

Giving Up in Costa Rica: Reflections on Social Justice in Counseling

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When I finished my master's degree in counseling I needed a break – a complete shift from what I'd been doing. Although I loved counseling and felt excited to continue in a doctoral degree program, I didn't want to think, breathe, or talk about counseling until the following fall. My mother had taken a rainforest preservation trip a few years back and, given her love of nature and tendency to encourage others to get involved in environmental experiences, she mentioned a trip to Costa Rica as the perfect way to get away and shift gears from counseling. I found online openings for volunteers for a rainforest preservation program in Santa Elena Cloud Forest Reserve. The position involved staying with a local family for only \$7.00/day, and working in the rainforest from 8 - 3:00. Volunteers in the program did trail construction and maintenance as well as any other manual labor needed at the Reserve. After doing work in the rainforest, I'd have afternoons free to explore the local towns. "Perfect!" I thought. In an effort to really get away from it all, I decided to travel alone – the notion of anonymity was appealing to me. I planned the three week experience online with the help of the rainforest volunteer program, bought myself a guide to Spanish since I knew next to nothing, and prepared for my trip. This would be an incredible way to rejuvenate, I thought.

As I rode the bus to the village where I'd be staying for the program, the heat was oppressive. I looked around at the passengers and became more and more aware of my whiteness. I was no longer a majority group member, rather I was in the minority. I felt like an outsider – an object of attention, different from the rest of the passengers who looked alike. Although I had learned in my counselor training program about white privilege (an invisible package of unearned resources and special supplies) and examples of daily effects of white privilege (i.e., most of the time, I can easily find myself in the company of people of my same

race) (McIntosh, 1989; 1992) this was a moment when I really felt the absence of this privilege. I began to second guess the most basic Spanish I'd learned. Phrases like "thank you" and "excuse me" escaped me on the ride. Simple phrases I'd practiced before my trip! I felt self conscious and stumbled over my words when others attempted to engage with me. Luckily, a few stops later, a white woman traveling to another part of Costa Rica got on the bus. She quickly initiated a conversation in English and I recall feeling relieved that there was someone else like me. I didn't have to "work" as hard to speak to her in English. We chatted throughout the long and bumpy ride.

Upon arrival in Santa Elena, I met my family – none spoke English except for the youngest child who was eight years old. Ready to tackle my Spanish again, I took out my trusty language book and looked up what words I could practice during our conversations. It was the weekend when I arrived, so I relaxed, explored the small town, and enjoyed my host mother's cooking before I started volunteering in the rainforest. On the first day of work I met the other volunteers – two from Canada, one from Sweden, and many native Costa Ricans. Again, I can recall the feeling of relief when I heard other English speakers. I noticed that the two Canadian volunteers seemed especially eager to learn Spanish. They had been there for two months already and like me hadn't studied the language before. They began practicing in earnest since they'd arrived. Rather than referring to their Spanish language book, they quizzed the employees at the forest when they forgot a word. "Como se dice..." they would constantly ask. The Costa Rican employees loved it; they embraced their teaching roles and like good educators spoke Spanish only. I, on the other hand, did not jump at the chance to learn the language. Although at times the rain forest employees would gently challenge me to speak to them in Spanish and I would

politely respond, I preferred my native tongue. I spent most of my time with Sylvan from Sweden who spoke fluent Spanish and English.

I'm still not sure if my inability and reluctance to master the language was due to my shyness in a new place, my unrealistic expectations about what I could accomplish, mental fatigue from my graduate work, or a combination of all of these things. But the days and weeks passed and unlike my Canadian friends, Spanish words and the motivation to learn them escaped me. Perhaps I simply gave up because it seemed too difficult or because I had the luxury of finding a few who did speak English, allowing me to stay in my "comfort zone." Rather than experience some discomfort, push myself, and not worry about sounding awkward or rusty, I chose to essentially give up on learning the language.

As I reflect on the role social justice in my work as a counselor educator and clinician, there are some important take - away reflections from my experience in Costa Rica. Clients who come to the United States who are unfamiliar with the language and customs use a lot of energy just attempting to navigate their way through a day - to - day existence. Just as I did on that hot, crowded bus ride when I arrived in Costa Rica, those who are coming to the US for the first time might feel overwhelmed uttering a seemingly simple phrase during their first few attempts. No matter how much one practices with a book, it's no substitute for hearing live native voices whose agenda doesn't necessarily include helping one learn the language. Being surrounded by so many people who are different can be an unsettling event. Thus, as counselors we might normalize this with clients who are feeling overwhelmed by the experience.

As counselors concerned with social justice, we might need to step outside of our normal role as counselor and function in a different way for clients who are new to the US. Just as I felt relieved when meeting a woman who spoke my language, a counselor might assist a client in

finding a community of others from outside of the US. Connecting with professionals from clients' countries of origin might assist with a transition to the US for those who have just relocated. Another essential resource for clients who are non English speakers is a translator who can attend counseling sessions. A counselor might make this a "first step" in the process of accommodating clients' needs.

Although there are common experiences to those arriving in the US for the first time and struggling to navigate a new system, individual differences exist too. In my experience, although the two Canadian volunteers and I were similar (we all came from English speaking countries and did not know Spanish beforehand) our personalities resulted in very different experiences with learning and speaking the native language while we were in Costa Rica. Two people from the same country can come to the US with the same amount of knowledge and skills, and behave and respond in two very different ways. Although as counselor educators and clinicians we discuss within - group differences, my experience in Costa Rica really brought this phenomenon to life for me. As counselors for social justice, it's essential to meet a person (depending on personality) where she or he is – while one client might transition into US culture with ease, another client who appears similar in circumstances might have a markedly more difficult transition. If, as counselors, we assume that one experience with one client from one country will result in a similar experience with a client from the same country, we ignore the notion of personality and individual experience. For some, coming to a country for the first time might result in a similar response to mine when learning a new language – wanting to give up when practicing a new language proves tiring. It is important to anticipate a host of reactions to this challenge. It's uncomfortable to speak a new language, eat new foods, and learn a new culture.

I had the luxury of finding those who spoke my language in Costa Rica. Others who come to the US might not be able to “give up” as I did and enjoy the benefits of falling back on a comfort zone. As counselors for social justice, perhaps one of our most important goals is to remain cognizant of this luxury and, to the greatest extent possible, aim to level the playing field so that these power imbalances and luxuries are lessened and eventually erased. It’s important to be aware of white privilege, daily effects of such privilege (McIntosh, 1989; 1992), as well as privilege related to majority status associated with sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, ableness, and religious affiliation (Black & Stone, 2005). Counselors who travel abroad can treat experiences such as this as a valuable reflection tool and resource for future work. Counselor educators can take this a step further by not only examining their own privilege and resulting oppression but also modeling this introspection to students (Black & Stone, 2005). Reflection questions might include:

- What sorts of privileges do you have?
- How did you become aware of these as you traveled in another country?
- What was your experience as you abandoned some of the luxuries of your privileged status?
- How does your personal experience relate to your work as counselor or counselor educator?

References

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