The courage to face yourself

- about being a social worker in an unknown culture and in unfamiliar situations

Kajsa Liisa Høiland, University of Nordland, Norway

I have called this essay, *The courage to face yourself;* in it, I use stories from my internship in Cuba to reflect on being a Norwegian social worker in another country. I also consider the many challenges that arise in this situation, and focus on the two different cultures and their attendant values, norms and morals. The stories are also about being a social worker in an unfamiliar culture and being in new situations. They are about the importance of getting to know yourself, daring to fully face yourself and having the courage to be the person you want to be, both privately and professionally. They are about developing yourself through interactions with others. They are about giving voice to the uncomfortable and incomprehensible. They are about having the courage to be yourself.

Background

As a second year student in the Bachelor of Social Work programme, I chose to do my internship in Cuba. I was curious about how social work is done in other countries, and I wanted to develop and challenge myself. To me, Cuba was an interesting and exciting country and a place that I wanted to explore and experience. I had read about Cuban history, politics, society and culture. I had devoured book upon book. Yet I could never have prepared for what awaited me. When I look back, I think that was actually a good thing. I gained first-hand experience of what it is like to be completely unprepared for something I had prepared so carefully for. I often compare it to reading all my coursework: being able to repeat the theory and actually meeting clients face to face and relating to real people in real situations are two very different things. Books and coursework provide a foundation, a tool for the work ahead. Yet you are the one who must do the work, who must develop and adapt to diverse situations.

I grew up in Norway, I have lived most of my life in Norway and most of my education has been completed in Norway. My experiences are primarily from Norway, which colours how I see the world. I tried to take on a Cuban mindset while I was there, but I can never remove the part of me that is Norwegian. Being Norwegian is part of who I am, as a person and as a social worker.

I faced many challenges during my time in Cuba, and thus also gained many experiences. Here, I try to use my own voice to talk about my experiences during my internship in Cuba.

My first meeting with the internship site

I worked at a youth centre on the outskirts of Havana, which was run by a general manager, a few employees and several volunteers. It was open every afternoon and served children and youth in the neighbourhood. Our primary work was preventative: the centre offered leisure activities for children and youth in the area.

My impression is that this was a rough area to grow up in. The area is in a poor part of Havana that has high rates of unemployment and multiple social problems, and there is visible use and abuse of alcohol; for example, rum is consumed everywhere and at all hours. I remember one of the first days of my internship. We arrived at the centre and found two of our colleagues sitting outside on the centre steps. It was 2 PM on a Wednesday afternoon, and they were drinking rum. In my culture, alcohol is usually not consumed in the middle of the day. Moreover, youth centres in Norway are alcohol and drug free, and employees certainly cannot drink while at work. I therefore found the behaviour of my new colleagues to be inappropriate.

According to Henriksen and Vetlesen (2006), ethical problems are often the result of our diverse backgrounds and values. They argue that our cultural background particularly

affects how we view reality and how we perceive conflicting values. What we see as appropriate and positive is thus tied to our culture and the values this culture is based on. According to my world view, consuming alcohol during the workday is unacceptable. It is not necessarily harmful to have a glass of rum, but to do so during working hours conflicts with my professional values. I also found this behaviour problematic because the purpose of the centre was to provide a safe space for children. The centre was supposed to offer an alternative to the street and to drugs and alcohol. Knowing that many of the children who came to the centre and used its programmes lived in homes with significant alcohol problems and other social issues, I found it difficult to relate to employees and volunteers who drank rum while waiting for the children to arrive. They were role models for the children in the area, and to my mind they therefore had a moral responsibility to the children. What message is being sent to the children when they see adults drinking alcohol at the same time as these same adults are trying to teach the children that alcohol does not solve any problems? To me, there was a conflict between my values, my view of the professional role of social workers and the obvious alcohol consumption among the employees. I was aware that I was living in another culture in which different norms and rules applied, and some might say that I overreacted, as the employees certainly were not staggering around drunk at work. Yet for me, this was not about the result of the drinking, but about the action and what it meant. In my world view, this was fundamentally wrong, contradictory and immoral. I worked on this ethical challenge throughout the internship.

Norway may have very restrictive attitudes to alcohol compared with other countries. Even in nearby Denmark, the cultural view of alcohol is completely different. Some might argue that seeing moderate alcohol use might be a positive experience for the children who witness alcohol abuse in their homes, and I did not witness the children being harmed due to the obvious alcohol use among the staff. However, in addition to being used to Norwegian culture and drinking habits, I have experiences that indicated that such behaviour was not right. Nonetheless, this does not mean that I see this behaviour as always and necessarily wrong. In this situation, I had to adjust and try to accept that we had different values and views of reality. As long as I did not see the children being directly harmed or affected by the drinking, I did not feel that I could criticise this behaviour. I had to realise and accept that I was living in a different culture in which the reality was different from the one I was used to.

Facing myself

It is hot and humid. I wipe away the sweat that is running down my face. It is much too hot to play baseball, but then every day is too hot for any type of outdoor activity - at least to me. The children do not appear to be particularly affected by the heat, though as long as they can play and run around nothing stands in their way. I sit down by the edge of a wall where my face is almost in the shade. My fellow social work student, Alexis, is from Spain. He is joking around and chatting with the children, as they climb all over him, tease him and laugh as he tries to grab hold of them. I feel a sting of jealousy, as well as feeling that I am being left out. The language is a barrier for me, something that makes me feel unable to achieve a similarly good rapport with the children. While I am sitting quietly and observing the play, Magdalena comes over. She is about 12 years old, and without saying a word, she climbs onto my lap, puts her head on my shoulder and starts playing with my hair. It strikes me that even though I cannot have long and in-depth conversations with the children, they mostly come to me to be comforted, to get a hug or to just sit on my lap.

Being unable to communicate with the children and my colleagues as well as I wanted made me feel unsure of myself. I felt unable to show them who I was. I saw myself through their eyes - or rather how I *thought* I saw myself through their eyes: a shy girl, a foreigner at that, who spoke poor and heavily accented Spanish, someone who did not understand what

they were trying to communicate and was therefore worthless as a social worker. I was in unfamiliar territory, both as an inexperienced student and as a Norwegian in Cuba, which affected my sense of self.

William James talks about "the social me", which is the recognition we get from others. James believes that we have as many different versions of the "social me" as we have people we know, because each of those we know sees us differently or sees different aspects of our character depending on the social context (Burkitt, 2008, p. 35). My perspective changed during the situation I described in which Magdalena climbed onto my lap. I acquired another view of "the social me", and felt recognised and valued. Perhaps I was not useless, after all? Perhaps I was the one making the language into a barrier? It did not seem to matter much to the children that I could not communicate well verbally. Why did I let my lack of Spanish skills be a hindrance? Why did I dwell on being a student and being Norwegian? I did not have to be an expert; was I not here to learn?

In my meetings with children and colleagues during the internship, I felt naked: I did not have the right words and could not communicate well with those around me. Yet in our meetings with others, we are constantly communicating. We communicate in ways other than by the things we say and our stated purpose or goal. We also communicate something about ourselves. To meet another is to meet a face. Our face shows who we are; our face is something we are. We can formulate words and choose whether to use them or remain silent, and we also use words differently. A face is always communicating; it shows who we are, it exposes us and lays bare our needs. A face is naked (Henriksen & Vetlesen, 2006).

Perhaps I did not think about it at the time, but my face was the only thing I had in my meetings with others. I felt that my insecurity, vulnerability and frustration were written all over my face. The face is often the first thing we notice in meetings with another person. Generally, we can use words to support and elaborate on who we are and what we want. Without words, I felt exposed, helpless and stuck. I was my face, with no words to support and explain who I was and what I wanted. It is frightening to be without a safety net, rendered naked when coming face to face with yourself.

According to the ethics of proximity, our moral intuitions, concepts and principles are inextricably linked to our experiences of being a human among humans (Henriksen & Vetlesen, 2006, p. 219). Løgstrup (1997) argues that when another person addresses us, we immediately hold a portion of their fate in our hands, despite never having asked for such a responsibility. This means that we also have a form of power over and responsibility for the other person. To be human is to live in interdependence with others; our fates are intertwined. Løgstrup (1997) writes:

> *But the fact is that there is a demand. And since this demand is implied by the very fact that a person belongs to the world in which the other person has his or her life, and therefore holds something of that person`s life in his or her hands, it is a demand to take care of that person`s life.* (Løgstrup, 1997 p. 22)

In relationships between clients and social workers, the focus tends to be on the social worker's power over and responsibility for the client. In the situation in which Magdalena came to me, we can see that we were both vulnerable people in a relationship of mutual dependence. Magdalena approached me to find comfort, care and a feeling of safety. As a social worker and fellow human being, I could offer what she asked for; I could take on the responsibility asked of me and meet her and her needs. Magdalena climbing onto my lap was also a positive experience for me. That she approached me in this way showed me that she acknowledged my status as a social worker, thereby confirming my view of myself as a

professional. Løgstrup calls the responsibility each individual has in meetings with others an "ethical demand". In my meeting with Magdalena, I opened my arms and received the trust she placed in me (Olsen & Oltedal, 2007). By climbing onto my lap and addressing me in this way, Magdalena gave me a portion of her fate to hold in my hands (Løgstrup, 1997).

As humans, we are vulnerable and needy; this is true for both social workers and clients. Magdalena addressed me in a manner that I needed at a moment when I felt vulnerable in my role as a social worker. She gave me the acknowledgement I so desperately needed: She needed me and the care I could provide. I think most people need to feel needed by someone, and to show both care and to be cared for. Through a mutual vulnerability, we met each other and established a bond between us. For me, this bond also worked as a bond to the other children at the centre. Magdalena showed me that I was wanted, accepted and liked, and through her I felt a connection with the other children.

Magdalena's actions led to a change in my thinking, as I realised that I was limiting myself and my work. Without using any words, this young girl had led me to reflect on my own actions and identity. I recalled what my grandfather had always said about me, "You're like the potato: you can be used for anything". It was true. I was not a useless social worker, I could be used for something. After all, I had chosen this training because I felt it was what I was meant to do and that I was good at it.

The courage to take action

I experienced the children as eager to seek contact with adults. They were interested in me and the other visiting students who came to spend time with them. They were very loving, and showered us with hugs. At the same time, I also noticed that the tone and play between the children was rougher. There was a very short distance between laughter and crying, hugs and punches. Conflicts arose over even the smallest thing, and the children quickly started punching or kicking each other. The rule of the strongest applied. At times, I thought their play and language brutal, and found this shocking in the beginning. How could they attack each other this way? A peaceful ballgame could become a serious fight. I was appalled that the adults at the centre did not intervene immediately. Was I, as a Norwegian, the only one who did not understand this? Was this part of the socialisation in the area?

Early on, I remained in the background, as I felt uncertain of myself. I did not know the language well enough to explain why I felt that violence was not a good way to solve problems. I did not feel that I could explain my actions, and I was uncertain and felt cowardly, but dared not intervene. Afterwards, I have looked back on this in shame. As an adult, I should have intervened, and I should not have been afraid of stepping in. Previously, I had seen myself as a decisive adult, someone who was not afraid to speak up. Yet at the centre I struggled, as I did not want to be someone who failed to act in accordance with my own morals. In retrospect, I also thought that I should have talked about this issue with my supervisor the first time I witnessed violence between the children.

> *As usual, it starts with teasing. He is teasing her. He is about 12 years old, she is 14. I am standing right next to them. I expect the play to soon take on a rougher tone. I expect a punch or a kick. I am ready. I have debated with myself and have decided that from now on, I will not accept that they solve problems with punches, kicks and hurtful words. That is no way to solve problems. There is nothing more to it. I have regained my self-confidence, and am determined to stick to my plans if and when the children's games turn into something more serious. Then something I had not expected happens. He lifts her skirt and grabs between her legs. I watch her surprise turn to humiliation and anger. I am paralysed. He gets a slap in the face before she runs off crying. Everything happened so quickly. I am left behind. What do I do now?*

For me, this was a new situation. I was both shocked and numbed, as a social worker, as a person and as a woman. To me, this was and is completely unacceptable! I could not let this pass, and fought with myself about how to best handle the situation. The boy did not understand the severity of what he had done, and was completely unaffected.

Again, it is necessary to consider one's own background and culture. Like most Latin American countries, Cuba has a macho culture and the game between women and men plays out daily, both on the streets and in the home. As a foreigner this can be exciting, but also bothersome or frightening when men comment on your looks as you walk by. Regardless, it is a form of interaction that is Cuban, that is part of the culture and that one must adjust to and accept. The constant flirtation and play between men and women is something children clearly pick up on and act out, though I do not actually find this aspect of the culture problematic. For instance, I have never felt threatened or harassed. It is when this game shifts into violence and abuse that I am troubled. To physically touch another person without their permission is not part of the macho culture, and is thus something that not should be accepted.

Another aspect of Cuban culture that I quickly noticed was that the flirtation between girls and boys is much more "sexualised" than would be common between, e.g. 12 year olds in Norway. I was not comfortable with this sexualisation, but as a Norwegian in Cuba I had to see a distinction between right and wrong, the absolute and the relative, actions that are culturally dependent and the things that are acceptable or unacceptable. My first thought was that children quickly become adults in Cuba. To me, this is not a desirable pattern, yet this does not mean that it is wrong. I view this development though my eyes, which are coloured by the culture, background and values that I carry with me. At the same time as I take a step back and look at the situation with open eyes, I cannot overlook the things that make me who I am: my values, morals, ethics and convictions.

> *The rules and resources we learn and use to put together our actions, along with the personal characteristics, attributes and beliefs we derive from our actions and roles, plus the way others evaluate us and our behaviour all go together to make us into the person that we are. (Burkitt 2008, p.60)*

In my role as a social worker with foundational ethical values, it was important to me to address the situation with the boy, the girl and possibly the rest of the children as well. It was also important to me to handle this situation in the right way. I wanted to show my anger and yell at the boy immediately, although my experience and knowledge told me that this would not be a good way to handle this situation. I must admit that I took the boy aside right away and had a serious talk with him. But I also chose to address the issue with Jimena, the manager at the centre, as well as with my fellow students. We discussed different events and situations that had taken place. It was clear that the situation I had witnessed was not uncommon; there was a focus on sex, a regular violation of the girls' dignity and the ongoing play between the girls and boys. Jimena's explanation was that this was unique to the area, and that many men behaved in this way to their wives and to women in general, and that the children learn from the adults around them. She did not defend this behaviour, quite the contrary.

Up until that moment I had felt that I was not doing social work at the centre; I had felt that I was like an employee at a youth centre where children came to play in the afternoon. This situation changed my perception of my role, and I saw that my knowledge could be used and that there was a need for me as a social worker. My interactions with the children and my witnessing of this situation gave me a sense of responsibility. My conversation with Jimena and my colleagues ended up being another turning point in my internship. I was met with

interest, respect, understanding and confidence, and the way they viewed me gave me more self-confidence, motivation and a sense of security. In retrospect, I can see that in going through this I developed as a social worker.

I finally felt that I could use the things I had learned during my training. We planned training sessions with themes we considered important in relation to the challenges and problems in the area, in relation to the children and in relation to situations we had witnessed and experienced. This also changed my view of social work. I gained a new understanding of how far the concept of social work can be stretched, and at how many levels social work can be carried out. Social work can be defined and done in multiple ways, and even the smallest task could have meaning for the children and youth in the area. In the beginning, I found it difficult to see how social work was related to the sessions we planned, but my conception of social work expanded when I realised how meaningful these small inputs were for the children. I was impressed by how little it takes to see an effect, though I suspect that we in Norway believe that it takes a lot to change attitudes or make people reflect on things. From my colleagues and fellow students I learned that all that is necessary is courage, determination and motivation. As a colleague said, *"We might not have much, but we do the best we can with what we've got".*

Retrospective reflections

During the internship, I was so focused on seeing, learning and understanding that I had little time to reflect on my experiences. My head was full of questions, doubts, thoughts and concerns, an. I could not process everything while I was there. It is only in retrospect that I have been able to see all the small events that have been very meaningful in my life. It is only now that I can see all the experiences I had and understand how they shaped me, both as a person and as a social worker. My experiences during the internship have made me a more secure adult; I am more confident in my role as a social worker and I have faith that small things can have a big effect.

One of my challenges during the internship was to have the courage to listen to my own voice and use my knowledge and common sense in the various situations that arose. I arrived in Cuba as an uncertain and inexperienced student, anI left Cuba as a social worker still under training, but one with a new self-confidence and faith in myself and my skills. I am still learning, and will continue to do so until the day I die. Yet I feel that the internship in Cuba provided me with a practical foundation that adds to the theoretical basis that I have acquired through my training. I no longer doubt that I can take action when faced with such situations. If I do not have any similar experiences to draw on, I can use my skills and personal characteristics to help. The most important thing is to want to take action and to want to make a difference. I like to use my colleague's example, "*We might not have much, but we do the best we can with what we've got".*

Looking bact, I think I may have placed too much emphasis on my status as a student. My being a student might not have mattered much. Perhaps most foreigners who participate in this type of work would feel small in a context in which they have limited language skills, there are cultural differences, different sets of rules, etc., although Foreigners might feel this way independently of their social work expertise and skills.

I still think about Magdalena and the other children, anI wonder how they are doing now, and what has happened since I last saw them. I feel I should have done so much more for them than I did during my internship. I can now see what I might have done differently, what I could have done more of and how I should have handled various situations.

Yet I could not have done it differently sinc. I as who I as, and I did what I did. The reason I now see these things is probably that I have been able to proces my experiences in Cuba, and I have obtained more personal and professional experiences.

As I have never had an internship in Norway, I cannot compare tha Norwegian and Cuban internship experience. It might be just as difficult, incomprehensible and uncomfortable to do an internship in Norway. I can only see things based in what I experienced. The period in Cuba was tough, ant was characterised by many difficult feelings and experiences, althougt I also had just as many, if not more, great experiences. To enter a foreign culture in itself is difficult under any circumstances. To work in another culture and to understand the rules, norms and values associated with that culture and the place of wor, is challenging, also in terms of ethics. Yet it is in these situations that learning takes place; when faced with yourself and your thoughts about the situations. I know that I am a better person and social worker than I was prior to the internship. I learnet a lot about myself and about social work. This is knowledge that I can use in all situations throughout the rest of my life, andNnot least, I learnet to have the courage to face myself.

References

– Bech-Karlsen, Jo (2003). *Gode fagtekster. Essayskriving for begynnere*. Oslo. Universitetsforlaget AS. 2nd printing.
– Burkitt, n. (2008). *Social Selves. Theories of self and society*. London. Sage Publications. 2nd edition.
– Henriksen, J. O. d Vetlesen, Ae Jn (2006). *Nærhet og distanse. Grunnlag, verdier og etiske teorier i arbeid med mennesker.* Oslo. Gyldendal Norsk Forlag AS. 3rd edition, 3rd printing.
– Løgstrup, Kd E: (1997). *The Ethical Demand ,* University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame and Londo7.
– Olsen, R. d Oltedal, Sv (2007). *Blikk på praksis. Sosialarbeidere forteller fra yrkeslivet.* Oslo. Gyldendal Norsk Forlag AS.
– Oltedal, Sv (2005). *Kritisk sosialt arbeid. Å analysere i lys av teori og erfaringer*. Oslo. Gyldendal Norsk Forlag.