

My “Self of the Therapist”

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The development of the “Self of the therapist” is arguably one of the most important components of becoming an effective therapist, as it contributes largely to the growth of each therapeutic relationship. As a student at Lewis and Clark, I have learned that this concept of “self of the therapist” consists not only of my own resolution of family of origin issues but also the development of my own critical consciousness and cultural competency. I feel that carrying the title of Marriage and Family Therapist adds an additional responsibility to contribute to and always be aware of social justice issues and my own contribution to the resolution of these issues in my community. As a marriage and family therapist, I recognize that I have the ability to not only understand systems, but also to affect systems.

When I began my program of study at Lewis and Clark, I believe I was a different person than I am today. I’ve lived a life of privilege and my studies at Lewis and Clark have given me the skills to not only put that privilege into perspective, but to also begin to put it to use. My first two years as a student were full of self contemplation, constructive feedback and opportunities to participate in communities and conversations unlike any I had participated in before. One of these opportunities was the Fourth Annual Liberation Based Healing Conference. This was a forum that brought together people from many different fields who all share a similar goal; to allow for healing to occur through the empowerment of marginalized communities.

Participating in this conference was a powerful experience for me. To be a part of that conversation between community leaders and mental health professionals was transformational. I had become familiar with some of the topics through previous class work, but to see these issues playing out in front of me was a whole new experience. My heart raced and my blood boiled that day, and at the end of the first afternoon, I built up the courage to stand up in front of that group of people to share my perspective and my thoughts. My heart stopped racing a few hours later, but that conversation continued in my thoughts, my

relationships with classmates, in conversations with friends and family, and in the work I am doing today.

I was inspired that day to become more involved and a few months later, I had an incredible opportunity to do so. After sharing this desire with Dr. Brown, I was given the chance to begin volunteering with an amazing group of educational leaders and students through the Early College Access Advocacy Program. This was a group of alternative high school students, who are marginalized not just because of their status as “alternative students” but also because of their race and social class. The program is a collaboration between Centennial Learning Center and Lewis and Clark. It brings 10-15 students to a college campus once a week for the opportunity to be empowered through learning about social justice ideas and issues as well as learning critical consciousness skills. The students also participate in a research project aimed at creating future opportunities for students like them. My role as a volunteer with this program quickly evolved from joining them in the classroom for a few hours a week to spending upwards of 8 hours a week with the kids. I volunteered regularly with the program from October 2009 through May 2010. I spent Wednesdays with them on the Lewis and Clark campus, helping them with classroom activities and discussions around critical consciousness and research. In November of 2009 I attended Portland State’s Symposium on Injustice and Racial Inequalities with a handful of select CLC students. This was another incredible opportunity to participate in a forum of community leaders whose lives are dedicated to righting so many social inequalities. Our CLC kids were the only adolescents in a room full of adults who were talking about the very issues that they face on a day to day basis, such as discrimination and racism. To witness the student’s engagement and subsequent motivation was humbling and was such a privilege. I also began going out to the CLC campus 1-2 times a week to meet with some of the students one on one to provide them with additional support. For several of the students, this support looked much like counseling in that I was helping them with relational and behavioral issues that were making school attendance difficult. While this was a wonderful opportunity to further develop my skills as a therapist, it was most rewarding because of the relationships I built with the students. Hearing about their lives and the constant struggles they faced was another important reminder of my own privilege, as well as an inspiration for me to continue

working with that age group and population. I was constantly amazed at their resiliency and insight as well as their capacity to work towards change for the greater good when they often came to school feeling as though the world was out to get them. As the Lewis and Clark school year came to an end, so did my time spent with the kids. They are constantly with me though, as I have begun my internship working in a residential treatment program for adolescents. I am planning on volunteering with this year's group of students 1-2 times a month.

If you would have asked me three years ago what critical consciousness, social justice and cultural competence meant to me, I hate to say that I probably wouldn't have had an answer for you. While my answer is still evolving and hopefully always will be, I at least have a foundation. I feel that the experiences I have spoken to make up this foundation, which is what I am building my "self of the therapist" on. I hope to use my past and future experiences to empower families by giving them the ability to understand the roles that imbalanced contextual factors, such as ethnicity, race, class, sexual orientation, ability and gender, can play in their presenting problems. I believe it is my responsibility to evaluate how systems of power and privilege, including my own, can and have influenced the functioning of the families I will work with. Just as I will challenge the structure of a family that might be helping to maintain problems, so must I constantly work to challenge the structures in society that are maintaining imbalance.