

Building Bridges and Blurring Lines:
The Value of Reflexivity in CYC-based Humanitarian Practice

by

Kim Vradenburg
B.A., University of Victoria, 1997

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In the School of Child and Youth Care
Faculty of Human and Social Development

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University of Victoria

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ABSTRACT

This research suggests that Child and Youth Care based reflexive practice contributes to crucial shifts in perspective in both international and national staff in humanitarian contexts, and blurs the line between beneficiaries and practitioners in humanitarian intervention. I maintain that national staff (people hired in country by international organisations) to care for affected populations in humanitarian contexts are a distinct group within a vulnerable population, and with whom integrative, focused efforts in practitioner development must be made. Specifically, this research suggests that an emphasis on reflexive practice with this group in Malawi, Sierra Leone and Sudan facilitated small but crucial increments of human change processes which lead to increased responsibility as part of developing practitioner identity and wider social change. All of this is important if effective practice towards targeted beneficiaries and humanitarian protection aims are to be fully realized.

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Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge support for the preparation of this thesis received from the following individuals:

Dr. Daniel Scott
Dr. Marie Hoskins
Dr. Sibylle Artz

and

Glyn Taylor
David Lamin
Hitham Apdel Rahman
Marnie Helliwell
Reiseal Ni Cheilleachair
Stephanie Ogden

“Zikomo”
Introductory Exposure in Malawi
Chapter 1



Figure 1

I walk slowly along the red, dusty, well-worn road. It is a road and it is not a road. How do you define a road? It is not paved, lined with street lights or bordered by a curb with houses and green lawns or manicured gardens, funnelling vehicles from one location to another in a continual stream. It is unpaved, compacted red dirt that dips and swells according to how the rain has touched it, with little to distinguish it from the bare earth, treed in vibrant greens, that extends from the fronts of the houses that contain it. It slithers its way through villages and denotes a well-worn pathway, wide enough for the rarity of a vehicle, more commonly used to mark a path for foot-travellers of all kinds.

Small groups of women, dressed in brilliant hues of cloth depicting presidents' heads and local currency, carry bundles of long thin trees twice their length and probably twice their weight.

Entrepreneurs push their bicycles loaded with wares; Coca Cola, Benson & Hedges, coal, maize, chickens, sheep and goats, tied at the neck and knees, feet dangling over the side and aimlessly surveying the scenery, bleating and clucking as they slowly move past.

The sun is high in the cobalt blue sky and the houses are built from earth and the combined creativity of people and palm trees. They have likely been for generations in the same places they now stand, periodically mended when the need arises, when mother nature reminds who is really in charge. Silence is punctuated by children's shouts of "azunGU, azunGU", a rhythmic chant that starts off small, builds in the middle and is huge at the end. It is playful and inquisitive and suggests both a fascination with and fear of the strange white people rarely seen in this area. The children run close enough for me to see their smudged, smiling faces but not close enough to touch. Any slight shift of movement in their general direction sends them scattering and laughing back to the safety of their house fronts, as I laugh and smile with them in return.

We are in Malawi, a densely populated country roughly 900 km long in South Eastern Africa. My Malawian counterpart, Mangochi and I are heading out to discuss child-care in a village some twelve kilometres down the road. Mangochi is an understatedly committed member of his community, a word that denotes belonging to a particular tribal group, a village and cluster of 90 villages and a country. He has no paid work and relies on his wife and a small plot of land to grow enough maize to feed everyone he is responsible for and it is never enough. Large extended family systems live together here and collective responsibility is part of an integrated socio-cultural belief system.

Mangochi is a small, wiry man with a great, huge smile and we both enjoy discussing aspects of our respective lives and cultures with each other. I enjoy the expression on his face when he hears something that appears new to him. His eyes grow wide, his face pushes forward and the smile covers exactly the space between his ears. We discuss many things on our walk to the village. It is a long and typical walk for the average Malawian whose business resides in a place far from his primary dwelling. We discuss what life is like in Canada, what life is like in Malawi. Our range of topics to depict our lives is broad and cautious at first and Mangochi is curious and polite. I am aware that there are multitudes of implied social rules that frame our discussion. Some belong to the context through which I am moving, some belong to my place of origin, and some were imposed by my ancestors. I am associated with these influences by virtue of skin colour and yet I believe I hold different beliefs about people and the value of human interaction and it is important to me that this man knows that I am not like every other foreigner he has met.

I tell him there is no question I will not attempt to answer, nothing I am not willing to discuss. “I am here, use me”, I say. I tell him I am interested in what he thinks, how he perceives his people and the problems facing them. We discuss food, as one is wont to do in a place that does not have enough. We discuss the problems of maize that have developed here in recent years. He tells me a story from some years ago, of a well-intended foreigner who introduced a hybrid type of maize that was supposed to yield a greater volume of maize crop, though required fertilizer. It all sounded like a fine idea until the market crashed and the price of fertilizer rose to three times more than the average Malawian’s monthly salary. And now the regular maize doesn’t grow so well. He shares this with a sense of resigned incredulity. Many a foreigner has come to Malawi “to help” and yet still his people struggle.

We are curious about each other and open, and it is a long walk. And the combined openness we show each other builds trust and soon we find ourselves trying to define complex perceptions of our lives to each other. It is what I came here for: this type of exchange. He tells me his perceptions of the problems his people face: food scarcity, the effects of HIV/AIDS, political instability and the impacts of years of authoritarian leadership. He shares with me his own struggles to support his family.

I find myself reflecting on struggles experienced by people in my socio-cultural origins. I reflect not for the purposes of comparing experiential intensity or impact as greater or lesser than, but rather to consider my place of origin through a lens tinted with Malawian perspective. Mangochi is as curious about the problems in Canada as I am in the problems of Malawi. He checks the things I say against what he has heard, read and understood from others about Canada. He asks for examples of problems faced by “my people” in Canada. I reflect for a moment and begin to describe some of the social problems I perceive in my own country: homelessness, addiction, eating disorders. He stops me. His eyes widen a little, “Eating disorder? What is this, an eating disorder?” My mind works at rapid speed. I realize quickly that I will now have to try to explain disordered eating to a man who never has enough food to feed his family. “What are my assumptions about disordered eating?” I ask myself as I begin to ponder how I will describe my perception of it. He looks at me expectantly and I turn to him and smile. It’s as if I’ve just seen my whole life race up three levels of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and come crashing back down again. I realize for the first time in *my* life, that the ability to think about *self* reflexively is a luxury that stems from the relatively little amount of time I must spend attending to basic human survival necessities.

It's predicated on all the privileges and opportunities that Mangochi does not have, a man whose pants would not stay up on his bony frame were it not for the rope holding them there. If one's daily life is *consumed* with securing enough food to feed one's family, there simply isn't opportunity in the list of priorities for the day, to spend much time pondering one's self, choices, purpose, goals and next steps on the hierarchy of human needs. I come from the world of abundance and long-term thinking. Post-educational aspirations, credit ratings, job security, investment funds, retirement funds, it's all geared towards a tomorrow that is virtually and literally insured based on the prevailing belief that with so much abundance we will be here to see it.

Mangochi's world in contrast, is all about *today*. He needs to make sure his children eat *today*. He needs to find medicine for his sick mother *today* or school fees for his children *today*. Life moves in seasons dominated by the planting, growing, harvesting cycle. The rainy season is a much-needed one for growing purposes but it is also a lean one in terms of food consumption. During this time the roadsides are lined with vendors of unripe fruit. It just doesn't have enough time to ripen on the tree, vine or bush because it needs to be picked and put on the road for selling *today* because people need to eat *today*.

I hear myself using words like "power", "control" and "identity" in the answer I am creating about eating disorders, on my feet. I have never considered the issue of disordered eating so closely before, and never from the perspective of having to explain them in a context where access to sufficient food is a problem and thereby the concept of choosing deliberately not to eat may be difficult to understand. Suddenly I'm seeing my own socio-cultural place of familiarity from a new perspective and I find myself frustrated.

“We’ve lost the plot”, I’m saying to Mangochi. There is too much abundance, too much individualism and convenience and the resulting lethargy or tendency towards insatiable desires for movement and things and busy-ness. Somehow we have created new problems for ourselves with the resolution of others, such as having enough food. Reflecting on what I have experienced here where a majority of people are struggling to survive in contrast to my country of origin where the majority are well cared for, the social problems of my home country seem somehow diminished.

I share with Mangochi what’s going on in my head as I answer his question. I have no choice but to consider things from the perspective with which I am being presented. He looks at me with his widened eyes and enormous smile as I speak and I sense that it is difficult for him to understand. Indeed, with each step it is becoming increasingly difficult for *me* to understand my socio-cultural origins. Life for Mangochi is grounded in survival and with securing the things he and his family need to live, while also addressing the ecological factors that threaten survival. My life, in contrast, is grounded in abundance. I have always had sufficient food, secure shelter, clean water, vaccinations, education and opportunity to think about my self, my choices, my life and what I perceive to be problems within a framework of abundance.

I am reeling with shifting perspective and feeling as though I still have not explained the issue we are discussing. And then it comes to me. I remind him of a recent interaction we shared with an American colleague. This colleague had been away for a month, and upon her return, Mangochi paid her the highest compliment a Malawian can give when he said “It is wonderful to see you, you are so fat now”. To be ‘fat’ in Malawi means one must be doing well, one must be succeeding, and the evidence is in the weight gained. To our American colleague, who valued thinness over fatness, this was not a compliment. Our socio-cultural experiences define our

perceptions. And there is resonance as I remind him of this. He laughs as he recalls her reaction to his words and places them in context of the discussion we have been having. I ask him what he thinks about the things I have said, how they fit with what he believes and knows about life. He says, “We come from very different places”. And I agree. He suggests though, that problems created from abundance “must still be somehow better” than those created from insufficiency and I cannot disagree.

As we approach the village and begin our greetings to the people, we move in separate directions and I marvel at the exchange that has taken place on this walk, and on the significance of exposure. Both of us considered new perspectives today and are better for it. Not better as in *better than* in a judgmental sense but in a mutually pedagogical sense as two teachers and students of life exchanging meaning and experience.



Interpretation

I spent the years leading up to this experience reflecting on individual vulnerability in the School of Child and Youth Care (SCYC) at the University of Victoria. This program aims to train and develop practitioners to work with vulnerable populations, and specifically, children, youth and families. As a student, I was asked to explore and reflect on my own subjective experiences of vulnerability for the purpose of understanding how these vulnerabilities and the meaning I made from them, could impact my practice with other vulnerable people. The model used by the SCYC at the time was called the KSS (SCYC curriculum documents, 1979), which reflects a belief in a tripartite relationship between **Knowledge**, **Skills** and **Self-awareness** in human service practitioners.

The KSS model reflects the value that CYC places on the ongoing relationship between knowledge, skills and self in CYC practitioners. Theoretical knowledge underpins how we approach work in the helping professions and skills allow us to practice with vulnerable populations from the basis of what we know theoretically. The self-awareness component involved a process of reflection that facilitated intimate knowledge of personal vulnerability, in addition to strengths, beliefs and values. The relationship between these three components reinforced the idea that our beliefs, values and experiences impacted our ability to practice with vulnerable populations.

In the SCYC I learned the skill of reflection, which to me is a process of careful consideration of past experience, questioning the meaning I make of it, and challenging myself to see if there are new ways of perceiving the experiences toward understanding and deeper learning. I learned to reflect upon my own experiences of vulnerability and analyse and reframe them in ways that were more conducive to self-understanding, awareness and positive human change processes. From *reflection*, my practice evolved into an ability to practice *reflexively*, which allows me to reflect not only on past experiences but also on present ones, in the moment. From these origins of reflecting on my own vulnerability and the changes this induced in me, I believe I learned to meet others in vulnerability, practice reflexively and co-initiate vital increments of human change processes.

The narrative reveals the experience in which I became aware of vulnerability as a subjective experience grounded in socio-cultural context. Describing the concept of disordered eating to an underfed Malawian required me to reflect immediately on my socio-cultural location of origin, my beliefs and values and my pre-existing conceptions of vulnerability. This is an example of what Hertz (1997) describes as “reflexivity”, or having “an ongoing conversation about experience while

simultaneously living in the moment” (p. viii). The narrative is an example of shared reflexivity between two people from vastly different socio-cultural locations. The title, “*Zikomo*”, which means “thank you” in the Chichewa language of Malawi, is important because I am profoundly thankful for this experience as a catalyst for the subsequent practice approaches that have evolved.

In this context I was exposed to beliefs and values that were very different from those of my culture of origin, as this narrative suggests, and my ability to be reflexive in the moment and use the questions this raised in me in dialogue with others contributed to the shared nature of the learning experiences. Adler (1975, as cited in Montuori & Fahim, 2004) states that “most individuals are relatively unaware of their own values, beliefs and attitudes. Transitional experiences, in which the individual moves from one environment or experience to another tend to bring cultural predispositions into perception and conflict” (p.246). While my time in SCYC involved much reflection on beliefs and values, these became considerably clearer and open to adjustment once faced with such differing ones.

The crucial insight for me in this exchange is that everyone may benefit from reflexive dialogue that is grounded in applied openness and integrity. I do not assert that all dialogue is of equal value. Rather, through this document, where I value dialogue as a key part of the human change processes experienced, I refer to the kind of dialogue that facilitates connection, generates insight and shared learning. Integrity in this sense is an expression of a “do no harm”, reflexive, responsible, reciprocal, open approach to cross-cultural exchange. Meeting people in their “life space” (Phelan, 2005, p. 349) in this context necessitated primary respect for existing beliefs and values and equally knowing my own. Even if the beliefs and values I am exposed to seem

incomprehensible I must consider them equally and as thoroughly as I consider my own to facilitate connection and possibilities for co-created meaning and exchange.

The narrative depicts an interaction between two people in which small but crucial increments of human change processes take place: considering new perspectives. While my practice with Mangochi was not aimed at helping *him* to *change*, I became aware through our long walk that the dialogue we were having was facilitating change in me. While Mahoney (2003) suggests that as humans “we resist change even more passionately than we seek it” (p. 2), I maintain that we can approach it and facilitate it in each other in unintrusive and minute ways. In exposing ourselves to such different life experiences, Mangochi and I were thinking about our lives from novel perspectives and co-creating the kind of transitional experience of which Adler was speaking. Of further significance to me was that it was not only I, as privileged traveller, who was experiencing the benefits of perceptual shifts brought on by exposure to new beliefs and values. Our dialogue suggested that together we co-created and shared an experience in which our perceptions of ourselves, of each other, of our world views were altered. I learned in that interaction that human change processes can be initiated through considering new ways of thinking.

Adejunmobi (1999) suggests that “ethnic identities do not emerge in isolation and fully formed, but from the interaction between cultures” (p. 583). In this narrative, both Mangochi and I are engaged in an interaction that exposes both of us to novel perspectives that require us to re-consider our existing perspectives through slightly altered lenses. Through this experience of shared exposure and reflexivity, subtle shifts in perception transpire that have the potential to lead to larger human change processes. One of the complexities depicted in the narrative relates to the contradiction between how I perceived reflexive thought as a luxury borne of secured basic survival

needs and simultaneously recognized that the abundance so prevalent in my socio-cultural location of origin actually contributed to diminished practice of reflexive thought.

Moving through the heat that day, engaged in dialogue that was irrevocably shifting my perceptions of life, I felt I learned that thought, in and of itself, was a luxury. It felt as though I was learning that the ability to think and reflect on *self* was predicated on the luxury of not having to focus almost entirely on meeting basic survival needs. If, in order to survive today, I must find enough food to eat and this food requires more thought, energy and effort than moving to the refrigerator, then perhaps I do not have much time, space, energy or opportunity to consider my *self*, as do those whose access to food is more secure.

And yet, with all the seeming opportunity to think, reflect and consider *self* and the implications of *self* in one's own life and the lives of others, it felt in that moment I was also learning, through the simplest consideration of eating disorders, that those opportunities in some way contributed to the social problems I was describing. I felt as though I was coming full circle, having perceived thought as a luxury, and then in its own way facilitating the creation of new problems to deal with, problems created through insufficiency and problems created through abundance. At the time, and for a number of subsequent years, I struggled to come to terms with the implications of this new learning. Each time I returned to my home country I seemed to bring a little bit more righteous anger with me. Anger that my fellow Canadian citizens could perceive the television not working as a problem when my friends in Malawi did not have food or were dying of HIV/AIDS. With a few more years of reflection I am left with no less passion for this subject matter, but certainly less judgment and anger and a greater openness to embrace the questions raised by these

experiences rather than seeking answers. Is reflexivity shaped by abundance or insufficiency and if so, how is it similar and how is it different?

The experience in this narrative initiated questions that influenced my professional practice in subsequent years and across diverse contexts. I moved from Malawi into contexts where humanitarian intervention was occurring or had occurred in the past. Humanitarian interventions are aimed at providing rapid, life saving assistance and humanitarian protection in acute crises caused by conflict, famine, disease and natural disaster to most affected or most vulnerable populations. In these contexts, practice with most vulnerable populations takes place almost exclusively through indigenous populations or “national staff”. These national staff are hired in-country, in their own rapidly changing socio-cultural contexts and they are often bombarded with information-based training and skill development activities. What these efforts lack are reflective practices aimed at helping national staff understand how their own experiences in context impact their ability to practice and equally, opportunities to integrate novel perspectives with existing cultural beliefs and values.

Questions then arose that now guide this research including: Is there room to consider both wider and more subjective experiences of vulnerability in humanitarian programming? How are the indigenous people hired in context to work with most affected populations, themselves vulnerable? Are these national staff members also “practitioners” even in the absence of formal education? What role does reflexivity play in facilitating practitioner development in these contexts? How do individual human change processes influence wider social change within these contexts? And how is the concept of self perceived and experienced in these collective societies and how can we best work with them to support change?

These questions have evolved through my experiences in several African countries. They act as practical points of entry and as a guide for my practice in diverse contexts. These questions, their application and the responses to them converge in the form of my thesis statement.

Thesis Statement

I propose through this research that national staff (people hired in country by international organisations) to care for affected populations in humanitarian contexts are a distinct group within a vulnerable population and thereby warrant focused, integrative efforts in practitioner development. Specifically, I hope to demonstrate how an emphasis on reflexive practice with this group facilitates small but crucial increments of human change processes which have the potential to contribute to wider social change. Novel perspectives of self in relation to socio-cultural context generated through exploring experience, beliefs and values and how these impact practice facilitate increased interest in continuing reflexivity, heightened programmatic responsibility and expanded sense of practitioner identity. Humanitarian protection efforts aim to cultivate social change through targeted interventions with wider society and this research suggests that national staff are a crucial component of these efforts.

A few terms require brief definition before I outline the pathway through the rest of the text. I have already briefly defined humanitarian contexts. The people who work in humanitarian contexts come in a variety of shapes and forms. Humanitarian aid workers, alternately referred to as international staff and expatriates, are hired by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and various United Nations (UN) agencies according to specialization and enter context. The indigenous people hired in country by these INGOs, UN agencies or local NGOs to work with

the internationals in addressing specific needs of vulnerable populations are referred to as national staff. The national staff I focus on specifically are those hired to work with their most vulnerable populations. The concepts of vulnerability, reflexivity and self will be taken up in significantly greater depth throughout the text.

Research Data

I wrote journals during each experience as an international practitioner and these are the heart of the research data. The journals were used as a means of recording personal and professional experience in an attempt to understand *context* and *self in context*. They were never intended for formal research purposes. However, exposure to diverse beliefs and values, contradictions and ethical dilemmas provide a fertile ground for development and the use of reflexive practices in journals created space for me in which to grapple with complex change processes experienced through the exposure. Because humanitarian contexts exacerbate confrontation with novel perspective and experience, for me, ethical practice depended on my reflexive capabilities, which were enhanced through my journal writing practices.

From these journals, and from the lasting impacts that such vivid experience generated, I have reconstructed performative narratives that highlight key shared learning experiences in the contexts of Malawi, Sierra Leone and Sudan. These narratives are the substance of the research. They convey the impacts and challenges of reflexive practice in the lives depicted and provide contextual description for the analyses shared here.

Two former national staff members from these contexts expanded and critiqued these narratives, adding their reflections and perspectives of the learning we did through practice. Framing these narratives are analyses that draw on an eclectic mix of literature, voice and influence

from fields of CYC and Humanitarian practice, from theories of development, from spiritual ideologies and constructivist perspectives on practice and human change processes.

Why is this Research Important?

At ground level, every humanitarian intervention asks people to consider changing beliefs about life and how and why it is lived. Even the most basic forms of humanitarian aid – providing food or water or shelter or soap to a vulnerable population – asks people to consider changing their beliefs about what it means to be an adult responsible for caring for themselves and their families. Working for an international NGO and designing a child protection program in an African country requires national staff to adhere to international regulations on children's rights even if they conflict with the cultural beliefs in context.

When considered this way, the complexity of human change processes in these contexts is revealed, but so is a path. Reflexive practice provides a path for exploring existing contextual and individual ideologies as the foundations upon which any humanitarian intervention must be made. Humanitarian intervention brings to context vastly diverse perspectives on practice, agendas conceived out of context, international laws and conventions and desire for change in human behaviour that may conflict or contradict existing beliefs, structures and practices.

My experience suggests that in human change processes, behaviour comes well after changes in belief and attitude. Changing beliefs is a complex task and requires at very least, respect for the time it takes to do so. I believe the capacity to think reflectively exists in all human beings and I admit that since being introduced to it I have found it difficult to turn away from. Practicing reflexively in humanitarian contexts with national staff has outlined for me a most unintrusive

approach to developing national practitioner identity and practice, to effectively caring for beneficiaries and to influencing wider social change. I will demonstrate that in the text that follows.

The research describes conscious attempts at reflexivity in practice and purposeful levelling of power-dynamics created by history, experience and unexplored beliefs about “other”. I am comfortable as “other” and as “outsider”. Indeed, sometimes I am too comfortable with these, which has its own consequences. With openness to self comes openness to “other” and with clarity of belief, purpose and intent I am able to meet others where they are by knowing where I am and where I am from.

I am claiming the need for reflexive practice in humanitarian contexts to work effectively within the dynamics of rapidly changing social environments. National staff are a part of the society experiencing humanitarian intervention. They are affected to varying degrees by both the changing landscape of their socio-cultural environment and by being exposed to vastly new perspectives and ideas about change through international humanitarian personnel. Simultaneously, the international humanitarian personnel have chosen to expose themselves to contexts other than their place of socio-cultural familiarity. Both groups must spend considerable time processing vast amounts of novel beliefs, values, perspectives and experience. Reflexive practice can make contributions not only across diverse social and cultural contexts but also across diverse definitions of “practitioner”.

Style

The style of the text is conversational rather than formal to reflect the value of dialogue as facilitator of the experiences depicted here. The style is also conversational to facilitate access linguistically between those of us whose first language is English and those for whom it is not.

Similarly, I do so to open to those for whom the opportunity of education has not been a reality, and without whose contribution these pages could not be created. I use ecological language in my daily depictions of life and in this document as well, which highlight the influence of scholars such as Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Maluccio (1991). Words like *place* and *space*, and references to *movement* appear throughout and are representative of the way I experience and perceive the world.

I also try to convey a sense of landscape in the text through descriptions of places and people. I move between voices, some casual, some formal, some the voices of others and some the voices that live inside me from these experiences. The voices change as does my proximity to the earth or ground. In African contexts much of the practice took place in open spaces, under trees, on low benches or on mats on the ground. My preferred location was and is always as close to the ground as the people with whom I am attempting to connect and live.

The Path

As this narrative reveals, the personal and professional education that began in the hallways of SCYC found refuge, was challenged and expanded upon within the developmental context of Malawi. From the powerful realisations that presented themselves in “*Zikomo*”, follow four narratives that take us through the development and application of these ideas in chronological order. We remain in Malawi long enough to explore the methodology and salient themes that emerged in the research in the narrative entitled “*Yendani Bwino*”.

From these origins we move into the complexities of humanitarian practice in the conflict setting of Sierra Leone. Two narratives entitled “*Eh-bo*” and “*Ow for Do, Nar for Forgive*” (sometimes shortened in the text to “*Ow for Do*”) span the key themes of humanitarianism, vulnerability, human change processes and self from CYC theoretical and African perspectives.

In the narrative “*Eb-bo*”, the key themes of humanitarianism, vulnerability and self are drawn out. In the analysis that follows, humanitarianism and vulnerability are explored in practice, as is the use of the KSS model, with an emphasis on the importance of the Self component, applied through reflexivity.

From these foundations, “*Ow for Do*” reflects a shift in my perspective from the programmatic to a wider view of human change processes taking place in the broader communities in which I practiced. It continues the themes of humanitarianism, self and reflexivity in practice, through the specific lens of humanitarian protection. This narrative links individual and collective human change processes with specific focus on African perceptions of self.

The substance of these two chapters affirmed for me that in this collectively organised society, individual conceptions of self existed and furthered my beliefs that the life experience of the national staff, and specifically, extensive exposure to violence, impacted the ability to practice. Led by integrity and guided by relationship, the experiences in these chapters make a connection between exploring vulnerability and openness to change. The experiences described also led me to surmise that reflexive practice in context contributed to shifts in individual perception that I perceived as critical increments of human change processes and indicative of the potential for wider social change.

Following these chapters is a narrative entitled “*Al Ham del’Allah*”, in which the perceptions, beliefs and approaches I held, and that had evolved from Malawi and Sierra Leone, were tested. My belief that an individual self existed within a collectively organized society was challenged in the

context of a deeply religious culture. I experienced professional vulnerability through the realization that a lack of reflexivity in and about a previous context had inadvertently impacted my practice in Sudan. Ultimately, however, reflexive practice in this context created space for open discussion of conflicting beliefs and perceptions and expanded the perceptions of those who *benefit* from humanitarian intervention.

The final chapter summarizes the key learning from each of these chapters, as they relate specifically to reflexivity, vulnerability, self and human change processes within the field of humanitarian protection.

“Yendani Bwino”
Reflexivity in Practice and Research in Malawi
Chapter 2

It is surprisingly cool in the great empty room given the temperatures just outside the door where light takes over from shadow. We are still in Malawi, in the height of the dry season. The low benches we sit on are the only pieces of furniture in the large concrete community hall adorned with a larger-than-life sized Rambo on one wall. We are a mixed group of twelve people. Malawians from a number of tribal groups and villages make up the bulk of the group.

I am the only foreigner in the room and my Malawian colleague is an indigenous female professor from the University of Malawi, of Malawian-Indian descent. Even with the cool contained in the room, the heat from outside has a narcoleptic effect. Arms and legs are crossed, heads are down, some eyes are closed. In addition to heat, these bodily messages are more an indication of the time of day and efforts made, than a lack of interest. I am having difficulty myself, struggling to stay present to discussions in a language I do not understand.

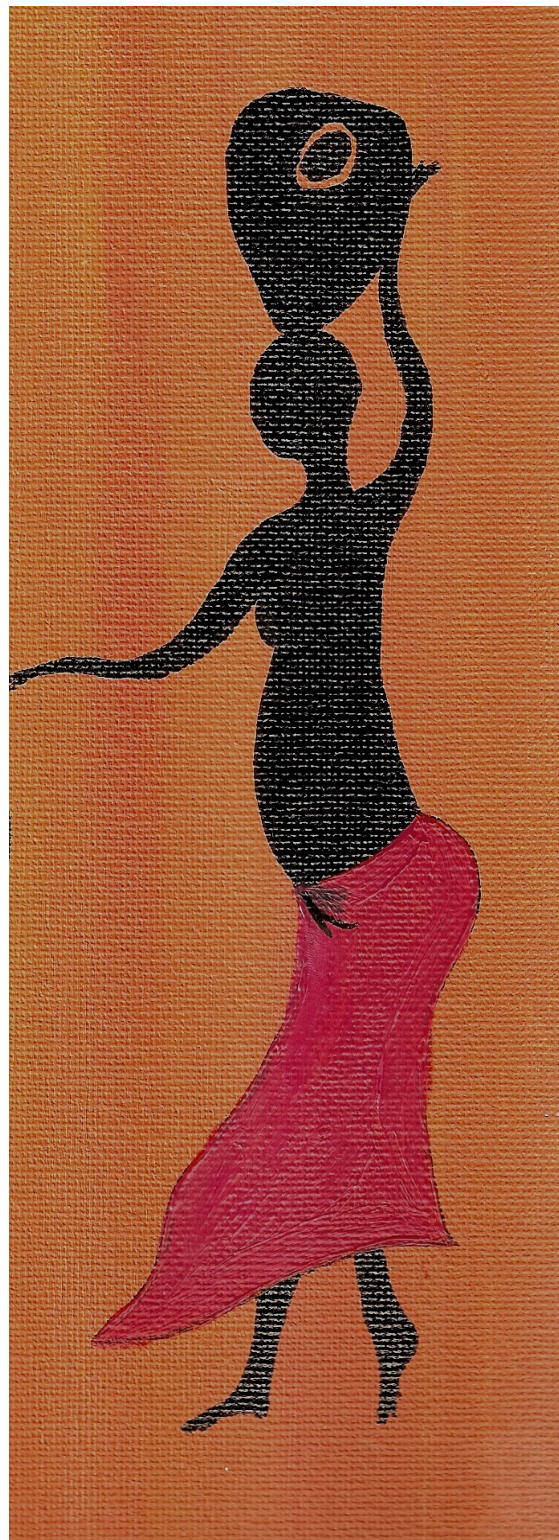


Figure 2

We're having this meeting to follow up on a project that both the University of Malawi and the University of Victoria are supporting. It is a participatory action research (PAR) project aimed at helping Malawians address the effects of HIV/AIDS in their communities including caring for the sick and strengthening families supporting orphaned children. It is my first time meeting this particular group and I begin the same way I always begin groups, by asking for names. There is much laughter in response to my request as we move around the circle and after every three or four people I start from the beginning and repeat all the names until we reach the end where I pronounce them from start to finish. This never fails to yield clapping and laughing and I am becoming somewhat notorious in my small, adopted community for my ability to remember names. It is important to me to do so. It not only builds relationship, it conveys respect, and demonstrates my genuine interest in knowing these individuals as people, in learning about their lives and hearing what they have to say.

My colleague introduces some psychological terminology in an attempt to get at some of the emotional complexities of dealing with this pandemic at community level. She believes in discussing the psychological complexities of the effects of HIV/AIDS on communities in addition to the economic vulnerabilities. There is interest in these concepts, and there is also confusion as we find ourselves struggling with language. Many of the group members do not speak English and my counterpart moves easily in and out of English into the vernacular. But this time there are no words for the experience in the vernacular, and the group looks round at each other to see if anyone understands. Immediately I wonder if the lack of words to describe a certain emotional state suggests that the emotional state in question is not a part of these individuals' experience. We are discussing "guilt" and I am curious, so offer my own interpretation of it to see if there is resonance.

“Guilt, for me, is as if something is weighing on me,” I say. And as soon as I say it I know it won’t work. The people sitting before me are men and women between the ages of 25 and 60 years old and constitute the most productive part of this population. These individuals are mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, sons, elders, chiefs, nurses, teachers and all are farmers. Many of these people, at various points of the day are responsible for carrying enormous weights: firewood, water, food, earth, children or anything else that needs moving from one place to another. My depiction of guilt as something “weighing on me” reflects my experience with weight in the emotional sense, as opposed to the physical sense. It reflects my socio-cultural origins. It is very unlikely to facilitate connection and resonance in this particular context as it is a representation of *my* experience as someone more familiar with emotional rather than physical weight, not the experience of the people who sit with me in this room.

My Malawian colleague suggests a better analogy of guilt as in “when you’ve wronged someone and know you have and the feeling that ensues”. This gets a reaction. There are small bodily movements and attempts to make eye contact between group members. The analogy works because my counterpart is from this socio-cultural location and naturally understands the culture better than I do. I am re-learning that everything I perceive is not only through the lens of personal experience but also through my socio-cultural place of origin. Exposed to a context in which my own points of reference do not work I am forced to see things from the perspective of the people in front of me and adapt myself accordingly if my goal is to facilitate resonance.

We solicit participation by asking questions and conducting activities. We use humour when it fits to raise the energy level in room. We use full-body non-verbal demonstrations to work through not only the barriers of language but also technical language. The women in the group are

very quiet and I wonder how my presence is contributing to this. I wonder about the expatriates that preceded me, the rules and expectations that framed those experiences. I wonder about beliefs and values related to women's place in and contribution to their communities and whether it feels risky for these women to be here today. I wonder what primary responsibilities we are keeping them from.

My mental dialogue is interrupted by a question my counterpart has posed to one of the women sitting to my right. There is silence. Silence is not new in this group nor is it to be feared. It is suggestive of thought, but in this current silence there is something else. I can feel it. Though the woman is sitting four people away, I can feel her struggle. She smiles, puts her head down, unclasps and re-clasps her hands and trembles slightly. I can feel her wanting to speak and wrestling with doing so. I sense her wanting to give the "right" answer. I turn to her and speak in English, knowing full well she will not understand but wanting to make a personal connection.

I say, "There is no right answer to any of these questions. And there is no wrong answer. I really want to know what you think." I ask my counterpart to translate what I have said and wait for her response. There is a shy smile of recognition. There is encouragement from others in the group. And after a time she pushes bravely past whatever personal and socio-cultural difficulties she wrestled with, to make her contribution and there is immediate reaction from the group. For a moment I don't know if it is hostile or simply energetic. I look to my counterpart for understanding and she is smiling. The group is discussing this woman's contribution with interest. The energy level has increased dramatically in the room and I watch the woman become animated as she engages in dialogue with her fellow group members.

She has experienced a moment of vulnerability in this exchange and she has chosen to move through it. I am vulnerable in this context for all the perspectives I bring that naturally do not fit and which require my reflexive attention to stay present and find ways to meet people in their experiences of vulnerability. Vulnerability in this context is often discussed primarily from economic and health-related perspectives. But that does not negate the experience of individual vulnerability in these or more emotional aspects. It is not for us to impose the assumption, but to know they exist and rather use reflexivity in the moment to ask questions, make connection and see what is there that we can work with.

For a long time we are invisible, my Malawian counterpart and I, as the dialogue continues, and we are thankful. This project is about the people living in the communities discussing the problems they are facing and identifying solutions that will work for them. We are here to support and empower, to draw out what already exists, to work with it, to contribute analyses and information. We are not the focus, we are the background, and as I look around the room at the exchange taking place my eyes fall on the woman whose initial hesitation inspired it. Her eyes meet mine and we share smiles that say “I see you” and “I see you seeing me”.



Interpretation

“Researchers who begin their research with the data of their experience seek to ‘embrace their own humanness as the basis for psychological understanding’ ” (Walsh, 1995, as quoted in Finlay, 2002, p. 213).

In addition to “embracing my own humanness” through this research, I seek to embrace the humanness of others and highlight the simplicity and complexity of reflexive practice. In relation to my thesis, this narrative presents the continued development of my thoughts related to reflexivity in practice across diverse socio-cultural contexts. It reveals the moment when I recognize that the lens through which I see and experience everything has been created in my socio-cultural context of familiarity. In that moment I feel a sense of vulnerability and I use this experience to adapt myself to the current context and facilitate personal connection towards a shared reflexive experience. I choose to explore what Phelan (2005) quotes Krueger (2004) as suggesting, is the “use of personal stories both to articulate CYC practice and to explore self as a reflexive practitioner” (p. 349). In the analysis that follows, I explore my chosen methodology and salient themes that emerged through the research as highlighted in *“Yendani Bwino”*.

It took a long time for me to give myself permission to undertake this specific piece of research. The process included grappling with one voice in my head that told me choosing to use my own journals would constitute “doing research on mySELF” in a voice loaded with contempt, while another evenly suggested that given the emphasis I place on developing practitioner reflexivity in humanitarian contexts, it was crucial that I used my own experiences to do so. As an international working cross-culturally I expose myself to different beliefs and values. Equally so, the indigenous people of the host culture in which I practice, are exposed to different beliefs and values through my presence in their community and our mutual willingness to apply openness and utilize difference as an entry point into co-created meaning and shared learning experiences. As an international, my journals provided an additional outlet for processing meaning beyond the experiences themselves. They provide a site for doing further reflective practice in retrospective

consideration by leaving traces of experiences that served as triggers for reconsideration and additional layers of meaning making and understanding.

I set out to practice in these contexts and discovered very early on the necessity of, in one sense, conducting research every day. Being immersed in unfamiliarity necessitates becoming familiar with context through active engagement with individuals and groups within that context. It set up for me a cyclical process of reflection and action. It was research as necessity to understand how life works, to understand how self affects and is affected in context and to understand ethical, conscious practice and collaboration with people in humanitarian contexts.

This research has felt and continues to feel complex and in some ways backwards. I have no choice but to “embrace groundlessness” (Hoskins, 2001, p. 664) in the process of analysing the entangled threads of reflexive practice and reflexive research. I cling to Hoskins’ (2001) assertion that “It takes discipline to work without prescribed rules, to cultivate one’s mind to stay open to contradiction and complexity, to practice simultaneous perception and to work in non-linear modes” (p. 673). These statements describe some of the challenges of this kind of research, yet I find parallels in the reflexive practice approaches I describe in the narratives. I will now attempt to demonstrate the parallels a bit more clearly through a discussion of my chosen methodology.

Auto-ethnography & Ethno-narrative Approaches

Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2006) suggest that the aim of auto-ethnography is to create space for discussion about how people live, rather than reduce or condense those lives into definitive and analytical statements about how the world “truly is”. This statement describes a particular methodology within the larger realm of sociological research but also offers a point of

convergence for research and practice. I applied this approach in my interpretations, such as in “*Yendani Bwino*”, when I describe simple activities such as learning the names of the group members, using analogies to draw out experience and intuition to expand the group’s contributions and facilitate further discussion. I use these approaches to create the kind of space Ellis and Bochner are talking about, space for discussion about how people live in relation to the concepts we are trying to understand together.

As I listen to the participants’ contributions I am listening for more than responses that relate directly to our current subject matter. I am listening for stories. I believe everyone has a story, usually several, and as I listen in this context there is so much I cannot know that my mind gathers up the smallest pieces and tries to formulate a picture, a narrative, about the life of the person in front of me. In return I share pieces of my own story to create further space for discussion about the similarities and differences in how people live. I choose auto-ethnography as a research methodology because it duplicates my style of reflexive practice. Having struggled to identify the voice to share these stories I could find no other research methodology that has genuine resonance with my practice.

The moment in the narrative when I chose to use my intuition to make a personal connection with the woman on my right reveals an example of the kind of “embodied participation” suggested by Ellis and Bochner (2006) as an aim to shift ethnographic research away from the detached observer/observed relationship and towards more intimate relational engagement. I did not practice in that context believing only I had something to offer. On the contrary, I had much to learn, as the guilt analogy revealed. As this narrative reflects, my practice is relational, indeed dependent upon the level at which I engage with people, as living lives of experience.

Hoskins (2001) suggests that auto-ethnography “helps us make the transition from expert to co-creator and co-director. What we gain from this research is the knowledge needed to practice embodied therapy” (p. 670). In the rural Malawi context I describe in the narrative, most aspects of the immediate environment were unfamiliar to me and, as such, required focused attention to avoid assumption and misunderstanding. In the movement towards the unfamiliar, the unknown, the “other” by both internationals and nationals there is substantive opportunity for facilitating understanding towards continued development and achievement of mutual objectives. This narrative describes one example from my experience where reflexive practice helped to shift perspectives and blur the line between the givers and receivers of development and humanitarian practice.

Notwithstanding the narrative style of my thesis, it remains an academic text and certain key terms within it require expansion and clarification. I also need to present my epistemological foundation to help the reader better understand what underpins my thinking. Having done so, I will then expand on my research process.

Reflect, Reflex, Reflexive Practice, Reflexivity, Praxis.

I learned to *reflect*, as in “to think deeply or carefully about” (Oxford, 2003), during my time in the SCYC program at the University of Victoria. Through practical activity and repeated application, the process of *reflecting* on my experiences and choices towards best practice became a *reflex*, defined as “an action that is performed without conscious thought as a response to a stimulus” (Oxford, 2003). I no longer think about thinking deeply or carefully, I just do it.

The word reflexive, in social sciences denotes “taking account of itself or the effect of the personality or presence of the researcher on what is being investigated” (Oxford, 2003). This is a limiting definition if confined solely to research and indeed I suggest in this paper that to be reflexive in cross-cultural humanitarian contexts is essential for ethical practice. I must not only reflect reflexively, I must also be reflexive in recognizing that everything I bring to context has consequences and potential impact. Additionally, every act of shared reflexivity in practice facilitates understanding and helps to establish a continuous cycle of assessing experience and informing action. The title of this narrative, “*Yendani Bwino*” reflects this knowledge. It means “Go Well” in one of the tribal languages of Malawi and I chose it to convey the importance of entering and practicing reflexively in cross-cultural contexts.

Reflexive practice, as in the act of practicing while having ongoing dialogue about the influences, choices and factors contributing to practice, suggests a means to bridge all of these complementary facets of the initial verb and lends itself to *praxis*, defined by White (2007) as, “ethical, self-aware, responsive and accountable action” (p. 5) and describes this in relation to SCYC education and practice as a tripartite relationship between “knowing, doing and being” (p. 5). In my practice in humanitarian contexts this manifests itself in a multi-layered experience of reflexivity wherein as an international I am actively engaged in praxis, modelling praxis and engaged in the process of developing praxis with national staff members through daily professional practice with vulnerable populations.

Davies, Browne, Gannon, Honan, Laws and Mueller-Rockstroh (2004) ask:

How are we to conduct our reflexive work if the one who gazes and the one who is sometimes gazed at are themselves being constituted in the very moment of the act of gazing by the discursive and political and contextual features constituting the moment of reflexivity? (p. 368)

My response is, by *using* the reflexive processes while they are transpiring as a means to facilitate connection, as demonstrated in the narrative above. I conveyed to the woman who I perceived to be struggling, “I see you”. I may also have conveyed, in the act of seeing her, an acknowledgment of struggle or an invitation to take risk, but I will never fully know how she interpreted my actions. The essentiality of the interaction for me was in the smallest act of *seeing*, her; showing her that I was *seeing* her, understanding as I did, from conversations with other Malawians, that *mzungu* came and went, but *mzungu* did not really see the people.

In that moment, using *immediacy*, a counselling practice learned in CYC, I acknowledged her as a person both inside and outside of the room and conveyed some understanding of the experience of the risk involved in speaking. My understanding of that experience did not need to be the *same* as hers, nor generated in *her* context, it was enough that I understood, as a woman and as a person, the experience of speaking as vulnerability and that I conveyed this to her by saying “There are no right answers and I really want to know what you think”. The smile she shared with me later, after the discussion, seemed to convey “I see you seeing me”.

Writing about this experience and including my interpretations of it in a way that can be understood by people who were not present in the room that day presents a significant challenge to me. What I understood about the woman’s struggle that day, I understood because I have deep familiarity with the risks and responsibilities associated with speaking and following on from this, with writing. To put oneself “out there” is to risk misunderstanding, judgment, scrutiny. But equally, to remain silent, when words want to be spoken risks insignificance, self-defeat, regret. From the place of knowing my own experience with these conflicting states I took a risk to show the woman on my right that I could see her struggle, and she responded by taking the risk to speak.

In the simple acts of our combined, mutual acknowledgment, both verbal and non-verbal, space was created for new perspective to be generated. From these new perspectives, and from the process of continued consideration of reflexivity in this experience, questions that guide this research are initiated.

How can I convey the complexity of lived experience and shared learning contained in the experiences depicted in the journals? And how can I ensure that both the research process and the finished thesis convey the beauty, challenges and contradictions of human change processes as well as the polyvocality of these experiences? These questions keep me striving to reflect on the initial reflections and experiences, to identify underlying beliefs, values and assumptions, to attribute these to key influences and ways of knowing and to be aware of the processes unfolding in me as I struggle to find words that may facilitate resonance. Writing about reflexivity in practice necessitates the practice of reflexivity in writing and creates both challenge and multiple layers of interpretation.

In "*Yendani Bwino*" I describe a moment in which I realize that the analogy I use to facilitate understanding of the concept of guilt is ineffective in my current context. In that nanosecond of reflexivity I learn that what I know, what I perceive and indeed what I believe has been generated from my familiar socio-cultural context. As I write about this now, it is almost painful to perceive myself as ever having been quite that "green", but as Montuori and Fahim (2004) say, it is only through exposure, and as in the case of this narrative, immersion, in different cultures that we become aware of "patterns that are deeply embedded in ourselves and in our social environments" (p. 245). I move now to discuss some of the underlying beliefs and perceptions that influence my practice choices as part of an epistemological foundation.

Epistemology

My epistemological underpinnings fall within the scope of constructivist theories of learning as understood through Michael Mahoney's (1991) work *Human Change Processes*. He discusses constructivist theories of co-creating meaning with clients in psychotherapeutic relationships towards understanding "personal meaning systems". This describes precisely my practice approach in the contexts that constitute this research. When my Malawian colleague and I encourage our participants to explore their personal experiences with caring for family members with HIV/AIDS or children orphaned due to the disease we are asking them to help us understand the meaning they make from their experience. Rather than impose our own ideas of what such experience may entail or how it may be interpreted we work within the personal meaning systems of our participants to determine how best we can meet our objective to support them.

One of the earliest forms of constructivism, which underpins the practice I describe in this text, can be found in Lao Tzu's work, the *Tao Te Jing*. As Mahoney (2003) describes, "emphasis is on a receptive and fluid frame of mind, believing that there is an inherent rhythm to all things" (p. 212) and the recommendation is to live in harmony with this rhythm. It is not surprising then perhaps, given all that I have shared here, that the well of my spiritual teachings rests within the Tao Te Jing. Some refer to the rhythm as "the Way" (Mitchell, 1988, p. vii). I embrace the rhythm and work hard to maintain a receptive and fluid frame of mind in the face of extremely diverse beliefs, perspectives and experiences. This underlying belief allows me to meet others where they are and begin to identify ways and means to facilitate connection, rather than coercion. In this way the learning is self-initiated, co-created and can meaningfully be applied within contextual boundaries.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) suggest that members of constructivist schools of thought embrace qualitative research methods so as to transcend scientific research that “silences too many voices” (p. 15). They go on to state that researchers within these realms “seek alternative methods for evaluating their work, including verisimilitude, emotionality, personal responsibility, an ethic of caring, political praxis, multi-voiced texts and dialogues with subjects” (p. 15). This is indeed what I hope to present in the following pages. Throughout these texts I “use personal revelation as a springboard for interpretations and more general insight” (Finlay, 2002, p. 215). I use what I perceive to be key learning moments for both myself and others as a basis from which to generate discussion about the value of reflexivity in research and practice.

Humanitarian practice can only be as effective as the actions of the individuals hired to conduct it. NGOs comprise heterogeneous groups of individuals from varied cultural locations with diverse beliefs, training and purpose. We are hired for specific programmatic purposes and emphasis is placed on technical expertise over interpersonal or leadership skills, despite the fact that we will undoubtedly practice through and be responsible for supervising national staff. Experience in diverse contexts is valued over technical experience and little attention is given to an individual’s degree of “cultural competence”, which Chang (2007) refers to as “a process composed through experience of internal discovery and external adjustment” (p. 190).

When I learn that my analogy for guilt reflects my socio-cultural location, I discover this internally and recognize immediately that I need to shift my approach externally. I suggest, as a peripheral argument to my thesis statement (see page 19), that in order to practice reflexively with national staff, international staff must be also be reflexive and culturally competent. The individual character of the international staff is an integral part of not only meeting program objectives but is

also necessary for reflexive practice that facilitates national practitioner development and increments of wider social change processes.

Epistemological and ontological considerations raised in the process of this research continue to prompt only more questions rather than answers. I believe in a constructivist approach and my practice reflects this. How then do I depict both the connections and the separations I have felt at times in practice in practical terms to facilitate comprehension for others? How can I convey the salience of my practice in means that foster continued critical reflection while remaining open to the mystery? Openness yields connection, exposure, challenge, growth and most summarily, learning. I believe in people's ability over inability, in their honesty over dishonesty, in integrity over ulterior motives, and in perception over truth. Ultimately these beliefs contribute to an approach that is open to the kind of connection described in the narrative. I believed that the woman in the narrative had something valuable to contribute and this in part led me to choose to acknowledge her, to see her and to encourage her to speak.

Understanding what I believe about the state of being and how knowledge is created will always be evolving, as will the beliefs and values that coexist within my epistemological and ontological frameworks and personal and professional ideologies. I seek not to be what the Taoists describe as the "Confusionist Dessicated Scholar" (Hoff, 1982), who studies knowledge for the sake of knowledge and creating distance between those who have it and those who do not. On the contrary, I seek knowledge for what Taoists describe as "the enlightenment of others" (Hoff, 1982).

Davies et al. (2004) suggest that in narrative auto-ethnography, "the writer moves among descriptions, interpretations, and voices" in an attempt to (citing Denzin, 1997) "recreate a social

world as a site at which identities and local cultures are negotiated and given meaning” (p. 367). In this case I have used narratives to portray multiple social worlds as examples in which individual and collective experiences of human change processes transpired in culturally diverse contexts through reflexive practices. The observations shared are interpretive rather than analytical, or as Wolcott (1994) distinguishes, they are “generative” and “impassioned” rather than “methodical” or “reductionist” (p. 23).

Hansen (2006) says “ethno-narrative approaches view texts/context as endo-symbiotic”, which I translate for the purposes of this research as entities embedded within one another. He suggests they reveal “reflexive hermeneutic shifts between text and context” and that they “consider the social act as the level of analysis” (p. 1051). “*Yendani Bwino*” depicts an experience in which I was working in close association with individuals from a vastly divergent context. The dialogue, use of internal thought processes to promote further dialogue and the shared learning moments represent examples of endo-symbiotic human relationship. What I am highlighting through the narratives is the relationship between text and context as experienced through reflexive practice across diverse contexts. To do that, I must first attempt to outline the research process and some of the underlying complexities.

Research Process

“*Yendani Bwino*” depicts an ongoing process of reflection as I continue to learn and create meaning from key personal and professional learning experiences. My journals, the data for this thesis, “are not just subjective accounts of experience; they attempt to reflexively map the multiple discourses that occur in a given social space...hence they are always multi-voiced” (Davies et al., 2004, p. 367). Journals provide an additional outlet for understanding experience and wrestling with

the ethical dilemmas enforced by power differentials between those in position to “help” and those in position to receive help. And I acknowledge that we can never fully know the impact of our presence in a cross-cultural context, as in the following example.

In Sierra Leone, international humanitarian aid workers were present with the aim of providing assistance to war-affected communities. However, this meant that for security purposes all internationals had to live in housing that met certain security standards. The influx of large numbers of internationals needing housing provided an opportunity for money to be made by those who owned houses, pushing the rents for houses out of reach of many Sierra Leoneans who also needed safe housing. This is one example of the inadvertent ways in which the consequences of our intentions may actually negate altruistic purposes.

The research itself involves a number of methodological approaches. My twenty journals inspired the idea for the research. Twenty journals depict my perceptions of experiences as a CYC practitioner in humanitarian and development contexts in Africa and Asia. They are not merely linguistic recordings of the lived experiences but also artistic representations, quotes, monologues and long written processes in which I grappled with the complexity of novel learning in scale, volume and speed.

Hoskins (2001) says, “Narrative approaches, performance pieces, and auto-ethnographic genres, whether used in the research or as a basis for practice, require advanced knowledge of the self in relation to culture, to others, and to oneself” (p. 671). Through this research process I have embarked on a process of re-reflecting on the experiences that not only were recorded in these journals but which take up permanent space in my memory. From the journals and the memory of

experience I have created performance pieces in the form of narratives that attempt to convey the beauty, complexity and significance of context, the individual lives involved in context and the salience of shared reflexive learning experiences that occurred in those contexts.

The narratives included in this text are borne not only of revisiting the journals that inspired them but also in extensive reflection on the experiences depicted in them. In some way, this text represents a master's thesis and in another way, more significantly, it represents my life's work over the last decade. These narratives are accumulations of stories that I have told and retold over and over since the experiences were experienced. The spatiotemporal proximity to the experiences influences *how* the stories are told, and how they are *felt* as they are told. When I first began sharing stories from Sierra Leone I would notice that my body experienced involuntary uncontrollable shaking as the intensity of the experiences, captured somatically, were released verbally.

And the purpose of the stories that constitute the narratives changed as did the audience. With friends and family who have little experience of life outside of Canada and only a media-portrayed perception of African contexts I find myself speaking of resilience, of values, reflecting the beauty of collective societal organisation and the harsh, material perception I now hold of my culture of origin. With colleagues and peers from the Northern hemisphere I highlight practice choices, similarity and difference of CYC practice across contexts and speak less passionately and more theoretically. In sharing stories with fellow humanitarian aid workers there is less need for detail, for there is common ground and the telling of stories and the recognition of shared or similar experience confirms and challenges perceptions and forges bonds in heartbeats.

It is not an understatement to say that everything I do is related to, inspired by or a manifestation of dialogue. And in order to write these narratives alone, in front of my computer in my drafty English house, I have had to imagine an audience. I have had to imagine telling them as stories to someone sitting across from me, keenly interested of course, and bottomless in terms of what they can take in. This is often best imagined for it is rare to find in actuality. I imagine myself writing largely for academic audiences, and I struggle with this, for I write also for the national staff whose stories are inextricable from mine and whose experiences require words suggesting closer proximity to ground than to the ivory tower. At times I also imagine the questions that come, from key people in the faculty of SCYC, knowing their inspiring unwillingness to let words come forth without further explanation of their meanings, origins and implications.

As I write I perpetually ask myself “Is this true?” and “How would this be interpreted by someone from that context?” “How might it be misinterpreted by someone who has not been in that particular context?” I have struggled continually to convey the kind of detail that is essential for understanding but that is equally difficult to depict for its origins are often intuitive, mysterious, spiritual. For a number of years, I told these stories with axes to grind about systems unfit to provide services, unconscious individuals causing more harm than good. It seemed I needed to live in the place where I placed responsibility for ineffective practice in some contexts outside of myself.

The voice that has largely narrated this text has evolved, thankfully, from that place. As narrator of these experiences I remain critical but also more magnanimous and accountable for the parts I have played in them. I am someone who strives to reflect, learn and move on. I am not always able to do so, as some of the narratives will portray. During this writing process there have been times when I have spiralled so far inside of myself I needed a metaphorical flashlight to find

my way out again. And the significance in reflecting on these experiences to this degree does not lie solely in accountability, but in the willingness to go there, to continue to reflect, to see what I missed, what I could have done differently and hope to practice that in the next context.

The narratives live inside of me. There is no other way to describe it. They are cumulative examples of reflexive (and sometimes un-reflexive) practice in context, of reflexive journal recordings and re-reflected stories that always yield something new. Unsurprisingly, the process of writing these narratives had presented a parallel between my ability to step in and out of the writing chair and my ability to step in and out of such intense engagement with vulnerability in context, both my own and that of others. And in writing the final narrative, "*Al Ham del'Allah*", I discovered the full weight of the spatiotemporal element of reflexivity. I have had six, seven, eight years to reflect on the experiences in Sierra Leone and Malawi. I have had only one to reflect on Sudan, and I have discovered that one year is insufficient to adequately reflect on such poignant experiences in such a complex environment.

Two consultants agreed to read, expand and critique the reconstructed narratives from my journals. Both consultants are males, both display openness to the exchange of dialogue and opportunities for learning. I connected with these two consultants in a very significant way in context, both of whom are colleagues and former staff members and with whom I share an ongoing online relationship. My perception is that we found a common language through similar ways of making meaning from our lives and we used this to build bridges of understanding within environments of vast difference, in language, beliefs and access. The process of reflecting on the work contained in the journals naturally takes me back to the experiences themselves time and again and raises new questions, new feelings and new thoughts.

It has been a similar journey for the Sierra Leonean consultant, it seems. He is a man in his forties who impressed me immediately in our first interaction. He is naturally reflexive, quietly thoughtful and is very open to sharing his thoughts and feelings. Some days during our work together, before I knew him well, I would notice him staring off into space as I spoke and I once misinterpreted this as a lack of presence in the room with us. When I asked him about it as I noticed it happening one day he recounted for me not only what we had been discussing but shared the multiple layers of processing occurring in his head as the conversation continued. He is a remarkable man, this colleague and friend of mine and I am honoured to include not only his words, but what for me are his feelings and passions in this text. When asked how it felt to read the narratives about our work together he had this to share:

I felt sad for what the war had done to the people of this country and for what the war had made us become – dependent, uncaring, inhospitable, loss of cultural and traditional values, hopeless, physically marred and generally poorer than we were. I looked back on all the time we spent together and suddenly missed those moments and wish we could have them all back. (D. Lamin, personal communication , 2007)

And conversely,

It's like watching a photograph of yourself taken some ten to fifteen years ago. You look at what you are wearing in the photograph or maybe your hairstyle and it seems to be out of place...When I read the narrative I laughed within myself with self-satisfaction at how far we have gone in these seven years. Many of those recruited have gone on to some other great things in other NGOs, government service, private business or in the UN. (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007)

The second consultant is a man from the Sudan with whom I worked at a centre for abandoned children under the age of four in the capital, Khartoum. He studied psychology at university and was part of a team of psychologists testing and treating psychological disorders in the children at the centre when I began working there. To be a psychologist in Sudan is unusual, to be a male psychologist, working with children under four, what is effectively considered “playing with

babies” by most of the population takes a certain kind of character and this consultant has it. I would have to say I know him less well on the basis of time spent, than my first consultant, yet I would also say that we facilitated a rapid connection and I am equally honoured that he would participate in this thesis by sharing his perceptions of our work together.

I embarked on this research process from the knowledge that key learning took place for me as a practitioner in those diverse contexts. For many years I have been verbally expressing what I considered to be the significance of these experiences. I began the research process believing that caring, reflexivity and change were the themes that would reveal themselves in the journals and discovered that others were more salient. As Hoskins (2001) suggests, “rather than reducing the complexity of human experience into categories, performance pieces expand and illuminate subtle distinctions between one experience and another and between one person and the next while conveying a multi-layered interpretation of reality” (p. 670). It is my choice to highlight the themes of reflexivity, vulnerability, self and human change processes as I believe them to be particularly relevant to the complexity of practice in humanitarian contexts.

Opportunities for ideological shifts occur daily in the contexts depicted in the narratives. Exposure to and immersion in differing beliefs, values and lived experience offers infinite possibilities for learning. Reflexive practice opens the door. The challenge of reflexive narrative about reflexive practice is, as Finlay (2002) suggests, “to negotiate a path through this complicated landscape – one that exposes the traveller to interesting discoveries while ensuring a route out the other side“ (p. 212).

I have begun this path with narratives that highlight moments of individual and shared reflexivity in the context of Malawi. I have used these narratives to introduce the themes of reflexivity, vulnerability, self and human change processes within an auto-ethnographic methodology. From these origins I move into the complexities of humanitarian practice in the conflict setting of Sierra Leone. Two narratives entitled “*Eb-bo*” and “*Ow for Do, Nar for Fogiv*” span the key themes of humanitarianism, vulnerability, human change processes and self from CYC theoretical and African perspectives. In this first narrative, “*Eb-bo*”, I expand upon the key themes of humanitarianism, vulnerability and self.

“Eh-bo”
Vulnerability Expanded in Sierra Leone
Chapter 3



Figure 3

The combination of the blazing sun and lush, dense vegetation make the heat feel heavy even inside the cool concrete structure. Yet I am comfortable, dressed in long pants and sturdy field boots. The heat fuels me rather than draining me and several times a day I can be seen running up and down the stairs outside our office, something that never fails to amuse the staff. I am running because there is so much to do and I am running because I can. I look out the window at unblemished blue sky through mango trees housing chimpanzees and ponder the tasks before me.

Sierra Leone is a small country in West Africa bordered by Guinea and Liberia and with an estimated population of four million people. It is estimated because it has been some time since accurate census statistics have been collected. We are “upline”, a phrase meant to distinguish rural areas of the country from the capital of Freetown, home to the descendants of some of the first freed slaves from North America. Freetown is a mass of moving people, on the sides of narrow streets negotiating space with cars, trucks, overloaded buses on their way to unknown destinations. It was not so long ago that the last rebel incursion occurred on these very streets, and the sense of perpetual movement seems a manifestation of the energy that has kept these people alive during

years of conflict. There is tremendous resiliency here. Beautiful empty beaches frame the coast and are suggestive of a time long past, when tourists flocked to this country for its beauty and solitude.

Between there and here, in this small provincial capital town there are vast stretches of palm-laden territory, dotted with clusters of villages linked to roads little travelled for reasons of security. The view from the helicopter window reveals the extent to which mother nature has reclaimed her place in areas long cut off from human contact as crumbling concrete structures are literally consumed by the hungry vegetation. The competition for scarce resources is as evident in the layer upon layer of epiphytic growth in the forests as it is on the faces of the people.

Civil war has been a feature of this landscape for twelve years. It has moved from upline to the capital and back again through each area of the country, leaving few untouched in its wake. It began as a movement, a response to widespread corruption and socio-political vulnerability. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced from their homes repeatedly over the years. As the rebels attack, communities are sent scattering, running for survival, herding and carrying as many children and family members as possible knowing others have not been so fortunate. Those left behind are tortured, raped, burned, amputated and killed. Those that escape this time will likely bear witness or experience the brutality first-hand the next time the rebels attack. There is no safe place.

Some communities manage to put up a strong resistance, like this one in which I sit this very moment and there is a ferocity here among the people that somehow belies the grief they have experienced. It's interview day. I have stacks of resumes in front of me that have been passed

through the gate of our compound where an approximated hundred and fifty people are milling around hoping their name will be called. This is hiring in emergencies.

International humanitarian aid agencies are present where security permits to try to address the needs of this war affected population. It is 1999 and a fragile peace agreement has been reached between the government and some of the rebel factions. As part of this, the government initiates a national Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Program (DDR) to signify the end of the conflict and facilitate the return of soldiers, both adult and child, from the front lines.

As an expatriate working with an international NGO, my purpose is to create programs with Sierra Leonean national staff to care for and address the needs of children associated with the fighting forces as they leave military life behind and begin the long road of reintegration into civilian life. These young people, both male and female, have been porters, cooks, caretakers, wives, combatants, commanders and military strategists. Many have been participating in this conflict for longer than they had been with their families prior to it.

I need to hire twenty-five people out of the hundred and fifty outside to work with children associated with the fighting forces. The resumes in front of me are largely single hand-written pieces of paper reflecting attempts to convey in the best printing possible, relatively small amounts of related experience that might qualify them for the positions available. I choose to interview those who have previous experience with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or experience in the care of children in their households or in their communities. They come in one by one, some visibly intimidated by the office, the formality of the procedures and the prospect of answering questions

put to them by a white, foreign female. Others strut in with attitude, convinced from the outset of their suitability for the positions posted.

I am aware of a number of things as I proceed through the interviews. I am aware of the need to be reflexive every moment, aware of what I bring to context and how this will shape my ability to meet the individuals that come before me. I am aware that access to education in this area is limited by cultural beliefs in its value, financial factors, geographical proximity and the effects of twelve years of conflict on formal education throughout the country. I am aware that each person, man, woman, young, old, is a part of a complex set of familial, tribal and community systems. Each carries responsibility within these systems to contribute to households and provide in some way to the units of which they are a part. Birth order responsibility weighs in heavily, as first-born children are culturally driven to pave the way for siblings' futures. Division of labour falls along traditional gender lines with men's responsibility being primarily to provide income and women's to care for immediate and extended families.

I am aware of language and its inability to convey understanding of complex processes such as human development and change. I am aware of language as the means through which we convey our experience and the added complexity of doing so in a language not one's mother tongue. And I am aware of my own biases in language, my predispositions and reactions to certain words and expressions. I am keenly aware that these reactions are mine alone, borne of my social location and can either be used to facilitate connection or shut it down. And so I push for more, I ask for meanings, examples, definitions, to facilitate understanding, to move beyond my own social location to meet these people, in this rapidly changing context.

I have a desire to transcend the confines of my own social location, a desire to be guided by my belief in people's capabilities, often those most hidden from public view, particularly in societies like this one where attempts to project achievement of a certain level of success or status are often met with equal attempts to diminish this status by community members for whom survival continues to be the priority.

I listen carefully using all parts of my body. I am listening for what I approximate as honesty, humility, and openness to new learning. And I am aware that these people sitting opposite me, by the mere fact of being in an interview, compounded by cultural notions about the risks associated with "not knowing" the answer to a question, are predisposed to want to give me the answers they feel will secure them a position. But I listen for those willing to take the risks to go beyond programmed answers. I listen for genuineness and a sense of commonality in which to meet each other and work towards a common goal. I am aware that these are the qualities I value and that these influence my choices.

I pay particular attention to the women, small in numbers sitting before me, influenced by my own perceptions of their increased vulnerability in accessing education and experience. I am aware that to be sitting before me involves risk as it suggests a move beyond traditionally held beliefs about the role they play in society as primarily responsible for households and child rearing. I wonder if they are the heads of their households, their men lost in one war or another in the conflict. And I am aware of my own desire for their presence in the program, believing as I do that they contribute valuable and diverse perspectives. And I listen to these women knowing that each of them, like the men who preceded them, are responsible for providing for the financial, emotional, education and developmental needs of the people in their immediate and extended families.

The level of need is palpable. The visual desperation in some is inescapable. The power that resides in me to grant or deny each of them the opportunity to meet these responsibilities is uncomfortable. It raises all manner of historical, colonial images, perceptions and power dynamics. It highlights the responsibility I carry as a leader and an outsider, whose programmatic intentions depend entirely on the people in front of me. The recognition of vulnerability from multiple angles, combined with the responsibility, inspires me to be as reflexive as I can be and to choose with great care.

These are the potential practitioners I explore for the purpose of focused intervention with some of their most vulnerable populations, in this case children associated with the fighting forces returning to their families and communities. They are practitioners not because they have achieved a certain level of education or gained entrance to a particular professional body. They are practitioners because they are here. They are practitioners because they possess a level of comprehension about the complex needs of their own children, families, and communities and they practice, as a way of life, caring for those most affected beyond the level of social or moral obligation to do so.

I am reminded by the staff I choose to hire that “no one is untouched” by this conflict and this serves to make clear that there is no separation between life and work here. At the end of a long and challenging day spent caring for children from the fighting forces, these staff members will return to their homes to continue to live with and care for family members affected by the conflict. This knowledge serves to shift my focus at least temporarily, from the children we are programming for to the adults we are hiring to care for them. For how can we hope to effectively assist the

children in such complex human change processes as transition from years in the fighting forces to civilian life entails, if we have not first acknowledged the needs and human change processes taking place in the adults, affected by the actions of the children, who will now care for them?

I approach this practice from the belief that life experience and the meaning we make from it impacts our ability to practice with vulnerable populations. I approach it from the belief that practice is a combination of reflexivity, skill and knowledge and that providing opportunities for people to consider self in practice is a valuable component of ethical practice. In this particular context it feels necessary. It most certainly feels insufficient to provide information and training that is not grounded in experiential reflection about the conflict, the effects of the conflict, the perceptions of it and the needs of individuals and communities to move on from it into peaceful times.

It is clear to me that we have been given a gift in the time it will take to organize the DDR program. It will be weeks before we begin receiving children into our care and we must use them wisely. We spend this time discussing and working creatively with children's development. How is it experienced here in Sierra Leone? What markers or developmental stages are recognized? What additional information is available from outside Sierra Leone to complement this contextual knowledge? We discuss perceptions of what can happen when children don't get what they need and how we think the children associated with the fighting forces in Sierra Leone have been affected by their experiences on the front lines? There is much speculation, supplemented by information written on child combatants from other countries. There is much discussion and many differing perspectives.

We discuss the conflict, its roots and evolution over the years. As our relationships grow and trust for each other increases we begin to open the door for personal experiences to be shared and explored for potential impacts to practice. This is crucial. If we do not explore these experiences we will not only deny the possibility of best practice with these children, we may unknowingly place them in the path of harm. We discuss beliefs about children, about these children we are expecting and we speculate about what they may believe about themselves.

The most commonly heard expression in these times is “We must forgive” in reference to the atrocities that have been committed during the conflict, followed closely and quietly by “We will never forget, but we must forgive”. These Sierra Leonean staff members, who have survived twelve years of conflict, repeated displacement and violent experiences have perceptions of what needs to happen at this time and it is essential to understand these not only for programmatic purposes but also for contextual comprehension. “Rebels both young and old need to come out of the bush and be repentant for the atrocities they have committed”, they say. This sentiment is echoed within the community. There is anticipation of this frame of mind, there is expectation and there is need for this attitude from the soldiers, to foster the kind of forgiveness so often talked about.

We design a program together, these national staff members and I. There will need to be staff members on-site at the demobilization centres to walk the children through the process. There will need to be staff at the interim care centres where the children will live and where the bulk of our direct practice with them will take place. There is need for residential staff and day staff to build relationships with these children, to discuss their experiences and uncertain futures. I recognize early on that while these are all competent adults I am working with, they are themselves affected by the conflict. I hear the pain and anguish in their voices as they recall people they have lost through

the twelve long years. The most benign exercises that begin with laughter soon reveal underlying anger and I realize that there is need to work with these experiences before the children come into our care. I introduce activities that allow for stories to be told and for experiences to be explored in terms of how they might impact an individual's ability to care for the children. There is willingness to share these stories and just when I think we are finished, there is another painful experience that emerges and captures the attention of the room. Some days we don't even begin to reach the program objectives we set out for the day, consumed as we are by the stories that must be told.

We spend days training each other, these Sierra Leonean national staff and I. We discuss what will work and what will not and what is important in this context and what is not. What I bring are skills and beliefs grounded in reflexivity, a desire to listen and co-create. What they bring is intimate knowledge of context. We all bring a willingness to learn from each other.

Our staff spend a lot of time sensitizing the communities that surround the interim care centres (ICCs) to facilitate relationship and responsibility between the children and community. The staff are building bridges across the chasm between community perception of the children and children's perception of the communities. The communities are surprisingly welcome and in fact come to meet the children and youth as they arrive at the centre. One of the communities organizes a public rally to generate support for the needs of the children as they transition from military to civilian life. It is more than we had hoped for from the community. Our staff work with the children preparing placards and signs that express their thoughts and feelings as they move through town in a public march.

About midway through the day just prior to the rally, I get a phone call from one of the staff asking me to come to the centre as soon as possible. She is reluctant to describe the situation on the phone to me but encourages me to come quickly. There is no violence, she assures me, a common experience in the centres, but there is something very disturbing.

When I arrive at the centre the staff are in small groups that are buzzing with conversation while the children stretch out languidly under trees or play football. I meet with my staff. They show me some of the placards that the children created. Immediately I see the concern. On some of the placards children have written messages asking for forgiveness. On others, the children have written entirely different messages. On one such placard the words, “We fought for freedom, now how will you reward us?” On others, “We do not need forgiveness for we did what you asked us to do”. The staff are visibly disturbed. These are not the repentant messages they expected from the children and indeed, as I reflect on the weeks spent brainstorming with these same staff about how these children might enter society, it did not come up in conversation that some of the children might feel this way.

The expectation of most of the Sierra Leonean national staff, verbalized or otherwise, was that the children who had fought on the pro-government side of the front line in the Civil Defence Forces and therefore had the support of their communities, would be remorseless, for they had been fighting for the “greater good”. Those who had been fighting against the government, with the rebel forces, however, were expected to know that they had done wrong and needed to be forgiven. On this day we discovered that those expectations were not to be realized.

We spend the next 24 hours prior to the rally discussing this amongst ourselves as staff and then openly with the children. The children seem to fall into three distinct categories: those who feel they need to ask for forgiveness for their actions, those who do not and a third group who seem to have incorporated pro-rebel propaganda so deeply that it is all they can contribute to the discussions. I learn on this day that everything I have ever read about child combatants in this context is only part of the story. Most written documentation about children associated with the fighting forces in Sierra Leone focuses on the abduction of these children. What the children and staff reveal to me now is that in fact many of these children were sent in to join the fighting forces with the encouragement of their families and communities. Many joined of their own accord, believing in the communal rhetoric that this conflict could bring about the change needed.

This changes everything. In an instant, the assumptions made prior to the arrival of these children in our care come tumbling out. It appears that the *need* for these children to be repentant was more reflective of the feelings of the adults preparing to receive them and of greater significance than the collective memory of experience about the nature of their participation in the conflict. “Of course some of the children feel this way”, I find myself saying, given what I have just learned about how they came to participate in the conflict. Many of these children remember being encouraged to join in the fighting, or at very least the looting, and as such, they truly feel that in participating, they were doing what they were told. They were not privy to the changing attitudes outside the forces over the years as communities moved from being supportive of a movement to being victims of atrocities. These children were in the forces, doing what they were told to do.

In an instant, all of the beliefs, values and indeed the ethics with which we have designed this program must change to accommodate this crucial new piece of information. I am aware in this

moment that even with a commitment to reflexivity, there are vital pieces of information that can be missed in contexts as complex and dynamic as this one.



Interpretation

In relation to my thesis, this narrative depicts how a reflexive approach allowed me to recognize diverse experiences of vulnerability in the national staff I hired to work with children associated with the fighting forces. The reflexivity I brought with me to context facilitated a need to understand context and see the staff I hired as *people* from that context before they became members of our organisation. In seeing them as a distinct group from within a vulnerable context I felt a responsibility to consider how their experiences might impact their ability to practice and, in turn, to encourage them to consider how their experiences might impact their ability to practice. The narrative also reveals the CYC-based approaches that I utilized towards understanding diverse conceptions of self and facilitating the beginnings of human change processes through shifts in practitioner identity. Finally, it demonstrates that even with the practice of reflexivity in the complex context of Sierra Leone, we missed vital pieces of information during the design stage that resulted from the *human* component of humanitarian practice.

In the discussion that follows I explore humanitarianism and vulnerability in practice and discuss the applicability of the KSS model in this context, with specific emphasis on the Self component, experienced as reflexivity in practice with Sierra Leonean practitioners.

The Humanitarian Context

This narrative refers to my first experience in a “humanitarian” context. Through this research process, I recognise in hindsight the complexity of the term and understand some of the debates about core concepts of humanitarianism that revolved around Sierra Leone during the period I was there. The job I was hired to do was advertised as humanitarian, it fit with my developing ideas about what I had to contribute to emergency interventions, defined as urgent responses to challenging, conflict situations.

Looking back now I recognise that some would argue that our programme was not purely humanitarian. Being linked to the DDR programme itself could these days be labelled as “post-conflict”, “stabilisation” or “reconstruction” in relation to the situation in Sierra Leone. Still others would argue that the practice *was* humanitarian, given the focus on a vulnerable population captured in both ex-child combatants and their caregivers. In order to explain my choice to use the humanitarian label, I feel that I need to provide an outline of the most relevant debates to facilitate understanding of my choices.

There is a fundamental tension in the humanitarian world. Peter Walker (1996) sums this up neatly in suggesting that a dichotomy exists between “doing the right thing” and “doing the thing right”. A purist’s view of humanitarian action, described as “doing the right thing”, is that it is based on “justice, rights and imperatives” and that “morality resides in the act” (Walker, 1996, p. 79). In this sense humanitarian actors give up their right to be concerned with the “causes of suffering or the consequences of its alleviation” (p. 80). The driving principle is considered action and concern for assisting in a process of justice as opposed to passing judgment, in order to maintain the ability to continue to reduce suffering in other contexts.

The conflicting perspective, captured in “doing the thing right”, is that “goals, consequences and the best possible outcomes” are more important (p. 80). Humanitarian intervention from this perspective is essentially about civil, political and economic consequences of action, rather than the action itself. The actions must be weighed against the greater good of the community or population.

In “*Eh-bo*” I describe being hired by an international NGO to implement reintegration programs for children involved with the fighting forces. This reflects the “doing the right thing” branch of the dichotomy in its efforts to relieve the suffering of this most vulnerable population. However, through the process of dialogue with the national staff I hired to care for these children, I recognized that they too were affected by the conflict and in some cases they were affected directly by the children who would soon be coming into their care. The “do the thing right” branch of the dichotomy presented itself. In order to adequately support the children through their processes, I first had to explore the experiences of the national staff that might impact their ability to adequately care for them. Life experience impacts practice, and in this case, had I not worked reflexively with the national staff first, not only would we not be conducting best practice, we could potentially be putting the children in the direct path of harm.

Within the branch of the dichotomy that concerns itself with “doing the thing right” two particular debates were ongoing in the 1990s and both had particular relevance in Sierra Leone. One was whether or not humanitarian action should or could contribute to either a bigger political objective (Macrae & Leader, 2000) or a bigger “developmental objective” (Macrae & Harmer, 2004, p. 18). Although there are a group of actors who describe themselves as humanitarian, they do in fact allow themselves to play a number of different roles that fit with the two definitions above. As

a practitioner within that context at that time, I admit that I was not fully aware of the debates taking place. My focus, within the larger, complex dynamic, was on the changes that could be created through intervention at the individual and community level.

When I was hired by an international NGO to practice in Sierra Leone, I realised quickly that every aspect of my practice would be indirect as everything we do is done through national staff members. These staff members are far more contextually appropriate to conduct caring practice with their most vulnerable populations and yet also generally lacking in education and training that could support their indigenous practices in the support of their most vulnerable. What became clear was that what I had to offer were those aspects of my practice that could assist their development in effectively supporting the children reintegrating from the fighting forces. In doing so, I was supporting a bigger developmental picture.

The range of humanitarian actors has evolved since the beginning of “humanitarian action”. The roots of humanitarian action are easily traced to 1859, when Henri Dunant, a Swiss pacifist, convinced Napoleon III, the victor of the battle of Solferino, that a moral imperative required assistance to be provided to those who were wounded “regardless of nationality” (Walker, 1996, p. 78). In response, Walker describes how “Napoleon turned the good will of Dunant into an issue of rights and justice by allowing assistance to be delivered under the protection of an official proclamation” (p. 79). And from this “stemmed the Hague and Geneva Conventions and the legal framework for the League of Nations and later the United Nations (UN), with all its resolutions and declarations on humanitarian issues” (p. 79).

It is the Geneva Conventions and the set of United Nations resolutions that Walker describes which define International Humanitarian Law and expand and codify the simple moral imperative above. In the humanitarian arena, the Red Cross movement is the guardian of the Geneva Conventions and the humanitarian agencies of the UN are legally and specifically mandated to carry out certain functions. In terms of international “emergency” actors they are joined by a large number of Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs). These NGOs can be placed along a continuum that expands from those who focus on the justice and rights at one end of the continuum, such as Medecins Sans Frontieres, to those closer to the other end, such as Concern Worldwide, who work towards best possible outcomes.

In general terms, this collection of actors aspires to a broader set of humanitarian principles derived from the legal terms set out above. These are spelled out in many forms. One of the most commonly recognised is the “Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (ICRC) and NGOs in Disaster Relief” (International Red Cross and Red Crescent, 1995). In simple terms these principles mean that humanitarian actors aspire to act out of humanity and in a way that is neutral¹ and impartial².

So returning to the dichotomy above, even though these agencies seem to aspire to a similar set of values they do take a range of stances. My first humanitarian experience was with a North American NGO comfortable with taking a long-term view of “developmental” relief. Later I will describe working with one of the more purist agencies. In both cases I am comfortable using the humanitarian label, particularly as I saw my work as being at a “micro level” and concerned with both the initially defined vulnerable population and the staff who would care for them, as opposed

¹ On the basis of need alone.

² Not furthering any political or religious agenda.

to any bigger agenda directly. In the past three years only, the concept of humanitarian protection has come to the fore. Again with the value of hindsight, the work in which I was engaged also fits neatly into the humanitarian protection field. I will discuss this in greater depth in the next narrative but first turn my attention to an exploration into vulnerability.

Vulnerability

I use the term *vulnerability* quite liberally: It is another term which has come into common usage in the humanitarian context since my time in Sierra Leone. Its roots in the humanitarian context are in the field of natural disaster response and also linked to recent debates about developmental relief. The idea is that specific relief interventions could strengthen resilience, hence reduce specific vulnerabilities, in the face of natural disasters. Traditional definitions such as “exposure and sensitivity to shocks” (Ellis, 2003) seem to posit vulnerability as abstract and separate from the individual experiencing it.

Farrington (2005), as quoted in the Overseas Development Institute’s Briefing Paper Linking Social Protection and the Productive Sectors (2007), suggests that vulnerability “reflects the capacity of households or individuals to prevent, mitigate or cope with shocks and stresses” (p. 1). The emphasis is on vulnerability experienced by populations experiencing *shock* that impacts their ability to meet survival needs, whether that be conflict, displacement, exploitation, disaster or deliberate deprivation. Traditional frameworks for assessing vulnerability continue to focus on those aspects of vulnerability that can be more readily addressed by practical means.

I describe in the narrative “*Eh-bo*”, being hired by an NGO to design and implement programs for children reintegrating from the fighting forces, deemed one of the “most vulnerable”

populations. I briefly described a process of hiring national staff with whom I would design, develop and implement a program for a vulnerable group of war-affected children. Through the course of the hiring process and the preparatory work I realized that the national staff themselves were vulnerable from the effects of the war. Some of the vulnerability fell within established humanitarian frameworks for measuring vulnerability: Their ability to secure adequate housing, clean water and sufficient food for their families. The Sierra Leonean consultant recollected the hiring day depicted in the narrative and contributed this perception,

I remember when we thronged to the IRC office that day, it was a Thursday, to attend an interview, the outcome of which meant survival or starvation of our families and friends we had responsibility for. (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007)

The additional aspects of vulnerability that I identified related to their personal experience with violent conflict. Large numbers of displaced communities, combined with deeply ingrained beliefs about familial responsibility, meant that all of the staff were caring financially and emotionally for family members affected by the conflict. In many cases, they were also providing shelter for large numbers of extended family.

My staff told me every month that “payday is the worst day of the month”. The first time I heard it I found it unusual, given that it is the day usually celebrated in my socio-cultural location of origin, and so I asked them to tell me why that was the case. They didn’t hesitate to tell me that one week prior to payday, family members began to arrive at their already crowded houses, sleeping on porches and in any available space in anticipation of the day our staff would return with money. It was then the responsibility of the individual staff members, as the only employed family members for miles around, to divide the meagre salary in such a way that everyone got something, and still have enough money to care for their immediate families.

A crucial realisation I carried with me from Sierra Leone was that there simply was no separation between life and work for the staff in my program. While that immediately raises issues to consider along the lines of a Northern hemispherical perspective about the need for separation between life and work, I'll give an example to be considered. A practitioner in the city of Victoria, for example, who spends her day working with victims or perpetrators of sexual violence does not knowingly return to her home at night to live with or in close proximity to victims and/or perpetrators of sexual violence. But this is often the case in the Sierra Leone example. Staff spent their days working with children from the fighting forces who had often committed acts of sexual violence and returned to their homes at night to live with members of their own social networks who had experienced sexual violence or perhaps committed it. It can't be overstated: There was no separation between life and practice in this context.

One aspect of vulnerability in this context involved the direct experience of violent conflict and the reality that many of the perpetrators of that violence were the children we were about to receive. The rebel forces had been strategic in their use of children to commit atrocities against their own families and communities. Now these same children would be in the care of adults who recalled vividly their experiences at the hands of these children. It was imperative that we worked with these experiences in the affected adults prior to exposing them to the children.

Ecological theory suggests that human beings are "engaged in dynamic transactions with their environment, and specifically in a continuing struggle to maintain a moving equilibrium while faced with a complex and ever-changing array of environmental challenges" (Maluccio, 1991). The ever-changing array of environmental challenges in humanitarian emergency contexts compounds the struggle by national practitioners to maintain a moving equilibrium. In addition to coping with

similar constraints and vulnerabilities as their targeted populations, they face rapid and overwhelming exposure to novel concepts from foreign sources. Reflexive practice with this population not only leads to more in-depth contextual understanding but also ultimately to more effective programming.

The practice of supporting national staff members to reflect on their experiences towards understanding how those experiences impact their ability to practice reflects a number of critical points in this text. Firstly it represents a key CYC practice approach as in Phelan's (2005) suggestion that "the goal of CYC education rests on the development of a reflective practitioner" (p. 354). My purpose with these staff members was not specifically to conduct CYC education, but it was to build their capacity to support their most vulnerable populations. What I realized early in the program was that what I had to offer was much the same as what I had been introduced to in my formal CYC education process. These practitioners not only brought their life experiences to practice, they brought to the practice traumatic direct or indirect experiences of conflict, sometimes at the hands of the children in their care.

As "*Eb-bo*" depicts, the practice of throwing out the day's objectives and providing space for the stories to be told demonstrates a clear example of what Phelan describes as working in the "life space", which is "using everydayness to create hope and competence" (p. 349). He suggests that good CYC practice "involves using the life space to create self-control, hope, competence, and the willingness to face challenges, which is almost impossible to achieve with programs that impose external control as the main strategy" (p. 350). This is an essential core belief in the practice that was occurring at the time. The staff with whom I was working to develop a program for child combatants were themselves directly affected by the conflict, the combatants and changes brought

on by the end of conflict, such as rebels returning from the fighting forces and the influx of aid agencies. It was essential to meet these staff in their life space and explore their experiences to help them meet those challenges so that they, in turn, could help the children meet the same challenges.

It is too easy in contexts experiencing intense and rapid humanitarian intervention, such as this one, to see the forest but not the trees. The degree of need and the expectation of quick-impact program delivery can lead to prioritising work over practice, to meeting objectives over listening to staff perspectives, ideas or concerns. The harsh reality is that the people who became our staff in the Sierra Leone program were themselves vulnerable and only through the acknowledgment of that fact could we have worked together not only to create effective programs for beneficiaries but also to develop their abilities to care for their vulnerable populations in the longer term once humanitarian interventions ceased, an essential component of international service provision in this context.

The recognition of existing vulnerability among the staff does not infer negative judgment or set up power differentials between those deemed vulnerable and those not. In this context and within this practice experience, the identification of vulnerability, both mine and that of the national staff, created a space for us to meet each other as people first, and as developing practitioners second. The active and responsible practice of reflexivity among all of us facilitated relationships wherein the challenging work we came together to do could be carried out through the acknowledgment of our common denominator, our humanness. We were not simply skilled and knowledgeable practitioners, continually developing, we were also *people*. When asked what specifically he found useful about our working relationship during this time, the Sierra Leonean consultant replied:

Your sensitivity to the needs of staff in addition to program needs. You knew all of your staff especially the supervisors as persons, as individuals. You knew our weaknesses and tried to build on them and you promoted our strengths. Everybody could talk to you, even the guards at the centre. You appreciated your staff and had a good word of praise for everybody. (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007)

The national staff in the narrative were expected to support human change processes in children associated with the fighting forces reintegrating into their families and communities, while simultaneously experiencing individual and societal human change processes in their environments. Many of them had previous experience with NGOs in which they had been introduced to psychological concepts related to trauma, the UNCRC and any number of foreign perspectives on child combatants and how to work with them. Some of them possessed theoretical knowledge and many of them possessed skills associated with the helping professions such as active listening. What they lacked prior to the work we did, was exposure to the third component of the KSS model: the Self component.

The KSS Model

Okwu (1979) says, “the foundation of most African value systems, thought patterns and general attitudes to events and phenomena such as life, disease, and death is the belief in the unity of creation, in other words, the absence of any mental demarcation between the spiritual and the human, animate and inanimate” (p. 19). This differs greatly from the value systems of my socio-cultural location of familiarity. How then, am I to ethically intervene in a way that ensures respect for existing frameworks while introducing novel ones? As Chang (2007) suggests, “international humanitarian personnel work in a cultural context with which they are not familiar and cultural competence is even more critical for their service abroad” (p. 188).

I describe realising that personal stories of suffering needed to be shared, because they were being shared without provocation in “*Eh-bo*”. While Sierra Leonean society organizes itself into collective groupings of family, extended family, tribe and geographical location, the stories of suffering being shared were uniquely individual. And they were offered willingly and prompted others to share their own. Ethical practice in this context required me to recognise not only existing belief and value systems but also existing conceptions of individual self, within the wider collective conception of self. The practice demanded individual attention within the collective and active, reflexive learning about the systems of belief that fostered them.

The commonality in all was the need to make sense of experience in terms of the connection to spiritual beliefs and practically, how one was to continue living from this point. Without this understanding of how this group of individuals perceived themselves, attempts at providing information and skill development would have missed crucial entry points for integration of new material into existing frameworks. And furthermore, attempts at developing empathy and understanding within the staff towards the children coming back to their communities would have been undermined by their individual and collective experiences.

Marie Hoskins (2003) writes that “beliefs, values and assumptions about how the world ‘should’ be are not developed in a linear way. The development of perspectives is complex, including multiple sources of influence (peers, family, media)” (p. 322). I would add to the parentheses, environment, experience and exposure. To provide information and training as a means to building capacity in national staff to address the needs of their most vulnerable populations may be useful but it misses the mark for several reasons. Firstly, it does not acknowledge the need to work with existing practices of caring for vulnerable populations and

potentially undermines the practices of indigenous members of communities who traditionally fill this role, such as shamans and healers. Secondly, it presupposes a change agenda that originates from outside of the host culture. Thirdly, even in the event that a change agenda is co-created by national and international staff members, information alone does not lead to change.

Lastly, and most crucially, I believe that it is the third component of the KSS model that distinguished workers from practitioners and which expanded the concept of “practitioner” to include those whose experiences and on-the-ground learning weighed equally against formal education. In Sierra Leone in 1999, two-week training sessions for “trauma healing counsellors” were in great supply. Nearly every NGO involved in some capacity conducted training of this nature for national staff members to address all manner of the affected population, from victims of sexual violence, to child combatants, to amputees. Emphasis was on quick-impact training so that members of the communities could assist in the psychosocial recovery of those victimized by the violence. I do not mean to diminish the value of these efforts. What I mean to do is make a distinction between those brief introductions to psychological conceptions of trauma and recovery and the more in-depth approach we took with our staff through the introduction of the Self component of practitioner development. The approach involved modelling, practicing and developing reflexive practice.

In “*Eb-bo*” I draw attention to the realization of vulnerability, the desire to share personal stories and the response to use these stories and the openness and willingness to explore them to learn how they might impact practice. This shifted the practice from being about cathartic purging of experience to experiential learning and reframing of experience to understand how the meanings and interpretations might enhance or hinder practice with the children. Reflecting on experience,

beliefs and values and verbalizing them aloud, within groups, hearing oneself speak and the responses to our words reframes experience and facilitates new learning.

Through these reflexive activities, subtle shifts in self-perception occurred and these represented small, yet crucial increments of human change processes. After one particularly impactful reflexive activity with the staff, one of my supervisors turned to me with his enormous smile and said, “Now we are really learning”. When I asked him to tell me more about that and about how he knew he was learning he said to me, “Because we are learning about ourselves in the work”. I perceive this as a reference to the importance of the “Self” component of an integrative KSS approach (SCYC curriculum documents, 1979) to practitioner development through humanitarian protection interventions.

The staff in the narrative began to see themselves as practitioners and this showed in their practice with the children. The practitioners began to truly understand the benefits of deeper relationships with the children as they developed deeper relationships with themselves and each other. Curiosity about the perspectives of the children increased as the practitioners experienced what it felt like for fellow colleagues, including myself, to be curious about their perspectives and experience. And the children began to tell us how their worlds were changing through the changing relationships they experienced with their practitioners. One young man who had been a celebrated commander with his boy’s unit, notorious for his violent responses to not getting what he needed, turned to a staff member one day and said, “What I am learning right now, is that if I am patient, things will come”.

Self-awareness, or the S component of the KSS model has proven to be the most salient aspect of the model in my reflexive practice with national staff in humanitarian contexts. My experience suggests that there are volumes of information being provided in complex emergencies such as the one in Sierra Leone. What is lacking is the opportunity to explore how this new information fits, or doesn't, with existing cultural, societal and spiritual beliefs. This component of the model I carried with me to these contexts has evolved to encompass reflexive practice in the widest sense. To me it is not just about an awareness of self that results from learning to reflect on experience, belief, values and vulnerability but on a continual lifelong process of reflection, exposure and learning from new experience.

Cultural competence supports this practice in its ability to “transform knowledge and cultural awareness into practical interventions” (McPhatter & Ganaway, 2003, p. 105, quoted in Chang, 2007, p. 189). The literature on cultural competence reflects my belief that reflexive practice towards national practitioner development requires cultural competency in the international staff. Chang (2007) uses McPhatter's (1997) call for child welfare practitioners to utilise an integrated model of “enlightened consciousness, a grounded knowledge base and cumulative skills proficiency” (p. 189) to highlight the complexity of cultural competence. This is a parallel to the KSS model in the CYC profession. I see enlightened consciousness and cultural competence as synonymous with what I suggest here is reflexive practice, both *as* an international practitioner and *with* national staff in the process of developing it.

That said, what “*Eb-bo*” also reveals is that even with a commitment to reflexive practice and exploring existing cultural experience and beliefs in program design and implementation, it's still possible to miss out on key information. When we learned that some of the children did not feel

they needed to be forgiven, everything changed. I remember exactly where I was standing when I learned that piece of information and I suspect I will never forget it. It was one of the most impactful moments of my professional practice. At the rally, as I was reminded by my Sierra Leonean consultant, “in crowds of three or four thousand, children were able to sing and ask for forgiveness, some families were traced and the general township became aware of the need to support children in the Interim Care Centre (ICC)” (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007). While not all children felt the need to ask for forgiveness, they did experience the rally and the supportive atmosphere surrounding their presence and this went some distance to address differing attitudes. We addressed the perceptions of these children with community members in the same way we addressed every other experience of difference in perception: with dialogue.

The in-depth work came in the form of small gatherings in the centre that included children and members of the community who lived in the surrounding areas. In small groups, within the safety of the centre walls, the children revealed their perceptions and the community members listened. The community members revealed their perceptions in turn and the children listened. In this way, slowly, over a period of months, the seedlings of accountability and individual and collective responsibility were nurtured. I fully believe this is a very effective approach to such confrontational subject matter, particularly when it is so emotionally charged. There is no substitute for meeting people where they are, in their emotional, historical, cultural, individual and collective experiences in facilitating human change processes.

The interim care centres we managed provide yet another example. As an international NGO involved in the DDR program we were responsible for the reintegration of the children associated with the fighting forces but, rightly so, we were also paired with a local NGO that had

been operating in the area for a number of years. This meant we were to work together on providing care for the children. Our organisation's primary responsibility was for the psychological, educational and daily care of the children, while our counterpart organisation was responsible for the maintenance of the facility as well as cultural input into those aspects considered necessary for reintegration.

And naturally, some of that cultural input involved corporal punishment in response to violent behaviour from the children. This was an enormous issue for us. Our national staff, as employees of an international NGO, were bound by the principles of the UNCRC which meant they could not use corporal punishment even if they believed in it as part of their cultural heritage. Our counterparts did not feel bound by such rules in spite of the fact that their government had ratified the document, and they believed that corporal punishment was the only way to deal with the children. So what to do? While it is unacceptable to condone such behaviour under the blanket of "cultural practices" it is equally inconceivable to condemn a population for holding the belief without providing alternative options for consideration. It would not have served us well to simply judge our partner agency as wrong or terrible for their beliefs. What we chose to do instead, as I had done with our national staff in the early days of the program, was use the differences in beliefs as a means to open dialogue.

With the national staff, as subsequently with our partner agency, I had begun by asking "What is your role in the life of a child?" The response was almost always the same: "To put the child under control". So the belief was that children were unruly and out of control unless put under control by parents and community members. This was largely the consensus during the discussions and I *validated it as an existing belief* of the individuals as members of the culture in which I

stood. Then I would ask, “What other roles do you play in the life of a child?” That one invariably prompted a longer silence but eventually the response “To teach them” would come. In my mind at these times I would think, “Great, something to work with”. After some discussion about the kinds of values that parents tried to teach their children, such as not to steal and not to harm others, I asked them to consider a new way of looking at things. “If your child steals from your home and you beat him, what does he learn?” I asked. “He learns not to steal” was the response. “Yes”, I replied. “He learns not to steal because he will get beaten, not necessarily because it is societally unacceptable, but because he may want to avoid the punishment”. “Ah ah...” came from some of the participants, in that uniquely African way with the long slow exhale and question mark at the end.

“Is it conceivable that if you take the time to explain, rather than beat him, he also may not steal from you again?” There was no consensus in the response but there were murmurings of the possibility and in truth, consensus was never my objective. My objective was merely the simplest form of exposure to new ways of looking at caring for children, based on what the Sierra Leoneans in the room had told me. In this way we worked with our partner agency as well. We did not succeed in eradicating their use of corporal punishment within the centre, and nor could we have, but we did succeed in reducing its frequency and in increasing the number of staff considering alternative options for dealing with children. I believe it is these small steps in human change processes that can eventually lead to wider social change from the initiation of dialogue and considering new perspectives.

From the moment described in “*Eb-bo*” wherein some of the children told us they did not want or see a need to be forgiven, I began to reflect on how we had misperceived the children’s

perceptions of themselves so thoroughly in our weeks of preparation leading up to their arrival. When I began working with the Sierra Leonean national staff to develop this program we spent weeks discussing the conflict. We discussed how the conflict began, how it developed, how it had affected everyone but we never discussed the possibility that in some way, everyone had had a hand in its inception. I heard many stories of abduction but I heard none about voluntary participation or parental encouragement of children's participation. It was only once the children expressed themselves that the staff began to share this part of the story. And as they told these stories, their tones were grim. With the children's admissions, the staff reached inside themselves and shared those aspects they most did not want to share: the collective responsibility for the children's participation in the conflict. I suspect this partially explains how we missed this crucial perspective in our preparation.

Mbembe (2002) suggests that three critical events contributed to the "African identity" – slavery, colonization and apartheid. He maintains that "between African Americans' memory of slavery and that of continental Africans, there is a shadowy zone that conceals a deep silence – the silence of guilt and the refusal of Africans to face up to the troubling aspect of the crime that directly engages their own responsibility" (p. 21). He is calling for Africans to reflect and this reflection and engagement of responsibility is what the practice of reflexivity within our program initiated. The introduction to reflexive practice with a small group of Sierra Leonean national staff facilitated a willingness to learn more and to understand self within the context of practice. The honest expression of experience revealed by the children took this reflexive practice even further. The national practitioners chose to explore their personal and collective responsibility for the children's participation in the conflict.

I believe in the preparation stages we were influenced by contextual factors that combined to create an atmosphere of hope. After twelve long suffering years, the people I worked with were spent. They needed to believe that it really was coming to an end, that there was light at the end of a very long tunnel. With the influential messages from their primary institutions – their churches and mosques – encouraging forgiveness, they needed those coming out of the forces to *need* that forgiveness. Their needs influenced their perceptions of the conflict and the information they chose to share and as a foreigner, I had not thought to ask. I had not thought to ask for more specific information about the way in which the children had come to participate in the conflict. I believed what I read and what I heard about abductions and because it was beyond my experience to conceive that parents could send their own children in to join the fighting forces, never having suffered the way these people had, it did not occur to me to ask more questions about this very crucial aspect of the program we were developing.

The Sierra Leonean consultant who participated in the process of creating this narrative disagreed with the idea that my foreign perspective had limitations, and I absolutely love that he felt confident and comfortable enough to disagree with me. In many ways it is evidence of our ability to dissolve the hierarchical line between international and national staff and between giver and receiver of assistance. We met each other as students of life open to exchange and the co-created learning that could ensue. In his perspective, in some way, the national staff had a need for the children to “come like penitent sinners weeping tears and asking for forgiveness which the community would heap on them and that would have been a very good program” (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007). And in our preparation process, which included reflecting on normative child development in the Sierra Leonean context, the staff focused on their own childhood experiences, which did not include exposure to nor participation in such violent experiences. In the feedback he gave, he said

he “felt sad” that I took some responsibility for the limitations of my perspective in regard to this matter, preferring as he does, to believe that “if we were surprised that children did not feel guilty about their participation in the RUF then we may have forgotten our orientation” (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007).

For emphasis, he adds,

You used best practices to design the program – involving national staff and building on their understanding of the situation and their recommendations on how to address the problem. You did what many organisations never did – developing a programmatic approach right from inside Sierra Leone with Sierra Leoneans. You supported us wholeheartedly and were flexible in allowing very innovative activities in the ICC. You were very supportive of our work and went out of the way to help us implement the activities we wanted to do. (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007)

With the new information from the children, however, we had to adjust our programmatic efforts towards reintegration. “Having a plan is only as useful as your willingness to change it or throw it out” (G. Saunders, personal communication, 1997). A lot of the practice prior to this perceptual shift involved what I would describe as building bridges. We travelled long distances to listen and speak to community members in villages about the challenges that faced them in light of the DDR program. We heard infinite stories about the atrocities and heard expectations about the children’s attitudes in order for them to be accepted. Communities needed and expected repentant attitudes. And now we knew that these were not the repentant children the communities were expecting. These were children as reluctant to re-enter communities as the communities were to accept them and they had memories of being encouraged to participate in the fighting forces and, as such, many of them expected to be rewarded when they returned to their communities.

From the basis of individual reflexive practice, wider social change was initiated. The national practitioners were willing participants in reflexive practice that revealed how their own experience

impacted their ability to practice. The children's willingness to share their self-perceptions honestly provided the catalyst for the practitioners to reflect not only more deeply on their experiences with the conflict but also on their collective responsibility for the children's participation in it. And the practitioners took this to the communities. As I am reminded by the Sierra Leonean consultant, we had created a "community sensitization" team specifically to "bridge the chasm of fear distrust and guilt" (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007) that existed between the communities and the former combatants.

We were very fortunate. In terms of the program, the communities involved at the time depicted in the narrative were as brave and resilient as most Sierra Leoneans I knew. Prior to the children's revelations, the work with communities typically focused on the pain and suffering, the loss and anger at what had transpired. With the shift in approach, in which the national staff gently introduced the subject of collective responsibility, the communities began to shift the focus of their discussions. Amidst intense discussions of the pain and suffering, which needed to be shared, there were members of the communities willing to remind others that their children had gone with community blessing and encouragement and so, incrementally, slowly and painfully, they began to engage their collective responsibility.

This is an example of individual human change processes leading to wider social change through the openness to engage in reflexive practice in one humanitarian context. It represents the kind of change often discussed, much desired but rarely understood in terms of practical implementation among humanitarian policy-makers. Part of this lack of understanding relates to the dichotomy discussed in the beginning of this chapter: The tension between humanitarian organizations and the responsibilities of mandated agencies to implement quick-impact programs or

address bigger picture change. Part of the responsibility lies in the fact that few humanitarian personnel come from social service backgrounds with an understanding of the complexity of human change processes. Still fewer come to context with an understanding of the need for cultural competence.

Moreover, crucially, part of the responsibility for this lack of understanding stems from the confusion of simple humanitarian paradigms, and state-centred foreign policy and political agendas. That humanitarian change agendas involve some degree of *human change processes* is not commonly understood or discussed openly, let alone the idea that some aspects of human change are, in fact, mysterious. In the face of perceived responsibility to act, acting is valued if it provides measurable outcomes. Unfortunately, human change rarely chooses to conform. Reflexive practice in humanitarian contexts offers practical means to working with some of the mysterious aspects of human change processes. Praxis in Sierra Leone with national staff and subsequently with children and communities brought powerful, implied barriers to reintegration to the foreground where they could be discussed explicitly, where the power they held could begin to dissipate and responsibility and accountability could be faced.

I have reflected on one of my most significant professional practice experiences in this narrative and the subsequent analysis and discussed its relevance to this research in terms of defining humanitarianism, vulnerability and establishing support for reflexive practice as a tool for practitioner development and the possibility for individual human change processes to influence wider social change. At this junction a shift in perspective occurs. While we continue to focus with one eye on the individual practice taking place in the following narrative, "*Ow for Do, Nar for Forgiv*",

our gaze also encompasses a view of the human change processes taking place within the wider communities of practice.

“Ow for Do, Nar for Fogiv”
Human Change Processes in Sierra Leone
Chapter 4

The atmosphere in Sierra Leone in 1999 was thick with anticipated change. After twelve long years of civil conflict the country was on the precipice of peace. An agreement had been signed, a power-sharing government was being created and a national Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration program was slowly funnelling combatants out of the bush, out of the military, out from the front lines and into transitional living centres as a step on the path of reintegration with civilian communities.

There is no stress-free way to experience or assist with such complex individual and collective human change processes. Personal and cultural beliefs, values and norms are challenged, scrutinized and forced to adapt and shift with the dynamics of a changing reality. To facilitate the return of peaceful times, Sierra Leoneans of all tribal groups, ages and descriptions were encouraged by their community and religious leaders to ‘forgive’ their brethren for the atrocities committed, as they made their way back from the bush and into civilian community life.



Figure 4

“We must forgive” was a sentence I heard repeatedly from the national staff in our organization. It was followed closely and more quietly by “We will never forget” and a reiteration of the initial sentiment “but we must forgive”. It seemed a community’s honest attempt to address what they knew would be a difficult transition period as the unknown consequences of life after twelve years of conflict approached. The conflict had started as an active response to socio-political vulnerability and evolved into a much more comprehensive experience of vulnerability. Rebels forced the children in their command to commit atrocities against their own families and communities to sever the ties between them so the children could not go home. They carved the initials R.U.F. (Revolutionary United Front) into the chests, arms and backs of the children so that they would forever be branded and unable to leave the fighting forces. These fighting forces, adults and children alike were responsible for attacking, looting, raping, amputating, burning and killing. The children walked a very fine line between being both victims and perpetrators.

These same individuals, children, youth and adult alike, were now to leave their military bases in the depths of the jungle, put down their arms and voluntarily rejoin their families and communities. These individuals, whose identities were shaped by violence, were to now step out from the relative safety of their military bases and rejoin mainstream society. In the case of the rebel forces, it was the same mainstream society they had tried to destroy. Children involved from very young ages were now to leave their commanders, the only “families” they had ever known, for uncertain futures within families they had no recollection of. Youth, whose moral development and identities were shaped by participation in violent acts and military doctrine were to return to an unfamiliar civilian world with more recollection of the families they had harmed than they would have liked. And victimized communities, whose wounds were still fresh, were to open their arms and receive these individuals. Forgive these individuals.

I just didn't know how this would happen. The collective energy gathering behind the sentiment "We must forgive" was impressive but I wondered how the forgiveness itself would actually take place. How does one go about actively forgiving such personal experience with brutal atrocities? I reflected on my own experiences with the concept of forgiveness and realized I had more questions than I had answers. Every day I heard, "We must forgive, but we will never forget". It seemed that the act of not forgetting honoured the experiences that must be forgiven if peace were to be realized. I wondered how this forgiveness would actually play itself out when people came face to face with the people who had committed the atrocities.

I practiced in this context from the belief that my purpose was to work myself out of a job, to work with the national staff to the extent that they no longer needed me. An international program manager for an NGO in this type of program is responsible for meeting program objectives. My personal approach to practice in this context clearly delineated between work and practice. The work was about objectives. The practice was about people. The practice involved being present and developing relationships with national staff. It involved asking questions, on-the-job coaching and structured activity to provide support to the national staff so they could in turn support the children through the reintegration process, all while engaging in their own personal, familial and community reintegration and recovery process.

Some ten years on, I continue to say that the single greatest contribution I made to Sierra Leone in 1999 and 2000 was to provide national staff with opportunities to think and speak about themselves and their changing context in new ways. In the summer of 1999, as the DDR program was taking off I planned a workshop for the supervisors so that we could come together and discuss the work we were doing in greater depth. I planned sessions dedicated to core practice review,

communication skills, team building, art therapy and identifying personal strengths and weaknesses and programmatic challenges and impacts. I also planned to broach the subject of forgiveness.

It's a lovely day outside the cool concrete structure. We have been given the use of one of the buildings in the pastoral centre and we look out the windows upon green landscaped lawns, pointsettia trees and bulging palms. The staff in the room are energized. There are big smiles and lots of laughter. They know they are here to work and learn but it is such a welcome shift from the daily routine they cannot help but feel a little relaxed and free. Their days are spent tackling one problem after another: Listening to children, addressing violence, working with bureaucracy and coming up against military doctrine both from rebel forces and international peacekeepers that require all their patience and communication skills to navigate through.

In contrast, in this workshop they are open and willing. They know what to expect from me. They know what we do together in the workshop will be work and it will also be fun. They trust me and they trust each other and they use the activities to open themselves in small, personal increments towards new understanding and better practice. We work through the sessions hour by hour, stopping regularly, learning and laughing freely, sharing food together. In Sierra Leone, if one has not eaten rice on a given day, one has "not eaten" and I make sure there is plenty for everyone. I am amazed at their capacity to consume the heavy meal and return to the room now plastered with their learning and continue to work. I notice throughout that the seven of us move through the sessions in varying degrees of invisibility and exposure. I use intuition to respect invisibility and push for exposure and the new perspectives and learning it will yield.

It is the final day of the workshop and I know what is coming. I know what I intend to do and I intuitively feel that we have reached the place where we can open something particularly challenging. I want to talk about forgiveness. Everywhere there are messages that suggest the way forward is forgiveness and I want to know what these people in the room, as individuals, as national staff members, as community members and Sierra Leoneans think about forgiveness and how it happens. I want to use what is happening in the community in which we currently practice to open up a very complex subject and I want to encourage the individuals in this room as members of the community, as expected to forgive, to explore their own experiences of forgiveness.

I put it out there and as usual, they are willing. I choose an art activity. The children in our care spend considerable time conveying their experiences through artwork and the adults are fascinated by the stories that emerge on the page. We have dedicated a session in this workshop to understanding the messages conveyed in artwork and these staff know well my belief that it is unethical to ask a child to do something one is not willing to do oneself. And so I choose an art activity as an experiential learning exercise on the experience of forgiveness. I pre-empt the activity by disclosing my personal questions about forgiveness and how it transpires. I share my perception that the need to forgive in the community seems pervasive yet also ambiguous. I ask us all to think about someone we still need to forgive and I also ask us to think about someone who might still need to forgive us. We are to try and draw something that would represent the experience as we tell our stories in a large group.

They smiled broadly as they contemplated how they would draw such a thing. Some struggled with the idea and looked at me with incredulity, claiming not to be artists, but they persevered. They moved off into corners of the room, some on their own and others in pairs, to

begin their task. As I watched them reflecting on their experiences and drawing them on the big coloured paper my thoughts moved to the differences between our respective cultures. I marvelled at their openness with each other, to work on representations of personal painful experience together, rather than individually. I wondered whether shared experience and collective socio-cultural norms facilitated such openness. I wondered how the individualism in which I was reared contributed to the need for self-protection and secrecy while conducting such a task for I had never seen a group of Canadians undertake the task in such a way.

The results were fascinating to me as a facilitator and as a human. The results of that one afternoon have stayed with me in detail for nearly a decade, so influential were they on my understanding of the individuals, the context and the value of such activity.

One group member related a story that involved him perceiving for a very long time, that he had been betrayed by a brother. He told us that he had never thought clearly about the circumstances and how his brother, whom he had not seen in years, could equally perceive that he had been the one betrayed. He stepped outside his own perspective and considered himself from the perspective of another. His face was radiant as he described the shock of reflecting on himself and his experiences in this way. He shared that after years of ill thoughts about this person he would now like to find him and speak to him about the experience.

Another participant explored the relationship between his parents. He described their choices and the impacts of them upon him when he was a boy. As he spoke he seemed to become energized with novel perspective and insight into his family dynamics and the choices he now made as an adult with a family of his own. He had often thought of these things but not from the

perspective of forgiveness and he shared with us that his new thinking would alter how he interacted with his family and community.

Sierra Leoneans have an incredible capacity for laughter. Sometimes I found this challenging when laughter was a response to painful stories shared openly and I inadvertently projected how I feel about laughter when I share something painful. In this debriefing exercise, however, laughter was used with one participant to diminish the fear of judgment and encourage a story to be told. The participant who had looked at me incredulously when asked to draw held up his representation and the room erupted in laughter and included his own. I must admit I am laughing even now remembering his drawing. Where others had used circles and straight lines to depict the heads and bodies of people in their experiences, this staff member had drawn something very different. The lines were all squiggled as if to convey the impermanence and lack of solidity of existence and in fact this was at the heart of his experience. His experience of forgiveness required movement and action.

For another participant it was a struggle to see himself in these terms. Each aspect of the story he told seemed to portray him as the victim and switching to how another might have been affected by his choices was very difficult for him to comprehend. As a group we worked with him for a long time, each in our own, way looking for the key that would unlock the door to new insight into self-perception. We did not succeed as a group, in helping him see his responsibility in the experiences he shared with us in that room but it is impossible to know what he took from the experience of six people actively and compassionately trying to help him see something new.

Later that day, a colleague of mine found two of these participants sitting on a bench, back in their home provincial town. She described them as seeming pleasantly in awe, perhaps a little stunned, reflecting on all that had transpired in the workshop. Since she knew them both, she asked them how it had been. She relayed to me that they seemed lost for words at first, and then commented on the energy that had been generated within the group. For me it remains a powerful experience of shared reflexivity, from a basis of openness and trust and which had the potential for wider social impact in the area of forgiveness through these seven individuals and the families and communities of which they were a part.



Interpretation

In relation to my thesis this narrative demonstrates my commitment to reflexive practice with national staff members, with specific emphasis on practitioner development in contexts where humanitarian intervention is taking or has taken place. The narrative explains my perception that complex individual and collective human change processes were occurring in the Sierra Leone context at that time. It reveals a period of personal reflexivity in which I grappled with my perceptions of forgiveness and questions about how forgiveness could be practically realized from such violent personal experience and how I used these questions to provoke reflexivity in the national staff. It acknowledges immediacy in the use of what was then happening in the community to explore forgiveness for the purpose of a shared, reflexive learning experience.

“On for Do” attempts to convey the beauty and complexity of what was a very poignant experience in my professional practice and, specifically, the experience through which I became committed to emphasis on the Self component of the Knowledge, Skills, Self approach to practice in

contexts where humanitarian intervention had taken place. At the time of this practice I was not fully aware of the larger humanitarian system of which I was a part. My focus was much more directed towards micro-level intervention with program beneficiaries and national practitioners. Through subsequent humanitarian experience and through this research process I have learned more about the complexities of humanitarian assistance and this has raised questions about whether the practice I describe in this narrative would have been considered truly humanitarian at the time. Using the dichotomy presented in Chapter 3 there is room for argument that my practice in the Sierra Leonean context fit with the “best possible outcomes” branch of humanitarian assistance.

More recently, however, the emerging field of humanitarian protection has expanded the scope of humanitarianism and creates space for the kind of reflexive practice I advocate to be more clearly considered humanitarian. I move now to discuss this in greater detail, followed by an in-depth look at African perceptions of self that I feel could be extremely useful in humanitarian protection programming.

The Beginnings of Humanitarian Protection

Humanitarian protection brings to the foreground those aspects of humanitarian intervention traditionally referred to as the “softer sides” of aid. It acknowledges human beings *holistically* and in doing so attempts to create resonance between those programming for vulnerable populations and the individuals that constitute that group. It acknowledges the need to meet people in suffering and work with them to protect the “safety, dignity and integrity of the individual” (Slim & Bonwick, 2005). The seminal document I refer to here was produced by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action, or ALNAP. Its specific focus is directed toward victims of violations and abuses and the need for creative programming

toward protecting those who have suffered violations and influencing societal change to prevent future violations.

Humanitarian protection utilizes a concentric circular model referred to as the “Egg Model” to define specific “spheres of action” (Slim & Bonwick, 2005) for programming. Responsive action is the sphere closest to those who have experienced violations and abuse and includes a range of responses that attempt to “stop, prevent or alleviate” the worst effects of the violations. Remedial action, the second sphere, is “restorative and concerned to assist and support people after violations” (Slim & Bonwick, 2005). Environment-building is the third sphere of action and is “concerned with moving society as a whole toward protection norms which will prevent or limit current and future violations and abuses” (Slim & Bonwick, 2005, p. 42).

The field of humanitarian protection did not exist at the time of the activity described in the narrative. Retrospectively, the activity conducted with national staff described in the narrative is an example of a humanitarian protection intervention in two spheres of action: Remedial and Environment-building. In relation to the narrative I will address the Remedial Action sphere now and discuss the Environment-building sphere of action after some discussion on the varying conceptions of self and identity.

Remedial action involves activities that “aim to assist people living with the effects of a particular pattern of abuse” (p. 43). In the ALNAP text, this includes victims of atrocities, children in the fighting forces and displaced communities whose livelihoods have been destroyed. But this is also where some of the tension between “doing the right thing or doing the thing right” resurfaces. To do the right thing in Sierra Leone at the time described in the narrative meant to focus on those

most affected by violations but to do the thing right meant first recognizing and addressing individual and collective vulnerability in those caring for the most affected populations.

The economic instability, insecurity and emotional impact of twelve years of conflict remained facets of vulnerability, as described in the previous chapter, and suggested that the national staff themselves required continued support while they lived with the consequences of the conflict and simultaneously supported those most affected by the violations. If we were to support the children from the fighting forces to reintegrate into their communities, we needed first to understand how the adults in their communities could help them to do so. The prevalent community message at the time was about forgiveness. To do the right thing would be to get the children back to their families. In my view, to do the thing right was to explore the concept of “forgiveness” from a practical, experiential perspective with the national staff, to learn about how best to support and facilitate such a process.

Mezirow (1996) states, “the agent brings her own frame of reference which is an integral element constituting the experience. To understand others, one must gain access to their lived experience so as to clarify and elucidate the way they interpret it” (p. 160). I feel this supports the practice described in the narrative on two levels. Firstly, it supports the purposeful choice in humanitarian contexts to practice reflexively with national practitioners as *people* and beyond the program objectives. It supports my call for internationals to recognize that in order to reach program beneficiaries, we must first engage with national practitioners to the degree where we understand the host culture’s perceptions and interpretations of themselves and their existences. Only through this level of engagement will we co-create programmatic interventions that ethically and respectfully address the needs of diverse layers of vulnerability within populations.

Secondly, it supports the call for cultural competence in international humanitarian practitioners. To reach the level of engagement with national staff members that I suggest best facilitates support of program beneficiaries, international practitioners must also be reflexive. There is a need to know what one brings to context and as Chang (2007) suggests, “how we treat people from different cultural backgrounds considerately and with equality” (p. 187). The use of “how” does not suggest that there is a simple formulaic way *to do so*, but rather that reflexivity in practice highlights underlying beliefs and values about “other” and about experience that may inadvertently impact the ability to practice. I suggest that, in the same vein that CYC educators encourage developing practitioners to reflect on their life experience in order to respectfully meet vulnerability and minimize harm, international humanitarian practitioners working in complex cross-cultural contexts also have a responsibility to understand how beliefs, values and life experience enhance and hinder practice with vulnerable populations.

I discuss this here because I believe it to be a crucial aspect of reflexive practice with national practitioners in humanitarian contexts. In “*On for Do*”, I am engaged in a deeply reflexive process about a potentially distressing subject matter. The practice I was attempting required a level of relationship that had been established through ongoing engagement with my staff as both people and practitioners. The consultant who contributed to this narrative (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007), and with whom the initial work was conducted in Sierra Leone, had this to say about the narrative:

It shows a relationship of trust and faith we had in you to help us unravel ourselves. It shows that we all trusted you enough to open the closets of our hearts and reveal the skeletons we had been hiding there. We trusted you to lead us out of the labyrinth of our anger, disappointments, grievances, failures and emotional wounds. It also shows acceptance because no matter the high Sierra Leonean capacity for laughter, we don't

share ourselves with people we don't trust. We believed in you and what you did and how you did it. (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007)

I have always described myself as a “details girl” and the Sierra Leonean staff were well familiar with this “Kimism”, as it came to be known. They counted on the fact that I would push for more details towards deeper meaning. As the consultant refers to above, I asked for specific input related to “what I did and how I did it” that they found useful, to see if it corresponded to my beliefs about reflexivity being a key component of our effective work together. The consultant responded with:

You were easy to talk to, non-judgmental and you tried to put everything we said into context. But most importantly, you believed in us to do what we had to do and you built our capacity by delegating responsibility to us for the program, something which many other [international] supervisors did not do. (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007)

The choice to practice reflexively regarding forgiveness required me to reflect on my own difficulties with the concept, to know in advance that I could handle anything that might be shared and to know I would be learning as much as anyone else in the room. I was practicing within the realm of human change processes and that required me to access the lived experiences of the practitioners in my program to facilitate discussions that would draw out how we interpreted experiences so that we could support each other in our respective, mutually generated processes of change and meaning-making. This required making links between individual and collective experiences of human change processes and working specifically with African perceptions of self. I believed that shifts in perception led to increments of human change processes and as the narrative indicates, we were co-creating these kinds of shifts. I will now devote some space to a discussion of the constructivist theories of human change that underpinned this practice.

Human Change Processes

Mahoney (1991) suggests that human change processes are initiated when “internal working models” are challenged. *“Ow for Do”* portrays some of the challenges to “internal working models” experienced by national staff with the relatively sudden news that the rebel forces would soon be rejoining their former communities and further still with the realization that they would need to find ways to *forgive* these former community members for the atrocities they had committed, as was being suggested by their religious community leaders. “Shifts in internal working models do not occur rapidly, nor are they always readily apparent or measurable” (Radmilovic, 2005). In the narrative, the reflexive activity provided an opportunity for some of the individuals to connect immediately with new possibilities for their internal working models, while one staff member really struggled to see himself from a new perspective.

Human change processes are individual and highly complex and any change agenda must take into account both the tangible aspects of it and at the same time the mysterious aspects of it. Mahoney’s (1991) “self-protective theory of resistance” attempts to bridge the two. He posits that ‘individuals exploring or making changes (I would add ‘even inadvertently or forcibly’) must maintain a continuity of self’ and this manifests in a “self-protective resistance”. He suggests that “when this self-protective tendency is respected and worked with rather than against, the consequences for the individual are more likely to be positive and developmentally progressive” (as quoted in Radmilovic, 2005, p. 130). In the narrative, the participants were asked to consider not only people “they still needed to forgive, but also people who might still need to forgive them”. This was the significant shift in internal working models for those individuals. The act of stepping outside of oneself to see how one might be being perceived was a novel experience. It also leads to the realization that forgiveness requires humility and is a reciprocal process that dissolves the line

between forgiver and forgiven. “We stand in the middle of forgiving and being forgiven and this is an important shift” (D. Scott, personal communication, December, 2007).

While “novelty is an essential ingredient for human change” (Radmilovic, 2005, p. 131) it can also be overwhelming if it is experienced rapidly, excessively and violently, as in the case of the changing context of the Sierra Leoneans in the narrative. Not only was their way of perceiving themselves and their community changing, their daily lives were forcibly changing with the impending communal inclusion of rebel forces at whose hands they had experienced atrocities. Bronfenbrenner (1979) says “human development is a process of continual change taking place in a complex, multi-layered context” (p. 30). His comments seem to indicate that human change processes are persistent and inextricable from context and in the Sierra Leonean context, these normative processes were exacerbated from a decade of conflict and its effects.

As Mahoney (1991, in Radmilovic, 2005, p. 131) suggests, “novel experiences are rarely sought when an individual feels anxious, vulnerable or depressed”. In the Sierra Leone context, novel experiences were not only a product of the effects of conflict over twelve years but also the experience of humanitarian intervention. Exposure to foreign people, ideas, beliefs, training and documentation compounded the complexity of human change processes. INGOs focus on rapid impact interventions that do not often allow for the kind of programmatic activity that best facilitate the integration of existing and novel ideas towards maximum potential for change. My narrative demonstrates an example of the impact that reflexive practice in this context can have in effecting practitioner development and social change.

The consultant who worked on the two Sierra Leonean narratives contributed valuable insight into the challenges faced by communities coming to grips with widescale and painful change processes. The title of the narrative “*Ow for Do, Nar for Forgin*” is translated as “What else is there to do? We must forgive” suggesting people did not have an alternative about how to end the war. This sentiment was always followed by the addendum “but we will not forget”, which, as the consultant says, is “not an indication of helplessness and confusion, but rather an expression of caution and needing to learn from the mistakes that had brought the war and the process of reconciliation” (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007). He says the expression “We must forgive but not forget” is best explained by this contextual analogy: “if you have been bitten by a snake once, then you must flee whenever you see an earthworm” (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007)

“*Ow for do, Nar for Forgin*,” reveals that

People desperately wanted to put the war behind them, but they were not just going to shut their minds to the causes and effects of the ten brutal years. By not wanting to forget they wanted to learn from the causes of the war and prevent its recurrence in the future; by not wanting to forget they wanted to take responsibility for the war, not as individuals, but as communities, as a nation; by not wanting to forget they wanted retribution for the wrongs they had suffered by those who promulgated the war, by not wanting to forget they wanted to hold onto what existed before the war...the good lives they had lived, the things they had done together with the loved ones who were now dead, the pristine culture and traditions they had practiced – as the source of their strength, their resilience to the inhumanities they had suffered. (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007)

The reflexive activity on forgiveness is an example of a programmatic activity within the Environment-building sphere of action. Activities in this sphere are longer-term than the other two, further removed from the victims of violations and are more “structural processes” that aim to change “policy, attitude, beliefs and behaviour” (Slim & Bonwick, 2005, p. 43). My feeling is that the issue of changing policy is separate from the other three terms, which are about changes in human beings. I believe that efforts must be made to change policy but that these efforts are often

disconnected from the human experience in which they are constituted. The activity described in “*On for Do*”, and the subsequent analysis contributed by the consultant re-establishes this connection between policy and human experience. It depicts the connection between individual and communal change processes and between existing capacity for reflection in that context and the kind of prevention activities described within the Environment-building sphere of humanitarian protection goals.

I believe I can have impact at ground level where human change processes may be initiated. The reflexive activity described in the narrative is an example and it reflects my belief that wider social change can take place as a result of crucial increments in individual human change. The individuals in the narrative had the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences, explore their own vulnerability and perceive themselves and their responsibilities to themselves and their communities from new perspectives. These are the small but vital increments in human change processes and they are what Maier (1991) might refer to as “second-order change processes” (p. 32). They suggest “a transformation from one state to another” from the “aim of enabling an individual to behave, think or feel differently” (p. 32). Individual practice of this nature within a collectively organised African society raises the question about whether it is ethical to do so, however, the experiences depicted in “*On for Do*” affirmed for me that individual conceptions of self existed in this collectively organised society. Support for these beliefs and the origins of reflexive thought on the African continent forms the basis of the following section, guided by personal insight into the value of exploring vulnerability.

The Diversity of Self and Identity

It is from a deep familiarity with my selves and with my own experiences of vulnerability and how I have interpreted them that I effectively meet others in vulnerability. In the narrative, I was able to meet the national staff members as individuals and members of groups to explore the very sensitive issue of forgiveness because of my own personal experience with exploring sensitive issues. Reflecting on past experience is not only a manifestation of the belief that life experience impacts practice, learned in the SCYC, but also a personal commitment to strive for congruence between my beliefs, values and ethics. Reflecting on myself requires me to be honest, to confront difficult parts of myself, to be responsible, and ultimately to live with integrity.

I spent my formative childhood years moving between two families newly created when I was seven years old. In one I was an only child and in the other I became the youngest of four. In both families, new adult relationship dynamics and unresolved emotional issues left me feeling largely invisible. Conversely, lack of clear parental boundaries and the presence of alcohol led to a persistent threat of negative exposure. As a child I developed an ability to move between the experiences of invisibility and exposure, keenly perceptive to the contributing factors. As an adult, I perceive these experiences as gifts.

Personal experience with the disconnection and stagnation of invisibility and the risks associated with exposure facilitates an intuitive understanding of when and how to encourage others to take risks to move from these places. “Change occurs when you’re safe enough to be uncomfortable” (G. Saunders, personal communication, 1996). In the narrative, I challenged my staff to feel safe enough to be uncomfortable to explore their experiences towards new meanings

and understandings of forgiveness to not only enhance personal meaning but in the hope of contributing to wider social change.

It is fair to challenge the idea of doing this kind of individual reflexive practice with individuals whose conceptions of *self* differ greatly from my own. When I describe practice experiences such as those depicted in the narrative in my home culture, this is naturally what occurs. P'Bitek (1964) says, "If we are seeking to understand the African concept of self, we should endeavour to find what the African himself calls self and not to rationalize from a foreign concept of self" (p. 33). In the narrative, I describe individuals from various tribal groups who have come together to practice with me as part of a group within an INGO. Through my relationships with them and my experience with them in their socio-cultural context I understand that their sense of self and identity are generated primarily through collective associations beginning with birth order within immediate families and its relation to extended family, both socio-economically and tribally, geographically, nationally and hierarchically in terms of education and opportunity. Yet in this particular context, I learned that the largest and most complex groupings are still made up of individuals.

Phinney (2000) suggests, "identity development is based on a universal need to define oneself in one's context" (p. 30). I am not sure I agree with the universality of this need given what I learned in Malawi about the opportunity to do so in the face of very real survival challenges. However, he goes on to make the point that the progression of identity development is "shaped in idiosyncratic ways as each person makes individual choices...by events and opportunities afforded by context" and that a sense of identity "is constructed in endlessly different ways, in spite of similar circumstances" (p. 30) and this I agree with. I believe that one's sense of *self* or *selves*, is ultimately

individual, even within cultural groupings. As Hoskins (2003) suggests, “each individual makes meaning of aspects of culture through highly individualized processes” (p. 321).

Adejunmobi (1999) quotes Sollors (1989) as suggesting that “The term ‘invention’ in connection with the emergence of diverse identities does not imply an almost magical manufacture of identity out of prior vacuity, rather it underlines the unending dynamic of friction, exchange and interchange between cultures through which identities take shape” (p. 582). The narrative reflects an understanding of the complex individual and collective human change processes taking place in the context at that time. It reflects, what Radmilovic (2005) describes as a “crisis as an opportunity to learn” (p. 134). The staff members were open to not only the learning but to learning about the human change processes they were experiencing individually and collectively and which they were to support and facilitate with the children in their care.

The experiential learning activity that asked us to reflect on experiences related to forgiveness represents an activity in which I was both a participant and facilitator. My aim was not to educate but to initiate and facilitate a process of reflection. Mezirow’s (1996) transformative learning theory suggests, “through critical self-examination, adults sometimes experience a significant transformation of their perspective to respond to important events or difficult stages of their lives” (p. 189). The practical and emotional challenge of figuring out how to forgive individuals from one’s family or community for atrocities committed presented such an important and difficult event.

The origins of this kind of psychological reflection that contribute to individual and collective human change processes are often mistakenly accredited to scholars in the Northern

Hemisphere, but as Egbeazien Oshodi (1996) reminds us “the factual nature of psychoanalysis could in part find its profound meaning in the philosophy of Black Africa, beginning with ancient Egypt” (p. 176). In his article he infers that Plato spent considerable time in Africa and that from his “knowledge of the ‘eros’ (life or spiritual forces)” (p. 177), Freud developed his theories related to life, sexual and death instincts. Oshodi raises these points as a means to “keep scholars from pretending to be ignorant of Africa’s place in the historiography of psychology in general and in clinical psychology in particular” (p. 178-179). Reflexive practice on the African continent is not an imposition, it is a reminder of existing and historical capacity for resilience, growth and development.

In Zimbabwe, Chenjerai Hove (1988) uses literature to convey the role of psychological processes in coping with colonization. In his novel *Bones*, the protagonist, Marita works on a squalid farm and is heavy with emotional burdens, “the things of inside burn like a strong fire” (p. 45). Marita’s character emanates resilience and she carries her pain until a friendship with a young woman, Janifa, provides an opportunity for each of them to unburden themselves. They spend considerable time processing experience without a hint of psychological jargon. In one of Janifa’s final monologues on the lessons she has learned in her relationship with Marita she highlights the importance of relationship and verbalization of painful experience towards healing and growth:

Marita, you told me sad stories of the wounds in your heart. Many wounds which no one can see. Wounds cut with big knives and machetes. I listened because I saw them. Now I have no one to listen to me. Did you say every crack on the face of a farm worker is an endless story? Maybe it is good to have stories, but it is better to have people to share them with. I am young like a small maize plant: if a maize plant is alone in the forest why does it not grow? Why does it not ripen like the tree in whose shadow it is growing? It cannot grow because it is alone. It has no one to talk to. (p. 94)

This is an example, by an African writer, of the need for not only sharing painful experience, but also doing so with others. This is the nature of the work depicted in the narrative. In “*Ow for Do*”, the national staff choose to re-examine some of their own painful experiences and reflect on how these might impact their ability to forgive their countrymen coming out of the bush, and the children with whom they practice.

Where these excerpts provide examples of existing reflective capacity in the African context, what follows is a call by an African writer, for more. Mbembe (2002) suggests:

As long as continental Africans neglect to rethink slavery-not merely as a catastrophe of which they were but the victims, but as the product of a history that they have played an active part in shaping-the appeal to race as the moral and political basis of solidarity will depend, to some extent, on a mirage of consciousness. (p. 260)

He is an African advocating for reflection on one of the most tumultuous periods in African (and world) history. And he is openly making the connection between reflection and responsibility. In “*Ow for Do*”, I describe asking the staff to consider not only those they may still need to forgive, but also to consider those who may still need to *forgive them*. This is the pivotal shift. The psychological shift from seeing oneself solely as victim, to seeing oneself as also, if not equally culpable in a painful experience, is a powerful one and initiates responsibility, humility and change. Before the activity, one of my staff had never before considered that his friend might also perceive he had been betrayed. He had never considered a perspective other than his own, which is not to suggest he did not previously have the capacity, but rather that he simply had not previously done so. His experience working for other NGOs during the long years of humanitarian intervention in his country had provided him theoretical and skill-based training, but not the occasion to consider how his experiences influenced his perspectives in life and practice. As stated, questions remain as to whether this work we did could be conceived as “humanitarian”, however, given that

humanitarian protection seems more inclined to focus on the whole individual with an integrative attitude towards safety, dignity, protection and integrity, I will now look at the practice depicted in “*Ow for Do*” more closely through the humanitarian protection lens.

Humanitarian Protection Considerations

The consultant involved in this narrative is also the participant in “*Ow for Do*” who experienced a shift in his perspective about his relationship with his parents. He contributed this analysis of the experiences depicted in the narrative:

I was never able to overcome the impact of my parents’ decision to separate and I don’t think my brothers and sisters were able to overcome it either. It was a wound that lived in me, that burned in me, that haunted my dreams, because we suffered as a result of their decision. My parents had separated because of pressure from my father’s family. My mother was a teacher in a primary school and my father’s family were against him marrying an educated woman. In Sierra Leone then an educated woman was ‘too bossy and controlling’ and therefore does not make a good wife. Thinking about this episode that afternoon was painful, my heart pounded madly and I felt tears flow in me. I actually cried. Talking about it helped me and for once I was able to evaluate that chapter of my life not only as a victim of family conflict but as a perpetuator of family conflict. It was like opening the gates of my heart and letting my emotions flow, washing away all the debris of hatred I had felt for my extended family. Later on my extended family members were forcefully repatriated from Liberia and I hired a comfortable mini bus and picked them up from the Sierra Leone/Liberia border. I took the most elderly aunt to live with us in our town of Bo and the others to live with my cousins. I could never have done this if I had not rediscovered myself during the workshop that day. (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007)

The shift in perspective from victim to contributor opens doors not only for individual human change processes, but as described by this consultant, has implications for wider change within extended family systems. In a context dependent upon extended family and community harmony for survival and development, this kind of reflexive practice has potential to both work through existing and residual conflict and experience but also to promote protection and prevention of recurrence of conflict. As described in the narrative, not all individuals are capable of fostering this shift in perspective, even with structured experiential activity and the support of friends and

colleagues. For some the shift is too difficult, too painful but for those who choose to go there, the potential for individual change is enormous, and in a collective society individual change has tremendous potential to facilitate wider social change.

Humanitarian protection efforts as defined by the ALNAP (Slim & Bonwick, 2005) body in particular, make a clear distinction between victims and perpetrators and the means to providing support for victims and ensuring accountability by perpetrators. While this is a necessary demarcation it is also problematic. The lines between victim and perpetrator are difficult to draw and in some cases, people fall into both categories. The child combatants in Sierra Leone are such an example. They walked the fine line between having been victims, by virtue of being children at the time of either abduction or willing entrance into the forces and simultaneously perpetrators, by having committed atrocities by force, or over time voluntarily, against civilian populations.

The reflexive activity in the narrative reflects on some level the recognition that a part of the forgiveness process is to recognize personal responsibility: moving from placing blame externally to willingly taking responsibility for personal involvement. When the one individual in the narrative realizes that the one he believes has wronged him could also believe he has been wronged, this represents a crucial incremental shift in both human change processes and the kind of change in belief and attitude desired in humanitarian protection efforts in the Environment-building sphere of action. It also suggests, as Maier (1991) states, “the substance of CYC practice is applicable to all ages and levels of development” (p. 393).

What the narrative also highlights is that this kind of change, albeit non-linear and difficult to measure, is what must take place if humanitarian protection efforts towards the “development of an

increasingly non-violent public culture” (Slim & Bonwick, 2005, p. 43) are to be realized. Individual human change processes contribute to wider social change processes. The families and extended families of the individuals who participated in the exercise of shared reflexivity are influenced by the changes that take place in the self-perceptions of those individuals and in their reframing of their experiences and responsibilities. Hoskins (2003) quotes Bathkin (1986) as stating that “it is through dialogue that we come to know and understand ourselves. Conversations (both literal and symbolic) are more than idle past times or ways of connecting, they are essential for the process of self-definition” (p. 322). I would go on to say that through these processes of self-definition, human change processes and wider social change within “moving society” in humanitarian protection efforts within the environment-building sphere of action can take place.

The narrative “*On for Do*” ends with what a colleague shared with me upon encountering two of the workshop participants shortly after the final day. She describes them as somewhat awestruck and clearly reflective of the learning that has transpired. I asked the consultant if he remembered meeting her that day and if he recollected his thoughts from the interaction and this is what he shared with me:

Later that day I thought back on the whole workshop and tried to evaluate its impact on me. Was it about learning, was it about acquiring skills on how to understand and work with children to overcome their fears, doubts, wounds and confusion? I realised that the workshop was about me. I was both the subject and object of the workshop. For me the workshop was about healing, how we as participants could heal from the many emotional wounds we bore. (D. Lamin, personal communication, 2007)

The choice to conduct the activity with these individuals came from both my relationship with them as practitioners and my understanding of context and the challenges we all faced at the prospect of large numbers of rebels walking the streets after years of committing atrocities against civilian populations. The consultant’s perception that the workshop helped participants to heal their

own emotional wounds reinforced the link between their own vulnerability and that of the children in their care. The purpose of conducting the activity was not only to provide opportunities for individual reflection and learning but more importantly to facilitate connection between what White (2007) describes as the integration of “knowing, doing and being” (p. 5) that CYC practice emphasizes.

If in humanitarian protection interventions, the goal is to challenge societies to change beliefs, attitudes, behaviour, policy, laws and institutions, then recognition of the beliefs and values that underpin those societies must be respected and acknowledged as well as recognition that at ground level each of these involves distinctly *human change*. Open, safe, facilitated dialogue provides an entry point into understanding the roots of existing societal beliefs and steps towards such monumental human change processes. As an international, I am bound by a responsibility to practice reflexively, knowing that how I am perceived and what I bring to context can open doors to that kind of change or close them.

Facilitated dialogue such as the one in the narrative allows for diverse groups of people to consider and reflect on beliefs contributing to practice and context, to share these out loud in safe spaces and understand themselves as key actors in the human change processes involved in Environment-building efforts. These efforts must also be accompanied by a degree of cultural competence that facilitates a space for shared reflexivity.

From these experiences, analysed retrospectively through the lenses of humanitarian intervention and the emerging field of humanitarian protection, I move now to the final narrative. We shift to the Sudan context, and a narrative entitled “*Al Ham del’Allah*”, in which the perceptions,

beliefs and approaches I held, and that had evolved from Malawi and Sierra Leone, were tested. The themes of vulnerability, self and human change processes are explored from novel perspectives once again through the practice of reflexivity.

“Al Ham del’Allah”
Uncovering and Discovering Self in Sudan
Chapter 5



Figure 5

I’m standing in an intense and dusty heat. It’s 48 degrees Celsius. The sun is beating down on my blonde head and my covered body for I am clothed from neck to wrist to feet. I am wearing a long-sleeved black shirt and long pants, which are thin enough not to suffocate me, and large enough so as not to reveal any contours of my body. These same trousers, a few hours from now, will be soaked from belt to knees after sitting on a plastic chair for an hour’s meeting. I will get up and feel the breeze on my backside and know for certain that they not only *feel* wet, they *are* wet and obviously *look* wet too. It doesn’t matter. I will slosh my way from the office to the clinic and they will dry again in the sixty seconds it takes to get there.

The only exposed parts of my body are my head, hands and my orange-painted toes that poke out from the tips of my sandals. The woman standing before me is suitably covered as well, only she also wears an orange head-scarf to cover her hair, wrapped over her head and under her chin and pinned on one side to forestall any movement. Under her top layer of stylish, colour coordinated shirt and long skirt she wears layer upon layer so as to obliterate her body’s shape almost entirely. And she wears socks, something I can’t even consider in this climate.

We're in Mygoma, a centre for abandoned children in Khartoum, the capital city of Sudan in North East Africa. Sudan is the largest country in Africa, narrowly beating out the Democratic Republic of Congo for the title. It comprises a mostly desert North and a tropical South. The conflict between these two parts of this diverse country, with ninety-three different intermixed tribal groups, is the longest running civil conflict in Africa. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced over thirty years. Southerners amassed in the capital live in substandard temporary housing settlements that are periodically bulldozed by the government to confirm their unwanted status. It is 2005 and a peace agreement has been signed, but it leaves out some very significant players and does not account for one of the major issues that fuelled the conflict in the first place: control of the rich oil fields that lie in the south. So conflict, seemingly halted, remains just under the surface.

Mygoma comprises a number of buildings, each with its own unique purpose. There are twenty-seven rooms in which the four hundred abandoned children eat, sleep, play and grow in addition to a kitchen, a clinic, a warehouse and a laundry room. I'm working for an international NGO that considers itself not only purist in delivering aid, but defines itself as an association, rather than an organisation. It does so to diminish hierarchy, to facilitate an egalitarian sense of contribution and to foster continual reflection on the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Our presence in this centre aims to support the survival and development of four hundred abandoned children under the age of four. Nannies are primary caregivers assigned to specific rooms to feed, clothe, bathe, discipline and care for the children. Nutritionists weigh the children every day against developmental standards, nurses provide medication and psychologists test for and treat developmental delays.

The woman standing before me in the blazing sun is a nutritionist and responsible for a set of rooms at the back of the centre where the older children live. She has been working at this centre for five years and I perceive her as competent and open. I greet her in the standard Arabic way, “a salaam a le kum” (peace be upon you) and she responds in kind “wa a le kum salaam” (and to you). Societal norms around greetings are fierce in this context and dictate that everyone encountered on one’s path must be greeted “in his hand”. Given the hundreds of people working in the centre, it sometimes takes me half an hour to get from the front gate to the office in the back, a distance of approximately 50 metres.

In addition to cultural and social norms around greetings, it is my custom and preference to greet everyone I meet in the centre, especially the nannies, verbally and with a handshake. It is equally important to me to remember names, which is quite a task given the numbers of staff but over time I know some of them and I enjoy the reactions when I greet by name. In the faces of the women I see large smiles that suggest surprise and delight at being remembered. They are important enough to be remembered. To me, they are doing the most important job. There is an intuitive sense of kinship here. As if those who would dedicate some or all of one’s energy to Mygoma are bonded together in an implicit way.

I ask Samia in Arabic how she is doing and beyond the basic greetings I am rewarded with an account of her suffering, told with a smile and a sense of acceptance for her fate. It is not the first story of its kind that I have been honoured to hear. “Women are suffering here” is a statement I hear often, but it is the first to highlight for me, as a practitioner, the difference in how I am listening. As I scan her face I realize I am already figuring out how to shut this story down and how to remove myself from the position of listener. I am actively not attending to her story. I am

keeping these women and their stories of suffering at arm's length and I have never done this before. I am not practicing as I have practiced in other contexts. I wonder what this is about, but lodge the contradiction for later reflection and refocus my attention on Samia's words.

The centre is divided between "front rooms" and "back rooms". The front rooms are for the children under the age of six months. Two long corridors facing each other with a small courtyard in between comprise ten of the front rooms. I remember the first day I walked into the centre. I came around a corner into the courtyard and the ground was quite literally covered in babies. Nannies sat on blankets roughly six feet square, each one holding approximately twelve to fifteen tiny nearly-newborn babies. Some were sleeping some were silent, most were crying as they waited their turn in the nanny's lap. The sight was a little staggering, and I faltered in my step, trying to weave my way through the throng of skinny little arms and legs, little caps and socks, without accidentally stepping on one.

I slowly make my way back to the office to greet the Sudanese psychologists I am responsible for supervising, which to me involves not only administrative supervision but more importantly, a process of mutual capacity-building through dialogue and activity. I want to check on the progress of the "Room 2" kids. Up until recently, Room 2 was a special front room housing children with severe anxiety, disordered eating and special medical issues that required frequent monitoring. Some of the children in this room were over two years old and had not begun to walk for reasons no one could discern. Some of the psychologists had been working with these children for years with little sign of improvement. The children didn't seem to get much stimulation, or go outside very often and compounding this, cultural attitudes towards "unworthy" tribes and deficiency or disability seemed to influence the care they received.

The children in Room 2 had been moved recently because the room was needed as an isolation room for children with diarrhea. Outbreaks of diarrhea are a regular occurrence, especially in the heat of the summer when the temperatures reach 50 degrees on a regular basis. The treatment approach is to isolate these children but the reality is that there simply aren't enough rooms to isolate the numbers of children that need to be isolated. When it had become clear that the Room 2 kids needed to move, there was widespread fear and trepidation about the idea of moving these "fragile" children. Intuitively I felt that moving them might actually be the best thing for them but I kept this to myself until I could hear what the Sudanese psychologists felt about it.

Since my arrival at the centre I had inadvertently radicalised the concept of "meeting", which produced a mixture of excited curiosity and caution in the staff I was responsible for supervising. The psychology staff seemed unused to participating in discussions and decision-making processes about the work. I entered that context in the same way I entered nearly every other context: from a place of diminished self-importance. I wanted to know what these psychologists, trained in their home country and culture knew about how to care for these children. I wanted to know who they were as people in addition to practitioners. I held meetings that combined fun activities with discussion about the work, and learning about how the individual natures of the practitioners contributed to the work. At the end of the first meeting of this kind, the sole male member of our team, named Abdu, said that he hoped we could continue to have these "interesting and strange" meetings.

It seemed as though the long list of previous expatriate supervisors had done some great technical and theoretical capacity-building with this group. And in this context, as in others, I felt

that the contribution I could make would be to help the practitioners see themselves in the work and see how their experiences and beliefs and values impacted their ability to practice. I had noticed in my early days at the centre that the national staff had difficulty responding to questions about the purpose or motivation behind certain practice choices. While I speculated that some of this was anxiety about giving the “right answer” I also intuited that some of the challenge lay in the integration of what they knew (knowledge) how they applied it (skills) and the influence of their individual natures in practice (self).

In the meeting concerned with the movement of the Room 2 children, I asked us to think about the specific needs of the children and to think about what they most needed and in which rooms they might find what they needed. Some rooms were better than others. Some nannies were better than others. That was our reality. We needed to work with it, rather than against it. We carefully and methodically verbalised the needs of specific children and discussed the possibilities for rooms into which they could be placed where they would receive optimum care. And then we moved the children.

Change is both tumultuous and mysterious. This was key collective learning for us from the Room 2 experience. There were over four hundred nannies at the centre and moving the nannies from Room 2 with the children to their new rooms proposed a level of disruption to scheduling that the nanny supervisor was unwilling to endure. So when we moved the children from their familiar environments to unfamiliar ones, they experienced a disruption in their attachments, their routines and their development. Nutritionists became concerned that they were losing weight and some psychologists became concerned by their behaviour. The concerns quickly developed into a “crisis” within the centre that prompted many meetings about whether or not to move the children back.

Our psychology team was divided on the issue, so I decided to use the experience as an opportunity for reflexive learning.

As a group we discussed the complexities of change and we discussed the tumultuous nature of change. We discussed in detail what we were seeing in the children and we discussed what we experienced ourselves when times in our lives required us to change. Just asking the staff to think reflexively and to make the link between themselves and the children, was new. And for all of us, this happened to be a time of great change and so provided a practical example that facilitated an opportunity for learning. The international organisation we all worked for was handing over their operations to a local NGO in coming months and everyone in the centre was feeling uncertain about their futures. What we discussed, with reflection, was that change *was* difficult, it *was* uncomfortable and it often meant that we experienced a kind of loss before a kind of gain, just like the children.

There was consensus within the psychology team that we needed to focus additional attention on former Room 2 children to help them in their transition. And so we recommended keeping the children where they were and the nutritionists reluctantly gave us time. And within that time, a period of three weeks, the mystery of change prevailed. One of the children who had spent nearly her whole life as “failure to thrive” moved solidly out of that category and began to walk. Another child who screamed incessantly when faced with new people or situations, stopped screaming and started smiling. And one child who had been mocked and isolated, who had previously spent most of her days banging her head against her crib and who had never walked, began to walk, talk and seek out contact in her new environment.

Slowly, the worried frowns that had dominated the faces of staff for weeks started to be replaced by smiles and they further developed into expressions of surprise as the development of the children continued well. As part of capacity-building and my professional approach, I wanted to give some positive feedback to the psychology staff on how they had handled the situation. Abdu, from the North of Sudan, had a well-developed intuitive sense of his practice and he'd handled not only his work with the children but also his colleagues, very well.

I went to Abdu and said "you did well in your practice choices with the children". "Al Ham del'Allah" (praise God) he responded. I said to him, "yes, you can thank Allah, but you also need to know that *you*, as a practitioner, did very well in the situation". "Shukran, Al Ham del'Allah", (thank you, praise Allah) he responded again. "Your intuition is reliable and you understood that change is difficult but that it reveals strengths and can bring unforeseen benefits if we trust and persevere". "Al Ham del'Allah", he said with an enormous smile. I smiled too. And I laughed. "I'm not going to win this one", I thought to myself, and we both moved on to other tasks, chuckling to ourselves.

All this discussion about change prompted me to conduct a workshop with the national staff members to further reflect on change, on self in practice, on beliefs and values and how these impact our ability to practice, not just with the children but with each other as team members. The team comprised ten Sudanese staff members. Half of these staff members were from the Northern part of Sudan and members of the Islamic faith. The other half were from the South and practicing members of the Christian faith. They worked well enough together, but periodically, situations arose that revealed unspoken tension between the two groups. Similarly, in the nanny population, there was a mix of nannies from the North and South, with diverse representation of tribal groupings and periodically this created tension in the workplace.

The children in the centre were abandoned primarily because they were born out of wedlock, considered in the Northern society as a serious religious offence. As the centre was located in the North, the children living there were automatically considered Islamic by the government and therefore only able to be adopted by Islamic parents. This was hard to understand for some of the Southern nannies, who wanted to adopt the children, but couldn't, and who would regularly point out some of the children's prominently Southern features and skin tones. Some of the Northern nannies faced social ramifications of working at the centre. The stigma of being associated with these children was so strong in parts of the society that these nannies couldn't tell their families the truth about where they worked.

There was just *so much* that underpinned the practice in this centre and that influenced the way the children were cared for by nannies, nutritionists and psychologists that I realised I would only ever scratch the surface of comprehension in my limited time. Having accepted that, I wanted to open discussions with the psychology staff about some of these complexities to see what could be learned from each other that might benefit the practice of care. Knowing I would soon be leaving, I wanted to strengthen the team in the hopes that they might continue to support each other with our "strange" meetings after I'd gone. I designed sessions in the workshop that combined fun and reflection and that generated discussion about some of these important topics.

We spent two days together in a room whose walls were plastered with questions, expressions and the fruits of our labour. Sessions aimed at exploring personal strengths and weaknesses revealed in most an individual sense of self within the collective, while simultaneously revealing the complexity of doing so within such strong religiously-defined identities. The session

on change found the staff responding to rapid, unforeseen changes with little information, designed to draw out what they needed and what strengths they had to deal with the changes we faced in Mygoma. That session had them shaking their smiling heads at me in a blend of excited frustration, but it worked. We expanded our understanding of the strengths that lie within the complex and mysterious nature of change. In the months leading up to the organisational handover, the lack of information and perpetual uncertainty contributed to some of the psychology staff perceiving themselves as powerless in the face of change. The exercise reminded us all that even within the storm of great change, we have individual and collective strength, capacity and resilience.

The final session on the first day found us both relaxed and energised as a group. The session had small mixed groups answering question prompts such as “children are...” that were designed to explore underlying beliefs and values and generate discussion. They worked together quietly and when it came time to share aloud the volume picked up. This session revealed some of the deep cracks in the perceptions they held about each other as members of different religious groups. Laughter was the vehicle through which the initial discussion gave way to more confrontational attitudes about each other’s differing beliefs. At one point I sensed that tension was rising and responded with a reminder about the norms we had agreed to around respect for diversity. My calm external demeanour belied a series of moments in which I asked myself if we were ready for the deep waters of where this discussion might take us.

And then one woman, a strong, particularly vocal and generally confrontational member of the Southern staff directed a challenge towards the Northern group of staff with her eyes trained on Abdu. It began with “you people...” and ended with “believe these children are evil, are evidence of sin, how can you work here when you believe this?” Internally I winced. It lacked a lot in its

delivery, yet it opened up one of the deepest implicit challenges to the team's common practice of caring for the children. Suddenly, we were in deep waters. Unsurprisingly, knowing what I know of Abdu, the response to the challenge was delivered with utmost respect. He clarified the difference between what the tenets of Islam advocated, which in this case is the specific care of children such as those living in Mygoma, and the application of those religious teachings by certain members of society. He urged her not to make generalisations but instead to understand the beliefs that inspired his practice and those of his colleagues, and see parallels in her own religious beliefs.

She responded with an unconvincing nod of her head and then others readily jumped in, and we came back up to surface. I felt the group members attempting to ease the tension that had just been created (something the less secure part of me had wanted to do at several points). Since it was nearing the end of the day, I decided not to intervene and take us back into the uncharted waters. The discussion taking place stayed in the safe zone. Rather than opening doors, it remained within a familiar restatement of the challenges of co-existing and co-practicing with different beliefs. When a natural break presented itself and all eyes turned to me, I acknowledged and validated the choice to open discussion about such intense and challenging subjects and suggested we close for the day and continue the discussion the following day.

That night I slept poorly. I reflected on the discussion that had been opened and as I recalled specific points I queried my choices both to step in and to step out. Greg Saunders, my CYC Group Process professor, was in my head reminding me that in reflecting on the session I should begin with what had worked well and then move on to what I could have done differently and my second list had to be longer than the first. I went through both in my head repeatedly throughout the long night. I also questioned how much of my choice to lead us into this kind of

discussion was about “me” and how much was about “my staff”. I believed in developing practitioners’ capacity for reflexivity in practice, but did I know enough about this context to ethically open these doors? How could I be sure that what had been possible in other contexts would be possible in this one? I wasn’t sure at all, and as I finally drifted into fitful sleep I wondered how the following day would be impacted by today’s tension.

It didn’t take long to find out. The next morning’s activities were dominated by the crack that had opened on the previous day. When I asked if there was unfinished business in the morning check-in, the woman who had thrown down the gauntlet the previous day said that she needed to speak. She took the risk to apologize for her confrontational manner the previous day and to share that she was an emotional person, sometimes judgmental and that this did not always bring out the best in her. She took responsibility for these aspects of herself and for the way they influenced her contribution to the previous day’s discussion and to her practice. Internally I was thrilled for her and for the group. Externally I validated her courage to reflect and share in this way. She was displaying reflexivity as I had not seen her do before. She was answering some of my previous night’s worries with her words and opening the discussion up to the group. Mentally I threw out the morning’s activities, prepared to stay with this discussion as long as necessary.

The sole male member of the group to whom the challenge had been directed the previous day, and who had responded so well, responded again with reflections of his own. What transpired from those beginnings was a discussion about the differences and similarities in beliefs from two very different religions and, more specifically, in the complexity of individual and cultural application of those beliefs in a society. The staff chose to discuss their beliefs in relation to the children in their practice and they learned and took responsibility for the ways in which those beliefs both

enhanced and potentially hindered their practice. And they learned how much more similar they were to each other than different. It was an honest discussion, and an open one. The participants took risks to move from the safety of invisibility and non-confrontation, to step out, even a little, into the uncertainty of exposure. They shared pieces of themselves and in doing so, they shifted their perceptions of themselves and each other. They built bridges over chasms.

They built bridges. Recalling my conversation with Samia, it seemed I was actively avoiding bridges. Women were reaching out and I was pulling back, instead of meeting in the middle. What was that about, I wondered? I left the workshop that day more convinced than ever in the value of dialogue and its contributions to human and social change processes, and equally convinced that I was not operating at my best. I had made it through the workshop and I had facilitated well enough, but I wasn't really on my game. I wondered to myself what was different about my practice in this context? What was different about myself as a person? What confluence of factors led to choices so distinctly opposed to those I claimed to believe? And how would this impact my future practice?



Interpretation

In relation to my thesis this narrative describes multiple layers of reflexivity in practice in a very complex humanitarian environment. It depicts the challenges of cumulative humanitarian practice and the need for ongoing reflexivity to discern how experience can subversively and negatively impact practice in new contexts. It also highlights the mystery of human change processes and encourages us to accept and embrace those aspects we cannot understand within the milieu of those we can. The narrative portrays facets of my own vulnerability as well as how I perceived vulnerability in my colleagues and reveals powerful learning about diverse conceptions of

self. And the narrative as a whole reminds us that there are no easy answers to the complicated questions about human change processes and lastly that reflexive practice about even the most sensitive subjects, opens doors and builds bridges in an approach to change that strives to be un-intrusive.

In the analysis that follows, I describe how the perceptions, beliefs and approaches that had evolved and developed through previous contexts were tested in the distinctive context of Sudan. My previous experiences with African conceptions of self were challenged in a primarily religiously organized culture and unexplored cumulative experience from previous contexts impacted my ability to engage, understand and connect with the context in which I found myself. The pathway through this landscape is difficult and not easily signposted but I will do my best to guide the reader through my thinking here, beginning with reflections on defining context and vulnerability.

Humanitarian?

Reflexivity in practice for me reaches beyond the cognitive and emotional awareness that my presence and how that presence is perceived directs (and alters) the way human interaction will take place. In the opening paragraph of “*Al Ham del’Allab*” I describe the sensation of being completely *covered*, except for head, face, hands and toes. This covering wasn’t necessary for me to practice with this organization or even within this context. It represents a conscious, reflexive choice, not simply to be culturally sensitive, but to facilitate connection between myself, as a foreigner, and the people from the host context, with whom I desired exchange. It represents the choice to demonstrate through the small act of dressing, the desire to respect and meet people where they are and says to my host culture “I see you” and “I see you seeing me”.

The context described in *“Al Ham del’Allah”* is an exceedingly complex one and far beyond the scope of this paper to describe in the detail it deserves. The centre in which I practiced is a microcosm of the larger Sudanese picture and as such I confine my analysis to issues pertaining to that micro-environment as representing some of the complexity of the wider picture. The organization I worked for in Mygoma was the French section of Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF). Their participation in Mygoma began three years prior to my arrival due to a mortality rate often quoted as 75%. (Rates of child mortality are usually quoted as number of deaths per 10,000 children per day as the threshold and MSF takes 2 deaths per 10,000 children per day as the trigger for emergency medical intervention). The ongoing loss of approximately 75% of children even amongst a specific population is a truly extraordinary context. MSF went into Mygoma and did what they do best: they medicalized the centre, stabilized the mortality rate and then, as an association committed to alleviating suffering rather than the outcome of those actions, they found themselves asking, “Now what?” The psychology component of the program was the response to that question.

The Sudan context can be categorized as experiencing “protracted social conflict” (Slim & Bonwick, 2005) of a relatively complicated variety. At the time of MSF’s intervention, the conflict between the North of Sudan and the South of Sudan had been raging for decades and the conflict in Darfur had only just begun in its most recent incarnation. While armed conflict itself never reached the capital city of Khartoum, where Mygoma was located, the effects of the conflict did, in the displacement of several hundred thousand Sudanese. MSF’s intervention in Mygoma was initiated on the assessment of “social injustice” manifested in the high mortality rate of infant children in the centre. While the capital city was not in itself a “humanitarian context”, the intervention was an example of a “humanitarian agency moved to carry out humanitarian action by their most fundamental guiding principle – ‘humanity’” (Slim & Bonwick, 2005, p. 30).

In “*Al Ham del’Allah*”, I describe an important piece of my practice approach in the desire to not only follow cultural protocols for greetings but also to make personal connection with people and learn names. In the previous narratives I have explained in depth how my practice depends on my ability to meet and build relationships with people based on a desire to engage and listen. I depict an interaction with “Samia” in which I recognize that I am not practicing according to my core beliefs. Rather than seeking connection in this instance I am seeking separation and this is a destabilising realization. Hoskins (2001) writes “knowledge of self in context is essential when working with the complex dilemmas in everyday life faced by practitioners” (p. 671). In humanitarian contexts the complexities are often aggravated by the unfamiliarity of cultural surroundings, the transitional nature of contexts defined as humanitarian, and in the case of the international practitioner, cumulative exposure to insecure environments.

I believe in “knowing where I can have impact” (C. Kasting, personal communication, October, 2003). I practice at the micro-level with indigenous people choosing to care for those more vulnerable than themselves because I know I have something to offer at that level. What that knowing does not account for however, are the ways in which unreflected cumulative practice from other contexts impacts on my ability to practice in each new context. Cultural competency requires “internal discovery and external adjustment” (Chang, 2007, p. 190) and internal discovery requires reflexivity. And still further, cumulative internal discovery and external adjustment requires ongoing reflexivity. I realized that day that I was feeling rather full of suffering and that in one respect, I simply couldn’t take in any more.

I would like now, to include a deeper analysis of some of the factors that contributed to that lack of contextual reflexivity. To acknowledge the moment was difficult. To write about such complex internal processes now, for public consumption, in a way that may be understood, is also very difficult but equally essential, for my own developmental processes as well as for reader comprehension.

Vulnerability

If you were to hover in a nearby tree while I practiced in other African countries you would *see* me be present, you would *see* my interest, *hear* the engagement, the questions, the participation in dialogue, the laughter and I believe you would *feel* and *see* and *hear* my belief that this is what my practice is about: these exchanges. I work for organizations that define objectives, set goals, measure outcomes and report to donors. I describe them this way not to suggest that these organisations are lacking an ethic of caring, but to make the distinction between *work* and *practice*. I *work* to implement for organisations but I *practice* with people. I *work* to co-create programs intended for particular beneficiaries, be they children orphaned due to HIV/AIDS, child combatants, refugee or abandoned children. I *practice* reflexivity, caring, asking questions, facilitating, co-creating meaning and mutual development through exchanges with the national staff who are those most appropriate and whose responsibility it is to practice directly with these beneficiaries. They are the unheralded aid workers.

So you can imagine it was quite a shock for me to realize I was perhaps working but not practicing, as I stood sweating in the hot sun with Samia. Instead of practicing engagement, caring and openness to the possibilities for exchanges and new learning, I was actively avoiding creating the kind of connection and relationship that I believe makes those things possible. Immediately my mind flashed through several other examples of this shift in my practice since being in this context.

In that moment I needed to sit down and not just because I was melting. I needed some focused time to reflect on how I had come to this place.

What was my purpose? *Where* was my purpose and how had I misplaced it? Intuition assured me that the reasons for this shift deserved more attention than platitudes. More exploration than the simplicity of being distracted or tired or in a new place, more than being a new mother recently returned to practice. Though I would eventually have to acknowledge all of these factors, however grudgingly, I was soon to discover how much contextual weight I was carrying from previous exchanges and how much of my perspective was overshadowed by it.

As I walked home that day I was conscious of myself in Sudan from a new place of awareness. I was shielded somehow. I picked my way through the male landscape as if attempting to be unseen. All around me cars and buses and rickshaws passed. Horns blared and always, always the sun beat down. I noticed that I didn't look up very often from the road I travelled and when I did it was with a blurry field of vision and the intention of not making eye contact with anyone in particular. I passed shops selling coca cola, cigarettes, custard creams and mobile phones. Internet cafés and furniture stores were the backdrop for old men steering their donkey carts through dusty streets bringing water and corn and milk.

Periodically I could make out the tea ladies, arranged at the sides of the road with their small metal stools on which to wait while they made the beverage of your choice; tea from hibiscus flower or coffee. I could see all of this from the periphery, from a protected place, from a place of distinctively wanting not to be noticed, knowing all the while that I was. Where else had I felt this way? Suddenly I was flooded with the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch of Pakistan.

Hoskins (2001) writes,

Control is not a means for filtering out perceptions; rather, it is a way of controlling the mind to stay open to multiple sensory modes of knowing. Acute attention to touch, taste, smell, sight, sound, everyday experience and intuition all prepare the researcher to work with layers of perception. (p. 663).

Again for me as a practitioner in humanitarian contexts, the lines between research and practice are irrevocably blurred. As a practitioner I practice what I describe as *applied openness* in the way Hoskins describes *control* to stay open to the multitudes of novel experiences, exchanges, perceptions and interpretations of unfamiliar cultural contexts. However, what is clear in “*Al Ham del’Allah*”, is that inadvertently, I was operating from a relatively closed place that I was beginning to perceive as being related to cumulative unreflected experiences in other humanitarian contexts. This was my wake-up call for much-needed reflexivity.

I arrived in Pakistan a mere twelve weeks after September 11, 2001. The messiness that pervaded the world at that time was reflected in my personal and professional lives. I was actively avoiding reflection on painful personal experience and this left me feeling ungrounded, uncertain and insecure. I was also out of my professional comfort zone. Working for a UN agency, the national staff who perceived themselves as aid workers in previous contexts had been replaced by “high level UN staff” whose purpose seemed more self-interested than altruistic. I was disconnected from not only the people with whom I traditionally practiced but also from people in context and proximity to the ground I had come to understand and appreciate in African contexts.

Pakistan to me was a symphony of brown played by a nearly all-male orchestra. A vast brown landscape comprised of brown parched earth, brown mud houses, ancient brown military

fortresses and modern brown buildings. It was visually shocking to me as a female to suddenly find myself in a literal sea of men. Everywhere I looked I saw men in the cars, on the buses and in rickshaws, on the roads and in shops and markets, on camels and donkeys. Men dominated the scenery, carrying their guns, loading their vehicles, guiding their donkeys, gesticulating with each other, all dressed in shalwar chemise, which is a long, flowing shirt that reaches the knees over one-size billowing pants and for women includes a scarf covering the hair.

The colours float before me as putty, beige, tan, brown, deep brown, charcoal and suddenly a vibrant jarring blue. It is a woman, so startling amidst so invariable a landscape, she stands out only because her full-body covering, also known as a burka, is cobalt blue. She is simultaneously singled out and invisible. She is like an oasis in the desert. She stands out and she also stands in. She is unidentifiable (at least to me) beyond being female. She walks with purpose, pulling her burka tightly around her lest it reveal the contours of her body. I watch her for as long as I can through the car window before returning my attention to the blurry field of men.

One of the most important tools in my way of knowing the world and as a practitioner is my ability to see. Quite literally, my eyes are the lenses of my intuitive self. What I see when I look in people's eyes forms the basis for how I will proceed in any given interaction. What I look for as I am seeing is something I can identify with in terms of the degree of openness to exchange. In cultures such as Malawi, where prolonged eye contact with elders was considered inappropriate, I turned towards the mouth and tone of voice as indications of openness. In Pakistan, I felt that neither of these approaches worked in order to establish a basis for connection. Truthfully I was not as open as I had been in other contexts myself, due to the avoidance of my own personal issues, but equally, I experienced little openness by members of my host culture.

With reflection, what I experienced was something more destabilising altogether. I felt exposed in Pakistan. In the office in which I worked, which was predominantly male, I received no eye contact at all and little direct verbal acknowledgment. It felt like complete and total invisibility. Flashbacks to childhood. Out in the streets, walking (which we were warned against doing very frequently) or in the big UN vehicle, wearing traditional dress of shalwar chemise myself, I stood out like a beacon, and an unwanted one. I felt exposed in all the wrong ways. More flashbacks to childhood. A friend from Pakistan had told me prior to my arrival in Pakistan that I would find it a difficult environment in which to practice, and urged me not to misinterpret the lack of connection I might feel as based purely on gender. “It isn’t gender” he said, “It’s deeper than that. Foreigners and foreign ways of life simply aren’t wanted” (A. Farooq, personal communication, November, 2001).

I could understand that. I really could. It was in some ways refreshing to not be fawned over the way I had been in some African contexts. But it was so severely the opposite that it was destabilizing, especially in light of my personal mindset. And I did find it difficult to separate the foreign element from the gender element. Out travelling in the shiny white UN vehicle, which both distanced me from real people and drew attention to my foreign identity, I came across hard stares conveying what I could only perceive as extreme hostility mixed with what? Something related to being a woman was all I could articulate. Abu-Lughod (2002) suggests “veiling signifies belonging to a particular community and participating in a moral way of life in which families are paramount in the organization of communities and the home is associated with the sanctity of women” (p. 785). With hindsight what I may have perceived in those stares was non-verbal confirmation of the

exposure I felt. As a woman in that culture I was largely out of place moving out in the streets and the stares conveyed that message.

Would I have felt the same way if I were a man? I do not know. What I do know is that at the time, without reflexivity, I simply shut down. What I perceived in the eyes of those who did make contact touched something in me that I could not understand, nor face up to at that time and so I stopped making eye contact, altogether. And this process, of shutting down not only eye contact, but also my intuitive means of connecting with the world created a level of separation in that context, and within myself that in part remains with me to this day. What I learned, through my conversation with Samia in the scorching sun was that I inadvertently carried this sense of separation into the Sudanese context.

When I began the process of reflexivity in the Sudanese context, which took me back to Pakistan, I realized that I was carrying residual tension in my body as a result of that experience. I also learned that I was projecting a tremendous amount of that experience in the Sudanese context. In the Sudanese context, where there was also a predominantly male landscape, but one not so severe as Pakistan, I walked with my head down. I separated myself from Sudanese people on the street whereas in Sierra Leone and Malawi I openly welcomed connection with people I did not know. In those places I felt safe and welcomed. In Pakistan I felt the opposite.

In Sudan, within the confines of Mygoma I felt safe and welcomed because I had personal relationship and a purpose for being there, but on the streets I felt otherwise and this was exacerbated by world events that included the War on Terror, Danish cartoons negatively depicting Mohammed the Prophet and various comments made by Christians about Islam's origins that

fuelled hostility in the streets. Yet despite feeling safe and welcomed in Mygoma I learned in my dialogue with Samia that I still kept myself at a distance from the women and their stories of suffering.

Mahoney (2003) suggests that the emphasis in constructive practice is “on connection rather than separation” (p. 223). In the previous narratives I have depicted this philosophy as being congruent with my practice. The “*Al Ham del’Allah*” narrative defines a moment where I learn that this is not the case and I can trace the development of that incongruence back to a practice experience six years previously. Ironically, if you asked any of the Sudanese staff members whether they felt I was separating myself at the time, I suspect they would tell you I was very present with them. Because I was. I just wasn’t present with them in the way I knew I could be or had been in other places. When the realization occurred, I could no longer ignore that I was operating from a place of un-reflexive self-protection that had virtually nothing to do with the reality of my current context and everything to do with preconceived ideas based on a different context altogether. Again I had to shift. The practice of reflexivity *in* context through engagement *with* context and the individuals within it facilitated an ability to shift and adapt so I could strive for better practice. Much of the shifting that took place required me to engage with my self, to confront certain parts, to embrace others and, further still, to create space for new and evolving conceptions of self.

Novel Conceptions of Self

Mahoney (2003) says, “the self is a central mystery in consciousness...and is constantly under construction” (p. 152). As the “*Al Ham del’Allah*” narrative demonstrates with the Room 2 children, the mysterious aspects of self and change need not be perceived as deficient or less valuable as those than can be empirically observed and measured. We cannot establish causal

relationship between the movement of the Room 2 children and the changes witnessed but we can say that we witnessed changes in the children's development and sense of themselves after they changed rooms. Practice in this case, in this African context, necessitates recognition that the *selves* we knew as children, were influenced by human aspects of change and those relating to mysterious or perhaps spiritual processes. Mahoney (2003) says, "human change is a complex and dynamic process. There are, indeed, basic principles at work...those principles reflect both the complexities and the simplicities of the mysteries of change" (p. xi).

I believe the acknowledgment of multiple and varied conceptions of *self* must be embraced if we are to work effectively with them to support development and facilitate change in humanitarian contexts. As I have said previously, I believe that even within cultures that organise themselves collectively there remain individual conceptions of self and the development of these selves are inextricably grounded in context. Montuori and Fahim (2004) suggest, "abstract discussions of individualism and collectivism or autonomy and dependence suddenly take on a whole new meaning as one sees them played out in one's everyday experience" (p. 253) and I have found this to be true. The practice described in these pages is borne from everyday experience in context and on the willingness of both myself as expatriate and the national staff to challenge existing beliefs related to individual and collective identities.

Prior to my experience in Sudan, I experienced the presence of individual self or identity within collectively organised societies in other African contexts and I believed that these facilitated an ability to work reflexively with practitioners. In Malawi, I connected with Mangochi as an individual from the collective Malawian context. He defined himself by both his individual and collective positions and responsibilities. In Sierra Leone, individuals participated in practices that

provided opportunities for implicit beliefs to be explored explicitly, which contributed to developing practitioner identities within diverse tribal and geographical collectives.

In Sudan I was exposed to a new and fascinating perspective on self as related to reflexivity in practice. In the narrative, I describe trying to give Abdu feedback about his practice in the Room 2 experience. In each of his responses, he praises Allah for his work. And each time I challenged him to accept the feedback I was giving *him, himself*, as an individual. My belief was that it was important for *him* to receive feedback about his professional choices as part of an ongoing process of development of his *self* as a practitioner. What I did not fully understand at the time was, as Carmody and Carmody (1996) suggest, “for the pious Muslim, nothing stands on its own apart from Allah. Every physical being, every thought, every moral evaluation transpires under the umbrella of the divine presence, will, plan” (p. 164).

What I did not know about myself at the time was that as a white, female international practitioner who has never been fully immersed in any religious teaching, I perceived the *self* primarily as a psychological construct and seemingly distinct from a spiritual conception of self. I describe my thought processes in the interaction as “I’m not going to win this one”. I didn’t actually see it as a battle, *per se*, but there was much I was not aware of at the time and I was very intrigued about the exchange. It’s important to share that Abdu and I had a very good relationship and felt free to discuss our very different perspectives about life quite openly. We approached each other as human resources through whom dialogue, and much laughter could provide valuable learning.

When I left him that day we both had enormous smiles on our faces that acknowledged the differences in our points of reference from places of respect. We didn’t fully understand each

other's position, nor did we have time to explore them deeply in those moments but in our words we reflected the differences and in our smiles we conveyed the willingness to accept and the openness to come back to understand more. As Hoskins (2001) asks "who cultivates and who gets to be cultivated?" (p. 666). In my experience in this humanitarian context, with reflexive practice, the process of cultivation is mutual. We were learning from each other and had shifted the perspective of humanitarian assistance from one that posits a giver and receiver to one that recognizes a shared experience of co-created exposure and its respective learning. The Sudanese consultant reinforces this point in his statement, "there is no contradiction between thanking Allah and how we feel we do good achievements" (H. Apdel Rahman, personal communication, 2007). They are simply connected to each other in a way that this non-religious foreign female could not readily relate to at the time.

What I understand now, having reflected further on the experience, is that reflexivity in practice in humanitarian contexts is not only predicated on an understanding of diverse conceptions of individual self, within collective societies, but also that those selves are made up of, developed through and created not only in context but in the confluence of a vast spectrum of factors and that spirituality or religion adds yet another layer of complexity for internationals working in the area of national staff practitioner development. What I learned in the Sierra Leone context was invaluable to me as a practitioner and contributed to my practice in Sudan and equally, there was always more to learn. This may seem like stating the obvious but in fact I feel strongly that it must be made explicit. While learning is cumulative, each new context adds multiple new layers of complexity to practice. The practice of reflexivity is both necessary as an international to reflect on what one has learned, how that may help future practice and how it may also reveal gaps in future practice. Reflexive practice assisted me to comprehend how to best approach practice, build relationship,

support national practitioner development and create collaborative, ethical, responsible, effective programs.

Montuori and Fahim (2004) state, “an exchange with another culture may lead to psychological growth and to a better understanding of who we are, where we come from and where we want to go” (p. 248). They are speaking largely about foreign travel, rather than the kind of cultural immersion through practice that I describe in this text and they infer that the benefactor of such experience is the one who has travelled. I maintain through these narratives and analyses that in humanitarian contexts, reflexive practice shifts the line between helper and helped and expands the beneficiaries of exchange to include both the traveller and the host. In the exchange with Abdu that led to the title of this narrative, I learned that there was yet another way to not only conceptualise but also to experience *self*. Similarly, Abdu was exposed to a conception of self borne of a non-religious identity, different from the one he was individually, contextually, and intimately familiar with.

And with further reflection of that exchange, I realize that Abdu and I were actually saying very similar things. There was no need to perceive myself as attempting to force him to see or accept something I was giving him (positive feedback) because in reality we were expressing similar beliefs using different experiential language. “Allah is the sole font of creation, the sole explanation of why things are as they are, and also of why their being as they are is good” (Carmody & Carmody 1996, p. 164) and this is what Abdu conveyed in his response “Al Ham del’Allah” to my feedback. From my side, I provided positive feedback for his *intuitive* understanding and practice choices with the children. This reflects my belief in intuition as an understanding of how things are and what makes them okay as they are. For what is intuition if not an aspect of the spiritual dimension of this

life? This exchange reveals shared human change processes through openness to exposure to novel perspectives.

Does this mean that in this context that reflexivity has no value? On the contrary, it has value, both in the international practitioner's need to understand the existing beliefs and values of the population with whom she is practicing and the national staff's recognition that their beliefs, values, experiences and purpose impact the choices they make in their practice. As the narrative highlights, the individual application of even widely held beliefs is diverse. Practitioners, both international and national can benefit from exploring implicitly held beliefs and understanding how these impact practice choices. I perceive the absence of this connection to be a form of vulnerability. In "*Al Ham del'Allah*", Abdu demonstrated an understanding of the need to give the children more time to adjust, but he could not articulate at that time *why* he felt this way. Reflexive practice manifested through dialogue and activity moved his implicitly held beliefs into the domain of the explicit so as to facilitate connection between not only his *self* as a manifestation of his religious beliefs and his practice, but also between this *self* and the program beneficiaries.

Much of the practice we were co-creating was facilitated through dialogue, which was challenging for a number of reasons. I was practicing with two distinct groups whose religious and societal beliefs dictated different rules of engagement as well as unexpressed perceptions of difference about each other. It was also challenging because of limited capacity for dialogue in English. Memories of full-body non-verbal demonstrations and mobile telephone dictionaries spring to mind when I consider practice with this group of staff. In spite or because of these limitations, we worked hard to establish relationships that would allow dialogue to play its pivotal role in our co-created, learning practice. I will discuss some further examples of this now.

Reflexive Dialogue for Change

In “*Al Ham del’Allah*”, I describe a context fraught with conflicting beliefs and I describe Mygoma as a microcosm of the larger Sudanese picture. It is true that the national staff in the psychology team, half from the North and Islamic and half from the South and Christian, practiced for a number of years together without ever having open dialogue about the differences in their beliefs and perceptions about each other. And it is true that through the presence of an international NGO all of these individuals were exposed to novel beliefs about the value of children irrespective of the way they came into the world. My perception at the time was that while these individuals worked well enough together, the overall teamwork was mired by small conflicts and challenges, exclusions and subtle actions that hinted at the significance of underlying difference, and I perceived this as an element of vulnerability.

I perceived that the implicit power that these unspoken behaviours held contributed not only to programmatic difficulties but also to wider difficulties in how Northerners perceived Southerners and vice versa. This was not dissimilar to the steps taken in Sierra Leone to facilitate dialogue between community members and reintegrating child combatants, and between practitioners from differing tribal groups holding diverse beliefs and values. And it is also in a similar vein as making explicit the struggle I perceived to be occurring, before my very eyes, in the woman way back in Malawi. I see you. Making the implicit explicit. Opening avenues for dialogue and building bridges. When asked what it was in the practice he found most useful, my Sudanese consultant stated in his limited English, “you keep on gathering staff through meetings and this make us know each other more and more at the level of *persons*”. Not just as practitioners, but as *people*, who choose to come together to *practice*. And as Hoskins (2001) says, “respectful and open

dialogue are certainly a way of building understandings” (p. 668) in this case, between groups of individuals with differing beliefs, values and experiences who work together for a common purpose.

Adler (1975, in Montuori & Fahim, 2004) suggests, “most individuals are relatively unaware of their own values, beliefs and attitudes. Transitional experiences, in which the individual moves from one environment or experience to another tend to bring cultural predispositions into perception and conflict” (p. 246). Again these authors point to significant learning for the person who has moved from their socio-cultural context of familiarity but as in this narrative suggests, movement itself is not necessarily the catalyst. In “*Al Ham del’Allah*”, I describe the situation wherein ten staff members from two dominant religious groups who have worked together for a number of years engage in dialogue in a new way, for the first time, and allow their religious predispositions to come into conflict, and the shifts in beliefs and values that transpired.

I acknowledge there were some tense moments for me as a practitioner, but I believed in a number of things that inspired me to proceed. I believed in my skills as a facilitator, I believed in reflexivity as a practice to open doors and I believed at the time in the abilities of the national staff. Additionally, I believed in us, as a group who had been working together for nine months, to respectfully and openly address conflict. Maier (1991) suggests that a central function of CYC practice is engagement in “supportive, nurturing efforts against a backdrop of dependable presence” (p. 395). This is along the lines of what the Sierra Leonean consultant referred to as a level of trust that enabled those staff to open themselves. In Sudan I believed that I was practicing in this manner, in spite of the recent realisations that I was perhaps not *as present* as I had been in other places. Asking individual human beings to engage in group dialogue about sensitive, entrenched

beliefs naturally carries some risk. The concern and excitement I felt at the time revealed both respect for the risks involved and the significance I felt the dialogue could yield.

As I winced in my seat at the way the words had been spoken by one of our group members, I knew I was reacting to semantics imposed by my own personal preference for gentle delivery of confrontational statements. This was an aspect of my own personal vulnerability carried into context, but the awareness of it meant that I could change the degree to which it interfered with my practice. I immediately had a flashback to group facilitation classes in CYC education and the attention we had paid then, to delivery, but I was no longer in that context and the same rules did not apply. That said, I was also grateful for the risk that that particular participant had taken because it implied that we had succeeded in facilitating a “learning environment where as many as possible are comfortable in expressing their viewpoints and sharing knowledge” (Khuene & Leone 1994, p. 342). While I did not set out to conduct CYC education specifically, my assessment throughout the experience was that what I had to offer these practitioners was similar to what I had been exposed to in my CYC education experience.

One of the questions I had had going into the workshop had been about the potential for practitioner fragmentation. As I’ve described, societally there was a serious stigma attached to these children and all who chose to work with them so I was curious about how practitioners managed to practice in environments that were seemingly in contradiction to beliefs. Abdu’s response clarified some of those questions with his distinction between beliefs and the application of beliefs and in his distinction between religion and society. And most importantly, he clarified these things not only for me, but for the colleague who had initiated the challenge and those who remained silent but for whom she spoke. The perceptual shifts that took place in the dialogue described in “*Al Ham*

del'Allah” represent vital beginnings of human and social change processes within this microcosmic Sudanese environment.

Mahoney (2003) states, “an essential element of constructive practice is exploring, experimenting, and otherwise ‘risking’ novel experiences that challenge old patterns of activities” (p. 58). It was a risk to ask the national staff in Sudan to engage in dialogue about implicit beliefs and values that I perceived impacted their practice. It was a risk to ask the Sierra Leonean staff in both “*Eh-bo*” and “*Ow for Do*” to engage in dialogue about their experiences in the conflict. But these are risks worth taking, for in each case they chose to take responsibility for themselves and to open themselves to each other to facilitate connection and learn from each other. They chose to open themselves and the outcome was a shift in perception, in patterned behaviour of what they believed about their lives, each other and how they perceived themselves. These small shifts are the crucial increments of human change processes that humanitarian protection aims to facilitate. And importantly, as a co-created experience, we acknowledged that we were learning together, from each other, and therefore we were all benefiting from the humanitarian intervention of which we were a part.

This narrative has raised questions along the evolutionary path of my practice perceptions, beliefs and approaches, and I am thankful for it. The experience of personal vulnerability in “*Al Ham del'Allah*” required me to engage reflexively with subject matter I had clearly been avoiding and the process of doing so helped shift my perspective and take risks in my practice. Ultimately, the questions raised yielded more learning and created space for very open discussions between individuals and groups who believed they had conflicting beliefs. These honest discussions shifted perception, highlighted similarity and strengthened relationships within the team members and this

is the reflexive practice I believe leads to the kind of social change humanitarian protection programming aims to generate.

From this temporary resting place, I move to a summary of key points in the preceding chapters and attempt an overall synthesis of narratives.

**Shifting Ground and Blurring Lines:
A Summary Across Contexts
Chapter 6**

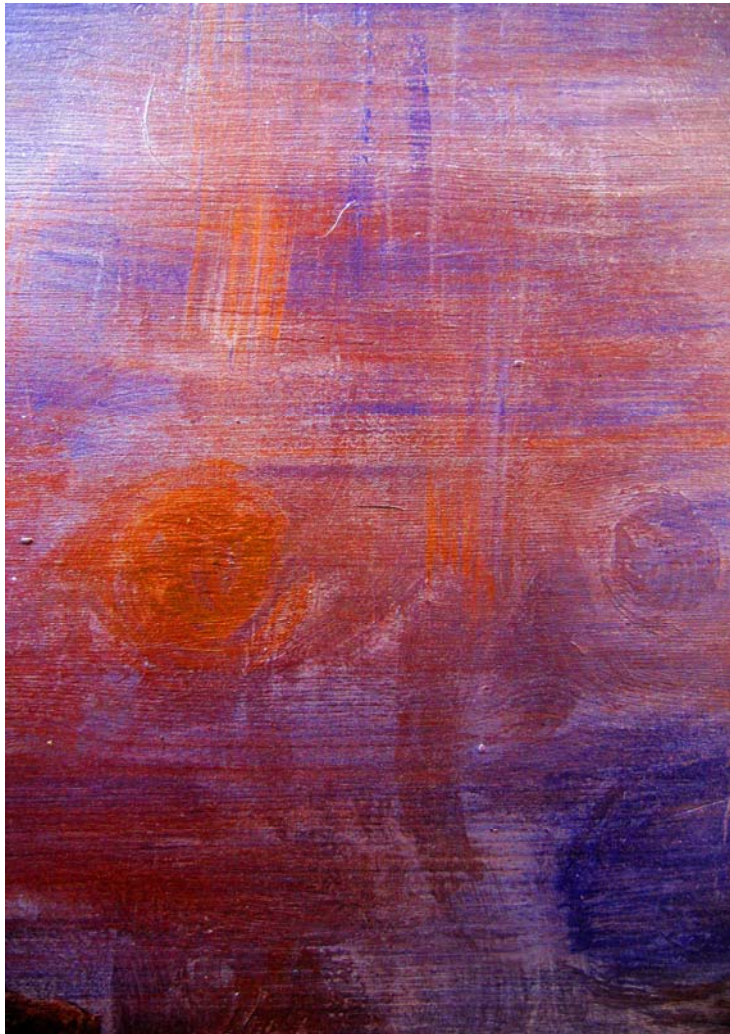


Figure 6

I believe in the concept of multiple fragmented selves developed not only through the influences of nature and nurture but also through meaning made from psychological and spiritual experience. The narratives shared in this text reveal an evolving conception of these beliefs through diverse contexts.

Okwu (1979) states that “life, in African traditional thought, may be explained as that phase of existence during which the soul, the seed of the creator, God, exists in a conscious, physical, and integrated union with the material body” (p. 20).

This is a perception of self that I feel must be understood if one is to practice in humanitarian contexts in Africa. All too often, the influence of beliefs from outside the host culture predominate efforts made in humanitarian intervention. In humanitarian organizations do we discuss soul, spirit or seeds of the creator in our programmatic designs for the African continent? Why not? Do we even acknowledge that these are significant facets of the change we seek to

facilitate? Do we acknowledge that the change we seek to create undeniably involves human change processes and thereby necessitates an understanding of how these processes transpire?

As humanitarian aid workers, members of international NGOs we speak in external, technical, language and resist acknowledgment of the spiritual as it somehow challenges the perception of having “developed beyond” such explanations. Since the influence of it cannot seemingly be measured, documented and empirically observed it is relegated to the background while more common and acceptable paradigmatic frameworks take the foreground. The same could be said about the positioning of the people. In humanitarian intervention, the suffering of beneficiaries provide the foreground, the incentive and motivation for action yet their unique perceptions, experiences and ways of explaining their worlds do not necessarily stand out in the foreground. More often these are left in the background.

This text advocates for greater emphasis on the details of those who ought to more clearly make up the foreground of humanitarian intervention. One of the inherent challenges involves the tension between the ability to pay attention to detail while attending to the needs of the masses. Ultimately in attempting to support large numbers of suffering populations there is movement away from the individual selves that make up the collective masses. In this document I describe a means to attend to the individuals within collectives and make a connection between the practice of reflexivity, the presence of vulnerability, the perception of self and the possibility of human change processes that are implicitly asked for, yet not fully understood in humanitarian interventions, through integrative efforts with a distinct, accessible and willing group: the national staff.

Humanitarian protection as defined by Slim and Bonwick (2005) suggests, “humanitarian organisations can work long-term to influence the deeper values of violent, war-torn and disaster-prone societies so that the principles of human dignity and protection are more broadly embraced by the hearts, minds and institutions of a society” (p. 13). I maintain that at its most basic level this involves asking people to consider changing their beliefs about the way they live and that we must respect the amount of time and the element of complexity involved in doing so. Reflexive practice as described in this text represents incremental and respectful steps towards these efforts. As Ellis and Bochner (2006) suggest, “The conversational style of communication has more power to transform and change the world for the better ... as a multi-voiced form, conversation offers the possibility of opening hearts and increasing understanding of difference” (p. 435).

As Slim and Bonwick (2005) suggest, “one of the most important aspects of protection is people’s ability to organize and claim it for themselves – protection as empowerment, not a commodity like food or shelter, protection is *fundamentally about people*” (p. 32). The dialogue depicted in these narratives reveals vital examples of national staff members as members of the “moving society” (p. 42) humanitarian protection hopes to influence. They were engaged in asserting protection for themselves through making powerful, implicit beliefs explicit, and thereby diffusing the power, increasing understanding, facilitating better teamwork and ultimately, altering perceptions, all of which may lead to wider social change.

To write this series of narratives I have had to delve not only into journals but into the deepest layers of myself. I have reflected and re-reflected on experiences both pleasurable and painful. I have told and retold these narratives to people in my life who are interested in the process to hear myself describe these experiences out loud because in the process of doing so I can check

myself. I can hear my own voice speaking and immediately I know internally, viscerally, intuitively if what I claim feels true, authentic, without gripe or grind. To access that voice, the one who speaks from a place of humility with no axe to grind I have had to remove many of the blockages that I have claimed for many years keep me sane and grounded within myriad experiences. Doing so is not dissimilar to facing my lack of presence in Sudan, my not-so-best practice in Pakistan.

It is a painful process, yet necessary for the voice of the student of life, the one who had lived the experiences depicted in these narratives to tell the story without hidden agenda, with the sole purpose of conveying what I feel are significant pieces of shared learning. I have confronted aspects of my practice, my choices, my beliefs and values that have lived in the relative safety of an un-reflexive mental compartment and I am only thankful for the learning that has transpired in looking into those compartments, into those dark corners whose power and impact upon my life and practice is derived from their implicit, unexplored meanings. Is it not the very thing I advocate for in these pages?

The seeds of the beliefs that flow through these pages were planted in the warm sun of Malawi while walking on a long dirt road, listening to perceptions and sharing my own, and considering the presence and absence of abundance and how that shaped contextual knowledge. From these origins grew the belief that with integrity, those in the privileged position of traveller can meet their hosts as fellow students of life and co-create new meaning and the beginnings of perspective shifts, which I believe are small, yet crucial steps in human change processes. These ideas germinated within the post-conflict jungle setting of Sierra Leone, where individuals as part of communities grappled with rapid change, facing their histories, their suffering and their choices through the presence of those who had committed atrocities against them. The seeds of reflexivity

took root in this context. They were welcomed openly for the learning that could be gleaned both individually and within communities and for their potential to facilitate human change. They were embraced for the integration between what we knew, what we did and who we were as people, that developed in both practice and life practice.

In Sudan the roots were shaken. The seeds scattered. Dialogue in the baking sun revealed that even with commitment to reflexivity, it was not always possible to stay open to it within my own growing, moving being. And the realization itself was enough to prompt more digging, reflecting on the experiences that had made the roots unstable, that had damaged the seeds. And the seeds found a place to grow anew in environments simultaneously perplexing and welcoming. An array of new perspectives shifted from invisibility to exposure through the kernels of reflexivity, confirming the existence of its capacity in diverse contexts, the value of its role in building bridges between chasms of difference. There will always be difference, there will always be incongruence and reflexive practice in both professional and non-professional life will always give me something to work with and strive for.

What does this mean for future practice? That I will strive to continue to have the dialogue while I am also having the experience. That I will not always succeed, but as long as I am committed to the practice of reflexivity, there will be space to meet others in vulnerability, to engage in an exchange of beliefs, values and experience through dialogue and that through these, perspectives may shift and the seeds of human change processes may be borne. Future practice for me looks like continuing to engage in this kind of exposure and dialogue with national practitioners in diverse contexts, generating questions and ideas, experience and perceptions and always, always open to the changes that will be created.

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Appendix 1 Request for Comments from Participants

As you now know from reading the Consent Form, I am conducting a research project for my Master's thesis that involves analysing journals that I kept during the time of our professional work together in _____ during the year(s) _____. I wrote in these journals during my personal time as a means to understanding context and the complexities of my place in that context.

I have created narratives that aim to highlight some of the practice issues and learning that took place during our time together and would very much appreciate your comments on them. I have attached the narrative(s) to this email and would present you with the following questions to keep in mind as you read the narrative(s). You may wish to answer the questions specifically in the comments you will return to me or you may wish to simply use them as a guide in creating your own comments.

1. What thoughts, feelings and reactions do you have as you read the narrative?
2. Does the narrative reflect a similar perspective that you have of the experiences described?
 - i. If so, *how*?
 - ii. If not, *how is your perception different?*
3. Are there other important aspects of our experiences together that you think/feel I should include in the narrative(s)?
4. Are there any contradictions?
5. How does this narrative reflect our working relationship?
6. In the narrative, I have attempted to convey what was important to me about the work we did together, including our relationship. When you provide comments, would you be willing to say what it was about our work and relationship that you found helpful/useful? And would you also be willing to share what about our work and relationship might not have been helpful/useful to you?
7. Are there any aspects of the work or context that I may have misinterpreted at the time or after all these years? Please reflect back to me anything you feel that contradicts or does not adequately convey the substance of the experience or context at the time.

Remember the work we did together! Share with me, the thoughts that come from inside your own mind as you read the questions and the narrative. I really want to know what you think and there are no *right* answers, there are only *your* answers. Your comments are very valuable to me and will assist me to convey to others that this work is *ours*, rather than *mine*, as the principal author.

Please take time to read and think about the narratives. I understand you have many aspects of life that require your attention, especially family and work, so I ask that if possible, you provide your comments to me via this email as soon as you possibly can.

Thank you so much for your participation and I look forward to receiving your comments.