstrated in a respectful and appreciative manner . . . respect and kindness are universal values." As one participant noted, "the simple kindness shown by our cook, who woke me up at four am to catch a tuk tuk [local transportation] to find the monks on their morning alms rounds will always remain one of my most exquisite memories of my time in Thailand."

6.2b The Impact of Language

The majority of participants recognized that due to the time consuming nature of graduate school, they did not spend sufficient time prior to the trip learning the basics of the Thai language. During the first two days of the volunteer experience, participants described miscommunications "innocent" and "fun," noting that they realized they were making simple errors that significantly changed the meanings of their attempts at communicating.

However, by the third day, participants began to describe the "serious implications of working in a site that does not know my language and vice versa." The experience of being unable to communicate, understand and describe what they needed or wanted, led several participants to comment on the parallel situation of some of their future clients who may not be comfortable speaking English. As one participant commented, "Through my experience I have a better understanding of how American foreigners or immigrants would feel if they were in an situation and needed my help in social services." Another related, "I can begin to understand what it might feel like to be in an unknown place, to be a minority, to not speak the local language…it will impact my work . . . ." Insights into the lack of Thai Language skills were defined as isolating and frightening as "if I were in danger, my cries for 'help' could not have been understood." This led to the view that "America does very little, if nothing, to accommodate anyone other than proficient English speakers."

In this struggle of communication, non-verbal communication became central in providing social services. For example, one participant wrote of aiding in the feeding of bed bound older adults and being particularly aware of nonverbal cues as to when a patient was full, wanting another food item, or needing more time to chew before another bite.

6.2c Variations in Time

Participants discussed the cultural norm of time in Thailand. They reported experiencing a more "laid back sense of time" than what they were accustomed to. One participant commented, "this lateness really challenged my patience and ideas on time and life. The things we worry and stress selves out over, like time, are so ridiculously arbitrary and petty. There are plenty of things to worry about in this world and American's choose to make a big deal out of time."

The awareness of fluidity of time in Thailand versus the more sequenced view of time in the United States led to an awareness of the differences in high versus low context cultures (Hall, 1976). For example, in Thailand, *sanuk* (Thai word for fun) is primary and this view of enjoying life and focusing on the moment is integrated in social and work settings (Jones, 2008). This can be seen as a component of the Thai high-context culture where the family, group, and community are more important than the task. Thus, time is flexible. Communication tends to be covert, understood and demonstrated nonverbally.

In low-context cultures, such as the dominant society in the United States, the focus is on the individual and autonomy. Communication is primarily through explicit verbal interactions versus the use of silence and body language in high-context cultures. Time is linear with specific beginning and ending points (Hall, 1976). As a result of the increased awareness of high and low context cultures, one student stated, "I learned from the Thai people that life is about three things: eating, laughing, and lastly work."

6.2d Global Citizenship

The view of personal development as a citizen of the world developed simultaneously as the participants experienced challenges with the culture and varying values, language, and awareness of differing social policy and program delivery. Participants related on ten different occasions, that they felt they grew as individuals by becoming more "worldly," "patient," and "not just an American, but a global citizen." This understanding of global citizenship was described as encompassing opportunities where one could "give back to a community." The participants spoke of how "Thai people serve their community" as a way of life, rather than involving themselves in a specific volunteer activity as in the United States. The participants related a desire to replicate this in their life. One student summed up the view, stating, "to have a worldview, an understanding of the suffering, hardships, and different cultures of people is unique. To be able to make even a small difference in a person's life abroad gives me a sense of humbleness and peace."

6.2e Understanding Privilege and Ethnocentrism

Participants became aware of ethnocentric policies and the global community on several levels. The first set of reflections on this topic was participants' awareness of their own privilege. This was presented as a realization that people in other countries live on much less than they do in the United States. One participant stated that s/he now "realize[s] that many people around the world make do with only the necessities . . . I realize the material possessions are not as necessary as I feel when I am home." Nineteen references from participants focused on increased awareness of areas taken for granted including clean water, education, a home, and "my freedom as a woman living in America."

As insights grew in regard to privilege, participants developed a deeper understanding of ethnocentrism. For example, one participant stated, "I am so lucky to have the opportunities that I have here in the U.S. I learned that being an American may have consequences and downsides as well." Another participant elaborated on this theme noting that the "… lack of flexibility that American's have in staunchly believing that we are correct in all practices… impacts interactions and relations," and may be "a tad bit embarrassing." Participants stated eleven times that the United States and policy makers would benefit from exploring other countries' policies. One participant stated, "If Thailand can provide services such as free health care, free services to children, and free services to older adults, understanding how Thailand implements these services could be beneficial to our county."

On another note, the participants' insights into privilege seem to parallel to their discussions on culture and excess. A participant related, "Western culture and materialistic indulgence are infiltrating cultures across the globe." Another participant stated, "I have never thought so much about the materialism, competition, and environmental consciousness in the U. S. before." As students' awareness of privilege, ethnocentrism, and global citizenship developed, the concept of cultural humility was exemplified. For example, one participant stated:

> I think that seeing a different culture reinforces the view that one cannot assume they know something about someone based solely on the culture they are from. Culture gives us a lens for understanding groups, but one must always be cautious in applying generalizations to any individual . . . having an understanding of culture can create sensitivity to how we interact with the person individual our behavior can fit the needs of the individual when more information is provided."

6.2f Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism, the notion that that an individual's beliefs, activities, and human rights are culture-specific and should be viewed from the lens of that culture (Ayton-Shenker, 1995), was a topic addressed thirteen times by participants in the study. Cultural relativism can be viewed as a way to avoid an ethnocentric focus and this was noted in reflections. For example, participants stated, "not all people see 'abuse' in the same way" and that "some aspects of social service are culturally specific such as the belief that a government agency has the right and authority to intervene to preserve the welfare of a child." The participants who were focusing on child welfare in their graduate education provided commentary on the conflict in cultural views of violence. For example, a participant related, " I was amazed to learn that physical 'discipline' was only very recently regulated by the law, that traditionally Thai culture has considered such matters to be 'private family affairs'." These contrasting aspects seemed to the participants to be in conflict with the collective values and Buddhist philosophy they were learning simultaneously.

As the participants evaluated the issue of cultural relativism, statements such as the following represented the process: "the deeper social justice issue is whether it is morally right for a visiting culture to dictate the codes of ethics in another country." A participant related in regard to this, "I do not believe in 'Westernizing' other cultures, however, basic human rights of safety from harm and lack of oppression seems to be an essential human right . . . colonialism turns my stomach, but so does spousal and child abuse." Several participants discussed the view of domestic violence in Thailand as an issue of "tradition," and their own internal conflict of regarding their own conflicting view.

6.3 Benefits and Challenges of a Short-Tem Volunteer Cultural Immersion Experience

From the summaries and excerpts of the participants' reflections, benefits and challenges became apparent. The prompts led to rich material in regard to this area. The volunteer cultural experience provided a forum for not only self-reflection, but also immersion into another culture. This engagement, albeit short-term, allowed the participants to learn from Thai counterparts' perspectives, observe the facilitation of services in a fashion different from their home culture, and practice within these setting. Students were provided specific tasks within each agency that were applicable in light of the participants' limited knowledge of the Thai language.

One participant stated that through the experience, s/he "learned that social services in Thailand care about the health and well being of all Thai people . . . health care and services to older adults are free. The viewpoint is that individuals have a right to living a quality and healthy life. I think that those same values are present in America, but not widespread." Another participant related the immersion into the agency provided the opportunity to learn about the integration of older adults and children through school-based intergenerational activities that exemplified the value of elders.

A participant stated, "instead of isolating…they [Thai social services] seek to include them [older adults], and to provide them with services even if they cannot afford them." Another added, "understanding other cultural view points, how other countries serve their own people, broadening one's cultural education, and realizing that the scope of providing assistance can extend outside the United States is good experience to gain. Social workers should strive to save the world, not just the community in which they reside."

Participants expressed challenges with language, time, cultural differences in views of domestic violence, and in internal conflict with personal values regarding being a citizen of the United States. Through the narratives, the participants provided frank discussions of these struggles and the resounding outcome that the experience provided opportunities to challenge them beyond their comfort level and in turn, grow personally and professionally. One participant stated, "I learned that food is wonderful way to share community and culture, even if you can only speak a few words to one another…humility and respect go a long way."

7.0 Discussion

"Same same but different" is a saying common in Thailand, seen on T-shirts and in verbal exchanges in English. It means that something is similar but is not exactly the same thing (Smith and Johnson, n.d.; Urban Dictionary, 1999) and is used when describing schedules that vary slightly from day to day or interactions in Thailand by foreigners and those who work with visitors.

This experience of "same same, but different" was apparent in the reflections of the participants in this study. Through the process of naming the experiences, the reflections revealed components that are necessary in the development of cultural humility and critical consciousness.

Self-awareness was demonstrated through reflection, as postulated by Jacoby (1996) and Sullivan (1999), and the experiences increased the participants' sense of social responsibility, global citizenship, transnational social issues, and a greater awareness of nation-specific power and privilege (Askerland & Payne, 2006; Joseph et al., 2007, Lough, 2009; Sandy & Meyer, 20-09; Rosenberger, 2000). As the participants examined their own values and compared the value of the U. S. and Thai culture, a shift in perspectives occurred. Participants reflected on issues of cultural relativism and began to clarify in greater depth the values that they felt were absolute and those that could be subjective or relative depending on the context. This seemed to support the outcome of studies by Ford and Ericson (2003), Gilin and Young (2009), Lindsey (2005), and Lough (2009). One participant related a view resonated by several stating, "in social work practice, it is important to understand cultural norms within a group and be aware of your own behavior when interacting with the group . . . [this] will help the social worker gain a lens through which that individual can better understand the viewpoints of clients."

The premises for the development of cultural humility through a short –term international volunteer experience was centered on the work of Paulo Freire. His view of praxis (reflection, action, reflection) was that "through praxis [one] commit[s] themselves to its transformation" (Freire, 1999, p. 11). Through the use of reflective journals, the students engaged in "problem posing education" (Freire, 1999, p. 60) which consists of "acts of cognition," (p. 60), evaluating challenges, and critically analyzing. Freire related that:

> In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist*
> in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a
> static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. (Freire, 1999, p. 70)

As the participants began to make sense of the culture and experiences, they evaluated their responses, the basis for these reactions, and new ways to address challenges and experiences that might have been contrary to previous thinking. Through critically assessing experiences, the participants began to recognize connections between their individual challenges and experiences and the social context of the Thai culture. They also were able to generalize some aspects to social contexts within the United States, gaining insight into variables they had not previously viewed.

Freire believed that "education makes sense because women and men learn that through learning they can make and remake themselves, because women and men are able to take responsibility for themselves as beings capable of knowing — of knowing that they know and knowing that they don't" (Freire, 2004, p. 15). This seemed to be apparent through the reflections of the participants. The findings from this study are significant considering the sample was very small with six individuals.   For example, issues concerning language were discussed 65 times, privilege and ethnocentrism (including those connected to cultural humility) was mentioned 47 times, universal health care 37 times, care of older adults 25 times, and becoming a global citizen was noted 10 times. Every participant mentioned each of these areas at least several times in their writings. The impact of the experience provided an enriching opportunity to explore values and assumptions outside the boundaries of one's home culture.

The implications and application of this study to social workers from other nations studying in cultures different than their own is noteworthy. The social world is becoming increasing more connected through transnational organizations, networks, and families. For social workers, this shift towards transnational social relations (and thus, transnational social needs) has important implications both pedagogically and practically.

Pedagogically, social work education must begin to offer students opportunities to experience cultures other than their own in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of global politics and international social policies, how they affect society, and consequently, shape the services social workers provide. From a practice perspective this study offers an approach that immerses a small group of graduate students in a country different from their own, practicing and participating in experiences and exercises that enhanced and contributed to their sense of cultural humility. The study also describes the training needed in order to make it a successful experience.

For example, journaling proved to be an effective method in pushing students to be reflexive both during their international experience and after. Additionally, the experience of dialoging and working closely with other social workers in Thailand disrupted the students' U.S. focus of social work and provided a broader perspective of social work approaches, especially in the health policy/service field. This study is a first step in evaluating both pedagogically and practically the ways in which we teach our social work students to be global social workers in a transnational world.

8.0 Conclusion

During the international volunteer experience in Bangkok, Thailand, participants engaged in research to examine reflections on the preparation, duration, and post experience of volunteerism and cultural immersion. Visits to Thammasat University School of Social Administration, the Thailand Health Administration, Bangkok Municipal Social Services, and various cultural sites, allowed participants to compare and contrast services and delivery, values, and community challenges though observation, presentations and dialogues with Thai social work counterparts. The research was participant directed (co-researchers), and following completion of the trip, participants collaboratively analyzed data from reflective journals. The reflections indicated development of awareness of ethnocentrism, professional goals, and self-awareness of personal values, and of values that may, or may not, cross cultures. The data from this study suggested that a short-term cultural immersion experience may be an effective method for providing a forum for self and professional development through exposure and experiences, and in turn, increase cultural humility in graduate level social work students.

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