

## How Deep Is Your Commitment? Crossing Borders Via Cultural Immersion

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I was introduced to the notion of cultural competency (Sue, Bernier, Durran, Feinberg, Pedersen, Smith, & Vasquez–Nuttal, 1982; Sue & Sue, 1990) early in my graduate training. Since then, guidelines concerning multicultural competency and standards (American Psychological Association [APA], 2003; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992) have framed the scholarship and mission of the multicultural psychology field (Ridley & Kleiner, 2003). As vague as it may sound now, at the time, the energy feeding my decision to add a year of study abroad was motivated by the desire to “put it to the test.” The “*it*” that I wanted to test encompassed examination of my graduate school cultural competency training and the internalization of the APA guideline (2003) related to the “Commitment to Cultural Awareness and Knowledge of Self and Others”:

Guideline 1: Psychologists are encouraged to recognize that, as cultural beings, they may hold attitudes and beliefs that can detrimentally influence their perceptions of and interactions with individuals who are ethnically and racially different from themselves. (p. 382)

I believed if I immersed myself in another culture by crossing a border

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outside my comfort zone, I could assess my degree of competency in this area.

### From Theory to Practice to Immersion

In retrospect, of the more than 45 courses in which I enrolled as a graduate student, only a few had an exclusive focus on diversity. I accumulated credit for experiences and courses such as cross-cultural counseling, multicultural education, human sexuality, my master's thesis, and my year-long predoctoral internship. Our primary text, *Counseling the Culturally Different: Theory and Practice* (Sue & Sue, 1990), was the gold standard, detailing aspirations related to cultural competency for future counseling psychologists. I was motivated by these readings, including the politics, theories, and conceptualizations in the book. Also, scholars like Nancy Boyd-Franklin, Robert Carter, William Cross, Janet Helms, Allen Ivey, Reginald Jones, Wade Nobles, Thomas Parham, Joseph G. Ponterotto, Donald Pope-Daniels, and others espoused similar ideals that led me to feel included in the story of the human experience. They validated my perspective, gave a voice to my experiences, and framed much of my culture's narrative in a way that was reflective, critically compassionate, and affirming. I wanted to follow in their footsteps by becoming a mental health provider who offered the same enlightened, strengths-based, and conscientious perspective to future clients. At the time, this relatively new field of multicultural counseling psychology was coined the "fourth force" in psychology. Ignited by the energy and impressed by these multicultural counseling advocates, my goal was clear: to be a culturally competent practitioner.

Cultural immersion experiences have been used in multicultural counselor training courses to address racism (DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005). Cultural immersion experiences include activities designed to provide concentrated, direct, substantial, and meaningful interactions with multiple elements of a target culture for the purpose of promoting cross-cultural competency. My graduate course in cross-cultural counseling required an immersion experience as part of the evaluation process. I decided to immerse myself in the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (GLBT) culture because I had had limited contact with this group and frankly had been socialized to be homophobic. The University of Kansas (KU) had a series of Gay Pride activities for about a week, with events that educated the community about various aspects of the gay experience. I decided to attend as many events as my schedule would allow. This decision was my first intentional cultural immersion exercise. It was the first time I had been conscious of any intent to cross a border. In

one early encounter I arrived at a social function that was attended by many lesbians. I was actually sweating as I interacted with the women. Sweating! I reflect on that time then and now as a teachable moment. What were my beads of perspiration telling me? What was the story I had been told about lesbian or gay people? The lesson was clear: both conscious and unconscious biases exist deep within, and only when we totally immerse ourselves, creating vulnerability by erasing familiarity, can we get closer to understanding our hidden feelings about certain groups. I knew intellectually I had blind spots about gay culture. Immersion allowed me to find, feel, and recognize my blindness and bring it to the surface. It was clear to me that cultural socialization is not just an intellectual exercise; it is a physical and spiritual endeavor, as well. When we produce sweat by laboring to obtain a richer understanding of our socialization processes, we open ourselves to the possibility of approaching multicultural competency.

During this Gay Pride week I heard Essex Hemphill, a poet and activist. I was moved by his courage, creativity, and self-affirming attitude. As he spoke, his art reflected deep truths about African-American identity and internalized homophobia in the Black community. The wit in his poetry took me back home to familiar nuances of Black life and to my upbringing as a Black person unconsciously trained to be homophobic. In the question-and-answer portion of his presentation, I asked him about the cost of advocacy and of being a gay ally. I wanted to unleash the fears that had inhibited my entrance to advocacy, but I was afraid. In response to my question, which reflected egocentric concerns, internalized homophobia, and consumption of the dominant society's views about gays and lesbians, he replied that I should always ask myself, "How *deeply* are you committed?" His response affected me in ways I have yet to uncover.

I completed coursework, practicums, and comprehensive exams and moved on to an out-of-state predoctoral internship. I was nearly finished with my clinical education. I loved my internship at the University of Texas-Austin, chosen specifically because of the attention given to multicultural competency. The internship offered an apprenticeship training model, exposure to diverse clients, and varied experiences in mental health work. I felt honored to work with supervisors who were explicitly committed to social justice, creating affirming environments, and training culturally competent clinicians. My crisis intervention, individual, couples, and group counseling experiences included cross-cultural exchanges. Professional seminars challenged interns to self-examine and grapple with blind spots in multicultural competency. The multicultural counseling field disagrees on a universal definition

of multicultural competency (Holcomb-McCoy, 2000; Ridley & Kleiner, 2003), yet what stood out for me and became clearer during the internship was this: cultural competence is about recognizing, owning, and working through conscious and unconscious biases so that one may be more effective in encounters with diverse clients.

My journey to be a multiculturally competent clinician included a decision to add a year to my extensive Counseling Psychology doctoral program at KU. At the time, it was an unusual move for a member of my cohort, or specifically a doctoral candidate, to engage in a study abroad experience after the predoctoral internship, which comes after completing all coursework and comprehensive examinations. Typically, the period following the internship is slated as time to finish a dissertation and to engage in career—not add another item to check off on an already exhaustive to-do list. I had tried other avenues to obtain a cultural immersion experience. For example, I had made an unsuccessful attempt to obtain a Fulbright Scholarship. Undaunted by the failure, I left for the University of Costa Rica, in San Jose, as a study abroad student, within a week after completing my predoctoral internship. It was the summer of 1998.

A commitment, like a marriage or a civil union, is an emotional experience. No matter how much one can read about marriage, take premarital courses, watch videos, have discussions, or engage in mini-encounters with married people, it is the lived experience of matrimony/civil union in which the strength of commitment is tested. Having had extensive intellectual training, clinical training, and discussions of cross-cultural counseling demonstrations, I wanted an emotional and kinesthetic experience.

Immersion in a different culture heightens an individuals' personal racial and cultural awareness and encourages the examination of thoughts, feelings, values, and behaviors that might be ignored or denied in a similar or familiar cultural context. (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010, p. 169)

Now having completed years of course work and training, exactly how in tune was I to the cultural dimensions of people's lives? When transplanted in a different cultural and linguistic context, how well would I navigate the processes of daily living? Unlike the mini-encounters in my cultural immersion experiences with GLBT life, in an abroad/cultural immersion experience I would be immersed all day, every day, until I left the country. To what degree was I then multiculturally competent, and specifically, how aware was I of my personal biases? Would immersion in another culture "sweat me"?

### Complications of Cultural Immersion

The direct answer was that it was complicated and surprising. In using cultural immersion to examine attitudes and beliefs that could detrimentally influence my work with culturally diverse clients, I had an experience that simultaneously surprised and humbled me. In my attempts to test myself, what got tested was my emotional resolve as I struggled with health issues, micro-aggressions overload, and securing a job once I decided, after nearly a year, my work in bias examination had only just begun. What happened was the discovery of a set of lessons as I journeyed into recognizing, owning, and working through my conscious and unconscious biases.

#### ***Lesson 1***

While multicultural competency as a mental health clinician, educator, student, worker, or traveler may involve some similarities, each role occupies and each identity assumes a set of completely distinct competencies in a culturally immersed context. Sue et al. (1982) argued for a tripartite (knowledge, skills, awareness) conceptualization of multicultural competencies, and Holcomb-McCoy and Myers (1999) presented five factors that constitute multicultural competencies (awareness, knowledge, definitions, racial identity development, and skills), totaling eight competencies. I suggest the addition of three additional abilities for multicultural competency: (a) cultural navigation (ability to move around seamlessly, negotiate, and meet the demands of daily living), (b) psychological self-soothing (ability to relieve stress, manage conflict, and augment emotional healing in ways concordant to mechanisms approved by host country nationals), and (c) language facility (ability to use the host language to meet needs). While in Costa Rica, at different times I occupied distinct roles: student, worker, volunteer, teacher, advocate, or tourist. The successful execution of the role that one plays (student, tourist, worker, or educator) and one's intentions in dealing with host country nationals also determine cultural competency. Though ambitious, I should not have expected my training in multicultural counseling and psychology to have prepared me completely for the multiple roles I would experience as a study abroad student.

#### ***Lesson 2***

Most of my education had not trained me for a global experience. Despite growing diversity in the United States, most of my primary grade education did not prepare me for a global experience. Although I was fortunate to have lived in Japan, on a military base, for over a

year as a teenager, I had limited contact with Japanese country nationals. I went to high school on the military base with other dependents, had instruction in Japanese, but had no country national friends or playmates. I lived in a truly diverse environment but was not really immersed in the diversity of the host country, nor do I remember being emotionally integrated in the culture in my day-to-day life as a teenager. This parallels the experience of some American citizens who live near or in diverse neighborhoods (near Native American reservations, near ethnically diverse urban cities, near military bases) but know very little about those communities.

My undergraduate education did not prepare me for a global multicultural experience, either. For example, as a double major (Psychology/Spanish) college undergrad and as a counseling psychology major in graduate school, I learned little or no history about U.S. capitalist involvement in the economic or social evolution of other countries; little or no history about the complexity of gender expression, social class, racism, sexism, or ageism in other countries; little or no history about the various ways that global marginalized groups have resisted or prevailed against external oppressive forces; and little history about how mental health is viewed globally. This reflection parallels the findings by Holcomb-McCoy and Myers (1999) that many counselors obtain “multicultural competence through post degree work with culturally different clients rather than through graduate course work” (p. 299).

This reflection on my education suggests that cultural competency work must be intentional. One can live surrounded by diversity and not see, appreciate, understand, or/and respect it. As the extant literature reveals, intentional cultural immersion experiences enhance cultural competency (Hu, Andreatta, Liping, & Sijian, 2010; Tremethick & Smit, 2009), cultural sensitivity (Johns & Thompson, 2010), cultural awareness (Mapp, McFarland, & Newell, 2007; Miller, 1993), global understanding (Kitsantas, 2004), and compassion (Plante, Lackey, & Jeong Yeon, 2009). This manuscript supports the current research on cultural immersion. Reflections contained herein note the educational, emotional, and psychological benefits of a cultural immersion experience and the impact it can have on producing a more culturally alert global citizen.

### **Lesson 3**

The best way to learn about the unwritten rules of the host country and culture is to live with a host family. Multicultural competence occurs via a shared emotional experience that challenges former beliefs and assumptions about people. Essentially, cultural immersion is a willingness to be intimate with the *other*, and living with host country

nationals is an immediate entry point to a deeper understanding of another's culture. Multicultural competence occurs when the learner is ready for sustained reflection of self and of self in relationship with others. While enrolled as a full-time student, I lived with several types of Costa Rican families (a home headed by an older citizen host mother; a home headed by a host mother who was lesbian; and a home headed by a host mother with several biracial teenage children). These experiences cemented my belief that one of the best ways to learn about the psychosocial history, culture, traditions, folkways, and unwritten rules of a group of people is by cohabitation. Each host mother's experiences provided deeper insight into the real Costa Rica and its master statuses (privileged segments of society in terms of race, sexual orientation, religion, social class, gender, and ability).

I completed one year at La Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR) in San Pedro. While at the UCR, I completed courses in domestic violence, the psychology of violence, the sociology of health, and contemporary issues in psychology and research. I participated in volunteer work with survivors of sexual abuse. I visited rainforests, volcanoes, beaches, national parks, and museums. Important lessons included those learned in the host family environment, out on the street, and outside the classroom.

#### ***Lesson 4***

Upon arriving at a destination, the first things to unpack are assumptions. Assumptions (believing a statement or idea is true or certain about people, places, and experiences) may be conscious or unconscious. For example, I believed that the shared experience of oppression and domination by imperialist countries would be a connecting link between the Spanish-speaking peoples of Central America and me. Not only was this notion presumptuous, but I also had no deep appreciation of the extent that colonization had influenced the country of Costa Rica, nor at that time just how much racism existed in the country.

#### ***Lesson 5***

Living abroad helped me to understand my culture and home country better. In flagrant to minute ways, culture is expressed in almost every element of life: greeting and closure rituals, classroom etiquette, adherence to time, expectations of gender, family structure, notions of success, hobbies, religious beliefs, and notions about privacy. My eyes were opened to the many commonalities that African American women have with Latinas, including the impact of the church on daily culture, the striking similarities between how Mexicans are treated in the United States and how Nicaraguans are treated in Costa Rica, and

shared similarities in the religious expressions of Afro-Costa Ricans and Afro-Americans. I became aware of the socialization of African-American men as I learned more about the socialization of Costa Rican men.

### **Lesson 6**

Nationality, the degree of skin pigmentation, gender, size, social class, religion, and age shape a cultural immersion experience. I was a dark-skinned, working class, young African-American woman in a study abroad cohort composed mostly of White, middle class, female, and (in most cases) younger Americans. Assumptions of a middle class status were based on apparent physical and dental health and the fact that we could afford to live in another country. Terms such as *gordita* (little fat one), *flaca* (skinny girl), and *negrita* (Black girl) could be considered enduring, descriptive, neutral, or derogatory, depending on vocal inflection, tone, and context. Some of the host mothers (many of whom were Catholic) held something close to prayer vigils for our souls. Some of us had to be careful and inquisitive about motives when dating country nationals. While it is true that these types of experiences can and do happen in the United States, it can be argued that the cultural immersion/study abroad experience heightens not only the memory but also the interpretation of the experience. As language skills increase, so does comprehension of cultural subtleties. At times, it was difficult to process these cultural clashes.

### **Lesson 7**

Discomfort equals growth, if one can stay with and work through discordant feelings long enough. Unlike the mini-encounters in my cultural immersion experiences with GLBT life in graduate school, in my cultural immersion experience I was immersed all day, every day, until I left the country. At times, I was tired and ached to speak to English-speaking foreigners. But at the seven-month mark, I knew that I could not leave. I was aware of my biases and felt frustrated. At this point, I had experienced enough micro-aggressions to obscure some of my initially positive notions of the country. (Micro-aggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” [Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007]). As my language skills increased, I became more aware of subcontext, both racist and sexist, in communication. Through my volunteer work with sexual assault survivors, I had a better idea of how violence was supported by religious and political structures. I became more conscious

of how, as in my African American culture, *Ticos* (a name Costa Ricans call themselves) were also socialized to be heterosexist. Although I was struggling financially, my presumed wealth (based on the fact that I could afford the flight to a foreign country) created a class chasm in certain circles, alienating me from some people with whom I wanted to get close. I felt frustrated, disappointed, and disillusioned. I had amassed a set of experiences that hardened negative notions about *Ticos*. I knew that, if I came back to the United States at that specific moment, I would have had more biases against *Ticos* than I had when I came. This prospect mortified me. I had to stay longer. I was having a crisis: Everything about my feelings was incongruent with my quest to become more culturally competent. I knew that I had to work through these emotions, which meant remaining in Costa Rica. That meant being uncomfortable longer—and sweating longer. I secured employment that allowed me to remain in Costa Rica two additional years.

### ***Lesson 8***

Staying and working through my biases was a sound and measured decision. By the time I left, my frustrations had dissipated and I was weighing the pros and cons of becoming an expatriate. I became close friends with Yamilet, a Nicaraguan who had immigrated to Costa Rica. I found an interesting job that combined psychology, advocacy, and teaching at a nearby international school. For two years, I worked with a teen, diagnosed with autism, attending a school that served 200 students from over 30 countries. I became conscious of the opportunities and unique challenges faced by primary and middle school students who move to a different culture. I made deep connections with a Taoist family in my neighborhood who had immigrated from Taiwan. I participated in regular spiritual and character discussions with a welcoming group of Costa Ricans practicing the Baha'i religion. I joined a Thai kickboxing gym, adopted a beautiful dog, and found loving friends. I took Afro Caribbean dance lessons, became a scuba diver, and started a cheerleading team.

### ***Lesson 9***

In hindsight, a mentorship from a cultural navigator (someone who was further along in the journey of multicultural competency) would have expedited my growth process. I believe my crisis point would have been less intense, and perhaps I would have adapted sooner. Once I completed my clinical internship and prior to going to Costa Rica, I should have had a cultural mentor and a far more structured cultural immersion plan. Integrating structured immersion training models into cultural competency programs is one way to enhance counselor com-

petence. Direct experience with culturally different people, via travel, study abroad, or in-home country immersion experiences, can enhance intellectual knowledge (Marshall & Wieling, 2000; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010), self-understanding (Streets, 2011), and level of comfort in providing mental health services (James, 2010). Access to the Internet in Costa Rica then and now is dramatically different; then, I had little contact with my home department or friends in the United States. Having culturally sensitive study abroad consultants/agents (or country nationals) to help in navigating the cultural immersion process, at the level discussed in the paragraphs above, would have been useful.

After a year, I found I had the most in common (in terms of processing a cultural immersion experience) with Peace Corps volunteers; collaboration with this agency may be a good match for graduate students in foreign countries. Essentially, a mentorship relationship with a cultural navigator provides an appropriate release and sounding board for processing cultural immersion micro-aggressions and culture shock. In agreement with Cordero and Rodriguez (2009), if training programs are devoted to generating practitioners who are responsive to diverse communities, then they should provide culturally competent infrastructures. A cultural immersion mentor may be just one part of this framework.

### **Lesson 10**

As a result of my cultural immersion experiences, I have become a more culturally competent educator, clinician, professor, traveler, and life-long learner. Since my stay in Costa Rica, I have travelled to other countries. In these cultural immersion experiences, I continue to examine and uncover my own biases and stereotypes, increase self-understanding, improve my appreciation and understanding of resistance strategies used by oppressed groups, and increase my tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty. For example, with each trip to Africa, I see more and more links between African-American and African cultures. I have become more aware of the diverse ways in which different cultures promote emotional health. I am better able to process my cultural immersion clashes, both formally and informally, with others or alone.

The strongest recommendation I offer for teachers and teacher educators is to create activities that allow students to immerse into another culture (either domestically or internationally). International cultural immersion trips may be viewed by critics as eccentric leisure activities. In response to that criticism, I am reminded of Essex Hemphill's question, *How deeply am I committed?* I am absolutely convinced of the utility of cultural immersion, both at home and in international venues, as a

legitimate and transformative educational experience for learners. Thus, I have applied my immersion experiences in teaching a graduate course in the counseling field (“Race, Class, and Gender Issues in Counseling and Psychology”). For example, I offer students the opportunity to engage in experiences such as writing a cultural autobiography, participating in a multicultural encounter, writing about their DNA results from participation in the Genographic Project, or writing a book or video review (often related to a nonfictional account of social injustice against a historically oppressed group or an autobiography by an anti-racism activist). Domestic cultural immersion experiences include attending numerous functions sponsored by a cultural group with which a student has little knowledge or contact. Having also participated in these experiences first-hand provides recognition of the difficulties that are inherent in the assignments and of the dynamics involved in the process of change. Encouraging students to process their experiences, and create a structured cultural immersion (and re-entry) plan are recommendations for teachers and teacher educators. Helping students understand themselves, their culture and their multiple identities via a global perspective is another recommendation for teachers and teacher educators.

The most uncomfortable recommendation I offer for teachers and teacher educators is to engage in the following activity:

- (a) Sit across from a colleague but as closely as possible;
- (b) Colleague ‘a’ asks colleague ‘b’ “How deeply are you committed?”;
- (c) Colleague ‘a’ listens, and repeats the same question after each response colleague ‘b’ supplies; and
- (d) Continue for two minutes.

Having participated in a similar activity (facilitated by Gerald Porter, a multicultural educator, who asked students “Who are you”), I can attest after the third or fourth inquiry, the speaker/colleague ‘b’ is forced to deeply ponder the essence of the question. It is this type of self-reflection teachers and teacher educators must engage in before we ask the same of our students.

### Rest as Needed, But Promise to Be Committed

Biases reside deeply within us. As I think back on my sweat in my first cultural immersion experience, it is clear that a culture’s socialization of children affects them at a biochemical level. It is easier to hide biases in a familiar environment than in an unfamiliar one. Total immersion strips

us of defenses that can be hidden in a familial neighborhood or home country. Crossing borders, whether emotional, physical, geographical, political, or social, requires courage and commitment. Crossing borders implies we have taken the stance that achieving multicultural competency is not for the sake of the other; it is for our own sake. As a result of my cultural immersion experiences, I am a more effective clinician and educator. I am better able to recognize and work through my biases, and I am better able to see hidden biases in others. However, I make no claims about being finished with this journey. I have made an intentional decision to continue to increase my competency in effectively crossing borders. I am not there yet, but I am deeply committed.

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