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Valuing Mentorship: Towards Cultural Humility

Lauren Oswald and John Korsmo

Abstract

This article explores the beginnings of an informal faculty-student mentorship developed to support each other's quest to become increasingly competent global citizens. Through discussion of embracing global youth work as a joint objective and with first-person accounts, we attempt to encourage readers to do two things: engage in mentoring relationships, and practice cultural humility

Cultural Humility

This special issue on beginnings for *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice* is timely. As a professor with years of experience in youth work and an undergraduate student entering the field, we are pondering where our new faculty-student mentorship may lead. Like most budding relationships, ours is nebulous. While we have a general goal of working together to become more competently engaged in global youth work, we have not set a specific agenda or roadmap of how we will get there, but so is the way of youth work. As intentional as we may be with efforts to map out the course and intentions of our time together and delineate 'early,' 'intermediate' and 'advanced' stages of interpersonal relationships, the journey when done well has countless beginnings; beginnings of thought, beginnings of change, beginnings of new, yet to be imagined directions.

In this piece we focus on our beginnings of crossing cultural and geographic borders to engage in youth and family work. We first met in spring of 2013 while preparing for a seven-week study abroad course in South Africa, during which time we learned of each other's interests in working abroad. Globalization, the widespread

international use of technology and veritable 24/7 access to immediate information from around the globe all add to the growing notion of a shrinking world. Along with this, discussions of global youth work point to an evolving desire and ability to connect with others in far reaching areas of the planet (Sallah, 2014). With this is a need to better understand social justice frameworks and cultural humility.

The beginning of our work together has been anchored by a critical contemplation of both the potential harms and benefits that could come from a group of privileged students from the US, and their even more privileged professors, providing service in another part of the world. Through discussions and readings related to culturally responsive practice, it became clear that we shared the principal aim to minimize the risk of perpetuating harm that has historically come from outside sources intent on “doing good” in international settings with traditionally marginalized populations. Thus, together we dove into the proverbial deep end of critical consciousness, re-examining our own biases and perspectives on life. There is a deep literature base about the complexities of one engaging

in such personal growth and transformation. The cognitive restructuring that may be necessary to move through a state of naïve realism is an ongoing and ever-evolving process – much like that of forming a relationship with another. It has therefore been helpful to have a mentoring relationship through which we have engaged in open dialogue and shared readings to get at a deeper consideration of our own roles in perpetuating – or at least passively allowing for – institutional and personal inequity to occur. Our being White, middle class citizens of the United States has not been overlooked. We are compelled to acknowledge the significance of the historic oppression and subjugation of others that continues to occur by those in power, but also acknowledge how our own thinking and ways of acting or choosing not to act either perpetuate racism and antagonistic thinking, or contrarily act in a true and meaningful anti-racist and culturally astute manner.

Moving beyond the perhaps passé notion of becoming “culturally competent” however, we are more considerate of the concept of cultural humility. As noted by Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington and Utsey (2013), cultural humility is

the “ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [person]” (p. 2). Such a stance honors the self-determination of individuals, groups, and communities with differential social positions. We are thus intentionally and cautiously approaching our work from the perspective that we have much more to learn in performing youth work in international settings than we have to teach or to give.

In this relatively early stage of our relationship we have steeped ourselves in joint thinking and learning through a critical multiculturalism paradigm (Nylund, 2006). While this tends to be a more radical view of cultural competence, we believe we owe it to ourselves and those with whom we work to advance our understanding of the whole picture of diverse ways of being. A social justice framework is based on the view that oppression and disparities are a result of historical biases and inequities that are embedded in and perpetuated by institutional structures and systems. In order to better comprehend and even admit to the reality of oppression and disparity, it has been imperative we

The biggest challenge was in removing my prior expectations of the way it should be ...

begin with a deeper and more critical understanding of ourselves (Nieto, 2012). To this aim, we have shared with each other the impetus for our personal interest in cultural exploration, some of which we share below.

Personal Narrative from Lauren's Beginnings

At ten years of age, I had the privilege of joining my family on a mission trip to Chihuahua, Mexico. I stepped off the bus into a dirt field littered with inconceivable shaky structures. Biases clearly influenced my young thinking as I shared with my parents all that was coming to mind.

"Why don't they have shoes?"

"Parents should not speak that way to kids."

"They don't love Jesus the way I do."

"They need a real shower."

I was well versed in my family's faith, and in our religious teachings for my age, but lacked any cultural and international understanding. As a young girl from a middle-class American family, this was also my first experience of seeing widespread poverty. Despite all of my ignorance and discomfort, there was beauty in a moment that my eyes con-

nected with those of a local girl about my age, who befriended me. Despite our language barrier, we made a connection, and our human understanding ran deeper than any trivial things I had felt before. Although it was a relatively brief encounter, it was that little moment that instilled in me an enduring value for cross-cultural experience and connection. Though the complexity of the issue was beyond me at that age, it is an image that has stuck with me and has driven me to further involvement later in life.

Within a few years, I found myself in San Ramón, Nicaragua on a medical brigade, once again with my family. This time more familiar with the rural poverty that would surround us I was still without a real sense of cultural competence. To me the answer still felt simple: love thy neighbor as thyself. A few more years would go by before I started questioning mission trips like those I went on with my family, about global inequality and concepts like the 'white savior complex'.

During my second quarter of college I began questioning some of my preconceived notions, biases, and perceptions of the world and felt a need for more depth in experiencing a cultural awakening.

I found myself applying for a faculty-led course in South Africa, not understanding at the time the degree to which this trip would influence my new beginning as a critically conscious global citizen.

Following acceptance to the program, a few prep classes and hours of research about what I was headed into, I was on the plane and headed to South Africa with a group of college students I had just met. We became well versed in the historically recent Apartheid and political unrest that has left much of the country economically and racially divided. By the second day, we had experienced the first of many discomforts which would soon turn into a new perspective as a global citizen. On a small bus touring museums and notable sights around Johannesburg, our driver offered to stop in a nearby township for a "tour". After some discussion, our bus stopped and most of us got off of the bus. We were given a scripted tour and description of daily life in this township, stepped inside a woman's home, and soon had five children holding each of our hands. Shortly after that, on reflection, I understood how invasive, culturally incompetent and disrespectful that was. However, getting off the bus,

ended up being one of the most valuable lessons I have learned in being critical and mindful.

Entering the child and youth care field in a system and culture with which I was unfamiliar was intimidating and challenging. Some of the most difficult of my biases to put aside were those that dealt with the ways in which children were treated and disciplined in the school setting and by after-school activity coordinators, as well as their parents. In one of my first days helping out in a local preschool, I observed what I interpreted at the time as deliberate violence and teachers screaming at children, with some appearing to be dealing with neglect. The biggest challenge was in removing my prior expectations of the way it *should* be and considering their cultural, historical and political backgrounds, and individual circumstances. This does not come easy as I still have to consciously remind myself of my biases and the ways in which I have been taught what is "right" or what is "wrong."

As I am currently preparing for what will be my third stint living and working in a South African township, I need to remind myself that I am only beginning my evolution as a more astute and culturally responsive youth

worker. I am contemplating the assets and multiple funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) that are present in the homes, schools and community centers in the township. I strive to be a critically conscious global citizen and am tested with situations that challenge my biases. That day my ten-year old self stepped off the bus in Chihuahua, Mexico I began this enriching ride towards international awareness, and with each experience and each conversation new beginnings emerge.

Personal Narrative from John's Beginnings

Like so many others, my childhood was one of rather insular social circles. My family associated principally with others who were pretty much like us. In our case, that meant being around other poor and working-class, under-educated white folks. My family bounced around in search of work for my parents, and the concept of international travel was entirely fictional to me. Yet, there was a yearning inside me to explore. Most of that exploration happened through fantasy and getting lost in books that for the most part romanticized the notion of a world beyond my neighborhoods. Being brought up

in communities that were downright racist and xenophobic left me with little space for a budding curiosity about and respect for the other. When Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976) was made into an afterschool TV special my world changed. I was in the fourth grade, attending my third elementary school, and would run home in order to catch the whole program. I fashioned myself as Kunte Kinte, and while foraging in dumpsters for food with my family or when dodging physical abuse and emotional insult, I'd repeat in my mind, "I am Kunte Kinte, I am Kunte Kinte." The resilience of this fictional character motivated me to overcome in moments of crisis. He also sparked in me an interest to better understand the oppressions and unimaginable colonizing forces that my White forebears wrought on the world, even though I was too young and unable to grasp the complexity of the matter at the time.

As years and locations rolled along, my private internal struggle to escape from closed-minded and insular thinking developed, and my reading and habit of assuming characters continued. I read and re-read Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), this time assuming the character of Tom Joad. Only I hadn't the

wherewithal or the courage as a child to actualize any of my desires to take on the issues of racism and classism through public discourse or action. I made grand comparisons between

Steinbeck's characters and my family. We had made it across the country from rural Oregon to central Michigan with five of us piled into an old International pickup truck with all of our meager belongings perched precariously in the back. It was 1972, a far cry from the Great Depression depicted in his 1939 novel; however as I reflected on my family's journey, I could feel Steinbeck's descriptive dust on my teeth.

In the winter of 1982, I pilfered a copy of John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961) from a laundromat to bring with me on a cross-country Greyhound bus trip with my father. After losing our home and hitting another rock-bottom in Michigan, some family members in Oregon pulled together enough money for flights for my mother, a sister, and my infant brother. There was not enough money for all of us to fly, and that's why my dad and I were taking the bus. After selling, giving away or abandoning all our possessions but those we could carry, we waited in the Flint bus station for a lengthy time. While there, a profound experience of cognitive dissonance occurred. A young African American man sat down by my father and me and we struck up a conversation. He was heading

back to college after a break. My father, whose formal schooling ended during the fifth grade, remarked that it was great the man was in college. He reached into his pocket and handed the man ten of the forty dollars we had, a sum which was to last us the four days until we would reach Hillsboro, Oregon, telling him, "Here brother, take this. You're going to need it for school."

In that moment I began to wonder if my father, like me, might harbor some private internal desire to think bigger than what had been displayed to me for the years leading up to that moment. Settling in on the bus my Dad told me that as bad as we had it, "at least we're not Black." He went on to explain his level of understanding that the cards were distinctly more stacked against people of color than folks who looked like us. "This is a white man's world Johnny and the rest have got it a hell of a lot worse than us." I dug into Griffin's book with voracity, reading it as the bus rambled across the country, and became righteously angered and motivated to work towards social change.

Those early experiences and so many others fueled my desire to learn as much as I could, and to persevere through college and work.

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This ultimately led me to a career working with youths and families in poverty. My work has taken place in a range of settings, from rural farming communities to urban centers throughout the US and several other countries. Through each of these different environments, my early quest to expand my horizons persists.

Vulnerability

Jointly exploring our own beginnings such as those shared above, allows us to unpack hidden biases and motivations for this work, which necessitates openness and honesty. This vulnerability, which is present in any healthy mentoring relationship, requires that each member trusts in the good intentions and capacity of the other. With that comes a greater ability to learn from our mistakes and challenge our thinking. While there is admittedly a power differential typically associated with mentorship, our aim is for reciprocity. Consequently, we have each benefitted from our time together, in both similar and different ways.

A Student's Perspective on Mentorship

Following my first trip to South Africa, I connected with my professor in hopes of continuing research around child

trauma and international work. With only one year of university this was a thrilling yet incredibly intimidating journey to embark upon. The opportunities I was given, in working towards a publication and participating in other research resulted in a complete sense of academic empowerment. I was given a very unique experience, working with a professor as an academic partner. Prior to this experience, I had not taken a class from the professor, and we did not know anything of each other. I think that has allowed a more professional mentorship to develop and has benefitted me greatly as I begin my career. Oftentimes, as a fast-paced student, the research felt intangible and out of reach. However, understanding the need for perseverance is one of the many valuable lessons I have learned in our time working together. I confidently reflect on this experience and the direction in which it has led me. The beginning of this mentorship turned into the beginning of a career that I am eager to pursue. I would encourage all university students to seek out similar opportunities.

A Professor's Perspective on Mentorship

As a university professor with partners and friends in far reaching areas, I feel both privileged and responsible to share my social capital with college students as they develop their critical consciousness in a global and multi-cultural field. I am fortunate to have found my vocation, thoroughly enjoying my work and embracing the opportunities I am provided. This includes the ability to connect with students on an individual level, which not only helps me be a better professor, but a more fulfilled human being. I did not have the wherewithal as a college student to seek out mentorship from a professor. I was however fortunate enough in the early stages of my career to find a person to serve that function. Mark Krueger, whom many readers of this journal know as a pioneer in the field provided me with mentorship that I regularly reflect upon. One of the many things Mark instilled in me was awareness that I have the ability to make a meaningful and powerful difference in the trajectory of a student's life. As Mark has recently passed on, I can only hope that he found as much joy and energy in his relationship with me as I found in

working with him, and as I find in my relationship with Lauren and other students I have the honor of working with and learning from.

Closing Thoughts

As we are currently preparing for a third trip to work in a Township in the Southern Cape of South Africa, we are eager to learn more from our partners and friends who have spent their lives there. As we develop our relationships with each other, so too are we building relationships with our South African partners. This has supported us in valuing the knowledge and personal expertise that already exists, which in turn has helped frame the strategy for most appropriate and supportive involvement from outsiders such as ourselves.

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John Korsmo

is a professor of Human Services at Western Washington University. His education includes a PhD in Urban Education and a Master's Degree in Educational Psychology. John has held a wide range of youth work positions, from entry-level direct service to Executive Director. He is committed to working with youth and families experiencing poverty, having published widely on the topic, and has worked in several countries, and many states in the US. He serves on numerous boards and advisory committees, including being Vice President for the Association of Child and Youth Care Practitioners in the USA.



Lauren Oswald

is a soon to be graduate of the Human Services Program at Western Washington University. A passion for intercultural learning has taken Lauren to 11 countries, which included CYC work in South Africa, Colombia, and Nicaragua. Locally, Lauren has gained experience working in a therapeutic children's program and interning in other CYC disciplines. With intentions of pursuing a career in this field, Lauren is excited about continued engagement in the international community of youth work.