Rediscoveries: Reconciling Personal Narratives in Community Building

The International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life
Brandeis University
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In many previous years, the majority of the Sorensen Fellows have left for their summer internships headed to countries and regions where they had never been before. Indeed, for some, the Sorensen Fellowship was the first time that they left the United States. This year’s class, however, was different. Seven of the eight 2015 Sorensen Fellows chose to do remarkable work within their countries of origin, though not always in the same community or region of their home.

At the Ethics Center, we have always encouraged this type of fellowship experience. Of course there is something to be said for taking a risk by immersing oneself in a completely foreign culture and atmosphere. Such an immersion can be deeply unsettling in the best possible way, offering unparalleled opportunities for learning and growth.

Yet there is also something to be said for challenging oneself anew by returning, in a different capacity, to a place or a country that while it seems familiar, may actually reveal a very different aspect. After all, the Sorensen Fellowship supports an internship of just eight to 10 weeks. For students who are traveling thousands of miles to an unfamiliar setting, the basics of the adjustment process can often absorb a great deal of this period. (The U.S. Peace Corps recommends that its volunteers spend six months just getting to know their new home, before trying to accomplish any substantial “work.”) So returning to an approximation of home and undertaking work in a more familiar community, where adjustment is bound to be much quicker, has its advantages. Perhaps more can be done.

And, as many of the 2015 Fellows found out, going home is not so simple. Anni Long returned to her native China fortified by her dynamic encounters with feminist ideas and convictions while at Brandeis; her newly-discovered feminist consciousness made her experience in Beijing disorienting in some ways, while encouraging her to take bold new risks in others. Bethlehem Seifu Belaineh discovered that her years of schooling in South Africa and the U.S. had made her something of an outsider in her former neighborhood in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; she had even acquired a foreign accent in her native tongue of Amharic. Wilkins Lugo found that a rural community in northwest Connecticut required a very different approach to community organizing than the one he had learned in his urban neighborhood, though his internship was only 100 miles or so from his hometown of Lawrence, Massachusetts.

Fellows did find some clear advantages to the return. Because of her own Amharic language skills and knowledge of local family dynamics, Bezaye Teshome was able to integrate quickly and powerfully into the Joy Center, which serves autistic Ethiopian children and their families. Shaoleen Khaled was able to jump into her internship at Boston Children’s Hospital, leading role plays with interns several years older than she, because she already had some experience in U.S. medical settings.

For some Fellows, a return to familiar cultures meant important challenges to deeply held convictions and hopes. Tove Olausussen Freeman spent the summer in Norway, her country of origin on her mother’s side, and where she had already spent a semester focused on understanding her Norwegian roots. Yet her encounters with immigrants from countries around the world exposed her to a completely different, and often unsettling, aspect of the country. Ariella Assouline, deeply committed to the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance (FMLA) at Brandeis, spent her summer in Los Angeles at the Feminist Majority Foundation, of which the FMLA is a chapter. To her surprise, Ariella sometimes found herself at odds with principles and tactics of the Foundation that had their origins in an earlier wave of American feminism.
Regina Roberg was the lone 2015 Sorensen Fellow who went the “traditional” route, leaving her Chicago home to travel thousands of miles south to Argentina. Her strong background in Spanish language and Argentinian culture allowed her to gain confidence quickly and play a key role in a mental health clinic in a neighborhood called La Boca. Yet even Regina, thousands of miles from home, experienced a sense of “returning” imaginatively to her own background and upbringing, as reflected in her Argentinian experience.

Upon returning to Brandeis in fall 2015, the Sorensen Fellows worked together in PAX 89, a class that gave them the opportunity to reflect on and write about their summer experiences in the context of their intellectual and academic interests. It was my great pleasure to teach this class, and to work with and learn from this extraordinary group of students over the course of the semester.

The result of their extraordinary work is this volume of essays that penetrate deeply into a diverse set of communities and issues, and interrogate the process of social change. There are no simplistic, linear messages in this volume. It is not a “how-to” collection. It is instead a series of provocative journeys through community and personal settings, dwelling on the insights and possibilities of landscapes twice-seen, rediscovered through experience, through reflection, and through the imagination.

The Sorensen Fellows chose “Rediscoveries” as the theme of this volume. Their rediscoveries, as I have indicated, were most obviously about their returns to countries and places of origin. Yet there were many other forms of rediscovery as well. The Fellows found that ideas and beliefs, nourished in other times and places, had to be explored and questioned anew in the context of this summer’s experiences. They found that Brandeis University itself had to be rediscovered in the light of what they had seen and heard. And they also needed, in profound ways, to rediscover themselves.

### The 2015 Sorensen Fellows:

**Ariella Assouline** ’17, from Miami, Florida, is double majoring in film and women’s studies and minoring in creative writing. She has a special interest in the ways television and film have shaped global understandings of gender and sexuality. On campus, Ariella is the publicity and media chair of the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance and is producing The Vagina Monologues. In her spare time, she enjoys watching “Parks and Recreation”, designing stickers, and engaging in feminist discussions. For her Sorensen Fellowship internship, Ariella worked as a West Coast Campus Organizer for the Feminist Majority Foundation. She organized and strengthened feminist student groups on college campuses across the West Coast. She also monitored anti-abortion groups, counter-protesting their “defund Planned Parenthood” events.

**Bethlehem Seifu Belaineh** ’16, from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, is majoring in biological physics and economics with a minor in physics. Before coming to Brandeis as a Wien Scholar, she studied at the African Leadership Academy in South Africa, a prestigious two-year pan-African program for Africa’s top young leaders. Bethlehem is a member of the Brandeis African Student Organization, Brandeis Encourages Women In Science and Engineering, the Brandeis Black Student Organization, the Afro-Caribbean Dance group Rebelle, and the South African step team Brandeis Gumboot, and is an Undergraduate Departmental Representative for biological physics. She dedicated the majority of her summer to founding the Ethio-STEM summer program in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, planning and organizing various workshops with students from grades 7, 8 and 9. She recruited university students from the STEM track to become mentors in the program, and worked directly with school administration to create a community of learners, mentors and mentees. She enrolled a total of 36 students and 12 university mentors into the program, and is working to upgrade her summer internship into an organization.

**Tove Olaussen Freeman** ’16, from Oakham, Massachusetts, is double majoring in health: science, society, and policy and biology and minoring in business. She is a coordinator for Waltham Group and organizes one-time service events for students on campus. In addition, she is the captain of the women’s varsity indoor and outdoor track and field team. As a person of color who identifies as both Norwegian and African American, Freeman has always been interested in better understanding health disparities in minority communities, especially in Norway and the United States. Her passion for research and improving health outcomes led her to her summer internship at the National Center for Minority Health Research in Oslo, Norway. She worked on a project about health literacy in migrants who had been in Norway for less that four years. She partnered with Caritas Working Migrant Information Center to interview migrant workers about their experiences with health and the Norwegian healthcare
system in order to determine what they did and did not know. Additionally, Tove worked on transcribing interviews for a project about children as next of kin who had parents with terminal illnesses.

**Shaoleen Khaled ’16**, from New York, New York, is double majoring in biology and health: science, society, and policy with a minor in chemistry and politics. While interning for the American Civil Liberties Union for three years, Shaoleen developed a strong passion for empowering and advocating for women taking full ownership of their bodies. She explores her pursuit of women’s reproductive health through many avenues including clinical research, black and white film photography, and philanthropy. Shaoleen is president of the Brandeis Photography Club, a research assistant at Harvard University’s Laboratory for Developmental Studies, and a volunteer at a shelter for battered women and their children. Shaoleen was an intern for the Center for Young Women’s Health at Boston Children’s Hospital. She extensively researched health information to update and create wellness materials for adolescents with endometriosis, PCOS, and MRKH. Shaoleen also conducted training sessions with medical interns and residents. Through simulations of teen health appointments, she provided feedback to the medical students to stress the importance of communication and how to initiate effective dialogue with teens, enabling accurate diagnoses and suitable treatment.

**Anni Long ’16** is triple majoring in anthropology, international and global studies, and women’s, gender and sexuality studies with minors in social justice and social policy and peace, conflict, and coexistence studies. Born in Tianjin, China, she lived in several cities in northern and southern China in her childhood. At the age of 10, she moved to Shanghai. She was a youth reporter for *Shanghai Morning Post*, a major daily news publisher in the city. As a young journalist and writer, she published several articles in newspapers and Chinese youth literature journals. While studying at Brandeis, she found her interests in gender, culture and power dynamics studies. She loves vocal and visual arts. She is now working as the Director of Internal Operations for the *Brandeis International Journal*. Anni interned with Media Monitor for Women Network located in Beijing, China, where she joined a continuing project that investigates gender discrimination in Chinese college admissions. She participated in several domestic violence events and assisted group therapy sessions.

**Wilkins Lugo ’17**, is majoring in biochemistry. He was born and raised in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He is a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Scholar, treasurer of the MLK and Friends club, and a peer mentor for first year students. Before studying at Brandeis University, Wilkins worked in his hometown with Groundwork Lawrence as part of their Green Team, which is composed of high school students working towards environmental stewardship. He interned over the summer with the Housatonic Valley Association in Cornwall Bridge, Connecticut. His responsibilities included assessment of the status of culverts encompassed by the Housatonic River watershed for the North Atlantic Aquatic Connectivity Collaborative and Trout Unlimited, for qualities of potential failure or barriers to wildlife continuity. He also assisted with the outreach effort for (potentially) underserved communities within the Still River watershed.

**Bezaye T. Teshome ’16**, from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia is majoring in neuroscience and biology and minoring in anthropology. She is president of the Brandeis African Students Organization, a volunteer for Global Medical Brigades, and a community advisor at Brandeis. In her spare time, Bezaye loves watching TV shows, especially “Friends”, working on her creative writing, and participating in cultural performances. Raised in a culture where developmental disorders are largely attributed to supernatural causes, Bezaye witnessed the lack of treatment and rehabilitation services for children with special needs. This led to her interest in working with Ethiopian children with special needs, particularly those with autism spectrum disorder, by interning with the Nia Foundation. Bezaye participated in speech therapy and social skills trainings, and in workshops designed to equip parents with techniques to enhance
their children’s communication and social interaction abilities. She also worked with professionals in special needs education to plan activities for the children at the Nia Care Center.

I would like to emphasize that the Sorensen Fellowship is a team effort at the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life. Marci McPhee has led the Fellowship for many years, including overseeing the selection process, working with Fellows on their site selections, leading pre-summer retreats, and providing invaluable support at every turn. Barbara Strauss provides the administrative competence and support that allows the Sorensen Fellowship train to run as smoothly and efficiently as any operation that sends college students to far-flung locales. David Weinstein oversees the production of this volume, and he also ably pinch-hit for me when I was out of town for one of the PAX 89 classes. Cynthia Cohen and Leigh Swigart, both of whom have taught PAX 89 in the past, are always generous with their insights and advice. It is an immense pleasure to work with all of them.

Finally, I want to offer my thanks to the 2015 Sorensen Fellows. As always, I have learned a great deal from you, and I look forward to many years of continued conversations as you rediscover yourselves, the communities around you, and the path to justice and dignity for the peoples of the world.

Daniel Terris is Director of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life.
Rolling Wave or Raging Fire? Clashing Activism from the Second to Fourth Waves of Feminism

Ariella Assouline ’17

origins

Ten black and white photos hang in the conference room, two neat rows of five along the right wall. In them, women hold posters, push baby carriages and march down the streets of Washington in the first suffragist parade.

On our first day, we interns walked into the conference room and saw these images. We are taken back to the first roars of feminism, to the 1913 march that changed the way the suffragette movement was discussed and accepted. Seven strangers, we each see each other in a rose-colored tint, the way history remembers the first wave: intelligent and powerful, unproblematic and pure, all bound together by the common goal of feminism.

Eight thousand protesters, 20 grand floats, nine bands, one musical performance.

On March 3rd, 1913, the Women Suffrage Parade marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington D.C., the day before Woodrow Wilson's presidential inauguration. Organized by Alice Paul through the National American Woman Suffrage Association, this march was led by labor lawyer Inez Milholland dressed in white and on top of a white horse. At the time of the march, women had been fighting for the right to vote since the 1840s and had only successfully received voting rights in six states.¹

This first wave of feminism fought for the tangible rights that have become an accepted part of American life. The thought of women, as a cohesive bloc, not being able to vote or own property is one that we, in 2015, cannot truly fathom. The women who marched in 1913 had been fighting for suffrage for at least 60 years. But the fight was almost over. In 1920, the 19th Amendment was ratified, making it the law of the land that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” (The word “woman” does not appear anywhere in the Constitution to this day.)

In 1963, Betty Friedan wrote her famous book The Feminine Mystique about the “problem that has no name.”² She conducted interviews with housewives in the late 1950s about the state of their lives. She found that many of them were truly unhappy and unfulfilled. They were not satisfied with their lives inside the home, taking care of the house, their children and their men. They had material wealth, but no emotional wealth. This book put into words what so many women in America were feeling. Sure, they could vote. But was that all there was to the fight for equality? What about having fulfilling careers? Satisfying sex lives? Control over when or if they could have children?

Friedan was the primary inspiration for the second wave of feminism, which spanned from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. With the right to vote now a part of the American lifestyle of certain populations of women (namely, white, wealthy married women), the focus of the movement expanded to include issues that had not been part of earlier feminist activism.

The first and the second wave of U.S. feminism have in common their exclusionary history. During the March for Women’s Suffrage, the organizers told Black women to march at the end of the parade or separately from it. They said the reason was a fear that they would lose Southern support in gaining federal women’s suffrage. The implied message was: we white women won’t get the vote if we’re seen with you black women.³ The second wave followed the same model of exclusion, both outwardly and subtly.
Protesting at Los Angeles City Hall during the Planned Parenthood scandal.

The issue of not finding joy in being a housewife is a feeling only a minority of the population can relate to. Low-income women, especially women of color, had been working outside of the home for decades. They were never given the choice between staying at home or having a career. The clamoring for jobs outside of the home also raised the question: who will take care of the house and kids when white mothers find careers and fulfillment elsewhere? The "problem that has no name" also reflected the continual oppression of women of color and the labor they are expected to offer.

In 1986, a Newsweek opinion poll reported that 56% of American women self-identified as feminists, even when the pollsters gave no specific definition of the word. When the pollsters gave a more specific definition, the numbers skyrocketed, across gender, age and socioeconomic status. The results of this poll inspired Eleanor Smeal, then President of the National Organization for Women (NOW), to create a new organization that reflected this public sentiment. Thus, in 1987, the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) was born. Powerful feminists Smeal, Kathy Spillar, Peg Yorkin, Toni Carabillo and Judith Meuli created the foundation with a mission of being a comprehensive source for education, research and political action.

Kathy Spillar, the current executive director of the organization, stated during our orientation: “We don’t need to work to turn the tide to our side or engage with people who don’t identify as feminists. We already are the majority. We just need to have our voices heard.”

Since its creation in 1987, the Feminist Majority Foundation has succeeded in having its voice heard. Its leaders have been visible supporters of crucial legislation such as the Violence Against Women Act (1994) and the (still not yet enacted) Equal Rights Amendment. In 1989, FMF created the National Clinic Access Project, the first and largest project of its kind, that works to protect women’s health clinics from anti-abortion extremists. They organize escort services for clinics across the country, increase security, and brief local law enforcement officers about the potential violence that can befall the clinic. The creation of this project followed directly from the FMF’s founders’ dedication to the spirit of the second-wave of feminism.

Stereotypes of feminists being fat, hairy lesbians came out of backlash from the political right during the second wave. Opponents realized the power of the feminist movement – in message, drive and work ethic – so they quickly and repeatedly moved to shut them down. Their campaigns have worked to distance women, especially young women, from the feminist movement. The fear of being undesirable in a society where female worth is attached to physical appearance and desirability to men is often enough to discourage women from engaging in feminism. I didn’t identify as a feminist until my junior year of high school; I didn’t want to be “one of those girls” because I desperately wanted to be valued by men and male society. I wanted to be worthy in their eyes, and it didn’t matter how miserable I was on the way to attaining that goal.

The word “feminist” has a long and contentious history. It has been everything from an insult to an empowering label. Recently, it feels like every popular female...
celebrity is quoted saying they don’t believe in feminism or that the word is too strong. “I wouldn’t go so far as to say I am a feminist,” said American Idol star Carrie Underwood. “That can come off as a negative connotation.” Shailene Woodley, star of the Divergent film series, stated in Time Magazine that she isn’t a feminist because she loves men. “I think the idea of ‘raise women to power, take the men away from power’ is never going to work out because you need balance.” The problem is that these women are the ones who are among the most visible, the most heard. These are people who help convince young women and the general public that feminism is dead, its mission accomplished.

The feminist movement today often has to fight invisible or subtle sexism. In the early 1900s, sexism was visible and tangible. It was being denied jobs because of your perceived gender, not being able to vote for your representatives, or not being able to own a house without being married to a man. Today, women can legally do all of those things. But sexism isn’t gone. It is just as pervasive today precisely because people believe that it doesn’t exist.

The second wave began to address some of these issues by drawing attention to the workplace, reproductive rights, sexuality, gender roles and the family structure. Sexual harassment in the workplace and on the streets is still considered just a part of life instead of a physical representation of misogyny. Women of color are still paid drastically less than both white men and white women. Women are still expected to complete the majority of the housework and stay home to take care of the children. Trans women are still being murdered for “deceiving” men. While laws aren’t in place that prevent women from achieving their full potential, societal norms and standards are still dangerously in place. It’s the responsibility of the feminist movement today to rectify these inequalities.

The third wave of feminism began in the early 1990s as a modern response to the backlash against the earlier waves of feminism. It was a time of Riot Grrl and female punk bands. It was also a shift in the way of thinking about feminism. The 1970s feminist icons were white, wealthy, educated women. They were the forefront of the movement, the ones who were the most visible and the loudest. Other feminists, such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks, were considered “fringe” because of their specific interests in black and lesbian feminism. The third wave addressed this issue by focusing more on hyper-marginalized identities and how the White Feminist movement itself oppresses queer women and women of color. This shift from political and legislative activism to critical thinking about societal systems reflected a new way of approaching social change. It didn’t need to be big protests and tangible laws. It could be academic, cultural and personal.

Now, in 2015, we’re on the threshold of something new. The normalization of the Internet in everyday life has radically shifted how people interact with each other and the world around them. Protests don’t happen on the streets anymore: Twitter and Facebook have become the new political battlefield. “Hashtag activism” raises global consciousness and has serious power behind it. Revolutions specific to the millennial generation, such as publicizing self-care and taking selfies, have increased the confidence and self-love of this new wave of feminism. The accessibility of the Internet to anyone, regardless of socioeconomic status and education, has allowed for the voices of hyper-marginalized communities to be heard in a shockingly new way. Feminism isn’t for the white and wealthy anymore; everyone has a say. This powerful shift from focusing on a few ideas to making space to think about all the issues on people’s minds is an incredible way of thinking that hadn’t existed before.

This is the feminism that attracted me. This is the feminism that looked at my sexuality, my heritage, my life and my hobbies and validated every single one. It has opened my eyes to the new ways of thinking about our world, how to help people in other walks of life. It has made me realize that I myself was a complete being, worthy of love and respect.

first steps
I chose Brandeis University for the vibrant feminist community that exists here. As a senior in high school, newly in love with feminism, I burst with excitement looking over the majors and clubs offered at Brandeis. Never could I imagine that a school would have both a Women’s and Gender Studies Department and individual Sexuality and Queer Studies courses.
Out of the hundreds of clubs, the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance (FMLA) called my name. I made a beeline for them at the activities fair during Orientation. I've gone to every meeting since my first and have been on the executive board for four semesters now. FMLA is my constant commitment, my number one priority at Brandeis.

I knew about the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) from a distance, as the big mother organization that gave our club buttons and posters. Our FMLA was a chapter club of FMF's Choices program that was created to ensure that every college and university campus had a thriving and powerful feminist presence. In the spirit of the second wave, the members of these clubs served as intelligent and passionate grassroots organizers. The Foundation has 12 campaigns that individual campus groups can pick and choose from, covering everything from campus sexual violence to exposing fake abortion clinics to ending sweatshop labor. By participating in FMLA, you tap into a nationwide network of young activists who all operate under the same name. FMF also affiliates itself with existing feminist groups on campuses; its purpose is to get the next generation of feminists engaged, informed, and active, by whatever organizational name.

My first semester on FMLA's executive board (e-board), I asked the group if we could change the name of the club. “I mean, what does ‘Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance’ even mean? It also kinda sounds like ‘F-My-Life Association’.” Our president at the time looked at me blankly and told me that we were a division of a larger organization so no, we couldn't change the name.

It's the summer of 2015: I am slipping my laptop into its case to start organizing FMLAs in the greater Los Angeles area. I had picked Brandeis for its Women’s Studies program and its FMLA; now I'm going to be a professional feminist, organizing on a large scale. Am I ready? I mean, I spend 99% of my life at Brandeis organizing and doing activist work across a multitude of feminist platforms. But my impostor syndrome constantly holds me back, tells me I’m not as good as everyone says I am, silences my tongue before my experiences are expressed.

The FMF office was all brick accents, glass elements and open air – high ceilings, hidden offices in every cranny. Besides the few office spaces with doors belonging to the executives, everyone worked in the same open-air space. I would come to learn how to curb my voice so I didn't distract duVergne Gaines, the Director of the National Clinic Access Project, who worked across from the intern space. I was shocked to find out that the office was 15 years old. It was modern, looked brand-new. It was created with intent and reason, but it has not evolved. While beautiful and pure in purpose, it remained unchanged in the roll of time.

The rest of the interns and I are told to meet in the conference room. It is a large space, with gray rolling tables in a “U” formation in the middle of the room. It can be closed off from the rest of the office by sliding the interlocking frosted glass doors. Along the back wall, there is a display of bagels, cream cheese, and coffee. At 10:00 am, this is a welcome surprise. We all nervously chat with each other and write our first names and pronouns on our name tags. Then we take our seats.

The frosted doors opened with as much flourish as thick, heavy glass can. duVergne Gaines (we didn't know this yet) strode into the room, tall with long blonde hair and imposing authority. She surveyed us, focusing on our name tags. “Here at the Feminist Majority Foundation,” she said, “We want women to know they are complete people. Using just your first name reduces you to a child, which is what women have been seen as forever. My name is duVergne Gaines. Go write your last names on your name tags and introduce yourself with your full name.” Then she left. Admiration welled inside...
of me. We all looked at each other, flabbergasted. Is this what our summer will be like?

Every executive member of the West Coast office of the Feminist Majority Foundation was at the intern orientation. I sat next to Kathy Spillar and felt pressure to impress. When it was my turn to introduce myself, I answered the question “what do you hope to get out of this summer” with enough clarity to make her nod her head and say “yes.” I said that I wanted to learn how to organize powerfully and efficiently so that I could bring back those tools to my FMLA. When it came time to talk about the Choices Campus program during Orientation, I asked the creators of the program if we could change the name. They chuckled and said, “We’ve been thinking about it.”

A small part of me thought that I might have to do office work like filing papers, cleaning up or forwarding calls. The thick “Intern Orientation Packet” folder in front of all seven of us told a different story. Inside was every campaign that FMF was currently running through its Choices project (which created and supported FMLAs and other groups like it) across America. Kathy Spillar spoke to us about the history of the organization, its purpose from 1987 to now, and its adoption of Ms. Magazine in the early 2000s. It’s crazy; here are the people who have been doing the work I’ve read about and discussed in academic spaces, right here in flesh and blood. I was about to do activist work with my role models, interacting with humans who have shaped my feminism and my personhood. These were the women who had worked before me and proved that change was possible on every level. My heart swelled with the possibilities of what I would learn this summer. If I were sitting with legends, what would stop me from becoming one of them myself?

**Adjustment**

During our second week, Mary rounds up all seven of the interns and herds us into the conference room. She is the National Campus organizer and our direct supervisor. As we take our seats around the table in the middle of the room, Mary slides the frosted glass door shut. She takes her seat at the head of the table, tucking her skirt under her and gathering her waist-long hair to the side. “Okay, so, we’re going to do this activity to bond and get to know each other but we can’t tell...” she hushes her voice “Kathy or duVergne because they don’t believe in this kind of organizing.” We’re new, and do not have a firm understanding of the organization. Right now, the Feminist Majority Foundation is a historical icon, a new experience, a learning tool. We have no reason to distrust them or think they have poor intentions. I had been there for two weeks. Mary had been there for a year. Of course I thought it was special that she made a space just for the interns, separate from the rest of the organization.

Mary sticks out at FMF among the sea of white skin and blonde hair. Her hair is thick and brown and down to the middle of her back. At the beginning of the internship, I found solidarity with her solitariness. She was unique at the organization, the most similar to myself in age, skin tone and ideals. She was loud, like me. The eldest sibling, like me. A Women’s Studies major, like me. Mary was a familiar person in an unfamiliar place. I felt invigorated when she critiqued FMF because that was our discipline. Our feminism was one that never ceased to fight for complete justice, to look at the past and present and analyze them. This was a mode I was used to. Being a student at Brandeis, so much of my work on campus is combating racist, sexist and horrific policies and actions that the administration enacts. I was used to critiquing and complaining about larger-than-life organizations, even ones that shared my most basic values. It was my life’s work.

It soon becomes a habit of the interns to retreat to the conference room, away from the open air office and duVergne Gaines’ cubicle across from the intern space. She often pops her head up and tells us to quiet down. The conference room is also a safe place away from the policing and politics of the office. At 26 years old, Mary is the most junior employee at the West Coast branch of the Feminist Majority Foundation. Her youth immediately causes me to trust her. Within the feminism movement, age has the largest effect on ideology. Self-identified feminists over 50 are typically heavily rooted in the second wave. Primary goals are reproductive rights and policy change. Millennials are on the cusp of the fourth wave. Our goals are total equality and inclusion, our interests vast and varying. Compassion for others rather than legal justice feels like the underlying driving force.

I was enchanted by Mary’s radicalism: her hatred for the state, her drive to create a world without borders and boundaries of any sort. I had wrongly assumed that because she was brown and queer and young and academic that she would be the kind of radical I was accustomed to at
By my last week, I was surprised by how frustrated I felt. This was supposed to be my opportunity to learn from professional feminists, to build positive relationships with supervisors and explore the world of feminist organizing. Instead, I had learned how to avoid an immature boss. I act confident, but it's artificial. I look at Mary's form of activism, all complaining and no action, and am reminded how familiar it is. I often feel like I'm not doing a lot, just talking. Mary's anger at FMF and defeatist attitude towards their activism pushed me into action. She spends time on Facebook, I organize the entire Feminist Campus Summit. I understood her frustration that there was no radical change happening through this work. I felt it too. How many hours can we spend doing activist work before the systems that are holding us all down disappear? How can we concede not fighting for that greater, radical change by working within the non-profit industrial complex? The difference between Mary and I was that I was willing to do this work, any work, within the system if it meant that change would come. I couldn’t sit on Facebook, idly by, while other people need this change to come. The contradictions embodied in Mary sparked a fire inside of me to organize my conscience; my change is just as valid as anyone else’s.

community (across space)

One of our main assignments over the summer was to conduct campus trips to five colleges in the greater Los Angeles area, to connect with the feminist clubs on campus, catch up, and learn how to best support them. I was conflicted. Who was I, the mere publicity chair for an FMLA in Boston, to comment on how to improve feminist clubs on a coast I knew nothing about? We would conduct classroom presentations in select classes in order to build up the club's membership base, and meet with the club's leadership to determine which campaigns and issues they wanted to organize around. The second week at the office, each of the interns was assigned to a school. As Mary read down the list, I had a start when she came to the University of California at Santa Barbara. I was inwardly transported to the previous summer, when the feminist world had been rocked by yet another school shooting. I immediately volunteered to work at UCSB.

On May 23, 2014 (just as I had gotten home from my first year at college), a student at UCSB killed six people, injured 14, and then killed himself. School shootings have become so ubiquitous in my life that I didn’t even think, “What could possess someone to do this?” But then I found out. His motive was to get revenge against all the girls who wouldn’t have sex with him, wouldn’t date him, wouldn’t pay him any attention. He killed six people because the myth of the “friend zone” and the “nice guy” were so ingrained in him. I remember reading about it on BuzzFeed, and the feeling of nausea and horror that overcame me. I sobbed for hours. I felt so powerless, so isolated, so hopeless. It was 2014 and six people were killed because of misogyny. At the time I was home from Brandeis, so I was away from the only feminist community I was a part of. I’d never felt more alone.

end trigger warning

For three weeks, I researched the University of California at Santa Barbara. When I couldn’t find any information about a feminist club on their Student Union website, I called their admissions office and pretended to be a very interested high school senior. I kept coming up against dead ends. There wasn’t an established club, and every student involved in some sort of feminist activism in years past had graduated. It was time to start from the ground up. Our campus visit was going to be during the fifth week of my internship and I needed to get moving. In the first wave of outreach, I emailed and called professors in the Feminist Studies department and the Women’s Center. Then, towards the end of my second week of outreach, I got an email from a rising senior at UCSB. Dani expressed interest in creating a feminist group on campus, one with the specific interest of creating a safe space for women of color to gather and share their experiences.

That email changed me, shifting my feelings about this internship. By this point in the summer, most of my work had been done online. It felt very routine and disconnected from actual change. But here was Dani’s email. She wanted to know if I was going to be doing a classroom presentation because she desperately wanted to be involved. Here was an actual person, with passion and vision, who was reaching out. Tears welled up in my eyes as I responded to her email with enthusiasm.

The Internet was one of the biggest causes for the shift from third wave to fourth wave feminism. In an article about this new fourth wave, The Guardian explains the difference between the waves quite well:

Welcome to the fourth wave of feminism.
This movement follows the first-wave campaign for votes for women, which reached its height 100 years ago, the
second wave women’s liberation movement that blazed through the 1970s and 80s, and the third wave declared by Rebecca Walker, Alice Walker’s daughter, and others, in the early 1990s. That shift from second to third wave took many important forms, but often felt broadly generational, with women defining their work as distinct from their mothers’. What’s happening now feels like something new again. It’s defined by technology: tools that are allowing women to build a strong, popular, reactive movement online. [bold mine]

Connections and relationships are built online, communities are reinforced online. People who are separated by oceans and landmasses can connect with an ease that didn’t exist in any of the other waves. This shift is absolutely fundamental to recognizing and respecting the fourth wave. Whereas other waves, such as the second and third, might have used technology to organize protests, the fourth wave actually hosts protests online. This wave has the potential to become the most inclusive and radical of the waves, because it is accessible to millions of people it wouldn’t be if the Internet didn’t exist.

I was used to this method of organizing and social change. I have organized through hashtag activism, have seen the power of spreading thinkpieces, have met and worked with activists across the country and the world. For feminists who grew up in the age of the Internet, technology is our common first language. Hashtag activism, online-only protests and organizations, and articles have worth in and of themselves. Websites like Everyday Feminism and Feministing are powerful consciousness raisers and educational sources. You don’t need to have the means to go to a prestigious university to get an intersectional and powerful education in feminism. All you need is access to the Internet, however you can get to it. Feminism is more accessible than ever, which makes it more intersectional than ever. No more are the days when only the privileged had the ability to be heard. Now, anyone can raise their voice and speak their truths.

Activism in the fourth wave doesn’t need to take physical form, like the protests on the streets during the previous waves. Empowering marginalized groups by giving them the space to tell their own stories is perhaps one of the most profound aspects of this new wave. In 2012, Laura Bates established the Everyday Sexism Project, an online project that aims to raise awareness of sexism in our lives. People from all over the world can submit detailed stories to the project’s website or quick quips on Twitter using the hashtag #EverydaySexism. This powerful project validates for women and girls everywhere that their experiences are valid and real. In an interview with the Daily Beast, Bates stated that “Again and again, people told me sexism is no longer a problem—that women are equal now, more or less, and if you can’t take a joke or take a compliment, then you need to stop being so ‘frigid’ and get a sense of humor. Even if I couldn’t solve the problem right away, I was determined that nobody should be able to tell us we couldn’t talk about it anymore.” This project addresses the very real “subtle sexism” that still exists in our society and how normative it is. After Bates wrote an article about the definition of sexual assault and the experiences it encompasses, hundreds of women wrote to her with their experiences, some not even knowing before that they had been assaulted, or that they had the right to say no to unwanted touching. It was just how the world around them worked. It was what they were used to.

Patriarchy wants marginalized groups to continue feeling powerless. It’s the only way men can keep their unearned superiority. Once the oppressed know how they are oppressed and become aware that it isn’t normal or right, that’s when revolution happens. Everyday Sexism inspired women to speak up against sexism in the workplace because they knew they weren’t alone and that it wasn’t normal. Words and power are being put into the mouths of people who have been silenced for thousands of years. The opportunities for empowerment that technology offers are innumerable and goosebump-inducingly exciting. A revolution is brewing and we’re alive to be a part of it.

Which is why I found FMF’s approach to technology very confusing. We worked with diligence to update the database, to research schools, to email about protests. During the Planned Parenthood scandal, Kathy Spillar sent out emails to those on FMF’s listserv to stand in solidarity with the organization. For FMF, technology was a means to an end, not the end itself.
Their goals are also different from those of fourth wave feminists. While FMF might have the savvy of hashtag activism when it comes to Twitter and Facebook (they’re certainly trying), they still lobby for legislation with determination and in conventional ways. Since their creation in 1987, they have worked to enact the Equal Rights Amendment, which would guarantee equal rights for women and would be the first time the word “woman” would appear in the American Constitution. They have counteracted many so-called “personhood” bills, which would have given legal rights to fertilized eggs, and ban abortion and some birth control options. One of the interns in my class had worked with FMF to strike down one such bill in her home state of Colorado. Someone reached out to FMF, and FMF rushed to their defense. It was a powerful moment of listening to what people needed and acting on it.

The Feminist Majority Foundation aims for physical change (change we can see and point to) rather than societal change (shifts in mindset and societal norms). Of course, each influences the other. Once Roe v. Wade passed in 1973, public attitudes towards abortion shifted greatly. Instead of being something shameful and abhorrent, abortion become semi-normalized and existed as an option for people who get pregnant. This focus on changing policies and getting politicians into office is a continuation of the second wave where women were legally prohibited from having abortions, couldn’t work in certain places or occupations, and weren’t guaranteed equal pay on the federal level. The organization’s continued focus on policy change is understandable, especially amidst the Planned Parenthood scandal this summer. Abortion rights may have been won in 1973, but they have been under attack ever since. Without the work of the Feminist Majority Foundation, it might have been lost many times over.

There needs to be intergenerational work being done. The feminists from the second wave know how to maneuver politics and protests. The new fourth wave feminists are well-versed in the changing world of technology. Rather than one being more valid than the other, each need to learn from the other and create a working relationship.

Patriarchy is widespread and evil. It is students killing women because they won’t have sex with you. It is elected representatives in an air-conditioned room shutting down abortion clinics state by state. But it can, and will be, dismantled. The only way to destroy it is to work together.

confrontation
On Tuesday, July 28th, the intern crew went to “counter-protest” an anti-Planned Parenthood protest at Los Angeles City Hall. Technically, it wasn’t a formal counter-protest because Planned Parenthood had told Kathy Spillar that FMF did not need to get involved. But Kathy was adamant. “It’s important that we have a presence at these protests. They need to know that you, the young people who need Planned Parenthood most, will fight for it.”

I felt anxious and nervous as we walked up to the protest. It felt like pre-show jitters. This wasn’t even close to the first protest in my activist career, and was my second one of this nature that summer. I had always imagined protests to come in these big sweeping moments, with people running and yelling up to battle, but we just walked
towards the protest location, casually holding the signs we made that morning during our briefing.

We were heading to a protest organized by #WomenBetrayed, an anti-choice group that came out of the Planned Parenthood scandal that exploded this summer. A couple of interns and I needed to use the restroom, so we went into City Hall nearby. Waiting before us in line was a woman from #WomenBetrayed wearing a shirt in the exact same shade of pink we were wearing. She smiled when she saw us. We exchanged pleasantries and she held the door open for us to enter the restroom. A small moment of common humanity.

There must have been anywhere from 50 to 70 people on the anti-choice side. They made posters, and had speeches, megaphones, and an organizer. There were only 10 of us (eight from FMF and two members of a local FMLA). All of us were under 30 years old. I felt outnumbered and weak. What could I possibly do to counter that many people? Mary and I started to chant, just loud enough to be heard — our personal resistance. All 10 of us moved in front of the crowd of anti-choicers and began to chant. We could have only been chanting for a minute before three uniformed police officers came up to us. “We need you to quiet down.” My parents always tell me that my quick tongue will get me into trouble one day. I desperately hoped today wouldn’t be that day as I stood tall and spit back, “Why?” at the cop in front of me. He looked tired, like he had been dealing with disobedience for a while. I was so relieved when the other interns spoke up as well. This was the only situation where we wasn’t terribly outnumbered. But, if all of us were dealing with these cops, who was protesting? We agreed that we would quiet down and they left us alone. So all of us moved to the left, blocking more of the protest. Waited. Then began to chant at speaking level. The woman who must have been the organizer of the event looked at us, shook her head with disdain, went over to the officers and pointed at us.

Once again, the police approached us. We challenged them. “We know our rights. We are allowed to protest here. We’re being respectful.” With the same tone of voice you take when a child doesn’t know what they’ve done wrong, the LAPD chastised us. “Come on guys. It’s like they’re having a birthday party and you come and crash it, yelling and screaming. It’s rude.” I was in disbelief. Did actual law enforcement officers just compare hosting a private party on private property to a peaceful protest? Is this what taxes are going to? They looked at me directly. “I’m asking you.” With hard eyes, I said, “I know my rights.”

The police weren’t here to protect us. I was hyper-aware of my white-passing privilege, that I could use it to make my voice heard in a way that other protesters couldn’t. I took my poster that said “Stop The War On Women” and stood on top of a planter. I began to chant, loudly and forcefully. “Pro life, Your name’s a lie. You don’t care if women die!” The rest of my group followed suit and suddenly we weren’t a peaceful group of kids anymore. The anti-choicers shifted quickly, turning on us like vipers. They began to chant “Pro-Life, Pro-Life” over and over again. Some fell to their knees and prayed to us, clutching to rosaries. One woman with crutches kept yelling, “817 women die every day!” She never clarified from what. More police officers came. They told us to quiet down, to get off the planter, to move to the left, the right. “Can I get a clear diameter of where we can stand? How about the highest decibel I can be?” I yelled back, my voice getting hoarse. Our protest was suddenly becoming overwhelming. Our energy was draining. Between engaging with cops and screaming back at people who despised me, it was starting to feel futile. I looked into the crowd of people and felt my heart drop. There were so many young women, young boys, kids who should be watching Nick Jr. instead of half-heartedly chanting “Planned Parenthood sells baby parts.” I wanted to cry. I was fighting for the future, for my generation and for the ones that come after me. But here they are in front of me. Which world am I fighting for?

Just as our energy was about to hit its lowest point, we heard thunder shake behind us. I shifted quickly into flight or fight mode, ready to break out running in case of the worst. Was it more anti-choicers? Extremists? I knew how violent they could be. Through NCAP, we learned how violent and terrifying anti-abortion
extremist groups have been in the past. They’ve bombed abortion clinics, stalked escorts to their homes and shot dead abortion doctors. This wasn’t the distant past. Dr. George Tiller was shot in the head by an extremist in 2009. Would the police protect me if anti-abortion extremists were about to shoot me dead?

The thunder was from the roar of the bullhorn from a group called Stop Patriarchy. They are a self-identified anarchist organization that fights to stop the enslavement of women. We had protested with them earlier in the summer in front of a “Crisis Pregnancy Center,” one of a chain of fake women’s health clinics that target vulnerable communities, provide false health information, and advance the anti-choice agenda. Stop Patriarchy’s activists were radical and afraid of nothing. Three of them crossed the street without even looking, one on the bullhorn and two holding a giant banner that read “Abortion On Demand and Without Apology” in bold letters. I was awash in euphoria at their arrival, knowing they were here to support us. Our intern group was suddenly reenergized and ready. There was a sudden crash of noise and movement.

From my place on the planter, it looked like a wave of confrontation. The opposition was invigorated as well, clamoring to reach us. They came rolling in and we pushed forward. We followed Stop Patriarchy’s chants, and I screamed with every bit of life that was left in me. Fury boiled inside of me. I was sick of these cops, 12 of them for 13 of us, circling us and gnawing at our ankles like hyenas. I was sick of respectability politics. Audre Lorde’s words filled my brain: my silence will not protect me.

It was a harrowing moment. I was there on behalf of the Feminist Majority Foundation, an organization created by feminists doing exactly what I’m doing now, except when the organization was created, they were doing it for the first time. Without them, I wouldn’t have a Planned Parenthood to fight for. I wouldn’t have knowledge about abortion, why it’s absolutely necessary to have accessible health care for people who can get pregnant, and why we need to keep Planned Parenthood funded. The second wave fought for the reproductive rights my generation gets to enjoy today. Before the scandal broke, I was unsure about my role within FMF and FMF’s role within the modern feminist movement. But this protest proved why they were so vital. The second that we stop fighting for reproductive rights is when the opposition will swoop in and take them from us forever. This constant vigilance is exhausting and terrifying.

At this protest, I never knew when the opposition would escalate, if screaming would turn into gunshots, if “quiet downs” will turn into arrests.

We were just young activists in pink “this is what a feminist looks like” t-shirts, with homemade posters and bullhorns. We were not a threat. Most of us were brown and in our early 20s. We didn’t have financial power. We weren’t wearing blazers or pantsuits like the organizers on the other side. I will never forget the woman in the brown pantsuit who looked at us with such pity and disdain. She must have been the organizer for the event. When we began to protest, she smiled so sweetly and took her permit to the police. She had bureaucracy and legalese on her side. Their protest was wrong, so obviously wrong. But ethics didn’t matter here. All that mattered was who had a paper signed.

* * *

I constantly struggle with the best way to achieve the goals of the feminist movement. Is it through policy change and bureaucracy? Or is it through grassroots activism? Is a formal education necessary for feminist activism or can anyone with passion be a leader? Should the techniques of the past waves be the models we use for the future? These are the questions that fill my mind during my internship at the Feminist Majority Foundation.

The organization is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that aims to better women’s rights in America and across the globe. On the foundation’s website is their definition of feminism: “the policy, practice or advocacy of political, economic, and social equality for women.” This definition...
would become a critical boundary in the work we did over the summer. It is specific, with a focus on tangible change. Their feminism is one that needs active work and practice.

The office, located right at the heart of Beverly Hills, looks like it belongs to a tech start-up, not a non-profit feminist organization. With clean lines, exposed brick and glass doors, the cold modernity of it threw me off. Everyone has a professional email, an @feminist.org, had to schedule meetings with one another, and knew the passwords to all of the databases. Our dress attire was business casual but Kathy always wore a dark pantsuit. Our day started at 10:00am and ended at 6:00pm.

I spent a lot more time on my computer than I expected. For the first four weeks, if we weren’t out on a campus visit, we were on our individual laptops researching West Coast colleges and universities. If a feminist club on campus wasn’t immediately discoverable, I called the office of Student Life and pretended to be a curious high school senior. When I did find a club, I reached out and inquired about their current leadership, past events and future goals. I was a representative of the Feminist Majority Foundation, my title immediately granting me knowledge and authority. I looked on the database, Campus Wiki, for the Brandeis FMLA and was surprised to see up-to-date information, my own name listed as part of the executive board of a college club. But now, here I was, calling schools thousands of miles away from my own, masquerading as a seasoned and vetted employee of the foundation.

The purpose of all of the research was clear. In order to be able to mobilize quickly and accurately in the future, we needed to be organized now. It made sense. It just didn’t feel genuine. Was this the methodology of Anita Hill? Did Gloria Steinem sit on a computer and just research? I itched to get outside, to get a taste of protesting again. I understood the second wave’s methodology with a clarity I didn’t before. The feeling of screaming and being heard, knowing you’re openly defying the system – it was addicting. Even though the end goals would be different, I felt as if I could be doing data entry for any organization and the feeling would be the same. I could feel my passion slipping.

Out of the second wave came the creators of the Feminist Majority Foundation, Ms. Magazine, and countless scholars. Audre Lorde, one of the most famous black lesbian feminist scholars, challenges how actual change can be made in her famous article, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” The master’s house is any form of oppression, be it misogyny, homophobia, racism or classism; the master’s tools are any of the ways in which these systems are held up. “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” Laws and capitalism have
Historically been used to keep a select few in power. The tools of bureaucracy, of hierarchy, of business, these are all used within the paradigm of oppression. They are used by the oppressors to “keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns,” to get them to believe that if we adhere to their rules and conditions, that we can change the way they have been operating for hundreds of years. These respectability politics were evident at FMF.

Even though laws are being changed and “good” people are being elected to public office, the question comes up: whose rights are being fought for, and if this the best way of affecting change. FMF’s mission statement says “women’s rights.” bell hooks, another feminist activist to come out of the second wave, expands on Lorde’s thoughts in her piece “Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression.” Like Lorde questioned the system we’re using to attain equality, hooks questioned the equality we’re fighting to attain. She argues, “Since men are not equals in white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure, which men do women want to be equal to?” Do we want to be equal to the men in our individual communities, men who, on the basis of racism, are treated less than men in other communities? Or do we want to be equal to our oppressors, the wealthy white men who have years of blood and hurt on their hands?

The strict meetings, the dark blazers, the set lunch hour…it was all very corporate. I wondered whether or not I would get carpal tunnel syndrome this summer, and if this was the right method of working for change. In the 28 years that the Feminist Majority Foundation has been around, radical change has not come to the United States. The slow waves of progress seem to be at a lull. I wonder about Lorde and hooks, and if a non-profit organization that operates so much like a for-profit corporation could be the answer. FMF’s definition of feminism being “for women” – doesn’t that just create the same boundaries that the patriarchy does? The master’s tools of diplomacy and policy and business casual will not get us (and have not gotten us) the change we need. In so many ways, I realize I am not at home with the calm and proper method of FMF, but rather the angry and loud activism of Lorde and hooks. My feminism might not have a definition yet, or a clear-cut method. But it does have goals. And will not rest until the oppressed are unshackled from the master’s house.

An emerging theory in activism is that of the non-profit industrial complex. Non-profit organizations are working within the structure of governments and corporations, only in a different form. While they don’t enact laws or create revenue, most non-profits work closely with organizations that do. This hazy line upholds the respectability politics that demands that you need to be polite and follow the rules in order to be heard. INCITE! is a national activist organization of radical feminists of color that do grassroots activism in order to end violence against women of color and their communities. They work to combat violence “directed at communities of color,” such as “police violence, war and colonialism” and violence “within communities” such as “sexual and domestic violence.”

Their book The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex details the issues with non-profit organizing; the state uses non-profits to monitor and control social justice movements, and manage and control dissent in order to make the world safe for capitalism, allowing corporations to mask their exploitative practices through “philanthropic” work. The authors argue that the state “encourages social movements to model themselves after capitalist structures rather than to challenge them,” and that non-profits “redirect activist energies into career-based modes of organizing instead of mass-based organizing.” These two points reminded me of the Feminist Majority Foundation. There was so much emphasis and energy on being professional that it often felt like actual change was a secondary thought. As a strategy for advancing the feminist movement generally, FMF’s course of action makes sense. The outside is constantly trying to invalidate feminism through criticizing their methods and their failure to include every possible angle. FMF’s methodology, their choice to be as respectable as possible, makes it impossible for people to devalue them or their work.

The fourth wave of feminism is something radically new. With just a click of a button, you are plugged into a powerful and expansive community of forward-seeking activists. Feminism isn’t exclusive to those who have the ability to dedicate hours of time to it. Just sharing an article or posting a status on Facebook, activities that take minutes at most, can be a radical act. The low time investment and ubiquitous access has made feminism into something that can adapt to thoughts across the globe instantaneously, a movement that criticizes itself constantly. This powerful and inclusive online community can focus on every issue, on every policy change, on every sexist movie, at the moment they happen. It gives voices to people who have been silenced. It validates existences. This feminism, my feminism, is changing lives across the globe. With the momentum of millions of people worldwide, it won’t stop until full equality for everyone is reached.
acceptance
What is a feminist? What is feminism? After three waves (and in a fourth) spanning hundreds of years, these questions are still central to the discourse inside and outside of the feminist movement. In her 2012 TEDx Talk, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gave us the simplest definition – the one from the dictionary. Her clear voice stated “feminist: a person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes.” And at it’s heart, isn’t that the truth? That a feminist is a person who looks at the way society is structured globally and is unwilling to accept inequality based solely on sex? The question then becomes, what is equality? And how do we achieve it? I don’t have the answers. I don’t think there is any one answer to the question of how to achieve social change – and constant questioning and investigation of how to achieve change can get in the way of actually doing change.

In the end, feminism is about people – making life as positive and full for everyone on earth, regardless of any factors that prohibit it today. Many take issue with feminism claiming we’re raising women by bringing men down, that the equality we strive for would lower everyone’s quality of life to some quasi-acceptable standard. But the main point of feminism is instead to raise everyone’s quality of living to the same improved standard. That is the focus of the work I do every day.

As with most large-scale movements, the idea of feminism has evolved from individual activists and specific goals to a larger and more abstract movement, with no discernible leaders and no singular goal. Feminism and feminists are criticized and demonized constantly for everything from appearance to lack of consistency. No other movement has to adhere to such strict politics. Feminism is the only movement that is expected to be perfect, to be completely encompassing of everyone, to always know what to do and say. It constantly has to take stances on everything and when, as any movement does, it inevitably messes up, it is demonized.

But feminism is imperfect because people are imperfect. Many of the faults of first and second wave feminism are related to their incredible racism and exclusion of people who do not fall into the white, wealthy, straight, cisgender idea of what a woman is, because those were the ideals of the people who led the movement. As we move into this new wave with new leaders and new activists, feminism has morphed and continues to evolve. It is all about the passionate people behind it.

Feminism is people. Feminism is people of all genders working together to eliminate all forms of oppression from the world. Feminism is individual activists who have exams the next day or a crappy boss at work. Who love going to musicals and playing with their dog. Who will snap or mess up or say something incorrect. It’s no fault of the movement and no fault of their own. Everyone falls down at some point. Feminism just teaches you how to get back up.

The parts of this internship that meant the most were my experiences with other people. Getting to know my supervisors and learn from the people who have been in this movement literally longer than I’ve been alive is incredible. They were at the forefront of the movement when abortion doctor George Tiller was murdered by anti-abortion extremists in 200917, when I didn’t even know about feminism and its revitalizing effects.

Working eight hours a day researching the feminist community at University of Santa Barbara meant nothing compared with meeting with Dani, a passionate senior invested in having an intersectional feminist space on campus. Through her, my work at this internship has permanence. Through her, I have reached out to a community of feminists across the country and given them the tools and know-how to begin their activism.

The shift from theory to practice was never clearer than this summer. Organizing has its place in front of a computer and is vital work. But the theoretical idea of people “out there,” that you are either helping or preventing from hurting others, begins to break down without any interaction with the outside world. At a protest where there were only 10 of us and a hundred of them, the tools of language and thought shift. Different gears come into play, no longer spotting potential threats in the ether, but spotting threats to my life now.

Within the feminist community itself, there is a lot of debate about the merits of academic feminism and feminist activism. Both operate in different spheres (academic in universities and activism on
My life was literally saved when I found feminism. I found purpose. I found power within myself. I found community and friendship and a group of badass activists who will go down in history as the change we fought to see in the world.

... 

Feminism is community. It's staying up all night with the executive board of FMLA trying to protect our Women’s Resource Center (WRC) at Brandeis when the administration tried to erase it from campus. It is creating a hashtag (#ProtectTheWRC) that was spread over a hundred times throughout the Brandeis community. It is feeling support from feminists on campus. It is saving the WRC. 

Most importantly, feminism is caring. It’s understanding that the other members of this community have their own trauma and hurt and attitudes and personalities and loving them anyway. It’s jumping to help when one of your sisters is hurting. It’s an unbreakable and unspoken bond that keeps each of us bound to each other in a way that patriarchy aims to disable. It’s a choice to unconditionally love your sisters because there is no one else in the world you’d rather be friends with.

Feminism is passion and anger and language and time. It’s an old movement that ebbs and flows with each generation, unearthing unsolved struggles and new adversaries. It’s beautiful because it constantly strives to do better, be better and do the most good. It isn’t selfish and neither are its activists. Feminists care deeply and love intensely. Every battle is not for more rights for ourselves but for our sisters who don’t have the rights we enjoy.

My life was literally saved when I found feminism. I found purpose. I found power within myself. I found community and friendship and a group of badass activists who will go down in history as the change we fought to see in the world.

And I love being a part of this community. One that only has progress on its track list and only altruistic goals for the future. I love this movement because it gave me a community that I had never dreamed about having before. It brought me to the best people I’ve ever met, activists who push me to be more inclusive, to do more reading and to be more confident. I would have never imagined that the people who society told me to demonize my entire teenage life would become the most accepting of all.

Ultimately, feminism is love.

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Notes


6. Black women make 64 cents to the white man’s dollar. Latina women make 54 cents. The rhetoric of “77 cents” only refers to white women. The focus on only white women reinforces the erasure of women of color. For more, go to: http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2014/09/18/3569328/gender-wage-gap-race/

7. At the beginning of the summer, Mary led an identity exercise. The purpose was to be able to recognize areas where we have privilege over someone else. Someone offered straight privilege, being middle class, and having an education. I was about to offer cisgender privilege when Mary looked pointedly at another intern (who is white) and me: “I’m looking at you two because you’re the only white people here.” Awkward silence. I had talked about my heritage before. The other interns and I looked around at each other. I spoke up. “I will claim my white passing privilege. But my entire family is from Morocco. I worry about being ‘randomly’ pulled aside by TSA or being attacked because of Islamophobia.” Mary looked stricken.

These kinds of actions, the continual erasing of my identities and experiences, take a huge toll on me. By taking away aspects of myself that are integral to me, I cease to exist.


10. The whole nature of disturbance is integral to the feminist movement. Feminism itself is a disturbance to the way society operates today. It does not conform to the status quo. If we work within the parameters of “civil society,” with respectability politics and police permits, nothing would get done. We need to disrupt. We need to be loud. We need to be the change.

11. Earlier in the summer, the FMF interns joined a protest organized by Stop Patriarchy at a Crisis Pregnancy Center near Los Angeles City College. CPC’s are fake abortion clinics that use fear tactics to intimidate vulnerable women into keeping their pregnancies. When a patient will ask for an abortion, they will often give baby toys instead, saying “Don’t kill your baby!” Anti-choicers “crashed” our protest as well, praying at us and yelling that “abortion is murder.” When the police came, they tried to get us off of the sidewalk. They followed us as we walked down the sidewalk away from the CPC, threatening arrest. Flash forward to the #WomenBetrayed protest. I was sick of the police protecting the people who murder abortion doctors and steal my autonomy over my body away. This was my last chance to be loud. To publicly support Planned Parenthood. To show them that they won’t win this battle.


16. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. (2012, April 12). We should all be feminists! Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie TEDxEuston

17. Dr. George Tiller was the medical director of the Women’s Health Care Services, one of the only clinics in America that provided late-term abortions, at the time. On May 31, 2009, Tiller was shot in the head by Scott Roeder. Roeder was an anti-abortion extremist part of the group called Operation Rescue. This group still exists. It still threatens abortion clinics and doctors. It still attracts new members.
E verything had changed. I could feel this city evolving. Gergi was my home – where I grew up playing on the muddy streets, walking for miles to attend mass, where I made my lifelong friends. But even though it is different, every time I think of my own metamorphosis, I am reminded of the relatively static nature of my hometown. Somehow even with Gergi’s change in landscape, its progress seems very slow compared to mine.

I had attended the last two years of high school, and almost four years in university abroad. When I returned in the summer of 2015, reconnecting with my community in Gergi was difficult, particularly because I felt that I had been exposed to so much more than members of the community. As I felt removed from my community, I also felt the sting of privilege that came with the wealth of experiences I harbored from abroad. Unlike my peers, my schooling in the U.S. and South Africa did not force me to depend on the government to attend university, apply for a job, or other modes of survival. I was a free agent, someone who came and went as I pleased.

Waltzing in the Mud: Summer is Not for School

Typically, my day starts at 7:00 am. I am reminded that I am back at my mother’s house, a house that I crawled in as a child, and later on left to wander in the world. This is home. I spend about an hour each day getting ready. I eat breakfast, and get ready for my half-hour walk to the school. When the clock starts nearing 7:50, I leave my house and head to Ethio-Parents School (EPS).

On the road to EPS, if one is coming from the main road, one will observe two narrow trails that lead to the main campus. I walked these trails for four months, studying every possible shortcut imaginable among the maze of bustling houses and compounds. On the road, the pebble arrangements were scattered and filled with mud. Cars rocked from side to side as their drivers would try to accelerate despite the pointed rocks causing friction. The mud would splatter to the sides of the road as the cars drove past, and the pedestrians would walk along a thin line on the sides of the road to avoid getting dirt on them. Children wore plastic shoes, and booties; some were barefoot and watched their steps. Pedestrians, children and adults alike, would carefully calculate their trajectory before their jump from one pebble aggregate to another, to avoid the pool of muddy still water on the streets. On the road, the cars and the people seem to be in complete contrast – the aggressive nature of the cars splashing mud into the sides of the street, and the calm, collected pedestrians who stand still, by the sides of the road, as the cars pass by.

There are small stores, restaurants, cafes, and coffee displays on the side of the road, all selling merchandise to students. One store has only a pool table in it, and a line of youngsters waiting their turn to play, paying up to 8 Ethiopian birr per game. Next to the school is Unity University, a small private university; at exactly 8:30 am, a large influx of people comes in and enters through the gate. The guards then let in students after searching them and checking their IDs. On the corner of the road is a small plastic shelter; the orange of the plastic gives the inside of
the shelter a bronzed look. There is one young boy who offers to clean students’ shoes for about 2 birr per customer. He also sells telephone cards, bottles of water, soda, cigarettes, and other quick items that students might need. Once you pass by, you easily notice the campus’s white faded rusty building towers among the otherwise barren surrounding of Gergi. Here the world completely changes. The surrounding mud disappears, and you are greeted by an endless swath of concrete on the surface of the floor.

The light blue front entrance is closely matched with the blue-colored fences. There are blocks of bricks topped by security coils, which makes any bystander looking at the gates think twice before attempting to climb them. Beyond the bright blue-colored gates, I see my students running around, or playing games on the campus. The security guards smile at the sight of an approaching visitor, and get up from their seats upon my arrival to the gate. They know me too well by now to search my bag or ask for my ID. The faint grey uniforms they wear match the faded concrete floors and the building exterior. I greet them briefly before progressing onto the campus. Inside the school, the janitors, all female, can be seen walking up and down the campus, carrying brooms, mops, soap, and other cleaning supplies to the dusty, empty classrooms that await them.

I check my wristwatch, to make sure I have arrived by 8:30 am. I greet my students on campus. They all walk quickly toward me, surrounding me in a semi-circle. Some take my bag and the drawing board I brought to class, and I lead them towards the school building. Seventh graders Hayat and Ledia run before everyone and reach the classroom first. One can easily tell that the campus is on its way to receive students again. Looking around at the near empty school, I sense an eerie silence in our surroundings, a grave contrast to a place that only a few weeks ago was filled up with sounds, voices, and the laughter of hundreds of students playing in the corridors, or going out to play sports on school grounds.

The volleyball net is still hung in the middle of the campus. Yet, there were no running children to fetch the ball. Schoolteachers and administration staff continue their daily tasks, unaltered by the unsavory silence that surrounds them. I look again and try to imagine sights and sounds that I would have seen in this place. There would have been students hurriedly opening their lunch boxes, and sitting in groups at the school compound sitting area. One would have seen so much more then. Upon entering, the echoing classrooms are only but a reminder of the absence of a big part of the school. One can imagine then what a fully enrolled school would feel, sound and look like.

In the midst of the eerie silence, I notice my students quietly gathering in a circle speaking about the day’s discussion topic, or outside on their class break. From time to time they run to the classrooms upstairs. The school compound is too big for only 36 students to occupy, yet with only this small group of them they manages to fill the campus. I had told my students that apart from a few classrooms, other areas of the campus and the playground area were under renovation and off limits. During class breaks, the school is a maze for anyone who wants to play hide and seek. After the first class break, they quickly go to the Primary School compound, and try out the swings. From the entrance, the security guards come to check where the sounds were coming from. I notice my student Ledia quietly sneaking away from the swings to hide from the guards, fearing their scolding. The rest of the class watches eagerly as more of their classmates play hide and seek with the guards, entertained by their classmates’ ability to outrun the guards in the event that they are caught. They bring so much life back to the place, and in a way they bring so much life back to me.

“Leadership, on the other hand, is about creating change you believe in.”

— Seth Godin, Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us

II. Ethio-STEM: Building an Organization From Scratch

Before the start of my internship, I was working on tying up some loose ends with the organization that I was going to work with. My main responsibility in the internship was starting a summer school program for an organization called Ethio-STEM. This organization represented everything “cool” imaginable that I strived for. At the heart of the organization was a model for women’s empowerment that focused on increasing women’s participation in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields, as well as changing the pedagogical approach to empowerment in the classroom. Here’s another cool thing about Ethio-STEM: It didn’t exist.

It’s the Start of Something New

On May 8, 2015, I was packing my bags to leave the United States. This was one of my yearly trips to my home country, Ethiopia. But this summer was different. I was starting my own organization. The organization’s prototype was modeled on a summer program I had designed four months ago. With the inaugural class coming, the goal was to have the prototype of the organization tested during the summer program. Although nervous about how everything would turn out, I had been extremely eager to tell people what I would be doing over the summer. I knew that it was the first thing people would ask
anyway, so I developed a script: “I will be interning in an organization dedicated to empowering women in STEM in Ethiopia.” This day had come faster than I had anticipated. Here I was with packed bags, and a plane ticket flying home to begin my so-called internship.

“I’m here to do my own thing. No pressure!” I told myself.

A week after I arrived in Addis Ababa, my best friend Bilen asked me what I was up to this summer.

“Dehna nesh, men adis neger ale? How are you, what is new? Min aynet internship new yemitseriw? Min litseri metash? What kind of internship are you going to be doing, what are you doing back here?”

I had calmly practiced a well-thought-out response that read more like a script. I was here to do an internship that focused on women’s empowerment through STEM, I would be here for the entire summer, etc. But Bilen was not letting me off easy; she had more pressing questions. Where was this internship located? Who was I working for? When would I be free during the day? Was it part-time or full-time?

I then told Bilen that I was starting the organization; in an essence, it did not exist yet. She was puzzled. She is someone who has known me since the fifth grade and probably knows me better than most people I know. Somehow I didn’t expect her to be shocked, but it had probably not occurred to her that she would hear me talk about something as unexpected as starting my own organization. Her first response was “How? And with what money? Are you doing this all by yourself?”

As her questions piled up, I realized that their pessimistic implication might be right. I might be in over my head. Who was I kidding? No amount of past experience was going to prepare me for what I was about to do.

You Have To Start Somewhere...:
Defining Ethio-STEM

Ethio-STEM was my dream. More than a summer project, it was a community building activity. After years of scanning organizations like FIRST\(^2\) (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology), GEARs\(^3\) (Garrett Engineering and Robotics Society), and growingSTEMS,\(^4\) I was on the path to starting my own organization. Ethio-STEM represented everything I strive for: women’s empowerment through increased representation of black women in STEM, as well as pedagogical changes in classrooms that would allow for that empowerment. As I stepped onto the school grounds to start Ethio-STEM, the organization that I had meticulously planned over a period of 4 months, I was immediately intimidated by the task of both founding and running the organization.

Shaping Ethio-STEM's framework

When I arrived on site, there was no guidance, no orientation program, no deadlines or registration. I was there alone, terrified, excited, eager, and above all not knowing how everything would work out. Ethio-STEM was very much an internship experience that was formed in my head, and required me to create it from scratch. What is Ethio-STEM? Who is behind it? Who named this organization and what does it stand for? What was its vision and mission? And who was going to register it under the coalition for non-governmental organizations? Apparently, the person who was supposed to do that was all me. It became apparent to me rather quickly that for a space like Ethio-STEM to exist, I had to delegate some of these tasks to my colleagues who signed up to be mentors for the program. I was never going to be able to do it all on my own.
Ethio-STEM’s Inaugural Class: Initial Reactions

I feared that others might not understand Ethio-STEM’s mission and vision the way that I did. Members of the surrounding Gergi school community misinterpreted my presence.

“Why are you here again?”

People don’t expect you to come back. After all, everyone assumes you have it better in America. The idea of “going back” to your home community is a concept that is radical, even unthinkable. I struggled to “empower” a community that questioned my motives for being there. I felt lost in a continuum of things I sketched up Ethio-STEM to represent.

“You don’t want to make false promises, do you?”

When I first proposed the summer project to the Ethio-Parents director, Mr. Worku, he initially thought this was an admissions drive from Brandeis University to bring more Ethiopian students to study in America. “Are you going to be taking the students to your university in America, or help them find ways to go to school there?” I was initially puzzled by his assumptions, but after a few conversations with my family I realized that I had forgotten the “hype” that surrounded anything American. My sister, who had just completed high school at EPS, had warned me about this. “Well, people are just going to sign up because they think this project will take them to America,” she said “You don’t want to make false promises do you?” She was right; there was a real risk my project would be misunderstood.

America and the Authenticity of STEM Programs

During my first visit to the Ethio-Parents School (EPS) Gergi campus, I spoke to one of my former high school science teachers, Mr. Haimanot Tesfaye. After we exchanged pleasantries, I let him know that I was going to be starting the Ethio-STEM summer mentorship program at EPS. Mr. Tesfaye was most surprised about my reasons for returning to Ethiopia, more than he was interested in my excitement about getting Ethio-STEM off the ground. “Did you finish your studies in America?” he asked. “I thought you would never return; we have very few citizens who want to come back after being in the U.S.” He lamented that most of our high school alumni who went to America never came back to visit their school, let alone to start a summer program. During my high school days, Mr. Tesfaye had encouraged the girls in his classroom to speak up and participate in the classroom. I had sensed, even when I was in high school, that he was keenly aware of the gender-achievement gap that exists in Ethiopian higher education STEM fields. In 11th grade, I remember him presenting the best female students in his class with biology textbooks that he had written himself. Although very humble, he was a published author of two successful biology help books for high school students taking National Examinations in the 10th grade and 12th grade.

Unlike other teachers, he was invested in knowing his students’ future plans and aspirations. He mentioned most of the women in my classes, and asked me if I knew where they ended up. Mr. Tesfaye was my Biology teacher in the 11th and 12th grade, and although that seemed like ages ago to me, Mr. Tesfaye speaks of his students as if he’s teaching them in the present or they have just graduated. “Did she go to Mekelle University or Addis Ababa? I haven’t heard from her in five years.” Most teachers did not focus on the women in their classrooms the way Mr. Tesfaye had, and as a result, women from my high school did better in his classroom than in other science classes.
Before we parted, Mr. Tesfaye asked me one final question, “After you leave, who will continue this program?” I was struck. As I struggled to put words together to come up with a response, he smiled, “Maybe you should recruit one of your students here to be a leader and continue what you started!” He waved goodbye, leaving me with more questions about the mission of my organization than ever before.

As I continued planning the program in May, a month before it was scheduled to run, I thought about Mr. Tesfaye’s advice, and the kind of impact I wanted to leave in Gergi. Other people in the Gergi community showed similar concerns and other:

“What will happen after you leave?”

“Will you be able to find scholarships for them to go to America?”

“How can I get my child to go to America like you to attend university there?”

It seemed to me that many of the community members in Gergi and I were not on the same page about Ethio-STEM’s main mission. More importantly, many people interpreted Ethio-STEM’s existence as a recruitment tool to get Ethiopian students to go to America. I struggled with people’s misconceptions throughout the summer program. I had to explain again and again that Ethio-STEM stood for the empowerment of young girls and women to succeed wherever they went, and it was not a program that promised an American education.

Is it From America? Parent Reactions to Ethio-STEM

When the program began in July 6th, I spoke on Parents’ Day, explaining why I was doing the summer project and the kinds of students the program was targeting. My interaction with parents was more personal than the teacher-parent interaction in a regular academic environment. I had made a flyer that included my contact information and passed it out to the parents. A lot of parents had contacted me before the program started to express their interest in getting their child enrolled. I received personal calls, emails, and some parents approached me in person often finding me in the school offices where I was organizing the project. I appreciated the parents who were forthright and direct about their child’s participation in the program. Further, most parents called me to express their appreciation for the program, which I found very motivating. I also interacted with a few hesitant parents who wanted to know if I had any agenda in starting Ethio-STEM. Some were initially hesitant to send their children to be under the supervision of a young woman who did not have a professional degree and was not a qualified teacher.

The concept of “mentorship” being at the heart of the program puzzled many parents and even school administrators, who simply did not know what to make of the project. Ethio-STEM’s approach to education was not traditional, and that might have caused both groups to worry. For these reasons, I had to learn to communicate effectively with parents, school administrators, and students to ensure the main purpose of the program was not misunderstood or lost. This proved to be difficult, and at times distracted from my main administrative role in the project.

Interviews and Getting In [Initial Interpretations of the Program]

After Ethio-STEM’s summer program was advertised on Parents’ Day, I had to gather a selection committee from among the mentors to discuss what criteria we would use to select the students, separating the students who had the time to commit to the summer project from those who didn’t. The interviews allowed us to clearly determine if certain people wanted to be part of the program because of parental influence or personal motivation. We were looking for students who had a sense of purpose for being in a program like this. The interviews also helped the mentors interact with the students on a personal level, and get a feel for their prospective mentees.

We were happy to find the right students to attend the program. We had about 50 students apply, and we accepted 40. The students who were not accepted into the program were not available to attend the full five weeks of the program, and or were not able to fulfill the number of hours of class time and discussion time required to be present in the program. (In Ethiopia, it is not common practice to have students enrolled in school over the summer, and some had other commitments.) We ultimately had four students who were not able to continue with the program after the first week, and so our enrollment was 36 students for the whole summer.
Ethio-STEM’s inaugural class was from grades 7, 8 and 9, all Ethio-Parents School students. After the Parents’ Day announcement, a lot of parents called me to express their admiration for my going to America to attend school, and wanted their kids to do the same. I also got specific requests to help their kids with college applications and SATs. I was overwhelmed. The project that I dreamed of in my head for months was now being interpreted in ways I had not planned for. I was terrified and sad that my affiliation with an American university was being used to somehow define an organization and a project that I wanted to be based on Ethiopian lives and narratives.

I did not want to disappoint the parents, which would mean a lower attendance rate. I was stuck: certainly, there was a higher regard for the project because I had come from a U.S. university – but much to my disappointment, I was seen as a foreigner first, and a fellow Ethiopian second. This complex relationship between different parts of my identity and experience made it difficult for community members to understand the nature of the program.

Throughout the internship, I struggled to dissociate the summer project from being seen as “American.” I wanted it to be recognized as the brainchild of an Ethiopian, and Ethiopia-based. My affiliation with Brandeis University got in the way of my hopes and assumptions that people would appreciate the project more because it came from an Ethiopian.

Accessibility and Transparency
Keeping in mind the need for accessibility, Ethio-STEM did not charge students for any of the services they received. The school administration was particularly uncomfortable with this idea. Much to my chagrin, they branded Ethio-STEM as a “prestigious summer program from America,” and the school administration had initially thought they would be able to have students pay tuition to enroll in the program. In order to rectify this, I met with Deputy Director Mr. Yoseph Yilma, the unit leader Mr. Wondwossen Metaferya, and the school director Mr. Worku Molla. Although the school director and the deputy director did mention the monetary gains that Ethio-STEM could bring to EPS, I had not felt that it was appropriate to create a distinction between various students’ socio-economic backgrounds; if Ethio-STEM required tuition for enrollment, there would be a division created between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Other staff members and teachers also expressed that having students pay for tuition for the summer program could encourage parents and students themselves to take the program more seriously. While I appreciated all their feedback, I did not accept the idea of the summer program requiring tuition since it was not in line with my original goal of wide accessibility.

Staying Focused
“Your need to feel significant will never be met, until you can conquer your fear and manage your focus.”
— Shannon L. Alder

Ethio-STEM was an idea that formed after I took a class at Brandeis University on the Economics of Race and Gender, a course that made me realize that women of color did not enter work industries on an equal footing. I thought of women who shared my identities – about their journey, and where they would end up. I thought about the lack of resources for women in third world countries, and the many hurdles they needed to jump over to succeed in STEM fields. I thought about my own journey, and the kind of mentorship, guidance, and support I needed (and still need). I focused my energy on the many reasons why Ethio-STEM was absolutely necessary. And those reasons kept me going, despite the many comments and criticisms I faced when I started out.
Ethio-STEM’s Working Model

The student becomes the Teacher: Innovation in Classroom Teaching

As the Project Manager, Organizer, and Head Mentor for the program my role was to make sure that Ethio-STEM was functioning. My roles put me in a position to interact with parents, students, school administrators, and staff. During the summer at the school, I learned the ins and outs of running a school compound. Since my students were the only ones on campus for most of the day, I had to foster relationships with school staff. This meant that I interacted, at least once, with every guard, custodian, and school administration member who was working during the summer.

Reality Sinks In

Going to work at my former high school was just as bewildering as going back home. Ethio-Parents was a school I had attended since the first grade. I had spent 11 years – half of my life – in this place. In a way, this was my second home. I remember playing on the swings as an eight-year-old in the second grade. After my classmate Amanuel pushed me too hard, I fell and broke my leg. Then there was the time my best friend from the fourth grade, Tsenu, and I snuck out of class early and hid under the tree near the primary school. And that time I carved my name on the tree, and on the steel outside the School Director’s office; I felt warm seeing my name was still there 10 years later. As I watched my students play around the school grounds, flashes of all these memories overflowed my consciousness.

Most things had changed, but a lot of things were still the same. The school still had three different compounds: high school, primary, and elementary school. It felt strange walking around a classroom I once sat in, trying to re-imagine my classroom experiences in Ethiopia. It was such a big contrast to the classrooms I belonged in now at Brandeis. I wanted to reconnect my past with my present, and think of the future I would have.

Mentorship & Creating Relationships in Ethio-STEM

“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea”

– Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Am I a Teacher or A Mentor?

Drawing boundaries between my roles in the organization

I wanted to learn what my students’ needs were so I could understand how best to equip them with skills and knowledge that they could make use of. As a first-time teacher, and head mentor, my most important work included supervising the mentors, who were the heart of the organization. I had to make sure that the mentors were doing the assigned activities with their mentees. The mentors were unpaid, and worked on a full volunteer basis, so it was important to keep their spirits and morale high throughout the program.

Mentors were responsible for teaching the students a particular topic within their disciplines. For example, mentors who were currently in medical school would be mentoring students who indicated they would like to be doctors, or have medical research as their career interest. The mentors could then share information through storytelling, sharing their own personal narratives of why they chose to pursue their current fields. A majority of the mentors were women (there were nine women and three men); I discovered that this work was more appealing to women than men. One could debate about why that’s the case; perhaps the women saw themselves in their mentees, and that made them bring passion and purpose to their work.

Real World Experience Mentors share their experiences in higher education with Ethio-STEM students.
“Creating is no problem – problem solving is not creating.”
— Robert Fritz, The Path of Least Resistance: Learning to Become the Creative Force in Your Own Life

III. Ethio-STEM: Philosophy & Pedagogy

Open curriculums that incorporate student-focused learning

Ethio-STEM operated on an open curriculum basis, where students participated in the design of the summer program curriculum based on the path they wanted to take upon entering university. This was to ensure that they saw purpose in what they were learning. At the beginning of the summer program, I asked them why they wanted to be part of a project like this. Most of their replies were along the lines of “doing well in university,” “becoming a doctor,” and also “gaining confidence.” The first two days of Ethio-STEM were dedicated to designing goals for the program, in line with each student’s interests. I wanted to challenge the traditional system of education that they were used to, in order to maximize the impact that Ethio-STEM could have on their lives.

I worked directly with the mentors and students to come up with a working syllabus for the summer. The syllabus was divided into three parts, each identifying an area of need for the students: Public Speaking, Writing, and Real World Experience. The public speaking component of the program came from most of the students expressing that they were not comfortable speaking in front of people. I stressed in the program that public speaking and communication skills were necessary for them to achieve leadership positions in their respective studies. I also stressed that they would need to convey their ideas in a clear way in order for people to understand their ideas and perspectives. For the writing component of the program, each participant brought a journal to class and completed writing assignments.

“Real World Experience” was a chance for the mentors to share some of their experiences with the students, and have them ask questions. The students were also asked to complete assignments about where they saw themselves in the next 10 years. It was so touching to hear the students’ voices come alive in their writings, to hear the kinds of dreams and aspirations that the students had at such an early age. And it reminded me of why the work I was doing with Ethio-STEM was particularly important: because it fostered a different kind of learning, learning that resulted from collaboration and from affirming fellow students’ narratives, learning that recognized the individual and operated in a context that was dynamic, cooperative, and radical.

Inside the Classroom: Class Room Culture, Etiquette, and Maintaining Safe Spaces in the Classroom

Challenging Hierarchal Educational Structures through Grassroots Education Reform

As a first-time teacher, I was concerned about the students’ level of respect for me. Would they be able to tell that I was inexperienced? How could I handle situations of conflict that would arise between students? How could I make sure that the attendance policy in the summer program was respected? How would I set up the dynamic of mentors and students to establish respect, communication, and productivity in the mentor-mentee activity sessions? How could I earn the mentors’ trust and respect in handling the classroom environment?

Initially, I was intimidated by the very idea of teaching secondary school. The students who had signed up for the project were among the most successful students in the school. I knew that they were smart and dedicated to their work. That created a lot of pressure for me, in a way, to impress the students themselves. The solution was to establish a sense of community in the classroom so that respect, effective communication, and understanding flowed seamlessly. We saw ourselves as a community of learners and discoverers, who set out to create a safe space that allowed each student to develop her personal narrative and feel comfortable in a classroom environment that did not focus exclusively on academic achievement. As the summer program passed, I struggled with de-centering the students’ focus from the grades or assessment points they were going to obtain in the class. Most of the students were in the top 10% of their class, and were used to competing for the highest grades, so most of the “de-centering” process did not prove to be successful or effective. I noticed the students’ eagerness to please the teacher figure in the room, whether the mentors or me, and this did bother me slightly.

Despite our intentions to move away from the traditional method of teaching and learning, it seemed that we were seen

Ethio-STEM operated on an open curriculum basis, where students participated in the design of the summer program curriculum based on the path they wanted to take upon entering university.
more like teachers than mentors. While a level of structure was necessary in the classroom, the goal of Ethio-STEM was not to structure the class in a similar manner to a regular classroom; it was to deviate from and disrupt traditional norms of teaching and a hierarchical structure in the flow of knowledge from teacher to student, and not the other way around.

Establishing Classroom Culture: Shaping Habits

Class Rules: Sit With Someone You DON'T KNOW!!

One of the rules of the class was that people would sit with someone they didn’t know every day. I purposefully did this to allow students to make new connections with their classmates, instead of remaining comfortable in cliques. I observed that the ninth graders, being the oldest in the room, did not socialize much with their eighth grade and seventh grade classmates. The eighth graders were the most social of the group since they easily navigated between the other students, who were younger or older than them by only a few months or a year at most.

The Importance of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Urban Schools

When I was in the classroom teaching the students, I felt a strange sense of unfamiliarity that disconnected me from my students. It felt odd to be standing there lecturing them about the things Ethio-STEM stood for: pursuing a science major, choosing a STEM-related field, becoming superwomen who would juggle family and career in the STEM world. I also often thought about the many differences that existed between us: age, ethnicity, experience, social class, and many others. I also thought of how different they all were; they had different ethnicities and cultural roots, they were different ages, and had different interests.

This is very common, since Ethiopia is a country with a diverse population, with more than 80 languages, ethnicities, and nationalities. It was quite a challenge to bring this sea of diversity together in one classroom and expect all my students to be on the same wavelength of understanding. That simply was not possible.

These realizations slowly emerged in the fieldwork. I noticed one student who was very ardent in public speaking (and who did excellently in the public speaking workshops), but the same student performed poorly in the writing workshops. I thought about how my lectures could be interpreted in 36 different ways. This realization was critical in my fieldwork experience, and it led me to an important lesson from a class that I took with Professor Derron Wallace, called “Critical Perspectives in Urban Education”: to practice culturally relevant pedagogy within the capacities of my fieldwork.

I realized then that in order to make an impact in the Gergi community, it was important to pay attention to individual students’ cultures, customs, and language. Professor Gloria Ladson-Billings describes this as “culturally relevant pedagogy.”

Describing the linkages between school and culture, Ladson-Billings gives an example of the Native American educator Cornel Pewewardy, who asserts that a critical reason that Indian children experience difficulty in school is because educators have attempted to insert “culture into the education, instead of inserting education into the culture.”

A closer look at anthropological studies reveals that there has been considerable work that has been carried out to study the link between a student’s home culture and schooling systems. The studies have made close attempts at locating “what students experience at home, and what they experience at school in the speech and language interactions of teachers and students.” Various sociolinguists have suggested that incorporating the students’ home language into the classroom helps students gain academic success.
The challenge of incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy into the Ethio-STEM program was to put elements of STEM education, culture, and women’s empowerment into a student-designed curriculum, all at once. On the first week of Ethio-STEM students were asked to contribute to the curriculum planning, along with mentors and the program coordinator. Some activities were predetermined by the program coordinator and the mentors. Students still had much say on the daily activities and the types of assignments that were required of them. This was critical in ensuring that students felt that their narratives from the particular culture were honored and respected in the classroom. I also wanted to make sure that we respected their “culture of learning” and not deviate too much from the system of learning they grew up in Ethiopia. For instance, we centered our class discussions on issues that spanned the cultural and ethnic diversity of the student body present in the program. As a member of the Amhara and Oromo ethnic group, which constitutes the majority of the Ethiopian populace, I was keenly aware that my experiences were not the same as my students from a different ethnic group. I believe we successfully created space for students to express their culture and identity in the classroom.

Formal Education in Ethiopia
Women’s Participation In Formal Education

A World Bank report has summarized the condition of the “typical” Ethiopian woman: “She is a victim of her situation, without the capacity to initiate change within the quagmire of her poverty, high fertility, poor health, and domestic drudgery.” As I have studied the condition of Ethiopian women through my university classes, I have been startled by the overwhelming statistical evidence that brings to light the fate of most Ethiopian women. I share this identity with them, yet because of a change of circumstance, I have had a better outcome than most.

The educational status of women in Ethiopia is among the lowest in the world, with the overall adult literacy rate to be less than 40%.$ Statistically, the number of women in university who matriculate into STEM fields is less than 10% in Ethiopia. Taking into account very high dropout rates in these fields, the number of women who graduate with STEM degrees, diplomas, or graduate level degrees is less than 5%. The statistics reflect cultural, sociopolitical, and economic barriers as the sources for the dearth of female representation in these important fields in the country.

There are fewer females than males at every level of the educational system. The proportion of female students decreases progressively at each level, starting from junior secondary school to higher education. In junior secondary schools (grades 7 and 8) 53.6% are male, and 46.4% are female; in senior secondary schools (grades 9-12), 54.8% are male and 45.2% are female; in universities 86.1% are male and 13.8% female.$ In this summer program, at the very least I hoped to open dialogue with the students and their peer mentors on what it means to grow up in a country that has a clear gender gap in enrollment (which leads to segregation). I wanted my students to understand the many ways in which women are severely affected by the patriarchal culture, sexist curricula, teacher attitudes and practices, parental expectations, and the persistent “glass ceiling” in higher education.
girls, and focused primarily on women. It was crucial to involve the students in a critical dialogue about issues of gender discrimination in their society. At first, most students were puzzled about the idea of a STEM program that focused on hearing their opinions about social issues, putting their ideas into writing, and public speeches; a lot of them thought they were going to be learning math and science all day. As the program progressed, more and more students participated in the class discussions and reflection sections. The students felt more comfortable with sharing differing ideas, having arguments about topics, and engaging critically in issues that affect their daily lives.

I learned in Ethio-STEM that women’s empowerment cannot be fully achieved without incorporating educational equality into the classroom. One of UNICEF’s millennium development goals (MDG) on education and gender equality is to “promote gender equality and empower women” and “eliminating gender disparity at all levels of education and empower women” by 2015. Through my fieldwork in Ethio-STEM, I saw that these goals are best achievable through consistent affirmation of women in the classroom. There is tremendous value in creating safe spaces that recognize young women’s narratives, aspirations, and worldview.

In our class discussions, we explored the meaning of women’s empowerment within the intersection of social, racial, and class dynamics. How do women become “empowered”? What are the power dynamics that are at play, when organizations claim to “empower women”? Is it giving power to women? What does the term really mean? What did the term mean in a social, political, and economic context? How can Ethio-STEM tackle this issue of women’s empowerment in a radical, necessary way? In essence, it was important to discover what the term meant for each of us. We learned together what attaining “empowerment” meant in a critical context. We discussed the power dynamic that results from grouping women as a historically disadvantaged social class in Ethiopia. Our classroom reflections helped frame the concept of “women’s empowerment” in a context that best applied to our lives and narratives.

It was my intention to have students grapple with the disadvantages they had to overcome as women, not with a defeatist attitude but rather with a positive mindset that empowered them to make informed decisions and to pursue their aspirations and dreams. In Ethio-STEM, each student had to define what empowerment meant for herself; each student was an individual who deserved to have a say on what her individual needs were. That would in turn form a collective understanding of what the community’s needs were. I informed my students that they needed to separate other people’s opinions of what’s best for them (such as pressure from parents, family members, siblings, and teachers) from their own thoughts.

The two empowerment models that deeply resonated with me came from WISE and U-Yāḥ-tal, two distinct organizations that had complementary theory of change models. I gained inspiration to shape Ethio-STEM through the use of WISE’s feminist approach to empowerment, and U-Yāḥ-tal’s theory of personal development as the key to community change. Hence, Ethio-STEM’s Empowerment Model is to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. This process creates the power to use these choices in his or her own life, community and society, with individuals acting on issues that they define as important.”

In addition, Ethio-STEM had designated reflection sessions for students to critically engage in the core ideology of The Empowerment Model. I grappled with some of these questions myself, and used our reflection sessions as feedback to improve the program. Some of the questions are as follows:

• How did that World Bank report make you feel?
• What were your perceptions of the women’s achievement in STEM fields?
• What kinds of resources would you like to succeed in the future?
• Where did you see yourselves in the next ten years?
• What is the driving force behind your career and academic interests?
• What kinds of careers are women ‘expected’ to have? Do you feel pressured to choose certain careers over others?
• What kinds of challenges do you expect to face upon entering higher education?
• How can you make sure you’re adequately prepared to tackle the academic rigor, and demands of being in a STEM program?
• Will you have the necessary background in these subjects?
• Will they have the support system they need upon entering universities?
As an aspiring educator and scientist, it is very challenging for me to answer these questions. As a summer program, Ethio-STEM may not be an impactful program (due to its short time span), but as an organization Ethio-STEM can create a network for women and girls who are going through similar challenges, as well as function as a think-tank for mentors, educators, and teachers to think about decreasing the gender achievement gap. From my personal experience, I know that it's people like my biology teacher, Mr. Tesfaye, who enabled me to achieve confidence and belief in myself to go through challenges in the STEM field, who can make a difference.

Interaction with Overall Gergi Community
Home does not feel like home when you're challenging the status quo
I left Gergi when I was 16 years old to attend boarding school in Johannesburg, South Africa, then found myself at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. As a Sorensen Fellow, I chose to come back to spend time in my country at a time when my political thought, emotional consciousness, and sense of belonging in the world is still being built. As a black woman in the sciences, I realized the many achievement gaps that exist across racial lines, and across genders. As a rising senior in college, I wanted to get into education, and in order to understand the structural issues, I knew I would get valuable insights by going back to my roots.

In Gergi, there are about 10 school districts, a large number considering that it's a small area found along the outskirts of Addis Ababa. Most of the schools are private, and there are two public elementary and high schools. Gergi was once a small town that was swallowed by the bigger city and is now on its way to gaining urbanization. Gergi's population has climbed over the years, with people opting to live in Gergi rather than Addis Ababa’s more urban districts such as Bole, Piasa, and AratKilo. Most of my students commuted daily from other city districts to attend the program, though they were used to the commute, since they went to the school during the regular nine-month academic year.

Gergi is a conservative district, with Addis Ababa's two orthodox churches located within walking distance from the Ethio-Parents School. If you are a woman walking through Gergi, you have to tolerate countless stares, catcalling, and even physical assault. There were many times I walked very quickly, or chose to head to the school at a much earlier time to minimize contact with street dwellers. When it was time to leave, I would ask one of the mentors to accompany me until I reached the main road. Often, my brother would accompany me or drive me to the location, which felt much safer.

Gergi’s overall climate is not conducive for exploration or outside learning. There were many times that I wanted to take the students on a field trip to a neighboring school, but was not able to due to warnings from parents and school...
administrators. For the time that the students were with me, I had to ensure their safety. I remember one mother coming with her daughter on the second week of Ethio-STEM saying, “I would much rather prefer if you kept my daughter in school, and not let her out.” She continued, “I fear for her safety here. I don’t trust anyone with her except you.” I felt a huge responsibility in my hands. For the time that these students were here, I was not only their mentor, I was their protector and guide.

**Being Ethiopian, Mistaken for Foreigner**

Immersing myself in the Gergi community was nerve-wracking at first. Upon my interaction with Gergi residents, I realized that my Amharic accent had changed, along with many things that enabled Gergi residents to identify me as foreign. Apparently, the way I pronounce certain words had changed. I would also mistakenly insert English words in my sentences. Three weeks after I came home, I was speaking to a local shopkeeper in our local supermarket. He asked me where I was from. “How long are you in Ethiopia for? And your Amharic is good for a foreigner.” I was taken aback. What makes me stand out? I asked myself after the shopkeeper’s embarrassing question. People in the shop were looking at me differently as well. I assured the shopkeeper that I was born and raised in the country. My mother had warned me not to say or insinuate that I had come from the U.S.; people would easily increase prices because they would anticipate that I have U.S. currency and see me as very wealthy. It was a subtle reminder that I was in a different world, and I had to understand how my interactions with people in my community could be interpreted.

**Personal Connections to Students: A Critical Part of Ethio-STEM’s Empowerment Model**

**The Blazing Dagim**

Dagmawit was one of the first students I met in the Ethio-STEM Program. She had called me a few times before the program had officially started, expressing her interest in participating. On the interview day, she promptly showed up at 9:00 am, almost half an hour before her peers. She engaged well with the university mentors, fully comfortable in the empty library that was intended for a full student body.

She greeted everyone with a smile and a firm handshake, with a tight grip that one wouldn’t expect from a person her size. “My name is Dagmawit, but you can call me Dagim,” she would say, with her head held high and her hands resting partially on her lap. Dagim would look straight into your eyes, her gaze tightly locked and intentional. She carefully listened to each question before answering, always keeping her cool. When asked difficult questions, Dagim would take a quick pause. She would answer the questions with the same degree of confidence and poise. Unlike her peers, Dagim showed no signs of nervousness. She was always sure of herself, carrying with her an aura of self-confidence whenever she walked into a room.

Dagim was eager to get to know all the students in the classroom at once; she would spontaneously stretch out her hand to other students and greet them. She made friends very quickly, even those who were not from her grade. There was a noticeably reserved student, Heldana, who became more at ease in the classroom upon her interaction with Dagim.

At age 16, Dagim possessed a talent for public speaking and writing, and she had an ambitious set of goals that made her easily stand out from the rest of her peers. On one of the lunchtime breaks, I had asked her what she wanted to become when she finished her university studies. She smiled at me, and said that she wanted to become a cardiovascular surgeon, because she had never met a woman in that profession before. Her ambition didn’t come from nowhere; she watched *Grey’s Anatomy*, in which the lead character, Meredith, is a surgeon. She saw many women who were doctors on that show, and she imagined herself in their shoes. She also wanted to help her ailing grandfather who was under her mother’s care.

Dagim expressed that helping people made her happy. She was interested in politics, and after she becomes a doctor, she has plans to join a political party and become the first female prime minister of Ethiopia! I was elated to hear her dreams and aspirations. I gave her a high five, and told her to never lose her confidence in herself. Despite the many structural issues that prevent women from succeeding in STEM fields, Dagim still dreamed of a better future for herself.

Dagim was fully knowledgeable about the current state of Ethiopia, when it comes to women’s representation in STEM and other fields. During our class discussions on the topic of women’s empowerment, Dagim raised a point that Ethiopia not only lacked competent women trained in STEM fields, but also needed women leaders to create a lasting impact in the country’s future. The essay she wrote for the weekly reflection assignment, “Critical Perspectives in Women’s Empowerment,” incorporated her dreams for a better Ethiopia, in which she imagined a country where women held the same power as men in government and education. “I dream,” Dagim wrote, “of having more women politicians in our parliament, more women doctors, lawyers, and judges. We
will not have a democracy when women don’t have the same power as men.”

Dagim’s presence had a ripple effect on the rest of her peers. Her contributions to the classroom motivated other students to voice their opinions and viewpoints. Dagim voiced her opinions in a calm, respectful way that allowed for constructive dialogue. She felt comfortable giving me feedback on the assignments and projects in the summer program. It was critical to get feedback during times when I made the mistake of assuming that the class had certain background information. Because of this, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Dagim inspired me to reshape and rethink the curriculum of Ethio-STEM. Her constant participation in the classroom helped me to remodel certain assignments and activities, which was invaluable throughout the summer program.

Dagim came to the Ethio-STEM program every day, even on optional study sessions and tutoring sessions. She was like a ticking box full of questions. She asked questions on anything that confused her or was unfamiliar to her. Dagim also wanted to have an international understanding of the world, and considered herself a global citizen. She counted on me as a resource to tell her as much as I could about the U.S.A. She wanted to study abroad in the U.S. and pursue a medical profession. During class breaks, she would talk about Ethiopian politics, medicine, and current news events. She was the most curious student I had the pleasure of working with at the summer program.

I recall Dagim offering to help me carry some of the books and notebooks I had collected from the students and return them to the library. On many occasions, Dagim volunteered to bring chalk and duster from the teacher’s office to the classroom. I would watch her from the classroom windows as she ran across the three campuses to bring the materials. She was athletic and ran at such a high speed that when she came back to the classroom she was breathing heavily, clearly exhausted from her sprint to fetch the items. I always thanked her, and gave her ample time to rest before carrying on with the classroom activities.

Dagim was eager to volunteer for Ethio-STEM, even on rocky days when the program wasn’t running smoothly. During the middle of the program, the summer program experienced some administrative issues with the school. After one mentor’s laptop was stolen while on site, the mentors all took a week off to carry out the investigation of the stolen laptop. The laptop included lesson plans and other material that we needed for the program. It was stolen while class was in session. What shocked the mentors and myself was not the stolen laptop itself, but the security breach that allowed a stranger to come onto the school compound unnoticed by security guards.

This incident put all of our safety in the school compound into question. After I saw the concern of the mentors, I hesitated to continue the program until the school took responsibility for tightening up security while we were indoors. I realized that discontinuing the program would mean losing connection to my mentees. As Dagim’s mentor, I felt a void that would not be replaced had I decided to discontinue the program.

Dagim mobilized Ethio-STEM students, and together they demanded better security for the campus. Dagim spearheaded their discussions with school administrators, school guards, and the unit leader. When I came back to the school after taking two days off for police investigation purposes, I was surprised at the amount of lobbying she and her team accomplished. Dagim and the rest of the inaugural cohort had cooperatively called their parents and collectively expressed their dissatisfaction with the school’s security system. I worked directly with the school administration soon after this incident had occurred. The amount of
support from students and parents was invaluable to Ethio-STEM’s continued progress during the summer.

With time, I learned more about Dagim’s personal life, and our connection grew as we discovered having similar experiences and perspectives. Dagim had lost her father when she was younger, and was raised by a single mother. She had a younger brother, whom she often raved about. Her mother was well-educated, and was an invaluable support who enabled Dagim to excel in school and be confident in herself. She lived most of her life in Gergi, where I had been raised.

Mourning
The past two years have been a difficult time for my family. My father was diagnosed with brain cancer in the middle of my sophomore year at Brandeis. As an international student, I experienced episodes of homesickness, and often was worried about my father’s deteriorating condition as a cancer patient. I visited during Christmas break and summer breaks. During my first visit home after his first diagnosis, he was still strong and able to walk. As I continued to visit home, I was trying to come to terms with cancer being an unforgiving illness. He had begun to lose a lot of weight, and could no longer walk the way he used to. Before I left home, I recalled my father being an athletic man who served as a pilot in the military – now he was struggling to do something as mundane as walking.

I had struggled with all this for a whole year before deciding to head to Ethiopia to make Ethio-STEM a reality. A month after I got home and before Ethio-STEM was running, I began to notice that my father was getting weaker and weaker. Revisiting those memories is difficult, since I could feel his pain and suffering whenever I was near him. He was strong throughout the process. He did not want to make me worry too much. I spent much of my down time while working on Ethio-STEM with him.

On July 3, my family and I gathered to go to church. I wanted to tell my dad that I was going to see him later, when my mom and I started to notice that my father was getting weaker and weaker. Revisiting those memories is difficult, since I could feel his pain and suffering whenever I was near him. He was strong throughout the process. He did not want to make me worry too much. I spent much of my down time while working on Ethio-STEM with him.

Dealing with Grief, and Practicing Self-Care
How can I become a role model to someone when I am experiencing some of the worst pain of my life? How could I be “present” for this group of girls when I needed my own alone time? I struggled with these concepts of personal space. I had to deal with locking away intimate parts of my private life away from the public eye. Yet, I did not want to grieve in vain. I still carried my father’s name, and the only way that I could ensure my father’s legacy was to continue doing work that inspired me from the core. With great grief also came a lot of raw emotions, and Ethio-STEM was a way I could channel my grief into something constructive. As tradition dictated, I wore all black for a whole month after my father passed away. During this time, a lot of office workers in the school administration, returning teachers, and other staff kept asking me about my choice of dress. Why was I always wearing black? After finding out about my father’s passing I was met with the usual condolences and sympathies. While I appreciated people’s concern over my personal life, I struggled with being reminded after every encounter that I was still grieving.

I was not prepared to be asked so many intrusive questions at the time that I was starting the summer internship that I had been planning for almost a year. I felt that the whole world was against me, because I did not anticipate losing a parent at the same time as I was starting Ethio-STEM. Looking back, I am thankful for the many support systems that were in place that allowed me to deal with personal difficulties that I struggled with behind the scenes.

To my students, I tried my best to give them the summer program they signed up for. I showed up everyday at 8:30 am. I showed up for them, I showed up because
they were important and I needed to set an example. Many parents found out about my father’s passing, and offered their support throughout the program. I had parents calling me, finding me outside class time and sending me messages through their kids offering their support. I realized then that through Ethio-STEM, I had created a community that included parents, students, and mentors. I was actualizing a space that as a young woman I wanted and needed to thrive in the world. At the end of the program Dagim, Misgana, Eden, and many other students wrote me personal letters that truly moved me. I keep these letters on my Brandeis wall as a reminder of what Ethio-STEM represented: community building, supportive networks, and women’s empowerment.

Dagim shared such intimate parts of her life during the Ethio-STEM summer program at the time that I also lost my father. She would constantly ask me how I was doing and check on me. I appreciated that our mentor-student relationship also served as a friendship that provided me with a mutually beneficial support system that I needed to go through the program. The mentors were also there supporting me every step of the way, through every single class activity and lessons we were running together. Mr. Tesfaye, the Deputy Director and the main Director were also very sympathetic and offered to help me in running the summer program. Marci McPhee, Dan Terris, David Weinstein, and Barbara Strauss from the Ethics Center sent me supportive messages, in a time when I was contemplating not returning to Brandeis in the Fall. Above everything, I appreciated being listened to, and people validating the pain and trauma I was going through.

I am beyond grateful for all the support and love I received from everyone mentioned (and unmentioned here), it made me realize that I was not alone, and that helped me go on even in times I thought I was falling apart.

“Weart our government, media houses, schools, must focus on creating a new culture in our society.”  
— Sunday Adelaja

Activism and Social Change: The Personal is Political: How Activism Re-Centers Me

I have learned to find home within myself. As a young person who left home at 16 years old, I have always struggled to define what home was. My world is continuously changing as I am adapting, unlearning, and relearning survival mechanisms and understanding my cultural, religious, political, and psychological development in spaces that simultaneously allow and do not allow my growth. This summer has made me evaluate where my priorities are in bridging my activism with my coursework.

At the heart of Ethio-STEM is the need for diversity and inclusion. Women have been underrepresented in higher education due to many factors embedded in the cultural and socio-political climate of Ethiopia. In many ways, I see the aim behind Ethio-STEM as deeply political, and critical. Making space for women in higher education ensures increased retention, and increased participation in the workforce in government, medicine, engineering, and the justice system. I see Ethio-STEM as an organization that challenges the status quo in Ethiopia, and matches my activism to academic work.

Conclusion (Remarks)

Ethio-STEM was in many ways birthed from a need I had growing up. I desperately wanted a mentor, a guide, someone who would help me understand my strengths and weaknesses. I imagined a world with people who looked like me and shared cultural ties with me mentoring girls in their community. The concept of empowerment was more illuminated to me, as I realized that empowering someone else was showing them their strengths and weaknesses, and the ability to look into themselves and see power, vision, and courage.

At the end of the program, I awarded achievement certificates to select Ethio-STEM students based on their performance in the program, as well as their overall character, leadership potential, and commitment to service. Dagim received all three certificates in recognition of her contributions to the Ethio-STEM community. Dagim is a young woman who has the purpose and vision to impact people positively around her; she has certainly left a huge impact on my life, and the way I see the world. I am thankful to have been inspired by Dagim through my fieldwork in Ethio-STEM.

In Ethio-STEM I did not only get a chance to mentor students from different socioeconomic classes, ethnicities, and diverse family units, I also met with future doctors, lawyers, scientists, and innovators. My view of these women as future change makers was crucial in how I conducted the classes and supervised mentors. It was important to frame each student’s role in shaping a better Ethiopia. Each student was important in her own way, and in the way she contributed to the class dynamic. Although it was challenging incorporating different methods of teaching, mainly culturally relevant pedagogy and women’s empowerment, into the main curriculum, it was an equally rewarding process that benefited everyone involved.
Working on Ethio-STEM enabled me to empower the girls, and the cyclical approach also empowered me to continue necessary work in bridging activism and scholarship together. The learning was a two-way process, and I learned from each of my students. Interacting with them made me understand the kind of impact I want to have as an aspiring educator, scientist, and world citizen. I am thankful for the Sorensen fellowship for giving me the opportunity to work on a dream that I’ve had for a long time. I plan to continue the work I started after graduating from Brandeis, in order to have more impact in my community.

Notes

1. In Ethiopia people have to constantly charge their phone lines with access cards to let them continue using their cell phones with the phone service.

2. http://www.firstinspires.org FIRST: The mission of FIRST is to inspire young people to be science and technology leaders, by engaging them in exciting mentor-based programs that build science, engineering, and technology skills, that inspire innovation, and that foster well-rounded life capabilities including self-confidence, communication, and leadership.

3. http://www.gearsinc.org GEARs: GEARs is a non-profit, volunteer-based organization, with its mission being to get young people excited about careers in science, technology and engineering.

4. http://growingstems.org growingSTEMS™. An organization with a mission of developing the next generation of problem-solvers through the application of interactive lessons, STEM activities, and encouraging students to excel in STEM.

5. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Ladson-Billings defines it as a pedagogy of opposition, not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions a) Students must experience academic success; b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order.

6. Ladson-Billings pg. 60

7. Culture of Learning: a collection of thinking habits, beliefs about self, and collaborative workflows that result in sustained critical learning.


11. Gradual Release of Responsibility Model: Research shows that optimal learning is achieved when teachers use this model. Students gain more responsibility in the classroom, and take ownership of their own learning.


13. WISE: A grassroots organization based in New Hampshire that focuses on domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking: http://www.wiseuv.org/history.html

14. U-Yäh-tal Empowerment is a global, independent, non-religious, non-political, personal and community empowerment network, founded by Brian Arthur Solomon in 2011, after more than 30 years of having worked with and for a range of NGOs whose focus was on personal and community development. Website: http://uyahtal-empowerment.com/the-empowerment-model/

15. From WISE’s Empowerment Philosophy (source: website)
Oslo, Norway

I arrived in Oslo on May 18, 2015. It was one of those sunny days where the rays hit your skin in a way that makes your whole body vibrate with warmth. I am perhaps one of the few who really love airports and airplanes. The anxiousness of taking off and landing, of an adventure that’s waiting, and perhaps best of all, the excitement of coming home. We have a saying in Norwegian, borte er bra men hjemme er best. It means that it is always fun to go out and experience new things, but the best feeling is always coming home from a long trip. Coming back to Norway meant coming back home. It marks the beginning of my arrival.

The Brown Norwegian

Being Norwegian has always been an important but not necessarily solid part of my identity. My father is black and Native American, and my mother is white and ethnic Norwegian. I’ve always felt that my Norwegian-ness was something that had to be proved. Although I know the language and spent part of my life in Norway, I have still had a difficult time owning an identity that I know was supposed to be mine but at the same time didn’t feel like it should be.

In the spring of 2014, I took a semester off from Brandeis to live with my grandmother in Molde, Norway. It was there that I enrolled in courses at the Adult Learning Center and became friends with many immigrants who were new to Norway. Most of the people, who would become some of my closest friends, had escaped war and political and physical abuse to come to Norway. Although I had grown up in the United States, the world’s most heterogeneous country, I had never been this intimately acquainted with people who had faced such adversity. My struggle for identity seemed minuscule in comparison to their struggle for survival.

There were many times that I struggled with “Norwegian-ness,” and I felt that I strongly identified with the struggles of being an “immigrant” while still having this “birthright” privilege of Norwegian citizenship that I sometimes felt I didn’t deserve. I often wondered how I could reconcile those emotions, and asked myself whether anything beneficial could come from these experiences. I was still a sophomore and wondered how I could use the rest of my time at Brandeis to somehow bring justice to the immigrant experience in Norway. I started to research for myself the history of immigration in Norway, which I hoped would give me answers about why immigration and integration in Norway were so difficult. Instead, this research gave me more questions.

Brief Background on Norway

The population of Norway is a little more than five million people. It is a very egalitarian and homogeneous society, similar to the other Scandinavian countries that surround it. The country is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democratic system of governance. Due to its vast oil reserve it is one of the richest and most industrialized countries in the world.

The welfare state has been a central component of life in Norway since World War II. Nazi Germany had been defeated, and national pride was so strong that class differences felt negligible (Brochmann, 2012). New immigrants, primarily young single men from Pakistan
and Sri Lanka, began to come to Norway in the 1960s to fill gaps in the labor market. As immigration increased, the expanding number of subcultures challenged the national culture. The idea of the unity of the nation, brought forth by the events of World War II, was now being challenged by the idea of inclusion through diversity.

However, a “multicultural” Norway is an idea that has not sat well with a significant number of ethnic Norwegians. In an August 28, 2011 article from the Bergen Times, a poll revealed that four out of 10 Norwegians still viewed “immigration as a threat to the country’s distinctive character,” and over half of those polled believed that in times of adversity, “employment should be first secured for Norwegians” (Blake, 2011). This reveals several issues, most significantly that there is an “otherness” associated with immigrants. This “us vs. them” mentality is something that has been instilled in Norwegians since World War II, and it can be very detrimental to the integration process for immigrants. In the 1970s, the Norwegian government sought to create a basic structure for immigrant integration programs. Although immigrants started coming to Norway during the 1960s, the government of Norway did not fully realize the adversity new immigrants would face – for example, learning the language and customs of Norway – in order to be able to better adapt to their new country (Brochmann, 2014). Norway has a multicultural approach to immigration, meaning that it is important for immigrants to Norway to feel that they can retain their national identity, language, and ties to their respective countries of origin. However, the Norwegian government also feels that it is imperative that immigrants have a familiar understanding of the cultural customs of Norway, in order for them to be able to fully adapt to their new host country (Brochmann, 2014).

On April 28, 2015 Aftenposten reported that the Progress Party of Norway, which holds a significant percentage of the seats in the Norwegian Parliament, held a meeting that produced a statement that Norway should stop accepting asylum seekers (Tjernshaugen 2015). The Progress Party would like for Norway to work to change the guidelines set by the Refugee Convention of 1951, which they believe to be outdated. Ideally they would like to end the asylum system as it is and only accept individuals with refugee status, rather than spending many resources on determining who is “real” and who is persecuted (Tjernshaugen 2015).

2015 was a particularly emotional and difficult year for migration throughout Europe. The atrocities committed by the Assad regime against its own people in Syria led to what some are calling the greatest refugee crisis since the Holocaust. Thousands of refugees have come to Norway, and new controversial laws put in place by the Norwegian government have made it harder than ever to seek asylum in the country. Like most European countries, Norway doesn’t let those with asylum or refugee status work. If there are not any discrepancies in an application, a work permit may be granted, but employment is still rather unlikely.

A large factor to keep in mind is that “asylum seeker” and “refugee” are both temporary statuses with many restrictions. For example, you are not allowed to leave the country, enroll in a university, or even get married. Depending on the situation and the verification of documents, it can take months and often years to receive notice of refugee status. Even after an individual has spent years as an asylum seeker, Norway will often deny refugee status if they feel that protection by the Norwegian government is no longer needed. In those cases, the government will deport people, even children, back to their sending countries. Although it is the right of the receiving country to
deport people who are deceitful or can be returned back to countries that are no longer unstable, it is often children who feel the negative effects of these policies. Often, the children have lived in Norway for longer than they lived in their sending countries, and it is tragic when they are deported back to “home” countries where they feel that they are not at all home. Refugees and asylum seekers are people who have fled their home countries because of persecution; they come with many traumatic experiences that negatively impact their health for years to come.

Take for example the case of Mewael, a young man from Eritrea whom I met during my stay in Norway in 2014. He had fled his home and became a political asylum seeker in Norway. He left for Europe in 2013, leaving behind his one-year-old son and a young wife with his parents back in Eritrea. Mewael fled because he was associated with a political group that opposed President Isaias Afwerki’s rule. He was therefore subject to persecution by the Eritrean government. Mewael vehemently opposed laws that prohibited free press. His activities made him a target for arrest, torture, and even death; he felt that he had no option other than to leave.

The path to recognized refugee status varies and often means facing treacherous and unpredictable odds. The difficulty of the journey alone often pulls people to stay in their home countries. Not only is this journey expensive, sometimes costing several thousand dollars per person, but it is also extremely dangerous, as people have to face harsh weather conditions and wild seas to get into the European Union. While this in one way limits the number of people coming into the EU, middle class young men are usually the first to make the journey as they are expected to provide for their family. Ideally, after the man has established himself in the receiving country, he will apply for family reunification, and will have saved up enough money to pay for his family to move to his new location (Hirschman 1999).

This was also the case of Mewael. Once his asylum seeker status was approved in Norway, he was sent to live in an asylum house in Molde, eight hours north of Oslo. Here he received a monthly stipend, in exchange for attending a yearlong Norwegian integration course. At the course, refugees and asylum seekers are taught the Norwegian language and learn how to navigate Norwegian society. I remember the pain in his voice, as he would tell me how much he missed his young son and wife home in Eritrea. I would ask him if he was receiving any help to cope with the atrocities he had experienced in his home country. “God is the only help I need,” was often his reply.

When I had arrived at the adult learning center in 2014, the wounds from the July 22, 2011 terrorist attacks were still fresh. This attack forced Norway to re-evaluate whether being Norwegian meant being multicultural. Norwegians had to grapple with the fact that maybe they weren’t as accepting as they had originally thought. I never knew if Mewael ever sought out, or received any psychological counseling in Norway, or if he even knew the resources were available to him. But it was through stories like his that I became increasingly interested in how feelings of xenophobia, racism and isolation affected minority health. I had heard so much from my friends who were immigrants that I wanted to begin to research it for myself.

I became curious about what resources were available to minority populations, especially asylum seekers and refugees. In addition to the traumatic experiences they carry with them, they are often subject to discrimination, racism, and fear.

While Norway is often seen as a utopia to many outsiders, a strong undercurrent of xenophobia and racism is also present that carries with it health and safety challenges for minority groups in the country.

My experiences in Molde in 2014 sparked a research paper I wrote for my Sorensen preparation course in Spring 2014. I decided to examine the July 22, 2011 terrorist attacks on Utøya and if this event affected the health of visible minorities in Oslo. The 32-year-old Norwegian Anders Behring Breivik, the lone gunman behind the attacks, saw himself as a victim of the Norwegian liberal state and called for violent opposition to multiculturalism in Norway. He killed 69 people in Utøya, execution style, after planting a fertilizer bomb in front of Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg’s office in the center of Oslo, killing eight and injuring 209 people (Borchgrevink, 2013). Those killed on the Utøya were predominantly teenagers attending a camp organized by the
This city is like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. It’s alive, it’s green, it’s cold yet warm at the same time. Everyone here says there’s nothing like summer in Oslo and I am beginning to believe them.

Norwegian Labour Party, the party that had allowed an increase in immigrants and refugees in the 1980s.

Prominent Norwegian social anthropologist Sindre Bangstad puts forth the idea that Breivik is not alone in his xenophobic and Islamophobic beliefs, and that the problem lies in the mainstreaming of racist and xenophobic discourses in Norwegian society. After reading Bangstad’s book, *Anders Breivik and the Rise of Islamophobia*, I questioned the effects that being a visible minority has on a person’s health. Are they more likely to be stressed because of perceived racism or isolation? Are they less likely to seek medical attention? Was the Norwegian government providing enough resources for its marginalized inhabitants?

At the end of the preparatory course we were asked to write about what we would do after the course was over to answer the questions that we had asked ourselves. At this point I had already secured an internship at the National Center for Minority Research (NAKMI) in Oslo, Norway. NAKMI is a government funded research organization that conducts research on minority health outcomes in Norway. I was really excited to for an opportunity to explore health in minorities as well as to experience for myself, life as a minority in Oslo. I felt prepared and anxious for the experience. My family was from Molde and I hadn’t spent much time in Oslo prior to my internship. As the Spring 2015 semester wound down, I couldn’t help but start counting down the days until May 18th.

**Løkka**

I walk out of the Oslo S train terminal with two large suitcases, trying to shield my eyes from the sun as I walk down the stairs to the circle of taxis waiting below. Keeping one eye on my 19-year-old sister and the other on the cars in front of us, I flag down a taxi driver. The car stops, and a medium-sized man with caramel skin, a salt-and-pepper beard and a burgundy turban steps out of the car. “Beautiful out, where can I take you today?” he says with a smile and a wink, in perfect Norwegian. “Sannergata in Grønerløkka, please,” I squeal. I can’t contain my excitement.

The city of Oslo is pretty clearly divided – ethnic Norwegians live on the west side of the Aker River, while Norwegians with an immigrant background live on the east side. This generalization holds true except for one neighborhood: Grønerløkka.

Grønerløkka, or to the locals, Løkka, is the Norwegian, gentrified version of Brooklyn. In fact, it’s a neighborhood sometimes referred to as the “East Side’s West Side” (Andreasson, 2009). It’s an eclectic neighborhood to say the very least. And with the homogeneity that is Norway, it’s refreshing to be surrounded by young people of all different backgrounds, cultures and skin colors. Until the 1990s, Løkka was a working-class neighborhood, but it has since been transformed into one of Oslo’s trendiest areas to live.

You can find everything to eat from authentic shawarma to exciting take-offs on sushi and kebabs. This place is for young people, not just young in age but in thought and spirit. A culture that is typically known for its shyness and introverted-ness becomes in Løkka a community of warm and outgoing people.

We arrive at the loft-style apartment that I have rented for half the summer. Located at the top of the building, we have the best view of the street we live on, Sannergata. I look out the window and just watch. Young women with long, tight, blond ponytails and designer workout clothes on their way to the luxury gym next door walk right past a Roma woman sitting on a broken-down cardboard box, begging with a plastic cup. Tesla taxis weave in and out of the lanes and young men walk the streets in their designer loafers. *Welcome to the world’s richest country.*

This city is like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. It’s alive, it’s green, it’s cold yet warm at the same time. Everyone here says there’s nothing like summer in Oslo and I am beginning to believe them. The Aker River flows through the city, grazing through the many parks and pulsing under all of the bridges. I feel my body come alive when I lay down on the grass and just let wind brush past my face while the sun cascades down on my body. This is the way I would like to remember Oslo.

**Nydalen, Oslo**

I take the 30 bus from Grønerløkka, to Nydalen where I get off at the Gullhaugveien stop in front of the...
I hop off the bus and cross the street, and step into the bustle of the sidewalk traffic. Men and women dressed in designer business suits, with hair meticulously styled, walk around here with purpose. I look around. One person is focused intently on responding to emails on her iPhone, while another checks out his reflection in the tall windows that surround most of the buildings in the vicinity. Another woman leans against the back of the platform, her right leg bent, with one hand holding open a book and the other coolly relaxed in a pocket. Here is the pinnacle of wealth, privilege and education: the training grounds for Norway’s upper echelon.

The main site of my internship was to be the National Center for Minority Health Research (NAKMI), located across the street from BI in a brand new building. The doors to the building open automatically, and I greet the building’s information desk worker as I walk to the glass elevator that will take me up to NAKMI. I count the floors as I go up. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. I have arrived.

*   *   *

NAKMI

NAKMI was created in 2003 by the Norwegian Ministry of Health and is administered by Oslo University. NAKMI is a government-funded, multidisciplinary center that aims to be a focal point for the country’s expertise in both mental and somatic immigrant health. Its core activities are research, development and dissemination work, which includes training, guidance and counseling for clinicians that work with minority populations. The mission of the organization is to create and disseminate research-based knowledge that can promote good and equal health for people with immigrant backgrounds. NAKMI researchers use their findings to influence government policy and create educational programs for decision makers, health managers, health professionals, researchers and students. They believe that social change will come through research and education.

To understand the way that public organizations like NAKMI are run, it is important to understand a bit about the role of the government. Norway is a constitutional monarchy, with the legislative power lying in the government and the parliament. Norway has a strong welfare system, and it is the belief of the people that the government is responsible for the general well-being of its citizens, quite the opposite of the individualism that runs through the veins of Americans. Each government bureau functions within the limits of its mission, and does not cross those boundaries. For example, NAKMI’s mission lies in creating and disseminating research-based knowledge about use of and access to health services. NAKMI has two branches: research and outreach. It seeks to fill
The line of visitors waiting to come into Caritas to get help. We would help upwards of 50 people a day.

in the gap in the Norwegian healthcare system into which persons with immigrant, refugee and minority background often fall.

The researchers and staff of NAKMI are kind, punctual and professional; it is an environment of collaboration, a place of ideas. There is a loose hierarchy, but the boundaries are fluid and everyone is open to suggestions. At least once a week, we would have meetings in the large conference room to discuss team development, collaborate on research projects or go through research exercises. Assorted coffee and tea options are always lined up in the middle of the table at the center of the room. Fruits, nuts, vegetables dips, sometimes even catered lunches were available for us to snack on while we tackled the challenge of the day. I was delighted by the team atmosphere, intoxicated by the academic discussions, and humbled by the experience of working with my colleagues.

I was intrigued especially by the location of NAKMI, far away from most of the immigrant population on which its research is focused. There was a disconnect between the immigrants and the work of the researchers; this was obvious to me when I felt stuck within the mission statement of NAKMI, trying to find a way to interact with the immigrant population and use the research we have done to help them. I wanted to combine theory and practice in my experience. Knowing this, I began to contact organizations that dealt directly with immigrants, and The Immigrant Resource Center at Caritas Norge was the one that ended up being the best fit. My advisors at NAKMI were supportive of my idea, though they had never thought of reaching out to such an organization before.

My internship at NAKMI was focused on three projects, the first of which was transcribing interviews from the study, “Children As Next of Kin.” This was a small study being conducted by NAKMI to fill in the research gap on this topic. Previously, the University of Oslo (UIO) along with many hospitals in the country conducted a similar study; however, that study did not include those who did not have fluency in Norwegian. Considering that 32% of the population in Oslo has an immigrant background, choosing to disqualify potentially a third of the population could result in conclusions and data that are not fully representative of the population. By conducting a separate, albeit smaller study on children as next of kin, NAKMI collected information that would help address the needs of this vulnerable population.

My role in this study was to transcribe two interviews; the first of a patient together with his or her children, and the second of a group of nurses who work at the hospital where the patient was treated. Additionally, I participated in a number of interesting meetings, the topics of which ranged from diabetes in South East Asian immigrants to the treatment of dementia. This allowed me to gain exposure to actual projects and meet very influential and relevant professionals in this area.

Throughout my internship, I worked on my own small project about health literacy in collaboration with my advisors at NAKMI and the Immigrant Resource Center at Caritas Norge. Health literacy is a topic that is relevant to all populations. At some point in every person’s life, it will be important to be able to take medical directions or make important health decisions. Studies show that immigrants, including refugees, are known to have more infectious diseases than indigenous populations in recipient countries in the West (Wångdahl, 2014). These poor health outcomes may be explained by several factors, including access to healthcare and information, as well as
socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds (Wångdahl, 2014).

Up until now, there has not been much research in Norway about health literacy in immigrants. The aim of this project was to find out what immigrants to Norway who have lived there less than 4 years know about the health system in Norway and about health in general. While this was just an exploratory project, my results from the interviews showed that many immigrants did not know their rights to healthcare in Norway. Many were afraid to use the system, or only went when they were seriously sick or injured.

*   *   *

Caritas

I started volunteering at Caritas as a way to add a more practical element to my internship at NAKMI. It was a perfect pairing, really; theory and practice are so intertwined that it would almost be an injustice to not seek opportunities that allow for both. Caritas is a not-for-profit Spanish organization run by the Catholic Church. The particular location at which I volunteered not only works with developing nations, but also provides a free information and resource center for immigrants in Oslo.

Caritas is in many ways just as you might expect it to be. It is located in Grønland, an area of Oslo heavily populated by immigrants. I know residents of Oslo who would never set foot in Grønland, let alone into a place like Caritas. People around here look like they’ve known nothing but hard work all their lives – clothes clearly worn, fingernails dirty, faces wrinkled but for the most part smiling. The contrast is almost startling with the people one might see, for example, in Aker Brygge, Oslo’s most exclusive neighborhood.

I arrive at Caritas every Thursday at 10 am. The line is always out the door, people waiting for their chance to get help. I push myself through the line, trying to make my way to my desk. I set my things aside, and find my way to the book that lies on the table in the makeshift foyer. The book reveals the names of all the visitors who have signed in to the center that day and the languages they speak. I scan the pages looking for English or Norwegian, feeling a little bad that I have mastery of so few languages. Most people there are looking for Spanish, Romanian or Russian, and all three are languages with which I have no experience. I usually end up helping people who come from English-speaking African countries like Ghana and Nigeria, and people from Southeast Asian countries like India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

I specialize in offering advice on the healthcare system in Norway. Everything from where the doctors are, to registering with a general practitioner, to how to get your prescribed medicine. The best part about this is that I never get the same question twice, and I never know what type of problem I am going to have to help solve. But I don’t just help answer questions about the health care system. Many of the questions I get are about how to create a resume, how to apply for a job and how to deal with all the documentation of living as resident alien in Norway.

The organizational structure of Caritas is a bit more complicated than NAKMI. It is a large international organization that supports many developing countries. I volunteer at the small resource center, which at times feels very disorganized. Many of my colleagues here are employed with Caritas, while I am just a volunteer worker. The camaraderie is different here, I feel more comfortable expressing myself; a large factor, I think, is that everyone working at the information center has been an immigrant himself or herself. I feel more comfortable speaking here, purely because I know that like myself, everyone there has Norwegian as a second language. A lot of this has to do with the struggle I have had all my life, finding the balance between being an insider and an outsider.

I am still navigating my “Norwegian-ness,” and my appearance allows me to blend in with the “others” who are not expected to be Norwegian.
That encounter has in fact played through my mind every day; I am discomfited by it, but I know it was an experience I needed to have. I don’t know more about this man than what he told me, and I’ll never know. But I will never forget him or the impact he’s made on me. Just because someone does something bad does not mean that they are a thoroughly terrible person. I have to believe that even the terrible are capable of doing good, just as the good are capable of being terrible. And that belief means helping someone no matter what wrong they have done.

I feel more comfortable speaking here, purely because I know that like myself, everyone there has Norwegian as a second language. A lot of this has to do with the struggle I have had all my life, finding the balance between being an insider and an outsider. I am still navigating my “Norwegian-ness,” and my appearance allows me to blend in with the “others” who are not expected to be Norwegian.

The environment of Caritas is always relaxed; everyone is busy helping someone but everyone also seems extremely happy with what they are doing. We are fighting the smaller battles, helping people with their everyday problems, the opposite of what I experience at NAKMI, where we battle the long term, trying our best to beat the bureaucracy with our research and knowledge. What I have learned from this is that behind the scenes work is just as important as face-to-face contact. We need information to back our claims and to disprove common (and incorrect) rhetoric.

* * *

When the Stereotype Holds True

I have this narrative about immigrants that I desperately want to believe – that they are all hardworking and just want the opportunity to have a better life in their new home country. On my first day at Caritas, I met someone who shattered my naive narrative.

By the way he walked up to my desk, it was clear that he had been here many times before. His gait was that of familiarity and confidence, unlike the many others who walked up shyly, often embarrassed to be asking for help. He sat down and smiled politely to me while placing his backpack on the desk. “I need help accessing my health records for my doctor. I called the hospital to get them but they said I need to request them online,” he said in perfect English. “What crap, huh?” I responded sympathetically about how complicated the system can be, and offered to help.

We went through the basics: name, age, country of origin, country of residence and personal number (equivalent to a Social Security number in the US). It started out like any of these conversations, with basic information: he was around 60 years old, born in Sri Lanka but has lived in Norway for the past 15 years. The more we kept talking, the more disgusted I became with him. He has spent most of his life bouncing around countries with some form of welfare system – first Canada, then the US, and finally Norway. He keeps roaming around until he gets deported. “The best was when I found my way to Norway; they tried to give me 300,000 kroner and deport me back to Sri Lanka, I laughed and told them not unless they give me 3,000,000 kroner,” he said, smiling. I felt a lump in my throat. He was the kind of person who ruins everything for everyone else; the exception always becomes the example, I thought to myself. The man continued on, finishing his story with the all too familiar ending, “but I told them they couldn’t send me back because the people in Sri Lanka would torture and kill me.” I might have believed him too if I hadn’t heard him tell me step-by-step how he was scamming the system.

It could have been straight from a book or a movie. He used fake names and fake personal numbers to apply for a new residence permit every five years. “This next time, I am going to use my real name,” he said to me while he gave me a wink. I could have cried, and I felt anger wash over my entire body; I wanted to tell him that I wasn’t going to help him anymore. I wanted to tell him how he ruins opportunities for other people and perpetuates stereotypes about immigrants. But I didn’t. I smiled politely and asked for the information he was currently using, and continued until I finished helping him. At the end, I asked him about what he does for a living, with
a guess in mind. “I eat, drink, and work at the church, helping out the children you know,” he said. I was taken aback again. Should I have helped someone I knew was breaking the law? The man was clearly ill and needed help, but did I make the right decision?

After long days like that, I would come back and reflect on my day while walking around the streets of Grünerløkka. It was a neutral ground, in between the richness and poorness of Nydalen and Grønland. It was here where I digested what I had experienced with this man, whom I knew as Afrim, among many other experiences.

That encounter has in fact played through my mind every day; I am discomfited by it, but I know it was an experience I needed to have. I don’t know more about this man than what he told me, and I’ll never know. But I will never forget him or the impact he’s made on me. Just because someone does something bad does not mean that they are a thoroughly terrible person. I have to believe that even the terrible are capable of doing good, just as the good are capable of being terrible. And that belief means helping someone no matter what wrong they have done.

* * *

Reflections

The nature of Norway has changed dramatically in the past 70 years, from a small, impoverished country, to a wealthy yet rather homogenous oil nation, to a full-on multicultural land. A major demographic change, especially when it involves people who are visibly different than the majority group, can provide special challenges. Organizations must adjust their structures, missions and visions as necessary in order to keep up with the demands of the people they serve. During my whole academic career, I have struggled to find the balance between theory and practice. In academia, theory has an allure. But the line “good in theory but not in practice” is a phrase that, although clichéd, strikes a chord with me. How can we find ways to combine theory and practice to work towards solutions?

I believe NAKMI has a meaningful and important role in migrant health in Norway. Through research at NAKMI, we knew that one of the largest obstacles in migrant health was finding adequately trained translators (Kale, 2010). From my experiences at Caritas, I knew that language was the largest barrier in access not only to health resources but to resources in general. Research like Kale’s provides grounds for policy change, which is one of NAKMI’s unstated responsibilities. It must not be forgotten that they are a government organization, and as such are required to act only within the bounds of their mission.

That was one of my both favorite and least favorite aspects of the organization. On one hand, it is easier to act within the bounds of a stated mission; it’s easy to see what falls within it and what falls outside the mission. But on the other hand, there seem to be many moments of missed opportunities for collaboration — missed moments of theory in combination with practice. I think NAKMI could do better to disseminate its findings to information centers like Caritas, and to explore less-than-typical places for the experiences of immigrants. What I had thought to be the target population for our research was in many ways the subject group. I had thought it was migrants themselves that was the target population, but it really was the health professionals and students that studied health care issues. The use of the published studies was left to other more hands on organizations. But I believe that it is only through real collaboration, and the combination of theory and practice, that solutions to the problems of migrant health will be found.

They say that if you find a job you love, you will never work a day in your life. Whoever “they” are, they were right about my internship experience at least. On my first day at NAKMI, we had an office-wide discussion on the meanings of “migrant” and “immigrant”.

In research, definitions and categories are of the utmost importance. They allow us to draw conclusions that may make the difference between life and death in certain populations, and for that reason it is critical that we arrive at definitions and categories that are inclusive and thoughtful.
Migrant (n): A person, or group of people that move from one place to another. Often receives poorer health care and is subject to ridicule and discrimination, especially if not from a western background.

Immigrant (n): A subset of migrant. A person who has permanently relocated to another country. (Not to be confused with the Western “expat”)

Some argue that categories and labels are social constructs that give us meaningless ways to measure characteristics of little importance. In terms of research, nothing could be farther from the truth. In research, definitions and categories are of the utmost importance. They allow us to draw conclusions that may make the difference between life and death in certain populations, and for that reason it is critical that we arrive at definitions and categories that are inclusive and thoughtful.

It seems in Norway that once you’re an immigrant you’re always an immigrant. There is a hierarchy of class and race that no one seems to want to talk about. An ethnic Norwegian is higher in the hierarchy than a Norwegian born to immigrant parents. No matter if you were born in the country or have lived here for 10 days or 10 years, immigrants and those with immigrant backgrounds are stuck in this perpetual state of arrival. They wait until the day arrives that they’ve passed the test and that finally others will see them as Norwegian, but that day never comes.

I experienced this most distinctly when I was at a birthday party this summer in Oslo. I was sitting on a chair in a circle of 10 young people, when women starting coming over to me and examining my face. They picked out features that they said "looked Norwegian" and complimented them.

Certainly this is a clear example of ethnocentrism, in which these women judged my Norwegian-ness relative to their own definition of what it means to be ethnically Norwegian. The women were a part of the in-group, the dominant group that fulfills the apparent requirements of the Norwegian identity. That is, they look ethnically Norwegian, have a Norwegian lineage, speak Norwegian, and were born and raised in Norway. As Norway has become increasingly multicultural, the definition of Norwegian identity has become increasingly “ethnic-Norwegian-centric”, making sure that the dominating group maintains their position of power. This is done unofficially, of course, but significantly, by defining Norwegian identity in terms of parental lineage, language skill, and adherence to cultural norms and resemblance to the Norwegian ethnic ideal.

The search for my Norwegian facial features was an acknowledgment that I do not fit into the ethnic requirements of Norwegian identity, regardless of the fact that I fill the other requirements. I was commended for my “desirable” traits: a “Norwegian” nose, white teeth, angular jaw line, and tanned skin that "was not too dark." While it may seem that my “otherness” was valued, it was valued in terms of exoticism.

There will always be that micro-aggression…that comment at the party or at work that will make you feel different from the ethnic majority. Research shows this to be true, that people associate characteristics with you based on your appearance.

For example, a study published in the Scandinavian Journal of Psychology in 2014 listed various ethnic and national groups of people in Norway and asked respondents to rank them by “warmness” and competence. The group rated the least warm and least competent were the Roma people, followed by the Somali (Bye, 2014.) The group scoring the highest was Swedish immigrants. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those migrants from a non-Western background were seen as being less competent and less warm. In some cases, they were likely no longer Somali “enough” (Polish “enough,” Pakistani “enough”) in their country of origin, and not Norwegian “enough” to be considered Norwegian. In Norway, you are seen as an immigrant for life, especially if you are a person of color.
An anecdote that exemplifies this came up during a discussion at NAKMI about the term “immigrant.” A Norwegian nurse who emigrated from another country many decades ago says, speaking about every time someone calls her an immigrant, “I have been here for years! I speak the language. I have been educated here. I have a job here. I am no longer migrating, and I haven’t been for a while now. I am not an immigrant anymore. Stop calling me that! This is my home now, whether you like it or not.”

This has stuck with me, and I think it reveals many truths about the acceptance of immigrants and migrants in Norway, and so many interesting comparisons can be made between this and the US. In Norway, it’s once an immigrant, always an immigrant; in the US, once you have attained your citizenship, you are indisputably an American.

I have been thinking about why that is. Perhaps it’s because the United States is a country of immigrants, arriving from Poland, China, England, Sierra Leone, Colombia, Mexico and so on. The United States’ largest wave of immigration came in the 1890s...can Americans still call themselves leaders in welcoming immigration? I also think that when someone becomes an American citizen, it is a celebration. Everyone is happy that you have become a part of the club, you’ve become the elite, and you have achieved the opportunity that everyone has been waiting for, bragging about, and yearning for – that American dream is yours for the taking.

Americans have disdain for undocumented immigrants in particular, but for the most part, people are fine with immigration as long as it’s legal. In Norway, there seems to be a disdain for immigrants, documented or not, perhaps because Norway has become relatively multicultural only in the past few decades. The immigrants, the “others,” stick out and are somehow out of place. In the United States, it’s much more difficult to tell who is from a long-time “American” family and who is a more recent arrival.

As someone who is technically ethnic Norwegian, but doesn’t look it entirely, I identify with the struggle of the “immigrant.” It was this struggle that inspired me to get involved with minority health in Norway. My work at NAKMI and Caritas allowed me to interact with the very people who were working to understand what it means to be an immigrant in Oslo and what it feels like to be one. The bittersweet part of these experiences is that you often times end up leaving with more questions than you have answers.

I felt that by the end of the experience I knew more about Norway’s history of immigration and how Norwegian organizations were working together to understand immigration and its intersections with health. Every day my identity and my ideas about what it meant to be Norwegian were challenged.

The lessons I learned about migration and health were complicated and tangled with the fickleness of politics, the hardships of integration and the ends of desperation. The story of migration is a complicated one, with no real end. By the end of my summer in Norway I realized that I resonated with the immigrant experience because I, like them, am in a constant state of arrival, experiencing this culture and land in a new way every day I am there.

Works Cited


Notes

1. For more information about the Assad Regime and the Syrian refugee crisis please see the executive summary published by the UN High Commissioner on Refugees: http://unhcr.org/FutureOfSyria/executive-summary.html

2. The terms “migrant”, “refugee”, and “asylum seeker” are often confused. According to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) a refugee is someone who is fleeing armed conflict or persecution and are defined and protected by International Law. A migrant chooses to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons. Unlike refugees who cannot safely return home, migrants face no such impediment to return. An asylum seeker is someone who says he or she is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated. See the UNHCR website for a more detailed explanation of the differences.

3. I met Mewael in January of 2014 at the Voksenopplæring Center (Adult Learning Center) in Molde Norway. He was a student in an integration course for asylum seekers and refugees while I was a student at the center from January to May 2014. During our lunch breaks we would talk about his experiences as an asylum seeker and his integration process in Norwegian society. His story is one of the many that inspired me to aspire to a career in refugee and migration health policy.

4. This number is based upon percent increase of immigrants in relationship to the total population of native born Americans. In 1890 the immigrant share of the American population peaked at 15 percent due to high levels of European immigration. According to statistics from the American Center for Statistics the immigrant share of the population stood at about 13 percent in 2013. However it is of note that “immigrant” is used to refer to persons without American citizenship at birth. This includes naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents, refugees and asylees, persons on temporary visas, and undocumented persons. For more information on this please see migrationpolicy.org.
A Singular Model

Bright white lights, a tense and highly stressful environment, where medical machines and staff buzz and run around. Physicians and nurses speaking in what seem to be foreign tongues. In the air, a blend of hand sanitizer and strong coffee, the environment seemingly lifeless due to its Antarctic temperature.

Contrast this typical hospital atmosphere with the everyday environment at the Center for Young Women’s Health (CYWH). At the CYWH, it is typical for hospital staff to build close and comfortable relationships not only with each other, but with their patients. This includes awareness of and concern about the events that affect and enrich their everyday lives, with an emphasis on communication. That communication is more than simply speaking calmly and clearly in the hospital room; it also involves a myriad of other resources. From a highly informative and interactive website, to pamphlets and other tools to help patients gain the most understanding regarding their health and medical future, the healthcare CYWH provides is unique in its interaction with patients. Physicians at CYWH provide safe spaces and create communities in the form of annual conferences and online chat rooms for young women who possess rare congenital disorders (and their families) to connect, learn, and support one another outside of the doctor’s office. The total experience is one that provides a singular model for other facilities to follow as they attempt to meet the challenges of caring for a diverse population and responding to the growing knowledge in their scientific field.

From the moment one walks into the CYWH, one is comforted by the sights and sounds of warmth and care that a typical hospital so rarely allows. “This past weekend, my husband spontaneously created a backyard retreat by converting the tool shed into a tiki bar and transforming the backyard into a Hawaiian-themed island with various island accessories. He invited all the grandchildren, friends, and family, and we had an amazing weekend in ‘Hawaii’,” exclaimed Nurse May in a trembling voice as she pulled back her powder-white hair into a ponytail to get ready for the long day ahead. I caught a glimpse of her fatigued yet gleaming, galaxy-blue eyes as she recalled her weekend plans.

Nurse Phaedra shared: “I attended a country chic barn wedding on a rustic farm in Western Massachusetts. In my thirty years of attending weddings, I have never seen something so unique! They tastefully created a classy wedding with wine barrels as tables, hay bales for seating, mason jar vases, burlap and tulle garlands as decorations, and the bride wore cowboy boots under her dress! They also had--”

Nurse Phaedra was interrupted by Nurse Tiana running into the gynecology administrative office. She frantically asked Nurse Maria: “My wedding is in three days in Las Vegas and I have not found a wedding dress! What do I do? I have a patient to see at 2 pm and…”

In a calming voice, Maria says "Honey, one: you are crazy for not having found a wedding dress yet. Two, I will cover for your 2pm patient; why don’t you go out to
these list of stores that I recommend and find yourself a wedding dress?!”

Women of all different ages and backgrounds openly shared different aspects of their lives. Their stories personalize the hospital environment by contributing general human warmth and life. Hearing these stories every day (especially on Mondays), was similar to listening to cheery morning music in preparation for a long day ahead. These stories always kept me upbeat, happy, and enthusiastic about accomplishing my day-to-day tasks.

There are two offices across from one another in the gynecology wing where the nurses sit. The gynecologic administrative office is where Nurse Maria (who is the Chief of Gynecology and everyone else’s confidant), Nurse Phaedra, and I worked. When I leaned back on my chair, I had a full view of the other nurses’ office. Throughout the day, even when nurses and physicians did not come running in to ask Maria or Ms. Thomas for advice or enjoy social hour with them by the coffee machine, I could still hear them exchanging stories and problems in their office.

(Towards the end of the summer, when the water bubbler was moved out of Maria’s office to the hallway, she noticed that there was a stark decline in the number of “quick break chats” that took place with numerous physicians and nurses.)

This atmosphere is a far cry from the typical environment that I have encountered in many other hospitals and workplaces where I have interned. When lunchtime arrives at CYWH, at 12:00 p.m. sharp, people begin to microwave their food, the air is filled with the aromas of spices and women’s perfumes, and the chatter rises by several decibels. I am reminded of how a health care community can be warm and close-knit, and not merely sterile and distant. With a spring in my step, I leave for lunch even more excited about one day being a part of this health care community.

The sense of community, support, and care in the gynecology administrative office make the room and the hospital atmosphere extremely cozy. Unlike other places that I have interned or worked, such as the American Civil Liberties Union or Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, these women do not simply work together and share an office space. They are truly involved in each other’s lives as they continually support and care for one another. This physical and emotional comfort was not only expressed to one another, but also extended to the patients of the hospital and to the organization, the Center for Young Women’s Health.

CYWH: Its Place and History

This environment was created thoughtfully in 1988 through the efforts of Dr. Jean Emans (Chief of Adolescent/Young Adult Medicine), Dr. Marc Laufer (Chief of Gynecology), and Phaedra Thomas (Nurse Educator) to meet a need they saw for teenage girls. Many young women, they realized, were falling through the cracks between their pediatrician and internists or gynecologists. For example, when a young girl turns sixteen, she is often considered too old to see a pediatrician, but also too young to see a gynecologist. As a result, young women do not see either physician. Without those visits, they do not necessarily know what is happening to their changing bodies; when they need medical advice, they are typically misinformed or obtain information from unreliable sources. To ensure that young women are informed about their physiological changes during this uncertain transition between seeing a pediatrician and gynecologist, the founders of CYWH created a safe, all-encompassing space to provide young women with support and empowering medical knowledge.

CYWH is an independently funded non-profit organization, which means that it is not exactly a part of the hospital, but is a partnership between the Division of Adolescent/Young Adult Medicine and the Division of Gynecology at Boston Children’s Hospital. The Resource Center was initially funded by a grant from the Boston Children’s Hospital League, an organization that consists of volunteers who serve as ambassadors and fundraisers for the world-renowned Boston Children’s Hospital. It is still funded by the League, and through other grants and gifts from ongoing supporters. While this allows for a great deal of autonomy, it also leaves the organization with a constant vulnerability to insufficient financial resources and, in the worst case, the potential for dissolution.

The CYWH was originally conceived to address the specific health issues faced by young women between the ages of 11 and 20. The space was decorated with a restful cloud-and-sky motif, and was intended to be a resource center; one can easily find books, pamphlets, and brochures available...
to young women, offering information about various health concerns, ranging from pimples to MRKH (a reproductive anomaly). These days, not as many young women come off the streets to check out the resource center and obtain a book, because the place isn’t as highly advertised. Most visitors are young women who visit their adolescent medicine doctor or gynecologist, and then stop by to obtain materials or other health information.

The Unique Impact of CYWH on Young Woman Globally

Since its inception, one of the principal functions of CYWH has been its outreach to young women around the world through online information and exchanges. In the late 1990s, when the Internet became accessible to the public and started booming, CYWH picked up the trend and created a website using an early web development software called Dreamweaver. This website consisted of health guides and other helpful information relevant to teens’ health. Within the past year, they renovated their website, eliminating Dreamweaver and giving it a modernizing facelift. The website now contains a variety of features and functions. They offer health guides about general health (constipation, dandruff, bike safety), sexual health (abortion, puberty, hormonal implants), gynecology (pelvic exam, endometriosis, PCOS), medical conditions (ADHD), nutrition and fitness, and mental and emotional health (break-ups, anger management, and anxiety).

Over the summer, one of my jobs was to update many of these health guides to make sure our readers and young women have up-to-date, factually accurate information. I updated health guides about applying to college, dandruff, masturbation, periods, and other topics. These online guides are especially important because information regarding science and health is always rapidly changing. Many websites with health information do not update the information in a timely manner, which leads to misinformation.

Even when medical information is correct and abundant and found on reliable websites, the information can be used incorrectly. Since people with little science background often do not know how to navigate or interpret the medical knowledge they find online, they end up misdiagnosing themselves and requesting the wrong treatment from their physicians. For this and other reasons, the CYWH website contains a section called “Ask Us.” This feature allows people from all over the world to ask questions anonymously related to information about sexuality, nutrition, or emotional health. Some teens ask common questions (such as “I did X, does this mean I am pregnant?”), while others provide long, detailed narratives with a complicated question in the end; still others still ask brief health questions. The “ask us” feature provides people a safe space to anonymously ask questions, share stories, and express concerns about their personal lives. Nurse Phaedra, who is in charge of the women’s health website, chooses five questions to answer from about fifty questions submitted every week. It is not only girls and women who use this feature; a 21-year old man once asked (in broken English) if he had gotten a girl pregnant after kissing her. This question, among so many like it, highlights the fact that many countries and cultures provide very little sexual education or information about general health. Thus, websites like this are very important because they pave the way for people to obtain information and educate themselves about their bodies and health.

Furthermore, CYWH maintains a blog called “Teen Speak,” which is a virtual space that allows the center’s members (high school peer leaders, CYWH staff, medical residents, and interns) to write creative blogposts about topics including current events, women’s health, inspirational people and events, and societal fads. A few of the blog posts that I wrote on Teen Speak include “Overcoming Gym Intimidation,” “Minion Take Over” (about Minion menstrual pads), “What Ever Happened to Sex Ed,” and “U.S. Women’s Soccer Team Victory at the World Cup.” Phaedra ensured that the topic, content, and tone of the blog posts were always culturally and ethically sensitive, reader friendly, and interesting. While writing these posts, I always tried to keep in mind that it is an international website, and that I wanted my post to be able to affect, teach, or change someone’s perspective anywhere in the world.

CYWH promotes among young patients a culture of self-help, defined as the act of improving oneself through emotional, intellectual, and social means. In self-help groups, people assemble to respond to mutual individual needs and problems. These groups rose to address the medical model’s lack of focus on a patient’s...
subjective experience with illness. As an alternative to that model, three different forms of self-help have arisen, reflecting three different attitudes towards and perceptions of the role of self-help in society, each with its own ramifications.

The first form of self-help is seen as an adjunct to the professional medical system. Specifically, patients view and utilize medical professionals and self-help groups equally. Modern medicine simply focuses on the physical body and does not take into account the patient’s social and emotional background. Many patients turn to self-help groups for this reason, finding—according to sociologist Humphreys—that “many coping-oriented mutual aid/self-help groups focus on life transitions rather than illnesses” (Humphreys, 1994). In other words, self-help groups take into account the emotional and psychological elements of a patient’s illness. By utilizing both the medical system and self-help groups, a patient obtains two perspectives that together address both the physical and emotional aspect of an illness. For this reason, the CYWH stresses that every adolescent woman should not only discuss health information with a physician but also obtain resources from the Resource Center and utilize its website, teaching young women how to independently navigate resources and educate themselves about their health.

The internet serves as an important contribution to the self-help community by providing various resources for managing illness. To that effect, according to sociologist McKnight, “the Internet, even more than self-help books, serves as an important self-help community to validate and shape illness identities” (McKnight, 2005). In addition, since medicine is an ever-evolving field, the internet makes it easy to keep current with the latest evidence and thinking. This is well described by sociologist Pitts, who states, “The Internet has created a virtual library of medical information that can be surfed and sorted via search engines that people use to sort information, there are numerous health…engines that direct users to sites…[that] offer information about the disease, treatment, clinical trials, conferences, fundraising events, support groups, among other topics” (Pitts, 2009).

Although the surfeit of scientific information is helpful, information online is not always correct. For this reason, the CYWH shares and provides up-to-date information about various illnesses and health concerns through health guides and the “ask us” feature, because they want to provide young people with up-to-date, scientifically correct information from credible specialists and sources (such as scientific journals). Most individuals who visit websites similar to CYWH are looking for answers to their health problems and are not experts in medicine or science. They selectively interpret and cannot properly filter the medical information presented, which can lead to self-misdiagnosis. For this reason, the CYWH works to ensure that its information is as reader-friendly and clear as possible, but also always reminds teenagers that if they are truly worried, they must see their primary care physician instead of solely depending on the internet for answers and treatment ideas.

Online forums also provide a means for individuals to share personal problems and seek advice at any time of the day or night, creating an accessible and supportive environment. This form of self-help gives meaning to ill peoples’ experience and brings them together around diagnoses, symptoms, suffering, and an emerging sense of shared interests. This is best exemplified in the online chat rooms the CYWH hosts for patients with conditions such as PCOS and MRKH. These virtual rooms allow patients to support, teach, and provide one another with advice on how to overcome challenges and gain self-esteem as they struggle to become comfortable with their newly found disorder. Parents use the chat rooms for some of the same reasons, but they are also learning from other parents on how to create a safe, supporting, and caring environment at home.
Training Young Doctors: Building Empathy

One of my assignments during the summer gave me the opportunity to “act.” The CYWH hosts resident training programs that emphasize the goal of ensuring that residents are able to effectively communicate with adolescent patients. Essentially, I would create a role-play a scenario with each resident and provide feedback on his or her mock check-up appointment. My character was a 16-year-old girl who grew up with a single mom and was surrounded by her mother’s various boyfriends, who were verbally abusive. Since my character grew up seeing unstable, weak relationships, she too engaged in unprotected sex with multiple partners. It was the resident’s job to uncover this information about her. However, my character did not make it easy for the resident to obtain the information. Specifically, throughout the role-play I sat with my arms crossed and gave the impression that my character dreaded being in the doctor’s office and did not want to volunteer any information about herself.

“What are your favorite subjects?” asked the resident.

“Umm…none really…sometimes I like art class.”

“Really? Do you like to paint or draw?”

With a quick smile and bright eyes, my character answered, “I like to paint sometimes,” but then remembered she was talking to a strange doctor and retreated to her guarded persona.

Usually, the resident asks a laundry list of questions to understand a patient’s school life, performance in school, diet, sexual history, and other pertinent health information. However, this resident understood that simply asking my character questions and receiving one-word answers would not much help her assess the character’s health. She cleverly deviated from the mandatory list of questions and asked what my character’s favorite subject was in order to understand her interests and what makes her smile. By having a brief conversation about the character’s interests, the resident is able to connect with the patient and form a more trusting and comfortable connection.

Often, when a physician is able to successfully form a connection and show the patient that he or she cares about them, the physician is better able to elicit the entire picture of the patient’s background. This in turn allows the physician to more appropriately provide helpful advice, information, and resources about certain health scenarios, so that the teen can be more educated and can take an active role not only in her health care but also in her body’s health. In this example, once the resident established a connection, my character revealed most of her background. Subsequently, in a caring manner, the resident counseled my character on the disadvantages of unprotected sex, but did not go about it as if the resident was judging her, such as lecturing my character about how terrible unprotected sex is.

Afterwards, my role was to give feedback on their performance. The resident frankly admitted, “I knew you were uncomfortable living in your home and even more uncomfortable painting at home because of your mom’s various boyfriends. I really wanted to ask if it was because they were abusing you in any way, but I did not know how to ask you.” Immediately, in unison, the other residents in the room asked, “Yes, how do you approach and ask difficult questions like sexual abuse?” I tried to the best of my ability to give them advice and a few pointers on how they could thoughtfully engage in a discussion, learn to frame open-ended questions, and ask difficult questions in a creative yet sensitive manner.

This was a great scenario for these new doctors because they do encounter patients just like my character. However, they are uncertain about how to approach difficult situations similar to the scenario. It is really important for physicians to be able to put away their medical jargon and communicate about an illness or disease in layman’s terms to a patient, who may not have any science background. The unfortunate fact, according to Dr. Borris, one of the facilitators and organizers of these resident sessions, is that once a medical student graduates from medical school and starts interacting with patients, there is no one around to evaluate the appointments and see if a
resident is doing it right or wrong. They throw residents into the shark-infested waters. This is why many physicians get stuck in their habits, use formulas for communicating with patients, and do not actively listen to the patient, because no one addresses or points out these communication problems past the very beginning of their training and their interactions with patients. I strongly believe that this resident training program is a perfect example of gradually shifting medicine to a more holistic approach, which will not only improve medicine but also reduce complaints regarding the medical care system. This approach treats sick people as real people with emotions and personalities, not just physical bodies with illnesses, humanizing emotions and paying more attention to the person rather than the symptoms present.

The Heart of the CYWH
One of the center’s greatest strengths is its people. Nurse Educator Phaedra Thomas is one of the most influential people in developing this space for young women. “Because I said so,” Phaedra Thomas states as she strokes her blonde hair past her time-chiseled, fair skin. Working for 21 years, Nurse Phaedra is fluent in the rules and regulations of Boston Children’s Hospital, but she fearlessly bends them when she sees the need. Phaedra’s strong and kindhearted spirit is especially exemplified as she overcomes her ankle injury. Phaedra broke her ankle in April and was on medical leave for quite some time. However, she still managed to go to a conference in Florida and hobble around, getting everywhere she needed to be. Then, after the conference she spent another month traveling on her broken ankle. Phaedra was planning to take another month off from work, but since I was coming to intern in June, she decided to return to work early. When I met her in June, she no longer was on crutches but had a great cane that she occasionally walked around with; it looked like it was from Lilli Pulitzer--it was pink with pretty flowers sprinkled all over it. Although her ankles occasionally swelled up during work and it was somewhat painful for her, Phaedra was always a trooper and tried not to complain about her pain.

Throughout our mentorship, I came to understand Nurse Phaedra’s mission for the website, the conferences, online chat rooms, and the resource center: she wants a world where young women embrace their health flaws and take control of their bodies through knowledge—empowerment in a different form. Nurse Phaedra explained that there are a lot of centers for women’s health, but none for adolescent women. Through increased communication, whether it is by learning information from a website, from physicians at a conference, or by engaging in a dialogue with others who are in a similar situation, young women are able to exchange and gain knowledge. This diffusion of knowledge, advice, and support through these various forms of communication empower these women to feel confident and take control of their health. Phaedra is continuously coming up with innovative ideas and features for the website, to not only keep the information relevant to young women, but also attract both users and donors. Phaedra envisions the CYWH as providing resources for conditions that begin in adolescence but can have a serious impact on clients’ health as adults. She points out, for example, that “Knowing about polycystic ovarian disease as an adolescent can… prevent infertility later.”

Phaedra is very in-tune with cultural, social, and language barriers and differences, and she tries her best to alleviate and address them. The CYWH’s website is viewed and used by people worldwide. Consequently, Phaedra works to ensure that the language is simple, friendly, and the contents are culturally and socially sensitive. She is a nurse educator for a world-renowned gynecologist, so she has experience interacting with women from all over the world and taking into account their cultural, religious, and social norms.

MRKH: You are Magnificent, Resilient, Knowledgeable, Healthy – and Not Alone
One of the specialties of CYWH is addressing the needs of patients with rare and highly sensitive congenital disorders, such as Mayer-Rokitansky-Kuster-Hauser
Syndrome (MRKH), which affects the female reproductive tract. In addition to physicians treating patients with MRKH, CYWH holds weekly online chats and annual conferences for young women with MRKH. MRKH is a reproductive anomaly that occurs in young women during development and is present at birth (hence, the word “congenital” in its name). Girls with MRKH have normal ovaries and fallopian tubes, but most often the uterus is absent, or tiny and the vaginal canal is shorter and narrower than usual or it may be absent. These patients have “normal external genitalia,” which means that everything on the outside of the vagina is not affected. Since the vagina is smaller than usual, young women with MRKH often cannot have sex or menstruate. If a woman is born without a uterus or if the uterus is tiny, then she will not be able to carry a pregnancy. Many of these young women with MRKH feel alone, abnormal, and unhealthy. Online chats serve as a medium for them to connect with people from all over the world, support each other, and help each other understand that they are not alone. In particular, one of CYWH’s most important contributions to helping young girls with MRKH is that it provides an abundance of information explained in terms that young people will understand and can navigate. This allows young women with MRKH to be more comfortable, secure, and knowledgeable about their bodies and health.

CYWH also supports patients with MRKH who can afford to come to Boston for medical treatment. For example, a 19-year-old woman from overseas, recently divorced, was seeking treatment for her reproductive anomaly, MRKH. In other words, this woman possesses an extremely tiny vagina, so when she attempted to engage in sexual intercourse with her ex-husband, she would suffer in pain—making intercourse nearly impossible. Although her uterus is present, the inability to engage in sexual intercourse prevented her from having children. For these reasons, her husband divorced her. In this patient’s home country, unfortunate social pressure is placed on women to bear children. If women are unable to conceive children, they are considered useless and undesirable. Fortunately, she fell in love with her childhood friend and is planning to marry him, but she wants to fix her “problem” before she does so. As a result, she rushed to America with her mother and brother, who have no idea why she came to a hospital in America.

To treat MRKH, one must use a dilator to expand the vaginal opening. The vagina hole is similar to an ear hole in that it can be stretched. Phaedra teaches MRKH patients how to use the dilator through a step-by-step tutorial using a hand mirror. The dilation of the vagina must be done twice a day, every day. Phaedra recognizes the religious factors involved in using a dilator to enlarge the vagina opening versus surgically expanding it. With language, social, and cultural barriers in place, Phaedra, through an interpreter, explained to the young woman that her reproductive anomaly is not a “problem”, and it can be treated if one is patient, diligent, and persistent. Phaedra explained that she understands that using a dilator in some ways may be like masturbation, which is frowned upon in her culture, but it is a safer and more efficient method of addressing the anomaly than surgery. The young woman had to truly understand Phaedra’s intention and meaning through the words of the interpreter, and make a serious decision about her body without her mom and brother’s guidance. I strongly believe Phaedra’s soft touch, kind words, and empathetic nature—taking into consideration both culture and religion—led the young woman to make a smart choice. To make her patient feel further confident about her decision and empowered about her body, Phaedra also provided her with many resources from the CYWH’s Resource Center and the website.

Issues Faced by Patients from Adolescence to Adulthood

CYWH operates according to a holistic approach to medicine that takes into account the social as well as physical components of human beings. The primary flaw of the dominant medical model is that it focuses only on the physical body of individuals and neglects the human element of emotions.

Much of the contemporary medical world adheres to a philosophy of “reductionism,” which can be defined as “deconstructing a complex process into its component...

Explaining the importance of sun safety and providing sample sunscreen and brochures pertinent to understanding the importance of sunscreen and sunglasses all year round.
Integrating the lived experience of the illness into the medical model brings about many improvements in the medical care system, specifically in the doctor-patient interaction.

The limits of reductionism are demonstrated in the rigid relationship between a physician and a patient. For example, interactions between a patient and physician take place in a closed off room, where the patient receives advice on how to cure the illness from only one source. Typically in this private sphere, the physician follows a formula and determines which method of treatment, such as medications, drugs, or surgery, he or she believes is best to attack the illness. This is a serious problem, because the physician dismisses the emotional and social component of the patient’s illness.

Integrating the lived experience of the illness into the medical model brings about many improvements in the medical care system, specifically in the doctor-patient interaction. The CYWH, through its resident training program, actively attempts to move away from the reductionist medical model by teaching physicians how to forge bonds and communicate with their patients. By taking into account the emotional and psychological elements of a patient’s illness, the solutions to their illness become more personal and specific to each person. According to sociologist Peter Conrad, “Disease not only involves the body. It also affects people’s social relationships, self-image, and behavior. The social psychological aspects of illness are related in part to the bio-physiological manifestations of disease, but are also independent of them” (Conrad, 1982).

In other words, Conrad suggests that an illness affects various aspects of the patient’s life and experience, and simply tackling the physical element of the illness is ineffective. Hence, it is important for patients to discuss with their health care providers their experience, thoughts, and concerns regarding the illness.

To perceive illness as both a subjective and objective experience, the health care system must gradually infuse holistic practices into the medical model. The holistic method is “a patient-centered and whole-person approach” (Conrad, 1982). Doctors should provide therapeutic assistance and treatment to tackle the emotional aspect of a condition in conjunction with the physical. The process of finding a remedy for the emotional component of an illness is through discussing and understanding emotions, including how one feels about the treatment process and diagnosis, even one’s fears about death. Furthermore, physician and patient should discuss and devise a plan that is sensible and comfortable for the patient. This was demonstrated successfully when Phaedra and the nineteen-year old girl with MRKH attempted to figure out which approach to execute in order to enlarge her vagina. The dual approach of tackling the physical and emotional components of an illness together, as practiced at CYWH, both benefits the patient’s health and increases the quality of medical care.

Challenges to Still Be Overcome

After working with Phaedra, my passion for becoming a doctor has only increased exponentially. I learned about the wonderful teamwork that occurs between doctors and nurses as they pick one another’s brains on how to best care for the patient. I also observed that although Phaedra is the co-founder of CYWH and also possesses exceptional leadership skills and creativity, she does not have any ultimate say or final decision about projects or ideas for the center. Her opinion is always second to one of the physicians. For example, Phaedra thought it would be a great idea to make a pamphlet or brochure to help young girls who either have suspicions that their daughter has MRKH or not). This brochure is geared towards parents and girls who either have suspicions that their daughter has MRKH or have a primary care provider who has suggested the girl may have MRKH. Phaedra wrote most of the information in the pamphlet and was trying to figure out the best front cover photo. I found various options for photos of a girl who is neither too happy or nor too depressed, and multi-racial.
Phaedra took a poll among the staff regarding which girl’s photo was best for the pamphlet. However, when she brought it to one of the doctors, he did not like that the girl had a half smile; he wanted a girl who was happier. Phaedra’s qualms about using a photo of a girl that is exuberantly happy did not ultimately matter. This decision upset me; she invested a lot of effort into making the pamphlet, and we had both spent a lot of time finding the perfect photo and agreed that it had the best level of emotion and expression. It was upsetting that having an MD next to a name gave someone the final say.

Another example that portrays the hierarchy at the CYWH is when Phaedra wanted to change the logo of the organization (a picture of a few stick figure girls), because she found it incredibly outdated. Phaedra explained to the medical directors that Anna, the center’s media coordinator, is very creative and passionate and could come up with something modern and eye-catching. The directors rejected that idea, liking the old logo and believing that, with so many other changes occurring within the organization, changing the logo did not seem necessary.

Unfortunately, Phaedra’s authority is limited to the CYWH website, the “Teen Speak” blog, and other website features, but does not extend to the health guides, pamphlets, or other aspects of the organization’s communication with its clients. I think Phaedra’s strength, organization, creativity, and experience should be more appreciated and taken into consideration even if she doesn’t have an MD next to her name. Although the organization is progressive in the way that it reaches and communicates with adolescents holistically, the CYWH is somewhat still conventional in that authority is dictated by one’s medical degree. This hierarchy of the doctor or specialist on top of the pyramid and the nurse below is sadly still common to most healthcare settings throughout the world.

A Center of their Own
Over the years, as women have found control over their bodies and their sexual relationships, gynecologists have become greater authorities on a woman’s body and her sexual and reproductive functioning. However, all adolescent girls do not receive equal amounts of attention, and physicians do not generally do an adequate job of teaching young women about normal health. No one teaches adolescent girls how to insert a tampon or what normal menstrual pain feels like. The Center for Young Women’s Health fills this gap, exemplifying how physicians (and society) can best educate and empower adolescent girls all over the world to become independent women who are knowledgeable about their bodies.

The CYWH serves as a potential model for other institutions to create an adolescent hub for health knowledge. It provides various outlets for teens to ask questions and obtain information through health guides, blog posts, conferences, online chat rooms, and other features on the CYWH website. These various roads to becoming more empowered and knowledgeable about one’s health allow teens to learn how to further independently research and gain accurate information. Unusual in their field, gynecologists at Boston Children’s Hospital will accompany their verbal information to the patients with various resources and tools from the CYWH website, which is rare to see at other health care facilities. Through these resources and resident training programs, CYWH strengthens its avenues and forms of communication with patients so they clearly understand how to take an active role in their health care. The
Outside the gynecologic clinic tabling and providing information about the Center for Young Women's Health's website and the newly launched men's health website.

CYWH provides that space, whether it is physical—at the resource center and conferences—or virtual (in online chat rooms and other parts of the website), to continuously ease adolescents' transition into adulthood through knowledge, resources, and support.

I have explored various avenues and perspectives on women's health including the medical facet of women's bodies, and the legal and political aspects of reproductive justice. The CYWH is unique in highlighting the importance of creating a holistic approach to addressing young women's medical needs and in demonstrating the significance of understanding how one can prevent or treat a serious illness during adolescence that may develop or worsen in adulthood. What do young women need? To paraphrase writer Virginia Woolf: a center of their own.

Bibliography


Becoming Chinese Feminists: Power, Communities and Challenges

Anni Long ’16

On the evening of May 9, 2015, I walked out of my room in Waltham, Massachusetts with two large pieces of baggage, to travel to my summer internship site in Beijing, Media Monitor for Women Network (MMWN).

As I hadn’t been exposed to feminist theories until I came to Brandeis University, I had little knowledge of Chinese feminist theory or its history before I secured this internship in October 2014. Recognizing my ignorance, I decided to get involved in Chinese feminism as early as possible by becoming a liaison and translator for MMWN before my onsite internship began. From November to March of this year, I translated into English several reports and video scripts about Chinese feminist activities.

As I became exposed to Chinese feminism, I learned about the history and context of current Chinese feminist activities. In addition, I was privileged to witness various creative movements that feminists launched in China, such as the anti-discrimination protest against the China Central Television (CCTV) New Year’s Gala. Having been educated about feminist theories in the US and involved in feminist journalism in China, I became increasingly sensitive to gender and culture. May 2015 was a new stage on my journey into Chinese feminism and activism. With questions and curiosity, I walked out of my room that evening and headed to Beijing, the capital of China, which I had seen much of on television, and the neighbor city of Tianjin, the city of my origin.

Arrival

At the Airport

After an exhausting trip of almost 24 hours, I arrived at Beijing Capital International Airport on a cold, rainy May night. It had been nine months since I had been in China, and more than 10 years since I had last visited Beijing. I had seen the pictures of this airport in an anthropology course on global and transnational communities that highlighted its splendor. It was easy on the eyes, and the bright lights, the modern ceiling, and the marble floor all resembled the pictures I had seen.

However, tiny spots of mud now covered the marble floor. In the hallways, the opaque wallpapers in red, yellow, and blue were discordant with the style of the surroundings, but they distracted me from the architecture for another reason. On those wallpapers were Chinese socialist greetings and political slogans, such as “building harmonies” and “building a new ethos,” reminding me that this was indeed the capital of communist China. The smell of soil lingering around the airport made me wonder if they were doing some renovations. That was the smell I’d been

Chinese women are wombs, and they are other people’s wombs.

— a middle-school graduate writing to her friend, Ah Chen

My mother enlightened me, although she obeys my father sometimes. Her father sold her to another family, for she was the only daughter. After she married my father, my grandfather wouldn’t let her return home, because “a married daughter is like the water you poured.”

— Li Junyi, writing about her mother
exposed to every day in Shanghai. I used to call it the smell of construction.

When I went to the airport restroom, I found broken locks on doors and suspicious messes around the toilets. It was not as messy as the toilets in shopping malls where people would stand and leave their footprints, but still dirtier than I expected. I knew that Chinese people often doubt the cleanliness of public facilities so they prefer to stand on or over the toilets to make sure their skin makes no contact with the seats—but that didn’t explain why there were broken locks.

The airport shuttle train was filled with tired people. Half of the station was open-air. At the gate to the airport subway station, there was a long line of people, shoulder to shoulder, waiting to get through the tiresome security inspections, requiring you to put all your belongings through the inspection machine. (Later on, I realized that the security inspections for the subways throughout Beijing were stricter than those in other cities, such as Shanghai. This is most likely to prevent attacks by violent criminals and terrorists.)

The air was a mixture of the smell of soil, heat from the crowd, and cold wind from outside. A young student stamped her feet while waiting for the next subway, and rushed in with her parents when it arrived. Judging by their accent, they were from Anhui Province, a southeastern province. Luckily for them, they got two seats. The train filled up quite quickly, so when I finally got on with my luggage, no seats were left. My huge pieces of baggage were in the aisle, for they could not fit in the sitting area. Tired travelers tilted their heads. The feeling of standing among Chinese people felt odd yet familiar. I felt like I knew everyone on the train, though I didn’t of course.

As I leaned on my luggage for support, a comment from the subway announcements amused me. “Respecting elders and loving children² are the traditional virtues of Chinese people, so please leave your seats to those who need them…”

In Shanghai, the announcement says nothing about traditional Chinese virtues but instead speaks more directly: “Please leave your seat to the elders, children, the infirm, and pregnant women.”

What is the significance of the reminder about “traditional Chinese virtue”? Why would the government put the part about virtue before anything? Or was it a political message sent to the citizens, to indicate that the Party was recreating the good old days of China? In this capital city, I assumed that the central government had scrutinized every slogan, every sign, and every public announcement. For Chinese people, but especially those in Beijing, government involvement in everything is the norm.

This propaganda about “traditional Chinese identity” seems to contradict Chinese communists’ previous attitudes toward traditional Chinese authoritarian culture. Mao hated the stagnated traditional culture so much that he encouraged repudiation and revolution against traditions and stagnated classes, which ultimately developed into the Cultural Revolution. Decades after this revolution, it seems that the government is promoting the traditions that were symbolically destroyed during the revolution. And yet simultaneously, the government wants to develop Beijing’s cosmopolitan image, by building skyscrapers so avant-garde that many people complain.

Standing idly in the subway car with my baggage, waiting for my stop, I started watching the subway’s television screen. It was playing a series of odes to filial piety. I listened to the songs all along the way and had a thought: Today, the government no longer mentions certain slogans it used to promote, such as “give birth to fewer children and the government will take care of you when you grow older.” Instead, it teaches children to take care of their parents.

There are interesting contradictions in Beijing. On the one hand, it is a metropolis that attracts millions of people from all over the country and indeed the world; on the other hand, it tries to regulate the behaviors of these people so that they fit the Beijing government’s goals. While the government wants to present a positive image of China in Beijing, it also sometimes neglects specific practical details, like daily maintenance of the restrooms. In addition, there is an interesting paradox in the government’s philosophy of management, for it both invites innovations and creative ideas, and tries to promote traditional ideals.

I couldn’t help relating this paradox to the current conditions of feminism in China. I recall what Chairman Xi said to the newly elected leaders of the All-China Women’s Federation in October 2013.³ Xi said:

You shall emphasize women’s unique advantages in promoting the traditional virtues of Chinese family, and building a good family ethos. It is crucial to family harmony, societal harmony and the healthy growth of the next generation. Women should voluntarily take responsibility for respecting elders, educating children and contributing to the construction of family virtues. They should help children form beautiful minds, enable children to healthily grow up and let the children grow up to be valuable people for the country and the public. Women should carry forward Chinese people’s great traditional virtues of endurance through hardship and toils as well as ceaseless self-
improvement. They should pursue active and civil lives and therefore help create a good ethos.⁴

Xi then outlined other jobs for the Women’s Federation to promote their services for women, but his opening words had already set the tone. The goals were to make the family central instead of the individual, to emphasize tradition instead of innovation, and, most of all, to put the responsibilities for family and household harmony, and childhood education, solely on women.

Perhaps the current pressures from low fertility rates and the increasingly aging population have caused the government’s backtracking on traditions. After more than 35 years of the One Child Policy⁵, young people have few incentives to have babies, and a large part of the population is elderly. The government is facing the potential end of booming economic growth and the lack of resources to meet social security requirements. The government intends to leave the burden of elderly care and child rearing to families, especially to women, but it does not want to lose women’s productivity in the public sphere – thus, the calls for gender equality while also encouraging women to voluntarily take on more traditional family responsibilities. Utilizing women to fit the needs of the patriarchal state does, and we continue to see this tendency in the current Chinese state.

A Brief History of Modern Chinese Feminism⁶

Many scholars, writing in both English and Chinese, regard male intellectuals such as Jin Tianhe and Liang Qichao as the pioneers of Chinese feminism. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, these thinkers portrayed an imagined modern European way of living as the exemplar for China, and called for gender equality, freedom of marriage, and coeducation for women, among other ideas. However, women’s liberation movements in this context were regarded as part of the enlightenment movement and the nationalist movement, both of which were heavily male centered. In The Birth of Chinese Feminism, the editors present the critiques offered by He-Yin Zhen (a feminist female contemporary of Liang Qichao) toward this expression of male feminism⁷:

Chinese men worship power and authority. […] The men’s original intention is not to liberate women but to treat them as private property. In the past, when traditional rituals prevailed, men tried to distinguish themselves by confining women to the boudoir; when the tides turned in favor of Europeanization, they attempted to achieve distinction by promoting women’s liberation. This is what I call men’s pursuit of self-distinction in the name of women’s liberation.

The 1920s saw three kinds of feminist movements in China: first, the movement that called for equal political and legal rights; second, the Christian feminist movement, characterized by a focus on charity and social services; third, the female workers’ movement that called for equal economic benefits. The participants in the first two types were mostly upper-class elite intellectual women. The participants in the third type were mostly working-class women. The Communist Party helped to organize female workers and publicize their presence in public spaces. Nevertheless, with the wave of anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist nationalist movements, women’s movements developed into social liberation movements of women but not specifically for women – with the aim of encouraging women to support men in rejecting traditional feudalism, instead of exploring their own issues as women.

In Mao’s time, women’s liberation movements sought gender equality in the political and social spheres. The All-China Women’s Federation was established in 1949 to promote gender equality. In 1954, equality for men and women was written into the constitution. Chinese Marxists viewed the oppression of women as a part of capitalist class oppression. Therefore, supporting socialist and communist revolutions was deemed the only way for women to achieve complete liberation. The government attempted to minimize gender differences in the public sphere to eliminate power differences in the social status of different genders. The new China made laws and policies on gender equality, equal payment for equal work and freedom of marriage. However, equality in the social sphere did not extend to the private sphere, so patriarchy in the kinship system prevailed, which allowed continued and systematic gender oppression.

Liberal intellectuals were given more permission in the 1980s to “liberate minds” after a 10-year-long Cultural Revolution that had demonized intellectual culture and emphasized a class warfare that aimed to eliminate the capitalist classes. With Chinese economic reforms in place since 1979, newly emerged feminist thinkers such as Li Xiaojiang promoted the idea of the “sexed being”⁸ in contrast to the socialists’ de-gendered view of women. In the 1980s, many Western European feminist works were introduced in China, such as Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex) by French author Simone de Beauvoir. In 1995, the Fourth UN World Conference for Women brought the legalization of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in China and galvanized the rapid growth of NGOs focusing on gender issues in China.⁹ Also, foreign funding, such as that from the Ford Foundation, became a leading resource in support of gender studies. More scholars of gender studies emerged along with
many grassroots feminist activists. Many American feminist scholars, such as Betty Friedan with her influential book *The Feminine Mystique*, were introduced to Chinese feminists in this era.

Within the last century, Chinese women’s movements have often been profoundly affected by and also contributed to national reformation. Although feminist scholars have been trying to advocate for gender equality on both micro and larger cultural levels, it is still difficult for women to develop identities equal to those of men. Chinese women are, like men, valued as assets of the nation. However, while men are more frequently educated to become “owners of the nation,” women are still often seen as the properties of families, with fathers and husbands holding the positions of authority.

**Explorations Around My Site**

When I arrived at Liufang Station, the smell of soil returned. “These days have been really cold,” said Mahu, an intern from Jilin Province, who had been waiting for me at the entrance.

She led me to the site. It is located on the 23rd floor of a joint business/residential building in Chaoyang district, next to the Liufang subway station. At first glance, the business section of the building, though properly appointed, did not seem very appealing or up-to-date. However, as I would learn later, many NGOs are located in the building, probably because its rent is quite low for such a good location.

Walking into my soon-to-be office, I felt like I was entering someone’s home. In fact, it had previously been a residence, with a kitchen, a living room, a bedroom, a bathroom, and a home office. All the interns worked in the former living room, where four desks covered by tablecloths were joined together. The official members of the site worked in the office, where the decor seemed more business-like and professional. There were four business-style tables in the office. Two of them seemed not to be in use. White was the theme of the site: most walls and doors were white, though the walls of the office were light blue. On the wall next to the interns’ tables were colorful cartoon paintings by Meili, a graduate of a college of design and a renowned feminist activist in China.

Putting my belongings in the bedroom, I was both anxious and curious about my next two months here. Mahu slept on the couch in the living room, and I would sleep in the bedroom – where there were another three desks.

The next day I woke up at 5 a.m. and unexpectedly found that I had a sore throat. I wondered if it was because of the haze that permeated Beijing. The journalist Chai Jing had just publicized the haze problems in Beijing a few months ago, and people’s concerns were evident in the varied selections of masks available in convenience stores. Not knowing what to do, I walked out of the building to look around. I started to look for what might be familiar to me in Beijing. Having not seen Tianjin since I left Tianjin 10 years ago, I was desperate to seek the feeling of the city I had missed in the gentle breeze of that Beijing morning.

Before I left Tianjin for Shanghai, I had been to Beijing only a few times. Of those, I remember only one time. My father brought me to Beijing one weekend because I wanted to visit its science museum. We got up at 4:00 a.m. and took a two hour train to Beijing. I had a great time because the science museum was exactly as I had seen it on TV. Now lost in the streets, in an early Beijing morning, I realized that this city was altogether unfamiliar to me. I couldn’t find any buildings or places I was nostalgic for. I thought I could compare it to Tianjin in my memory, but I couldn’t even remember Tianjin in its particularities. I was used to recalling details about Shanghai, and realized that I had been thinking about Shanghai in comparison to Beijing on my way there.

But to explore Beijing as a new city was exciting. Interestingly, there were many hospitals and dentists’ offices around the internship location. There were also residential neighborhoods, a heating company and many resources for residents such as grocery stores and markets. Elders walked around all the time. Their voices singing Beijing Opera came from a shallow garden by the street. I found a tennis court and a gym with a swimming pool. I found Northern China-style street snacks, which I hadn’t eaten since I left Tianjin 10 years ago.

After enjoying my Chinese breakfast, I went back to the MMWM office. Mahu had woken up and started to make her breakfast. (Mahu”11 is not her real name, but we all call her this.) She is a college graduate, and comes from Jilin Province, which belongs to a geological area of China called Dongbei (Northeastern China). She is a lesbian.

Later, I realized that almost every feminist here has their own pseudonym (or nickname) used by their friends, and another for those who don’t know them, including the media, as they would rather keep their real names secret until they choose to reveal them.

**Life in a Social Worker’s Community**

**My Office, My Site**

My internship site, Media Monitor for Women Network (MMWN but more commonly known as Feminist Voices), is a Beijing-based Chinese independent
journalist organization. It was founded in 1996 as a volunteer journalist group, right after the 1995 UN World Women’s Conference in Beijing. MMWN aims to promote women’s presence and gender equality in the media and raise awareness about the difficulties women encounter in this context. Its target audience is journalists as well as the general population. MMWN established China’s most influential feminist social media platform, “Feminist Voices,” which has more than 100,000 followers. As an independent journalist organization, it shares articles, updates, and reports on gender-related issues. MMWN closely monitors and publicizes in a timely way gender-related events and activities, conducts research, holds events, publishes gender critiques, and provides training. Relative to its fame in the field, it is a rather small institution.


In recent years, the organization has addressed many topics it regards as relevant to women’s issues, such as continual domestic violence, inequality in education and employment, domestic servers’ rights, sexual harassment in public and in schools, and gender inequality in public infrastructures. (During my stay, it did much advocacy work for a law against domestic violence.)

The site had two staff members, Furi and Ermao, along with two interns, Mahu and me; other volunteers would come and go freely. Ermao is the Site Supervisor and Project Manager. Furi is a young, passionate feminist with long hair. She comes from Heilongjiang Province, which is another Province of Dongbei (Northeastern China). She finds the cold dishes Mahu makes to be extraordinarily delicious and authentic Dongbei style.

Lu Pin, the founder and advisor of the organization, was in America while I was doing my internship in Beijing. She would return sometime later. There had been other staff members before I arrived, but some had left MMWN. Silk, a former staff person, left the organization in March and had not been in contact with the rest of the staff members since; none of the local feminist activists knew where she was until she showed up one day during my internship. Xiao Ha also left, as she was leaving Beijing. Due to a March 2015 incident where five feminists were taken into custody,13 MMWN had cancelled many outside events, including those for May 17, the International Day Against Homophobia. Nevertheless, Feminist Voices didn’t stop its education workshops and feminist theater performances.

The official staff members usually start work around 9:30 a.m. and leave around 6:00 p.m. Ermao worked overtime from time to time to finish articles for Feminist Voices. MMWN members cook lunch every day, which reduces the cost of meals. The organization receives funding by projects, so as long as it is working on something it has financial support. Among the funding sources, many are Hong Kong-based or foreign foundations, including the Ford Foundation. As it has good connections with other global organizations, the official members of MMWN often received funding for various training opportunities abroad. For example, during my stay Ermao and Furi each had a one-week training trip to Thailand.

As an intern, I searched for news and articles about feminism and gender online, updated the website, contacted outside organizations when necessary, translated some articles and PowerPoint slides, and completed other errands. I expressed that I wanted to develop a middle and high school lecture or forum about feminism. Xiao Xing, an activist who came to our office for a visit, was very excited about my idea. According to her, “We should start early, because when they turn 30, there’s no way to save them.”

Xiao Xing is a feminist and a fortuneteller, which for me was a really strange combination. She is a lesbian from Shandong Province (a northern province just south of Dongbei), where she noticed gender inequalities from a young age. The reason for her visit was, in her words, “for the benefit of lunch.”

My initial idea to launch lectures by cooperating with school officials didn’t work. When I tried to contact high school administrators, it was either difficult to find their contact information or hard to get a
I bought a feminist T-shirt that Meili designed. It is black. On the front, it says, in Chinese: “This is what a feminist looks like.” On the back it has the same line in English. The design suits me well.

response from them after sending them emails. I therefore failed in the attempt to start my original project, so I ended up doing most of my work in the office. This nevertheless turned out to be an interesting experience.

The Lively Social Worker’s Community

During the afternoon on my first day, Zishu, a member of the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute (the NGO next door to MMWN), visited our office. After a while, I asked her if I could visit her office. She agreed and led me to the BGHE office. Their office looked much more professional than ours. They even had an editing room for video production. The BGHE produces online programs for queer people on a regular basis.

On Day Two, I finally met Meili, a feminist from Sichuan Province (in southwest China) who also came here “for lunch.” She was awarded the “Exemplar Woman of the Year” at the Women’s Media Award 2014 (issued by UN Women and Wangyi Lady’s Channel) for her long-distance hike against sexual harassment. In 2014, Meili walked through more than 20 provinces and more than 120 cities and towns to give local officials, along with local people, advice on sexual harassment prevention in primary and middle schools. She used the form of hiking because it was considered dangerous (physically and sexually) for women. It was her way of rejecting gender stereotypes, and encouraging women to explore the world rather than fear it as society had taught them. Before this, Meili had organized and participated in other activities against domestic violence, including the events “Occupy Men’s Toilets” and “Shave for Equality.”

In “Occupy Men’s Toilets,” she and other activists lined up outside men’s bathrooms to make people rethink about the inequality in toilet numbers and locations for women. At the time, they received much positive response and it led to change. In many cities, there were changes in the numbers and locations of women’s bathrooms in shopping malls and other public spaces. (Unfortunately, when some of the activists were detained, the police would humiliate them for occupying men’s toilets, which was merely the name of the campaign, not a physical description of what they did.)

In “Shave for Equality,” Meili and other activists shaved their heads to call attention to inequality in college admissions. At that time, some majors did not admit women at all, and others (e.g. foreign languages and media majors) lowered the admission scores for men to attract more male students. The Education Bureau responded rapidly by issuing bans on gender-based college admissions for all majors, except three related to the military.

For their ongoing activities, these feminist activists were occasionally “invited for tea” with the authorities, so when – on March 6 and 7, 2015 – about 10 feminists were taken in for interrogations, Meili did not take it seriously – until five of them were not released. After all, they had just been planning to distribute flyers to campaign against sexual harassment on buses and to run in strange clothes to raise awareness of it. They consulted officials before the events, and were warned that it was “better not to do them,” so they cancelled the run. But even before they did anything, the police came under different pretenses. The government charged them with “picking quarrels and provoking problems.” Like several other crimes, these have so much room for ambiguity that the authorities can interpret and apply them in many ways.

Fearing she would be the next target, Meili hid in daily rental houses in undisclosed locations, changed her cell phone number, and did not contact anyone in feminist circles. She reappeared after the release of the five feminists in April.

Talking about her experiences in that period during our lunch, she said: “Well, the hardest part was my relatives, you know. They sent me messages like ‘come back, don’t do this stuff anymore’ and ‘we will always accept you,’ etc. Well, they are all living happily in Sichuan, and I’m the one that looked like the problem.”

“You can educate them,” Xiao Xing said.

“They don’t listen to what I say,” Meili said. “They still think that I’m a child. Well, considering that I sometimes still need their money...”

“Yeah, money is an issue. But you can still try to educate them,” said Xiao Xing. She had earned money as a fortuneteller. “You can tell them that you were in Time magazine.”

“Haha, like they know it,” Meili responded. “They want me to have a lucrative job, and they only value money for happiness. But that would have no meaning.”

I bought a feminist T-shirt that Meili designed. It is black. On the front, it says in Chinese: “This is what a feminist looks
which makes the physical requirements for female leaders greater than those of male leaders. I also wanted to tell her that being a leader does not mean you have to be physically strong. However, the topic had moved on, so I didn’t have a chance to speak to her. After that, I thought about how society, education and especially the media produce so much negative impact that a high school girl believes that women are “just not made to be leaders.”

On the way back to the MMWN office, Meili told me that she actually liked the fact that someone could ask questions like the girl did, because it helped prompt discussion and helped the group think more deeply about the idea of feminism. “But for some people, it’s too late to change their minds,” Meili said, “so we would rather put our efforts into changing those who want to be changed.” She thought that all the people who come to our lectures had the potential to be changed.

That afternoon, Radio Television Suisse reporters interviewed Meili, who reflected on her decisions and activities. She said that March 7 had propelled Chinese feminism into a more political phase. In China, people often avoid being targeted by the authorities by depoliticizing their activities or avoiding using sensitive words. Although Chinese feminists had purposefully avoided emphasizing the political meaning of their activities, the fact that they called for equal rights made them political.

On Day Four, I began to learn that almost every member of the organization had participated in some public feminist action. Mahu was suing the Beijing Post Office for not hiring her as a courier solely because of her gender. Feminist Voices was supporting her case, but its process had been prolonged. Furi protested against sexual harassment in colleges, and she sent a questioning letter to the principal of her alma mater about a sex scandal. Both of these women are members of the feminist theater group “BCome” – a group of feminists who write and perform dramas about Chinese women in a form that resembles *The Vagina Monologues*. They were performing a piece in June in Yunnan Province, Southwest China, and in July in Beijing, and on the evening of Day Four, a dozen BCome members came to the office for rehearsal. Zishu is a member of BCome, too. Trying not to disturb them or to ruin it for myself before I watched the show, I went to bed very early that day.

On the evening of Day Five, my colleagues and I went to a Zhajiang Noodle social event held by the Yi Yuan Commune, another NGO located on the same floor as MMWN. The Yi Yuan Commune was both a public space that offers other NGOs a space to hold events and an activists’ network. All the people there were doing some kind of grassroots work. I realized I was regretting not doing anything as great as they were.

Moreover, I found myself to be more conservative than I expected. For instance, I would not forward by email anything that would be politically sensitive to my friends. Acknowledging that I was also benefiting like.” On the back it has the same line in English. The design suits me well.

On Day Three, Meili and I went to The Affiliated High School of Peking University, one of the keys schools in the city. We were invited by the students to give a lecture about feminism and gender. I went with her to learn how to talk to high-school students about these issues. On that day, I still did not know if I would ever receive responses from high school officials. I brought various pamphlets MMWN had printed on the topic from the domestic violence resource handbook, as well as gender research fact sheets.

Meili had much experience educating college students, but it was also her first time teaching high school students. After a brief discussion, we decided that high school students were not that different from college students, so this lecture was very similar to the lecture program for college students. The outcome was good: Meili was both humorous and knowledgeable about gender, and she knows how to provoke the audience’s laughs and thoughts. Although there were only a dozen people there, there were no awkward silences. During the Q&A, one female student asked: “It has been proven from history that men are better leaders, and women can’t take the role of leaders because of their lack of physical power. How would you recognize that?”

When Meili talked about how personal differences were far more important than gender differences, and how we should not discourage women from becoming leaders, the student did not seem convinced. Another student (a male feminist) spoke, though, and this seemingly convinced her. I wanted to tell her that history was written by men and for men, and that women leaders generally spent more time on childrearing than male leaders, which makes the physical requirements.
from the current system, I pushed myself to see how these activists reflected on the flaws of the social system and advocated for marginalized groups.

**Some of My Work**

Since Media Monitor for Women Network/Feminist Voices is the most famous NGO in Mainland China that facilitates independent journalists’ and media promotion of feminism, many people visited our office for help or to chat. During my office hours, I met journalists from Britain, Switzerland, Germany, America, and Holland. A Spanish photographer even came to our office twice within one week, because two different people led her to our site. When she arrived the second time, she laughed and said: “We meet again, then.” In addition to meeting people every day, I was able to communicate with experts in these realms, participate in workshops, read reports and conduct research on various topics.

As an intern editor, I got my first chance to publish some articles on feminism in Chinese. I was excited to see how people viewed the translations, graphics and articles I contributed to Feminist Voices, so I secretly logged in to my Weibo (Chinese Twitter) account with an unidentifiable username to look at reviews. While I was excited to see many reviews, positive feedback and critiques, it was hard to see some vicious insults. I was used to discussions without hatred in my family, in college and with other feminists. It was a shock that people would write reviews that contained nothing but insults, without trying to understand what the articles are really about. After a few days of exposure to such reviews, I gradually started to get used to them. I even learned to make fun of them, because people often use repetitive structures and vocabulary in these reviews. Sometimes, I even thought about whether they were purposefully writing these sentences to provoke more people into opposing the patriarchy. Sadly, though, when I looked at their Weibo accounts, it was clear that most of them believe what they wrote.

My major project was to research gender discrimination in college admissions among “Project 211” Universities in China for the year 2015. These 112 universities of Project 211 receive great support and funding from the government, which is a testimony to their exceptional education quality. As Chinese universities mainly admit students based on their admission exam scores (Gaokao scores) and the admission regulations (zhaoxing jianzhang) of respective universities, our research method was to scrutinize each college’s admissions regulations posted on the official platform of the Bureau of Education. I looked into gender ratio or quotas, if they had any, and found that 29% of the Project 211 universities I investigated either don’t mention gender at all, or mention in their Admission Regulations that they have no gender regulations. 71% of the universities I investigated have gender regulations.

The military tracks of schools often limit the number of women they admit. College admission for the military involves a special program. The Ministry of Defense cooperates with many prominent universities to enroll some students in the military and give them an education in science and technology in top-tier universities throughout China. The average admission scores for these military track students is significantly lower than the average for regular students. Military students also receive special scholarships along with the regular scholarships the universities offer. After graduation, these military track students will be assigned to PLA regiments.

Within the Project 211 universities that have military tracks, I noticed that gender quotas were prominent. Some universities clearly state that they only admit men in their military tracks. Others not only limit the number of women they admit (such as one or two among 20 military track students), but also have restrictions on their majors. Although military track students generally have major constraints, women experience more constraints than men because of the quotas limiting their admission.

Aside from majors related to national security, other majors that can involve hardship often give preference to men. These majors include: aeronautics, maritime transportation, and geology. Some majors that are especially in demand, such as broadcasting and minority language studies, often have quotas for women or limit the gender ratio to 1:1.

Such disadvantaged conditions in college admission are not the worst thing Chinese women experience: women face more
discrimination when they graduate from college. For instance, many jobs for language studies graduates are open only to men, or those who do the hiring prefer a man for the role, no matter how well-prepared a woman is from her studies, because the employers anticipate women will quit after a few years of working.

Becoming Chinese Feminists: Their Stories, My Story and Her Story

Their Stories
In June, MMNW held an essay competition with the topic “Why I became a feminist.” I helped edit and reply to essays from people all over the country. It was so touching to read about women’s experiences in China through their narratives. Despite the variation in authors’ ages, home regions, occupations and reasons for becoming feminists, these women all addressed their gender-related challenges and problematic experiences in China. Many of their experiences, although different from mine, resonated with me because of my similar frustrations.

Ah Chen is a high school student who took a half-year off school. She writes:

My mother argued with my father because he was too late buying my cake for my birthday. [...] She was not wrong, and she was just persistent with her points. But people around all said that she shouldn’t be that stubborn. [...] Other people think wives should change their minds when their opinions are conflicting with their husbands’ opinions. However, my mother is the sole provider of the family. She bought the house, bought the furniture, and took responsibility for everything about house moving, and my father just went fishing and had dinners with his friends as usual, not even willing to spend ¥1,000 on decoration. There are always people asking me if my mother has been treating my father badly. [...] My mother’s friend is a teacher. Her husband is famous for doing nothing to support their family, and he beats his wife a lot. When she demanded a divorce, he threatened to jump off the roof. He said it was because she had this coming.

I was saddened by these stories. What was these two women’s fault? They work hard to support their family, and their husbands just enjoy their fruits of labor, like they did with their beautiful body when they were young, and their fame and status when they age. Even so, people say they had this coming/they are too stubborn.[…]

What are women?
A writer friend of mine, a middle-school graduate, said to me in a conversation: “Chinese women are wombs, and they are other people’s wombs.”

I shivered when I read what Ah Chen’s friend thought about how women are viewed in China. Li Junyi, a young woman, writes:

My mother enlightened me, although she obeys my father sometimes. Her father sold her to another family, because she was the only daughter. After she married my father, my grandfather wouldn’t let her return home, because “a married daughter is like the water you poured.”

In their marriage, my sexist father makes the decisions. No one in our house shall disobey. We shall not start eating before he starts. My mother wanted to go to women’s school when my siblings all went to school. My father rejected this from the outset, saying a wife should focus on housework. But my mother insisted and went to the school. My mother also wanted to learn how to drive. She fought with my father for weeks. My father thought that good women should not drive. But my mother insisted and learned how to drive.

[...] I didn’t know exactly in which moment I became a feminist.

Is that the moment [my father] pointed to my nose, saying giving birth to a daughter is useless? Or is it the moment my mother spoke to me in teary eyes about her childhood story of being sold to another family?

Is it the moment my classmates humiliated me because I looked like a tomboy (due to my father’s dislike of girls)? Or is it the moment my brother’s friends urged me to go back home because I am a girl?

Is it when I saw my older relatives value obedience and giving birth to male babies for their husbands’ family as their missions?

Or is it when my friend’s husband cheated on her and other girl friends told her that women should learn to tolerate this? Or is it when I talked about the concepts of feminism with my friends and they told me I was naïve?

I was brainwashed to think I was as small as a particle of dust. I thought about death, for my closest family thought I was nothing. I feel happy for myself that today I can take my place and am proud of being a girl.

Among these essays are a few from men. Male feminists reflected on the experiences of their mothers, sisters, wives and other female relatives. They rethought their interactions with women,
From a very young age, I learned from historical stories, books and mainstream media that the only functions women have are to provide children, take care of households and to love somebody by giving up their whole lives. acknowledging their own confusion about growing up in a misogynist culture.

These authors are our subscribers. Many of them start to look closely at gender-related issues in their daily lives when they see MMWN publicize cases and publish gender critiques. This amazing feeling of attachment to a larger community whenever I read their works confirms my identity as a feminist and as a woman.

My Story

Born in Tianjin, China, I was privileged to study Mandarin Chinese, which had few accent differences from my native tongue because Mandarin Chinese is based on the Beijing-Chengde accent, and Tianjin was not far from the capital. Furthermore, I faced fewer obstacles in education than other children who were born in large provinces. Both of my parents are not native Tianjin people. My mother comes from Shanxi, a northern province famous for its coal production, rich coal bosses, corruption and bureaucracy. My father, in contrast, comes from a mountainous autonomous minority county in Chongqing, Southwestern China. Although my parents came from villages, they changed their lives by studying hard and becoming first generation college students in the 1980s. At that time, college graduates in China were guaranteed a job because the school, with placement permits from the state, would assign them to different regions where their expertise was in demand. My parents were both assigned to Tianjin, despite the distance between their origins, schools and majors. It was quite common, in China in the 1980s, for young college graduates to be assigned to big cities thousands of miles away from their hometowns.

As a child of a migrant family, part of me felt like I never had fixed roots. Even worse was when my parents’ friend teased me that I was picked up by my parents from a landfill. My parents comforted me and said I am of course their child. But they had another story about me: That the doctor said I was a boy when my mother was pregnant so the family prepared for a boy. But when I was born, it turned out that I was a girl. My father said he was struggling with my name before the day I was born, and he had a dream with people singing “Anni,” so when it turned out that I was a girl, Anni became my name. It is a feminine name that tells everyone about my gender. Luckily for me, I have never received any negativity for being a girl from my mother or father.

Nevertheless, growing up as a girl in China, I secretly resented women, girls and anything female. Before I learned how to read, I watched a lot of television, which made me speak to a boy like this when we played house: “I’m your wife and she [another friend who played with us] is your concubine.” Somehow this moment stuck in my memory and made me later develop resentment at being a girl. After hearing the story about how I was expected to be a boy, I further alienated myself from the girl/woman/female identity. From a very young age, I learned from historical stories, books and mainstream media that the only functions women have are to provide children, take care of households and to love somebody by giving up their whole lives. Moreover, in films and dramas, women are constantly portrayed as hindrances to heroes’ goals. Women must be perfect all the time for them to deserve and find love, while men can be imperfect yet still be attractive. For these reasons, I couldn’t identify with women.

I thought I must be a boy, since I believed I had nothing in common with what people call “women.” I wanted to do a lot of jobs in the future, but whenever I pictured myself, I could not picture myself as a woman. However, I am a woman. I realized this fact when I reached puberty, and I experienced the bodily developments of a woman, a female who I deemed the lesser species. I AM A WOMAN. It was a shock, a betrayal of my mind by my body, and a starting point for me to think about the range of things women can do.

I was trained not to express my frustrations regarding gender roles in front of people, especially to elders who have power and resources. “Don’t look like a feminist,” my mother taught me. “Don’t label yourself an extreme and angry woman. You should act elegantly and show your endurance. Only in this way can you gain respect and opportunities from people.” Endurance of what? I pondered.

When I was in high school and my father’s younger brother had a daughter, I watched as my father sighed and said: “The Long family has no heir.” So what am I? I liked my father’s surname, for it is rare and complex in Chinese. I wanted to let my children have Long as their surname. However, because I am a woman, they will most likely go by another person’s surname. I felt a little bit sorry for my mother in this way. She has one child who
I cannot deny. I am a fan. I have seen pictures of her and later meeting her, of all the cats she has met, which, having Ermao insists that Ah Huang is the cutest. Cats is popular among feminists in China. From these conversations that raising passion and excitement. It became evident to share their experiences with their cats with colleagues had at least one cat, as they were then that I discovered that all of my friends also had a cat. "I was interested in things related to gender," she said, “because at that point something in my life bothered me all the time. I thought it was gender. And I had no answers to my confusion. Now it’s clear that everything is about gender.” Ermao finished her application in three weeks and was admitted. After her admission, Ermao went to Hong Kong to study, hoping that finishing this master’s program would enable her to somehow answer her questions about gender and life. Recognizing her identity as a feminist, she also looked for people with similar interests. However, her master’s program disappointed her in both realms. First, the program was interdisciplinary, but the courses were not as interesting as she expected. And with many part-time lecturers teaching, it was hard for her to find her courses on particular interests within the field of gender issues. Secondly, she figured out that people around her joined this program for many different reasons, but few of them resembled hers. She visited several NGOs in Hong Kong, and she met with other master’s and PhD candidates in the subjects in which she was interested. The result was not satisfactory for her. Although Ermao had broadened her views in Hong Kong, she decided not to stay there. “Hong Kong NGOs focused too much on the issues of the city,” says Ermao, “and I wanted more.” She wanted something she could relate to. She wanted to come back to mainland China and do something in it and for it, whether related to gender or for her country’s development. At that point, she had not yet had contact with any mainland NGOs, and she had barely met any mainland feminists. When Ermao was graduating from CUHK, she noticed that the Media Monitor for Women Network (called “Women’s Voices Reports” at that time) was recruiting an intern. As she had no clear thoughts about what to do, she thought it was a good start for her career. “I never imagined being a white-collar worker or doing any office job. I wanted to get involved in grassroots development programs,” Ermao says. But after the internship, she decided to stay. It was 2011. The head of the organization, Lu Pin, had the wisdom to let her stay. It was through this organization that she finally found people of similar causes and beliefs. Supporting feminist activities through media became her job. As a part of the job, Ermao manages social media updates. Naturally, she gets close exposure to many critiques. Sometimes she likes the critiques, because through arguments she can get clear on what she thinks. At other times, she refuses to hear or read critiques, as some people just release their most vicious words to feminists. “You learn to ignore them.
It is a core part of Chinese communism that women and men are equal. Feminism should be a safe and correct subject no matter how much people politicize it. And yet, the police of a communist government detained five feminists for 39 days simply because of their plans to distribute anti-sexual-harassment flyers. There are some losers who only dare to post these words online because they don’t have to pay a price for their virtual behaviors,” Ermao says. But those critiques have also changed her. She admits that she tends to argue more now with people offline. Sometimes she argues with her friends from childhood. Sometimes she argues with her family. “My father is ‘Wumao’ [those who praise China as the best of all realms] and he holds many traditional and male chauvinist opinions,” Ermao says. “With people like him, I am fed up with frustrations. So I decided not to contact those who couldn’t possibly understand feminism.”

The job also had positive effects on Ermao. She became more confident. “It’s like you have the truth in your hand,” she says. She changed from being confused to becoming clear-minded, and from wandering around to doing the things she could accomplish. Her views toward the government also changed, as she realized that the government can and should be changed by ordinary people. NGOs and other social organizations are the tools through which people unite their powers to influence policies, cultures, and the actual well-being of people on a larger scale.

Sometimes, the fruits of Ermao’s and her colleagues’ activism will be taken by the government without crediting them. For instance, in the 2012 “Shave for Equality” event Lu Pin, Meili and other activists shaved their hair to attract attention to inequality in college admissions. At that time, some majors did not admit women at all and others (e.g. foreign languages and media) lowered the admission scores for men to attract more male students. The Education Bureau responded rapidly to this action by issuing bans on gender-based admissions to college for all majors except three disciplines related to the military. Nevertheless, the influence of activism was played down. These incidents made Ermao more or less cynical toward the government, although she recognizes that if certain actions affect policies they are successes.

However, nothing affected her more than the March 7 incident in 2015. The peaceful life she lived, the confidence she had, and the security she once held in this land she loves was shattered by the government’s abuse of power. The trust she had in this government was greatly undermined.

During the 39 days that five feminists were detained (2 days for interrogation and 37 days for detention), Ermao and the whole office fled elsewhere, fearing the police would look for them as well. Ermao remembered saying earlier that, “Feminism is basically a safe subject in China,” and so she felt the institutional betrayal. It is a core part of Chinese communism that women and men are equal. Feminism should be a safe and correct subject no matter how much people politicize it. And yet, the police of a communist government detained five feminists for 39 days simply because of their plans to distribute anti-sexual-harassment flyers. This abuse of power says clearly to feminist activists that the country is backtracking on its promises, turning reactionary and conservative.

Hearing her experiences, I started to see the constant horror in my mind with a clearer view. It was the horror toward a strong dictatorial government I love that gave me the most anxious fears. The March 7 incident left me with much trauma, even though I was not even present at the event. I could barely imagine its impact on those who experienced it directly.

Ermao was affected by this shocking incident. In one of the lunch chats in our office, we talked about how the five feminists would rise as the leading icons of Chinese feminism, and Ermao spoke: “Well... I would still rather not be arrested...” We all looked at her, waiting for her next line.

“Because... I want to be...alive?” she said. After saying that, she laughed. “Well, I heard that after the detention, if they were going to be convicted, they would be sent back to their place of birth to go to prison. And I thought about it. You know, all my relatives are working in the prison system, so...”

All of us laughed.

“Yeah, if I come back to Hubei to go to prison, it would be like coming back home. So I would fear no more.” She continued, “Well, hopefully. My grandfather is retiring. But then, he would still have connections to accommodate me, wouldn’t he?” This kind of humor circulates in the feminist community a lot. One of the “Feminist Five” even wrote a Gourmet Guide to the House of Detention about how to eat creatively in custody.

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In her recovery phase, Ermao found the cat Ah Huang to be comforting. When she touches Ah Huang’s fur and looks into Ah Huang’s eyes, she finds moments of peace. She could spend hours with Ah Huang to fill her mind with joy. I wonder if the popularity of cat-raising in feminist circles is for similar reasons.

Carrying the weight of the incident, Ermao decided to continue her career as a feminist advocate. However, admittedly, the organization stopped all outdoor activities and continued the indoor activities like lectures and theater. Chinese feminist activism had thus in part been thwarted. But what I witnessed was that many of the activists have helped each other to move on. Although some of them lost their institutions, their offices or their properties, or they chose to leave, they still respect each other. Personally, the same changes Ermao had experienced were also happening to me: I was becoming more confident and more likely to start taking part in activities than to wonder about the theoretical aftermath and doing nothing.

The Community in Transition

Changes and Challenges

As an intern in a journalistic organization, I had opportunities to interact with various people and observe the changes and challenges in the feminist and wider activist community. More interaction with people also brought me greater insights into the development of my own organization, in all its facets – from a rather traditional feminist media platform to a combination of feminist activism and broader feminist connection.

During my time at Media Monitor for Women Network, various media and artists visited the organization and were interested in the current circumstances of and difficulties experienced by Chinese feminists, and they sought feminists’ thoughts in the particularly difficult time after the March 7 incident. From listening to interviews, I gathered information that I would not have been aware of if I had worked only with my coworkers. For instance, in one interview Ermao talked about how this organization developed from a volunteer group of feminist journalists to the most influential advocacy organization for feminism in new media.

The purpose of the MMWN was originally to increase the presence of women in media. In the beginning, the head of the volunteer group, Lu Pin, thought that if more journalists were feminist, they would generate more reports about women. Therefore, the original function of the group was to hold workshops and to train journalists in the field to become gender-sensitive. Also, Lu Pin and her coworkers started to publish digital weekly reports called “The Women’s Voices Report.” In 2009, the organization became commercially registered under the name Beijing Gender Culture Communication Center. When Ermao started to work full time for the organization, it was still mainly for media-related training.

However, Lu Pin and Ermao realized that although journalist trainings helped the cause, they were not enough to raise the presence of women in the media. Women’s voices and women’s struggles still had to be newsworthy to be reported in influential media. Therefore, Lu Pin and Ermao thought they had to do something more to catch people’s and the media’s attention. Media Monitor for Women Network first appeared on social networks in 2010, and its official Sina Weibo (Chinese Twitter), account was renamed “Feminist Voices” in April 2011.

An incident happened in late 2011, when Kim, the wife of the Chinese celebrity Li Yang, sent photos of her bruised body via Weibo asking for help. When other media were treating this case as a celebrity scandal (in this sense, his issue), Feminist Voices treated it as domestic violence (in that sense, her issue), and it publicized the case in this way. Moreover, the general media at the time sought reasons for Li Yang’s violence, but the blame was usually placed on Kim: “It must be her fault.” “She is a manipulative psycho.” People kept ignoring Kim’s voice in this case and turned to Li Yang for an explanation.

A circle of feminists, including Lu Pin and Ermao, was so concerned about the indifferent attitude toward domestic violence and women’s suffering in the mass media that they decided to do something to raise public awareness about it. They started their first feminist activity in 2012, which they called the “Bloody Bride.” Three of them were adorned with fake bruises and each wore a wedding dress with red spots, and they all walked along the busiest street in Beijing, carrying boards with various slogans: “Beating is not intimate; insulting is not love” (this relates to a Chinese proverb 打是亲骂是爱, which can be roughly translated to “Beating means intimate and insulting means love.”); “LOVE WITHOUT VIOLENCE”; “Violence is all around you, AND YOU ARE STILL SILENT?”; “LOVE, is not an excuse for...
violence." Several media reported this activity, and my organization publicized it. Moreover, more media started to see Kim’s case as a domestic violence case.

After enjoying this taste of being activists, these feminists decided to establish a loose organization that holds feminist activities. The members have planned and participated in many feminist activities, but there is no permanent member in the activism group and no permanent focus. Anyone who is interested can participate in any appropriate activity and say they are from this group. Originally, they called themselves “Young Feminist Activists Against Domestic Violence,” for that was their main focus. But later in the same year, some of the feminist activists shaved their hair off to raise awareness of gender inequality in college admissions, which has little to do with domestic violence. Later on, the activists started to introduce themselves as being from the “Feminist Activism” group. Since then, these people have been active not only in feminist activities, but also in the promotion of these activities. For instance, my organization started the “Feminist Television” program online, with each video featuring a heated topic and the feminists’ activities about it.

Although being part of feminist activism is a fulfilling experience for most people, it is not economically advantageous. As I wrote earlier, my organization gets funding for each specific project; so as long as it keeps running there is little problem with money. Many funders of my organization are abroad; other full-time feminist activist groups similarly have less domestic funding than foreign funding. The reason for a lack of domestic funding for such groups is that feminist advocacy organizations (or indeed other kinds of organization that seek changes to the system) remain politically sensitive in China. Domestic foundations tend to seek less sensitive projects to fund, such as disaster response, building schools, and student support. They also tend to fund projects that have more immediate results, such as creating opportunities for poor kids.

Compared to supporting these projects, funding feminist media promotion is considered neither politically safe nor efficient. Media promotion prompts people’s critical thinking about norms and authorities, while challenging the culture itself to help change the larger system. Cultural shifts do not usually occur suddenly. Therefore, funding a feminist advocacy group seems useless and dangerous. People of my parents’ generation now hold the bulk of the country’s resources, but they remain cautious about feminists.

I met with one of my mother’s friends, a woman who has a top executive position in a state-owned enterprise. We talked about feminism as she spotted me wearing the feminist T-shirt Meili designed. From the beginning, a certain antagonism was evident, as she thought feminists were promiscuous people who are just trying to get attention and have sex with every “sick” kind of person (LGBT people in her mind). She also thinks feminists are loud but not necessarily helping anything. I explained that feminism needs publicity, for it leads to subtle cultural changes. If no one hears them talking, there’s no way for them to change the culture. She insists that if it is really good for people, feminists should cooperate with the government. “Why don’t you cooperate with the Women’s Federation?” she questioned.

After all, as a socialist country, gender equality is written into the constitution of China. Our country has a huge women’s organization, the Women’s Federation, and it is perhaps the largest women’s organization in the world, for it has members in each government branch. I explained that the government as an office might not notice the grassroots facts like commoners do. Furthermore, even if they discover some inequality, they might not be as active as feminists and NGOs. The government is controlled by patriarchal powers, and the authorities in the system emphasize stability, not activism.

Later on, as I was also curious about why our organization does not frequently cooperate with the Women’s Federation, I asked Ermao about it; she added a new perspective: the Women’s Federation itself is a marginalized governmental organization, so it has little power or space to exercise power – but still, we do cooperate with it when they reach out to us for trainings, lectures, and pamphlets, or more.

When I talked about the fact that we accept foreign funding, my mother’s friend strongly disagreed. “You shouldn’t have taken foreign money. Because you will listen to whoever gives you money.” Many of my coworkers’ parents were also worried about this. There are so many opportunities for trainings from abroad offered to my colleagues that sometimes their parents wonder whether they are being trained by foreigners to sabotage the country. When my mother’s friend...
and I were talking about the five detained feminists, she said: “It is because you [feminists] took foreign money first, that the country would investigate you. You know, young people are easily instigated.”

I know what she was referring to: the Tiananmen Square Protest of 1989. At the time that it happened, my mother’s generation was comprised of young college graduates and young newbie employees. They witnessed the heat of the movement and the fall of many young people at the time. They heard one of the student leaders say, “I was expecting bloodshed.” They witnessed how the leaders of the movement fled to foreign lands, and how the “instigated” people left in China ended up discarded, ruined, and unhappy for the rest of their lives. As my parents’ generation later climbed the heights of the corporate ladder in this country, they know better than anyone how important it is to cooperate with those who have power if you want to achieve a better future, and how dangerous it is to play with those who don’t have power but try to acquire power and unite people.

“If the government has to investigate you, then it must have reasons,” my mother’s friend strongly believes. Actually, patriotism in the form of trusting the government is well instilled in many Chinese people, including me, so it affects our instincts about many things. For instance, although feminist activists generally know each other and believe that most of their colleagues and peers are working for the best of the country and society, some of them still think (secretly) about the possibility of the detained ones taking money – and orders! – from foreigners to sabotage the country’s peace or something else. The power of doubt and fear is so strong that the authorities often use it to neutralize different voices.

Governmental powers have always kept society stable. Stability is a crucial aspect of a civil society, in which order and peace are maintained. However, stability is also used in some cases as an excuse for the stagnation of class, power, and the perpetuation of injustice. When individual officials and authorities are entitled to power and people have no way to object, they can use power to leverage the possibility of peaceful changes for their own benefit.

Power is a dual-edged sword. The current government uses its extreme power to eliminate corrupt officials. At the same time, the government uses its power to eliminate any threats to its rule (i.e. organized people who question the system). Xi is so adamant about eliminating corruption and limiting corrupt officials’ power that many people of power and influence have been arrested and convicted during his term. However, under this totalitarian reign, others must have the power to take over from the powerful. Xi is promoting legislation to regulate the corrupt ruling powers. Since corruption goes all the way down to local government branches, Xi must make sure he has the absolute ability to eliminate corruption while keeping society stable.

How can one establish people’s faith in the legal process if totalized power is still the most useful tool to solve problems? This is especially difficult when people find that the target is not only corrupt officials, but anyone who might stir up common people’s discontent toward the Party and the government. If the officials who promote peaceful changes in the government relinquished their power now, the Party would collapse while they worked on enacting punishments for that corruption. Therefore, I can logically understand why the government has started to limit foreign funds, as well as street demonstrations and other forms of activities that might affect their power and position in China right now. But understanding is not the same as accepting. If law enforcement does not respect the basic legal rights of Chinese citizens, how can one expect them to help promote the rule of law in China? Totalized power, however good its results can sometimes be, can turn against anyone when it detects a threat.

Similar violations of people’s rights happen in other “democratic” societies. In the name of “national interest” everything can be justified. In many countries, people are educated to value “the state” over their own lives. But whose rights do the states stand for? Shall we support the government and policies that might negatively affect our lives? There is never a simple answer. We all have opinions and identities, and we make choices about what to support and what to value most. Chinese government officials may choose to value the leadership position of the Communist Party more than some individuals’ lived experiences. From the officials’ perspective, the arrests and investigations they order serve their purpose of deterring those who plan to sabotage the Party’s rule in China; the unfortunate traumatizing experiences of
some “innocent” activists are merely the collateral damages.

Thus, being a full-time activist or NGO worker in China means that you are not only financially insecure, but also will probably be targeted by the Big Machine of the Chinese government. Organizing grassroots public action with funds from abroad becomes a dangerous activity for many feminist activists and other NGO workers. Many people get used to the police’s short-term interrogations. Even if activists and NGO members try hard to protect themselves from the authorities, they still live with insecurity. They and their families often experience long-term anxiety about their safety and security. This is especially true for those who are the authorities’ biggest targets.

“A while ago my mother watched a program on CCTV about a group of people who use ‘charity’ as an excuse to acquire money,” one of the Feminist Five said, “She called me immediately, fearing that these were my coworkers. She thought maybe I was in some organization that tries to sponge money off people or to stir up society. I realized that the government had already started to stigmatize NGOs. Well, my mother also has feared seeing me on television since then, since I was arrested. Probably we all don’t want to be there.” We laughed at her words. But how can we not have similar feelings?

The news about missing NGO workers had been circulating in Weixin for only a little while when my mother phoned, worried about me. For her, my safety is the most important thing. She couldn’t stand losing track of me without any knowledge of where I was. But then I comforted her: “I am not that important.” How much have I done in the eight weeks I have been involved with feminist organizations? Although I have attended many activities, they were never as sensitive as the street actions of the Feminist Five or the ongoing work of some NGO workers.

Aside from safety concerns, another fact bothers some feminists’ family members: There are many lesbians in feminist circles in China. I noticed this on Day One. Through this experience, I met more women who were openly lesbian than ever before.

I remember one time a reporter asked, “Do you think the situation for gays and lesbians is different in China?” Ermao answered, “Yes, of course. Gays are still men. Lesbians are still women.” It countered some of my thoughts. Before, I thought lesbians were more socially accepted than gay males, because for men being gay could be seen as a way of betraying their masculinity and male power. In fact, in China being lesbian actually invites more oppression, including within LGBT circles.

This fact is actually very pivotal to the lives of many lesbian feminists. T, one of the Feminist Five, once worked in an LGBT organization but found herself able to do very little. “Because it [the organization] is mainly for gays,” T explained. “And gays are men. Many of the gays, although being oppressed themselves, do not care about oppressed women. To them it seems that only gays can represent LGBT, and only men’s needs are crucial. It was an unpleasant working experience.” T found that only within feminist groups could she create attention for both women’s and lesbians’ needs. This is probably true for many lesbians participating in feminist activities: they feel that their voices would be silenced working primarily in LGBT organizations, even as the organizations have become more prominent.

A group of feminists formed from the tieba forum go even further: they claim that gay men are the most sexist people in China. The tieba feminists have certain views: On the one hand, gays don’t need women for love; on the other hand, they grow up in a misogynist culture where women are seen as son-bearers and baby-sitters. In China, men are the owners of the surnames. With the One-Child Policy, the young surname owners are often the only boys in their families. Many gay men know they have to have kids with women to continue their family line. Those gay men want to have children without having to pay much money and attention for a surrogate and childrearing, so they trick women into marrying them and having children with them while finding lovers elsewhere. These gays are probably the most misogynous men in China and are worse than many straight men. They look down on women and see them only as reproductive tools. They have neither love nor compassion toward women, yet they have men’s pride in families and the society and gays’ pride in marginalized communities. These views, as expressed by the tieba feminists, explain further why some feminists want to keep distant from an LGBT alliance. They believe that gay men are hindering lesbians and bisexual women from attaining women’s rights. This group of feminists is sometimes more anti-gay than non-feminists; some of them view gays as a cancer doing harm to the feminist cause.

However, I don’t think it is helpful to stigmatize any group. If we understand that the origin of certain gay men’s misogyny is the culture’s misogyny, we can do better in changing, for example, the culture of son-worship. That being said, women should never fulfill the wishes of those who hate women. It is important to be vigilant about the direction of one’s activism. It may cultivate compassion and inclusion on the one hand, but it also can cultivate exclusion and adversarial behavior on the other.
Reflections

In developing his theory of "panopticism," Michel Foucault introduced Bentham’s imaginary prison, *Panopticon*. In Bentham’s concept, the prison’s omnipotent supervisor ensured that all prisoners were alert to their own improper behaviors. Even if there was no one watching, prisoners would keep behaving well. Foucault writes, “[The Panopticon] is an important mechanism, for it automatizes and disindividualizes power. Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up.” When the powerful and authoritarian image is established, the architectural idea of power functions on its own and through it people borrow and exercise power. Foucault continues, “Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine: in the absence of the director, his family, his friends, his visitors, even his servants.”

Through my observations of how power and people interact, I found Foucault’s perspective to be both daunting and arguably applicable in contemporary China. Witnessing the struggles of people demanding power and equality was a significant experience for me. In China, the authority plays the role of the powerful entity, and activists fight for their rights to shape a new power balance while, without realizing it, consenting to the existing power. As one born in China, I acknowledge that there has been an omnipotent power in my life from a young age. There is no doubt that the government is monitoring and managing the development of our nation. We bear in mind the government when anything happens, good or bad, very much like the mechanism of the “Panopticon” as it develops into an automatized and disindividualized power. This summer, I was privileged to meet many active feminists and learn from them about their work and life; as I began to investigate Foucault’s insights into power, I couldn’t help but link it to their collective and individual experience as Chinese feminists.

Since the March 7 incidents, feminist activists cannot escape the idea that they are targeted and vulnerable. They always knew they were being scrutinized, for they were “invited for tea” by the authorities occasionally. They worked to avoid being targeted by depoliticizing their activities or avoiding sensitive words. But when they found themselves being punished and isolated in crisis situations (for example, with sudden arrests), their fear of state power grew bigger and started to affect their choices. Lu Pin, the head of the MMWN, is forced to stay in the US, and Meili decided to leave Beijing, the capital of China, for another city where she would feel safer, being further from the reach of government power in Beijing.

Many feminist activists felt isolated, and feared that they were spied on not only by the government but also by their own friends and family, since they, too, are supervised by the Great Machine. One example of this is when my mother’s friend insisted that feminists should not accept foreign funds and should cooperate with the government if they are really doing this for the mass population. As I elaborated in the previous section on community and challenges, many of my coworkers’ parents also worried about the legitimacy of their non-governmental work to address societal problems.

When the powerful entity grows as big as the government in China, surveilling each other’s behaviors becomes normalized. After all, the country is not so distant from the Cultural Revolution, throughout which many people got into trouble for even their inadvertent words. It is also not so far from the Tiananmen Incident, which is where many young people saw the negative consequences of participating in non-governmental movements. In this system, people alert others in all sorts of ways about their “misbehaviors.” The imaginary idea of power is exercised on people in each and every action they make to police their own bodies. Such voluntary surveillance has an effect on every aspect of activists’ lives, from raising funds to renting houses, for rich people and house owners do not like to get themselves into trouble, assuming they, too, are being surveilled by the Great Machine.

Being both the symbol and the entity of authority gives the government and its officials, and the relatives of officials, great power to determine the allocation of resources and discipline others’ behaviors. On the one hand, people support the government because they believe its authority prevails and contributes to (perhaps more accurately, controls) their future; on the other hand, people believe their behavior is constantly visible to the government and no one can help them when they confront the government and its agents. Through both respect and fear, people consent to the power’s actions and give up their own rights to officials.
and the relatives of officials who operate this powerful entity. Many people neither care to know about how the government is run nor know how they could contribute to policy change. Then, when people face difficulties, they resent not only the individuals who exercise the power but the powerful entity as a whole.

Feelings of insecurity in the country they love pushes feminists to rethink the governmental system as a whole. Feminists who were traumatized by the state tend to question whether the government can and will voluntarily promote justice in the current bureaucratic system. Even if the Party in theory embraces the ideals of social justice and gender equality, it is hard to ensure that these ideas are implemented in real life situations. For instance, although the All-China Women’s Federation has branches in every village and every county in China, there have been many controversial cases about the actual functions of the Women’s Federation.

For example, one case was publicized this July: A woman was beaten by her husband and suffered a concussion five months after giving birth. She called the police, and the police had her ask the local Women’s Federation to write her a letter of introduction to the judicial expert on domestic violence. However, the local Women’s Federation refused to write the letter, replying, “We won’t do it because if we do, she will have a huge advantage in the divorce case.” Another case became publicized because of the attitude toward domestic violence of the social media editors at Shanghai Women’s Federation, which posted about a domestic violence case on Weibo (Chinese Twitter): a woman, although she had been beaten by her husband many times, tried to kiss and hug him; in the end, her husband stopped beating her. Not at all moved by this case, many citizens instead became furious that the Women’s Federation was asking the victims to embrace the perpetrators even though they might have beaten them to death. “What are you standing for, Women’s Federation?” one citizen wrote. “Are you standing for the woman or the husband?”

Such cases inevitably cause feminists to doubt the possibility of achieving gender equality in a patriarchal system. When I remember what Chairman Xi said to the new leaders of the All-China Women’s Federation (which I translated above in the Arrival at the Airport section), it became clear why officials are opting to care more about husbands than women. In Xi’s words, women are important because they are useful in building family harmony, rearing children, and creating a stable society. The primary needs to be fulfilled are the needs of families and the society. Who decides the needs of families in China? Usually the men – the husbands, the fathers and the sons. Who decides the needs of the society? The government officials and people in higher positions in patriarchal institutions.

As Audre Lorde puts it: “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable.” What does it mean when the Women’s Federation remains subordinate to the patriarchal government? What does it mean when women’s rights are not necessarily what the officials of the Women’s Federation care about? It means that we are trying to use patriarchal tools to dismantle patriarchy. It means that only the narrowest parameters of change are possible and allowable in a system of governance by patriarchal officials. Although Xi expressed the mission of the Women’s Federation in a benign manner, it is still unclear what if any work on gender equality he will bring to the government. In this case, feminists cannot simply wait for the authorities to make decisions about their lives; even if they don’t have much power in the country, they have to take action.

Moving Forward

As working in NGOs can be financially and physically insecure and often frustrating in various ways, mobility has become a constant feature for feminists and NGO workers in China, especially in 2015, as the government was using harsher means to deter social activists. During my stay, I witnessed a lot of people leaving. The Yi Yuan Commune, an institution I wrote about in the previous section, moved out of our building on June 4. Watching the apartment being emptied was emotional for many of us. “The Yi Yuan Commune has finished its mission. So it’s time for it to leave,” the head of the Yi Yuan Commune, Cao, said. I could not tell if she was sorry, or felt relief at the end of an era. The Yi Yuan Commune would not stop its activities, but it chose to leave its office.

Several feminist activists I knew were leaving to go to the South. “I cannot stay here,” one of them said. After all, Beijing is the place where the government has the most power. Meili also left on June
15. We split up some of the belongings she left behind. One feminist institution, Weizhiming, in Hangzhou, announced its shutdown. In its announcement, it wrote, “Today is the last working day in May. Our institution has been suspended for two months since the March 7 ‘Feminist Five’ incident. And we have to shut down.” Its three core members were all members of “the Feminist Five.” Two of its allies were the other two feminists. Owing to its inability to continue their projects and pay the rent, they had to shut down the institution. Feminist Voices is very lucky in this case, because one alleged target of the police in my organization, Lu Pin, happened to be in the United States in March. Therefore, the police were unable to locate her in China, so she narrowly missed the March 7 incident.

Lu Pin is a leader in many feminist activities. When she heard about the detainment of several young women, she said: “I shouldn’t have taken [one of them] into this stuff....” She expected to come back within two months. However, after hearing so much news about NGO people continually disappearing, she decided not to come back, at least this year. Since she’s not coming back any time soon, she decided to lease her apartment. My coworkers and I helped to move her stuff into our office. When we cleared 20 boxes of books out of her apartment, I kept wondering what kind of person she is. I love her selection of books, and I know the feeling of being apart from your most beloved books. If being a feminist in China means that I have to cut off my connections with my past in the form of leaving or throwing away my precious belongings to keep my mobility, I would have to think twice about it.

After the eight weeks of internship, I left Beijing and my site in July. I still did not get a chance to watch BCome’s theater performance. However, I was grateful to have become friends with so many passionate social justice workers and feminist activists. In eight weeks, it was not possible for me to understand every aspect of Chinese feminism. (For example, in Beijing, it was impossible for me to investigate grassroots feminist education in rural areas.) And in a relatively short reflection paper, it has been impossible for me to present everything that happened to me in China. Nonetheless, I have tried to present many dimensions of and contexts for feminism in China as I saw it. Although I have recorded many challenges feminists face in China, I still see hope for greater developments in Chinese feminism.

My internship experience encouraged me to take action and “be the change.” I plan to do more advocacy of feminism in China in more creative and less politically sensitive ways. Next summer, I will be organizing a series of lectures and forums in Beijing featuring women speakers from various backgrounds. I believe that communication and storytelling are powerful in feminist advocacy. I am still thinking about ways to get those who will not yet listen to any words that women say to actually listen to women’s stories. For peaceful change to happen from the grassroots, we first have to make more productive communication possible.

Although I have recorded many challenges feminists face in China, I still see hope for greater developments in Chinese feminism.

Bibliography


Notes

1. 嫁出去的女儿是泼出去的水 (*Jia chuqu de nver shi po chuqu de shui*). It is a common metaphor in China to say that a married daughter belongs to her husband’s family and can never come back.

2. 遵老爱幼 (*zun lao ai you*). Translated by Anni Long
3. All-China Women’s Federation is a women’s organization founded in 1949 by the Chinese Communist Party. It is responsible for promoting government policies on women and protecting women’s rights from the governmental level. It builds branches in every village, community and county along with Party branches. From 1995, it recognized itself as a nongovernmental organization. However, its members are government officials and it often locate its offices in government office buildings.


5. In October 2015, the Chinese government ended its One-Child Policy and thus now allows families to have two children. See more from the New York Times article at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/30/world/asia/china-end-one-child-policy.html?_r=0.


9. Ibid. 201.

10. Tianjin is a northern city next to Beijing and one of the four national municipalities directed by the Central Government. National municipalities directly under the Central Government are politically equal to provinces; the other national municipality cities are Beijing, the capital of China; Shanghai, the international metropolis in Southeastern China; and Chongqing, the mountainous capital of Southwestern China.

11. In later writings, I am referring to everyone’s pseudonyms (except the founder of my organization, Lu Pin) when I write their stories. Some of them have built fame using their pseudonyms. Owing to their activity, I can only make some changes to some of their pseudonyms presented. Still, it is hard to hide their identifiable features, as this essay mentions their public activism.


13. The five feminists were released in April because of lack of evidence, but were still under restrictions.


18. Ibid.

The Web of the Environment

Wilkins Lugo ’17

A Culvert

When a puff of dust tailgating our car settles, we passengers, workers of the Housatonic Valley Association (HVA), know that we have arrived at our destination. Stepping out of the vehicle that had kept us somewhat isolated from the world outside — the window was rolled down for the relief of even warm air whipping across my face — I put on my hat to block the grand presence of the sun. The sun makes itself known with its ubiquitous reflections off of my glasses, the pavement, and the running water due to the lack of cumulus clouds, polka-dotting the blue canvas above me. The water traverses the culvert and exits on the other side of the roadway.

Before we have even recorded our first data, the snowballing beads of sweat are already forming on my forehead. The rising amorphous cloud of mud under the surface, as I make my way through the water to the hydraulic control, alerts the native fishes and frogs to flee from their potential predator, if our sounds did not already do so. The buzz I hear tells me that in future culvert assignments, I should not count on the bug spray’s claim to keep bugs off, and shows that I made the wrong choice today in using bug spray rather than sunblock. That buzz augments the sound of the flowing water. As I am recording the elevation, the sensor’s beeping becomes steady as the appropriate height is reached; I jot down the height, and begin trudging through the mud onto the next point. The elevation sensor data points are limited to roughly 50 feet on average on either side of the culvert, the bankfull data points on the other hand had a bigger distance.

I cautiously walk alongside the banks, since wet rubber waders do not have a great grip on boulders or moss, walking with another HVA worker because the acquisition of these points must be done in pairs. It is a lengthy process as I walk in a stance that appears as though I am on the widest pair of tightropes: my body is low, my arms are out, and my feet are wide. As we are making our way from point to point — over boulders, over and under overturned logs, through thorny rose bushes, avoiding snapping turtles here and there, and sometimes encountering water pockets that appear shallower then they are — the rears of deer and wingspans of birds can be glimpsed as they try to avoid human contact. I encounter blackberry bushes off to the sides of the banks, tempting me to momentarily stop and enjoy the scene: the undisturbed running river flowing downstream, the sound of babbling water mixing with the chewing of berries, and the periodic slaps against an arm to fend off mosquitoes.

I find myself thinking of my training for these assessments, and how I would ideally want further knowledge pertaining to earth sciences. The first time I doubted my knowledge in this field of science was when I was asked about the benefits of a plant buffer system for a river. I did not know the answer, but a fellow intern did. All of the other interns are majoring or have majored in fields related to Earth Science. That is when I realized the gap in knowledge I had in comparison to my fellow interns that summer. At first, I felt that I had to catch up with my coworkers, and decided to research some of the Environmental Protection Agency’s information on watersheds through their watershed academy. My academically competitive nature probably explains that temporary insecurity, but when I realized that I was up to par with my fellow interns in culvert assessments, that insecurity...
vanished, though I found myself motivated to learn more about the field to feed my interest. I would tell the other interns that I feared I would end up losing interest in Environmental Science if I spent my undergraduate years studying it, but I soon learned that it would be unlikely; on the contrary, one of my current graduate education goals is to get a master’s degree in environmental biology.

Conversations with residents regarding our work with the culverts are common. A typical conversation goes along the following lines:

Resident: “Hello. What are you all doing?”

Me: “Hi. We’re workers with the Housatonic Valley Association. We’re assessing this culvert for variable factors from its potential to maintain itself in a serious storm to its function in stream continuity.”

Resident: “That’s good work. Yeah… when it’s raining hard, the runoff would overflow the culvert and actually cross the roadway.”

Me: “Really!? [Makes note of that] That’s exactly why we’re doing our work. We want to make sure that the culverts that need revamping are indicated as soon as possible.”

Resident: “That’s good to hear. Well, I’ll let you all get to it then. Watch out for the snapping turtles!”

These exchanges may seem trivial, but they are an important part of HVA’s work. Often a community overlooks the benefits that the culvert assessments provide because the work is to prevent something from happening. By engaging people directly through a community outreach plan, HVA can build the support that it needs to protect the river and the broader environment.

HVA: The Organization

The Housatonic Valley Association (HVA) Incorporated is a tri-state watershed organization with locations in Cornwall, Connecticut; South Lee, Massachusetts; and Wassaic, New York. The HVA monitors water quality, adds sections to the Housatonic RiverBelt Greenway, and uses computer mapping to help towns measure the impact and benefits of land use and development, and more. Charles Downing Lay, who rallied his neighbors and friends to his cause, a healthy Housatonic River Valley, founded the organization in 1941 as the Housatonic Valley Conference, which evolved into the Housatonic Valley Association. The office in Connecticut is where I spent my Sorensen summer, and where I experienced culture shock in seeing how environmental features of a community are valued.

There were 13 full-time staff members at that time working for the HVA in Connecticut, with one part-time employee and five interns. Usually, there are only two interns with the HVA, but a Sorensen Fellow (me) and a part-time, part-volunteer intern (Jason) added extra help. The full-time staff consisted of various managers, directors, and a coordinator.

I got to learn more about the members of the organization as time passed, through common work responsibilities, organizational events, and spending time together outside of work hours. I met my supervisor when I was commuting to the place I would be living during the summer. He allowed me to tag along with him to his son’s peewee baseball game where he was the coach. I got to know Patience, the Financial Director, after she offered to host me for the summer. In addition to her HVA position, she is a firefighter and an emergency medical technician. I remember asking the Land Protection Director, Elaine, to introduce me to the world of camping, to help me reach a new goal I’d set: to one day finish hiking the Appalachian Trail. Knowing that she had hiked it, and that the trail goes right through Cornwall, I had to make the most of this opportunity.
The longer I worked for the HVA, the more its role in the community became clear. There are the culvert assessments that benefit the community, but the organization benefits from the community as well. As a non-profit organization, the HVA does copious fundraising to keep its mission alive and bring it closer to completion. Development Director Richard “Dick” Sears shoulders this responsibility.

When at the beginning of the summer the interns cycled through the staff for brief presentations about each person’s role in the overall function of the organization, we started with Richard. As he regaled us about his work, my understanding of what makes a non-profit like this integral to its community became clearer. Before joining the HVA, I had assumed that this integration was solely due to the services and benefits the organization can provide to its community. However, Richard told me about the importance of making the community feel welcomed by sending invitations to HVA events and fundraisers. My sense of how a non-profit organization best functions now includes actively trying to make the beneficiaries of the services a part of the organization. Over the course of over 60 years, the organization has remained a vital resource for community events, local pride, and advocacy for the local environment.

The Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) notices the advocacy the HVA does, and often makes enticing employment offers to their staff. I was told that the previous person who held Michael’s current position was recruited for the DEEP. Patience said, “They offer more pay, and better offers — tempting the switch to the DEEP.” This is the first time I had heard of governmental organizations higher on the governmental ladder actively recruiting employees in this manner, revealing a potential career track I had not previously considered.

I have come to realize the grand potential of a “bottom-up” process of change: In order to have an effect on the bigger picture, the change must first occur in the more localized sense. The mission of the HVA, “protecting the natural character and environmental health of our communities,” serves as an example of that kind of change. Focused effort in watershed communities will lead to the desired state of the entire Housatonic River watershed. And in a wider way, with the additive effect of more organizations acting within their communities with missions somehow related to social justice, the leadership and workforce will soon be saturated with altruistic people enacting social justice in their respective realms.

**Wilkins and the Environment**

Born and raised in an urban setting, I have always associated the outdoors with the sounds of car honks and sporadic smell of car fuel emission. In my hometown’s urban setting, the environment is in constant flux between a native poor state and a relatively better one, thanks to local organizations and work from a few volunteers. It was not until in high school that I really viewed the environment as in need of improvement. The catalyst that changed my perspective was working with Groundwork Lawrence as a Green Team member. My work ranged from park cleanups to community involvement (e.g. invasive species training), and outings like camping and a gathering of local environmental organizations at the 23rd Massachusetts Land Conservation Conference.

Being selected to talk at this conference about the action I had undertaken with Groundwork Lawrence allowed me to further explore the effects of my actions on my city’s environmental state. Presenting with a coworker as a pair, I do not remember much of what I said in the presentation except, “I feel like a philanthropist of sorts towards the environment.” After the unintended laughter ended and our presentation was done, I remember leaving the event knowing that I had found my niche in the world, as an environmentalist.

The rural location of the HVA office in Cornwall is the complete opposite of my hometown of Lawrence, MA. Ironically, in rural Cornwall a car is more necessary than in urban Lawrence, because in Cornwall there are no sidewalks. A landmark that the residents and the HVA workers both take great pride in is the Housatonic River that flows right through Cornwall. Each of the organization’s workers, volunteers, and interns take on responsibilities to improve and maintain the health of this flowing body of water.

I hoped that the Cornwall area would be where I would gain the primary experience necessary to work towards my ultimate goal, to combat global warming. I also hoped to learn through experience things that could carry over to any environment I would be in, including, I hope, future work internationally with the Peace Corps. To be sure, the impact of the work that lasted eight weeks in Cornwall Connecticut will extend far past that the summer season. Ultimately, it will translate to helping me work on a global scale to reverse current trends. From the local arena to the global,
my intentions are to disprove Steven Hawking’s statement: “I don’t think we will survive another 1,000 years without escaping beyond our fragile planet.” If successful, my incorporation of my learned experiences working for the HVA, and any future organization, will help me be part of an effective effort to convince everyone of the importance of our planet’s environmental health, and or working to revert back to a healthier state.

The Science of Environmental Chemistry

“Critical processes at the ecosystem level influence plant productivity, soil fertility, water quality, atmospheric chemistry, and many other local and global environmental conditions that ultimately affect human welfare. These ecosystem processes are controlled by both the diversity and identity of the plant, animal, and microbial species living within a community. Human modifications to the living community in an ecosystem as well as to the collective biodiversity of the earth can therefore alter ecological functions and life support services that are vital to the well-being of human societies.”

Whenever there is a roadway that crosses water, a culvert is usually present to allow the running body of water to continue on its path. Its flow is determined by a hydraulic control. Culverts come in many shapes, sizes, and materials: round, rectangular, corrugated, and metallic; although not a traditional culvert, bridges might also be included in this category. Failure in their function can lead to various outcomes, including habitat discontinuity: the isolation of one habitat fragment from another area of the habitat. This is a major reason motivating our work assessing the copious culverts located within the Housatonic watershed: to impede preventable habitat discontinuity. The habitats were not always secluded from residential properties, and we would often have a conversation with the property owner explaining our work. The information we gather pertaining to the culvert is entered into a database for Trout Unlimited (TU) and the North Atlantic Aquatic Connectivity Collaborative (NAACC), two environmental partners with the HVA.

Since the width of a river can vary over time, it is more appropriate to define the size of the river based on the channel rather than the width of the current wetted area. The way to do this is to use a set of agreed parameters of what defines the width of the channel. According to the Vermont Stream Geomorphic Assessment Identification of Bankfull Stage, these parameters include changes in the slope of the banks, the lowest extent of woody vegetation, changes in deposited leaf concentration, and the top of channel bars (which are sediment deposits from the river’s flow).

While looking for the indicators, we also scope the banks for severity of erosion or lack thereof. Degrees of erosion are based on the extent of erosion on the span of the banks. Plant roots affect the support system of stream banks. This is why one bank may appear to endure the stream’s current whereas the opposite bank will appear like a receding hairline. However, banks with severe erosion with roots from trees have been observed. The stream’s current will sometimes erode the soil in between tree roots, leaving behind a web-like structure static in space, representative of how much soil has been washed away. Once we are finished collecting the bankfull points, we assess the culvert.

Culverts can vary as much as stream conditions. The roadfill material, for example, can provide an ideal spot for some wildlife to bask in the heat, since it has an unobstructed exposure to the sunlight. If a piece of rope or a mat of dirt is on a boulder in this section, a second look is required before removing it, as a suddenly emerging snake or spider could cause you to fall into the water. A culvert can serve as a connection between upstream and downstream in a waterway, so wildlife like fish that cannot traverse on land are dependent on culverts for travel. Hence, the assessment of the culvert, such as the state of bank armoring, the level of erosion of culvert material, the water depth and constriction of the culvert, and other measurements, are essential to get an understanding of the continuity for its dependent inhabitants.
Another form of river assessments I performed was for Water Assessment Volunteer Evaluation (WAVE). At the training for WAVE, I found myself among others for the same purpose of learning to collect macro invertebrate samples as indicators of water quality. The reasoning behind using macro invertebrates is that they are slow moving and thus the most susceptible to water pollution. I remember being asked at the training why the HVA had an interest in a training that was strictly for New York. After I paused, forgetting the reason, my coworker Savannah answered for me: “The HVA is interested in the water quality of a watershed that extends into both Connecticut and New York.”

As a full-time member of the organization, Savannah continues the work we were doing over the summer, with some changes. The culvert assessments are still being conducted, along with the development of the Still River Alliance website. What has been added to her plate is work related to education. Recently, the HVA posted pictures of Savannah working with students at the Housatonic Valley Regional High School to do macro invertebrate sampling on a brook nearby. The students’ data would then be submitted to the Riffle Bioassessment by Volunteers (RBV) through the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

According to Ryan, a part-time staff member at the HVA, river assessments are an annual task. As I made my way from data point to data point along the river during culvert assessments, I would find myself listening to Ryan’s stories of assessments in years past. When I learned that they are performed yearly, my initial thought was that perhaps this work has a short lifespan with equally short benefits. But I now view the effects of each assessment as lasting longer than I had initially believed. In addition to the data they provide, these assessments provide ancillary occasional conversations between community members and HVA staff that further nurture the relationship between this organization and its community.

Community Outreach: Methods and Purpose

An important aspect of HVA’s work is outreach to the people of the communities that the organization serves. The HVA submitted a proposal to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for building community support for a healthier Still River. The Still River is a river that flows into the Housatonic River. The goals within the proposal include: providing up-to-date information on water quality and the safety of the river, raising awareness of how the polluted runoff influences the water quality, building community support for reduction in river pollution, and engaging local partners and the public in a nascent Watershed-Based Plan for the Still River.

The Still River is located in Danbury, Connecticut, a metropolitan area. Though the 1972 Clean Water Act improved the river’s water quality, it has a long way to go before it is consistently safe for human contact (without the sporadic spikes in pollutants that currently make it unsafe). The essence of the Act is that “point sources” — explicit sources of anthropocentric pollutants (e.g. industrial waste) — are regulated. But now, “non-point sources” (e.g. the salt to melt ice on streets) constitute the more prevalent issue threatening water quality, at least in the Still River watershed area.

Though not completed within the eight-week time scale of my internship, the outreach plan encourages community members and leaders alike to voice their thoughts on the Still River watershed base plan. My tasks with this project included arranging and listening in on a phone conversation between Michael Jastremski, the Connecticut Water Protection Manager, and Ann-Marie Mitroff of Groundwork Hudson Valley. I also gathered contact information about potential community partners and updated a Still River Committee Board meeting on my progress.

My supervisor told me about Ann-Marie Mitroff’s expertise in reaching out to underrepresented communities. In order to fulfill the mission of the fellowship, I was a major driving force in this outreach development. My supervisor also helped me fulfill the goal I set for myself in my phone interview for the internship: to apply what I would learn from this internship to my hometown’s environmental condition. After speaking on the phone with Ann-
Marie, Michael and I both felt confident about how we could gain momentum in outreach development. Ann-Marie had mentioned that we should find community leaders who were willing to participate and cooperate to fulfill our mission to protect the natural character and environmental health of our communities.

“Hey Will,” Michael asked me, “prepare an update on our status with the outreach for the committee meeting. And since we will all be in the same room, take advantage of it and ask how we can continue our momentum.”

“No problem.” I developed the questions and practiced the brief presentation I would give to the steering committee for the Still River. The committee is composed of various community leaders in the municipalities encompassed within the Still River Watershed. The day of the presentation came, and I explained my purpose in working with this task: to put social justice into action. I described my conversation with Ann-Marie Mitroff, and my reasoning behind the list of organizational leaders I have compiled, which was heavily composed of clergy and leaders in places of worship. The reasoning behind this was to bring our efforts to the wider community through religious organizations, which are usually well integrated into their respective communities and often welcome efforts at altruistic change.

When I finished my presentation, I grabbed a sheet of paper and a pen, and asked the room, “Do you have any ideas how we can succeed in our efforts?”

After a transitory pause, one of them told me of an area to explore that I had not considered before: The Department of Transportation. Those reliant on public transportation are a population underserved in the watershed-based plan. This was added to the ever-expanding list of contacts to assist us in the outreach effort. The intention is to reach out to those on that contact list, inviting them to host an information session for their community members.

Building Connections Between Science and Communities: Chemistry Affects Chemistry

Working at this office for the duration of eight weeks, I glimpsed the community’s perspective on the organization as one that supports its environmental virtues. This was first made evident when I would stop by the country market on my way to the office.

Crossing the Housatonic River, I have to stiffen my leg on the gravel to assist my deceleration on my bike to the Country Market. It is the nearest grocery store to the office, a mile downhill from the HVA. Even if I’d had a hearty breakfast, I used this stop as an excuse to give my legs a break before the upcoming physical challenge. The first time, after I’d purchased what would become the usual piece of fruit and juice, the cashier strikes up a conversation:

“So what brings you to Cornwall?”

“I’m a summer intern with the Housatonic Valley Association.”

“Oh wow, that’s amazing. They’re a great organization. What kind of work will you be doing?”

With co-worker Savannah Judge taking macroinvertebrate samples from a stream behind a train station in New York through WAVE [Water Assessment Volunteer Evaluators]. This is to assess the current health of the running body of water since these invertebrates are slow moving, thus, most affected by anomalies in the stream. The health is measured by determining which invertebrates are present and absent.
“Lots of river assessments and outreach. Well, I have to get going. Have a nice day.”

“Thanks, you too.”

This brief interaction showed me how one community member viewed the organization. It was not until I delved deeper into researching how to develop our outreach strategy that I learned how we could showcase the organization to the community by reaching out to community members directly.

When the internship arrangements were being finalized, I had emphasized the Sorensen Fellowship’s mission of social justice. The responsibility my supervisor gave me reflects how the organization views social justice: To develop an outreach strategy to the potentially underserved population in the communities encompassed by the Still River Watershed, a watershed that leads into the Housatonic River. This outreach required copious research and outreach to professionals with relevant, similar experience.

To reiterate, the goal of the outreach is to raise awareness of how the polluted runoff influences the water quality and the relative safety of the river, build community support for efforts to reduce pollution and make the river safer, and engage local partners and the public in the nascent effort by municipalities and other stakeholders to develop the Watershed-Based Plan for the Still River. Because the river is integral to riverside residents, fishers, boaters, and recreational users of the body of water — all of whom are present in the communities — their role in protecting the river is, by extension, protecting their way of life. The HVA exerts effort to ensure that the community’s opinions are voiced and heard before an intensive plan involving their river, which affects many residents, is put into action. In the conference room for the Cornwall office, the four walls are covered with paintings of various locations along the Housatonic River, various representations of the Housatonic River (i.e. various maps), and two posters that stand out from the rest. One poster includes a list of the various Heron Society members (a category for fundraisers) within the HVA, and a heron poster pinned right beside it. The heron is a common bird in the Cornwall area, and is often photographed in the river. These posters first caught my attention while I was sitting in on a board meeting. The posters behind the board members served to metaphorically resemble the beneficiaries of the work being done. Improving an ecosystem has immediate benefits to the organisms dependent on them, like the heron, but always spans wider boundaries to include community members.

The underlying goal of any improvement plan is to have the goals be sustained beyond the time span of its execution. A large part of the outreach plan was dependent on a proposal grant the HVA submitted to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. The proposal was denied, but, Michael (my supervisor) reminded me that a denied proposal is common for non-profit organizations such as the HVA. I was encouraged to continue with my outreach work, which we believe and hope will be helpful for similar tasks in the organization’s future, since the denied proposal eliminated the possibility of executing the current outreach plan. This highlights the importance of successful grant proposals, and why in many non-profit organizations there are full-time staff dedicated to handling this. Savannah Judge was a River Steward for the HVA in the summer of 2015, and is now a full-time staff member as their watershed technician. She was delegated the task of helping Michael draft and compose proposals, satisfying her interest in science writing and watershed health, which hybridizes well with grant proposals.

In the environmental chemistry course I took in preparation for this internship, I learned: air chemistry affects water chemistry, which in turn affects land chemistry. The learning in my internship mimicked this: An environmental organization affects the environment, which in turn affects the community. The work the HVA continues to do with the Housatonic River affects the ecosystem, which affects its relationship with their community. The Housatonic River affects the organization, since all of the organization’s actions are about the river. The river also affects the residents, as it affects the way of life for many citizens.

At a WAVE assessment training. I have my arms in the water, reaching for the cobblestones and the cadis fly cases mounted on them; my arms get acclimated to the usual decrease in temperature associated with contact with the stream from the hot air. After harvesting these

My hypothesis is that the river is a healthy one, but after cataloging the organisms at the stream by the developing golf course, I conclude that the opposite is true. Many, if not all, of the organisms are representatives of an unhealthy water body.
Air chemistry affects water chemistry, which affects land chemistry. A textbook example of this relationship is the emission of CO2 from automobiles. This gas reacts with the water vapor in the atmosphere, forming carbonic acid. This acid is then precipitated onto the earth’s surface, resulting in an acidified watershed. This rise in acidity in turn affects the wildlife dependent on the pH characteristic of the water. Wildlife dependence can be observed when some fish eggs will not be able to hatch below a certain pH (meaning greater acid concentration). The chemicals from non-point sources are numerous, and because they are not intended to be present in the ecosystem, their detrimental effects culminate in a state that the State of Connecticut Integrated Water Quality Report to Congress deems “impaired,” which, as noted above, can regularly cause pathogen and pollutant concentration to spike to levels that is unsafe for human contact.

My real-life experience exemplified the concept that “air chemistry affects water chemistry affects land chemistry” through the presence of the bulldozers from the golf course and the cars on the highways; both emit wastes into the atmosphere and potentially directly into the water body. The water that flowed from a tributary that has the development site upstream was not like the major water body; it was warm, affecting the water’s tendency to retain oxygen. Our actions may affect more than we realize. It is natural to become used to how we may be treating our environment, and it can prove detrimental. The effects of the tossed plastic bottle or the application of pesticides are too often ignored beyond the immediate benefit they pose to the person doing them: ease of waste disposal, or desirable crop and botanical yield. It can require getting one’s hands dirty and becoming deeply familiar with the environmental state to which these actions lead in order to fully comprehend their impact. Considering the intensive training in stream continuity and the number of observation assessments I had to undertake, it was easy for me to absorb the value of the river’s health not only to its habitants but also to the community’s residents.

The connection between practice and theory was evident in other aspects of the internship, including the analysis of documents for the community outreach and the Still River Day. This concept also relates to my overall experience during the summer regarding the relationship between our actions and their impact on the environment. Though an individual’s impact may seem negligible, the cumulative effect of communities having the same mindset will prove the contrary.

A pair of contrasting examples — Cornwall and Danbury, both in Connecticut — will demonstrate this. With the prominent Housatonic River flowing through their town and a Housatonic Valley Association (HVA) office located here, the residents of Cornwall are more aware of the importance of the watershed, and the aforementioned mindset (of the negligible affect of one person’s actions) is sparsely present. The residents of Danbury, a more urban environment without “the mighty Housatonic” flowing through it and the HVA office in it, has an opposite mindset. This makes intuitive sense; the more urban a setting is, the less we might expect its priorities to be related to the environment. Without closer knowledge of their actions’ effect on their aquatic ecosystem—that is, how their actions on land affect the water—urban residents will exacerbate the unsafe state of the river in the near future.

The first time I saw the difference between these two places was when I was tasked...
with analyzing documents that pertain to the watersheds: both the Still River and the Housatonic. During the analysis, I learned about the intentions the municipalities within the watersheds had towards their respective rivers. They all wanted to get the communities involved in the improvement of their environment. The challenge was reaching out to the people of the area, in order to get their voices heard in our plans. Though more of an analogy than direct application of the concept from my chemistry class, this demonstrates the government’s awareness of the chemistry of actions done in one terrain affecting others. Though I did not get to the phase of the intended outreach where I would physically meet with community members and residents, I did experience a something similar on Still River Day.

The annual Still River Day hosted along the Still River Greenway Trail is the closest I have gotten to teaching residents about this concept of one terrain’s chemistry affecting another terrain. At that event I taught fourth-grade students about invasive species. These are species not native to the local area, which are able to outcompete the indigenous populations due to their lack of natural predators. As I would circuit the greenway, pointing out the ubiquitous bamboo-like Japanese knotweed, I would ask my class thought-provoking questions. Some of the questions related to the effects of a specific plant: “Why do you think nothing is growing on the topsoil where these knotweeds are located?” Other questions would be about its relationship to the environment as a whole: “What do you think a long-term effect will be from this plant’s presence in this ecosystem?” This segued to talk about the balance of the different terrain chemistries in relation to one another. I would explain that the presence of invasive species, in the long term, might disrupt the natural food chain of the area, which translates across all of the terrains.

By working in copious culverts and helping develop a nascent watershed base plan, I feel I have taken the concept of the environmental chemistry course to a real life setting.

Knowing this concept from my environmental chemistry course primed my mind, throughout this internship, to look for areas where it could be applied. From the macro invertebrate sampling, to the document analysis, and to the Still River Day, to the culvert assessments, its application, though not always perfect or literal, is useful. This concept also made itself known outside of my work hours for the HVA. An example includes my choice to bike to and from work to prevent the production of additional fossil fuel emission, impeding the chain of reactions previously stated.

I am aware that my bike riding has a tiny impact on the global scale, which is why I work hard to try and motivate others to adopt a philosophy of mine similar to the phrase “saving pennies.” By working in copious culverts and helping develop a nascent watershed base plan, I feel I have taken the concept of the environmental chemistry course to a real life setting. Thus, in concert with actions of individuals like those within the HVA, my actions can be geared towards involving the public in educational awareness of their everyday actions and effects. Along with the benefits it would have for today’s communities, I hope that my actions will also have an impact on the communities of tomorrow.
Bibliography


Trout Unlimited Road-Stream Crossing Assessment Instructions Geomorphic and Hydraulic Info Supplement


Notes


2. Ibid.


4. Trout Unlimited Road-Stream Crossing Assessment Instructions Geomorphic and Hydraulic Info Supplement


“Hasta Magallanes y Patricio, por favor”

I get off at my usual stop on the corner of Magallanes and Patricio, bus 102’s last stop of the route. La Boca is the final destination for both of us, although the bus moves much more confidently than I do as we make our way in this neighborhood. I scan the bustling street with cars zooming by in all directions – there is no legal way to safely and successfully cross the road, as I and the others around me understand. One of the first things I learned upon arrival in Buenos Aires was to quickly disregard the American notion of pedestrians having the right of way, as the drivers are just as unpredictable and temperamental as the booming cosmopolitan city itself. Waiting for the right moment to move, mirroring the nearby elderly man also intending to cross the street, I hesitantly inch forward into the slowing traffic. As the man crosses, I quickly follow his stride and make it to the other side unscathed.

La Boca, which literally translates as “the mouth,” is a barrio known as the birthplace of the tango, and it has a rich history of immigration that traces back to the 19th century. During that time, an enormous influx of Italians settled along the Buenos Aires waterfront. Soon after the first wave of immigrants, the Italians were joined by Spanish, French, Eastern European, and English arrivals. While remnants of this European influence are evident throughout La Boca’s Italian cafés, colorful murals and conventillos – collective urban housing units that are shared by up to eight families – the demographics of the community and its dynamic in survival in Argentina’s current struggling economy have seen pivotal changes in the past century. As La Boca is a working-class community, it feels firsthand the whiplash of Buenos Aires’ violently fluctuating economy in many families’ own struggle to maintain financial stability. Many residents of La Boca and neighboring barrios work over 60 hours a week for themselves and the (often large) families they support to barely get by. While this financial support is integral, sacrificing time with loved ones can come at an even higher price when parents are unable to help guide their children through their academics and beyond, with funding for after-school programs instead being invested in job creation for the parents of Buenos Aires.

Once a few blocks past El Caminito (“the little walkway”) – a famous tourist site full of souvenir shops, restaurants with live tango shows, and bright, redone conventillos – lies the “authentic” rest of the La Boca community that tourists in countless websites and guidebooks are discouraged from exploring on their own. As an outsider to this community and a non-native Spanish speaker, I quickly learned upon arrival that very few people in La Boca speak English; they in fact feel no urgency or need for English, peppering words of Lunfardo, an Argentine dialect that originated in Buenos Aires, throughout their conversations in both casual and professional settings.

This “less explored” section of La Boca was my daily terrain. I felt the remnants of its past and present as I walked by the Italian restaurant I always passed, with the sounds of tango music and the smell of freshly baked empanadas greeting me every day.

The next two blocks loom grey and dreary in Argentina’s winter chill, with crumbling conventillos decorated in graffiti that an outsider cannot completely decipher. It’s easier to walk through the streets than on the uneven sidewalks, although one still must beware of zooming motorcycles, dogs, and their feces. The dogs are the least threatening of the three, because they are not strays, as they too are members
of the community. Dodging the occasional stream of sewer water, I scan the streets, unsure if I prefer them to be completely empty or busy, as I still get nervous about who might target an obvious visitor in a neighborhood that is notorious for its petty crime. La Boca is so much more than its bad reputation, but it is still a place in which dressing modestly and keeping a low profile are necessary precautions.

I walk past a police officer who often stands at the intersection, less to direct traffic and more for security for La Boca’s residents. To my left is a park with a run-down carousel that plays a carnival tune whose cheery notes are out of sync with the dreary surroundings. A group of young boys play soccer, while grown men on their lunch break congregate on the benches.

To my right, I walk by a large appliance store where a guard stands outside, wearing a full bullet-proof uniform. We make eye contact and I can tell that he doesn’t understand what I am doing in this part of Buenos Aires, as though I am a lost tourist having taken a few too many curious turns into the heart of La Boca. I take such looks on the streets as warnings to the potential danger, and it causes me to walk faster and with more purpose, tightly clutching the strap of my bag as I climb the steps up to the yellow painted building of the health clinic, CeSAC N9.

CeSAC N9 (Centro de Salud y Acción Comunitaria, the Center of Health and Community Action) stands out from the grey and decaying buildings beside it. A large sign outside of the clinic says “Argerich Hospital,” representing the public hospital with which this clinic is affiliated. I make my way past two stray dogs with dusty yellow fur sitting at the top of the steps, and I marvel at just how distinct each of this community’s dogs is from one another, with their own designated territory of La Boca to protect. Slowly opening the clinic’s swinging doors, careful not to let in these two curious creatures, I enter the waiting room. Relief and comfort flood my body as I am greeted by the clinic’s security guard, and I feel safe within the clinic’s bustle and warmth. In this place, I am not just a seemingly lost American, but a member of the clinic’s mental health care team.

The same bright, clean yellow color on the clinic’s outside continues within, covering the walls, chairs, and signs. Rowdy children waiting for their appointments climb and explore the waiting room area, scouting for toys, playmates, and their mothers’ attention. Young mothers openly breastfeed their babies as they wait their turn, chatting with their neighbors over the fussy screams. It is always a chaotic scene in the waiting room, but it is also a place of reunion for many community members who don’t have the luxury of time to see each other in between holding down jobs, families, and the difficult situations life throws at them. While families dominate the waiting room, in the corners of this space I see the drug addicts, nursing a black eye or trying to shake the symptoms of withdrawal while sipping on mate.¹ The availability of cheap, dirty, and addictive drugs is a problem that afflicts the lives of many in La Boca, as it not only affects the individual taking the drug, but his family members – emotionally, financially, and in terms of their safety. I feel their eyes follow me as I walk by, on my way to meet my internship coordinator on the second floor, and I try not to meet their searching eyes, for fear of provoking them. Within these walls, solutions are born and created, but it is also a place where this community’s problems and hardships are uncovered and dissected – a difficult task for both the healing and the healer.

I have witnessed that process of healing, though at times fractured and slow, through people’s trust in each other, a sacred trust cultivated through years of sharing and validating each other’s stories and experiences. As an outsider, I found the initial, deep-set distrust towards me and my role in the clinic difficult to adjust to at first, but it was important to understand the origins of that distrust.

Confronting the past to understand the lives of the present

“Everyone knew someone who had disappeared,” explained Professor Reyes de Deu, my Latin American literature professor. I was enrolled in this class during the second semester of my first year at Brandeis. This had been one of the first moments in my college career in which a professor spoke of a moment in history that had a personal impact on her own life, as well as on her community. She had been describing the widespread nature of the consequences of Argentina’s Dirty War and dictatorship from 1976-1983, a period of state terrorism during which more than 30,000 people were detained, went missing, or were killed at the hands of the government.² An introductory text on this topic described the government’s violent tactics as having “penetrated deep...
into the homes of the Argentine people, and disrupted the relations of protection, safety, trust, and love that dwelled there. Nearly two-thirds of all disappeared were abducted at home. These disappearances were so frightening because they were not public but intensely private and personal.... The most immediate military objective was to sow terror and confusion among the guerrilla forces, but the repressive method soon spread to civil society as a whole.”

Hearing of such immense militaristic repression and human rights violations from someone who had lived through it left me speechless. The day before, we had been analyzing the literature of Argentine writers and poets of this era who had fearlessly spoken out against the dictatorship (these words, written in a language still very foreign to me, had not held the same power that they now did just a day later). The rest of that day’s class was spent analyzing the political music of Charly Garcia, an Argentine singer-songwriter. One of Garcia’s most famous songs was “Los Dinosaurios” (“The Dinosaurs”). The first lyrics of the song expressed the very real danger Argentines from all walks of life were in during this period:

“Los amigos del barrio pueden desaparecer
Los cantores de radio pueden desaparecer
Los que están en los diarios pueden desaparecer
La persona que amas puede desaparecer.
Los que están en el aire pueden desaparecer en el aire
Los que están en la calle pueden desaparecer en la calle.
Los amigos del barrio pueden desaparecer,
Pero los dinosaurios van a desaparecer”

Garcia’s lyrics chillingly emphasize the widespread fear that the military regime brought within Argentina. Every Argentine ran the risk of becoming another desaparecido in a nation where citizens could no longer trust their government or even, in some cases, their neighbors. The last line, guaranteeing the disappearance of the dinosaurs, is a metaphor for the record of Argentina’s government’s actions, a record that would soon become as extinct as the dinosaurs in the history of humankind. It would be nearly impossible to uncover the remains or evidence of this mass injustice towards thousands of disappeared citizens and their families. The repressive socio-political climate at the time made many artists hesitant to create politicized, evidently critical expressions of art. Despite the danger in which Garcia put himself in writing this song, it is the song’s central theme of injustice inflicted on any and all members of a community that brought it so much nationwide success, because this experience rang true for so many in Argentina.

I thought about the words of Charly Garcia as I stood in the Museum of Memory during a day trip to Rosario, Argentina, a city that was a four-hour bus ride away from Buenos Aires. After the previous three semesters of learning about the Dirty War in Argentina through the lens of my Argentine Brandeis professors, I was curious to see how the country where this conflict occurred would tell this story of repression, deception, and violence. In presenting a country’s own history to the public, there is always a degree of bias involved, and I was intrigued by the way
I looked for signs in him of the rage and sadness that such injustice inspired in my own heart, but Facundo appeared to be his usual calm and collected self. Was the apparent emotional distance between himself and the recent tumultuous history of his homeland a way to protect himself from the trauma that such a reality could inflict vicariously, if he engaged with it in a deeper, more involving way? Moments like these showed me that my cross-cultural exposure in Argentina surpassed the general discussion of mental health care and treatment, exposing me to different approaches to expressing and reflecting upon trauma – personal, collective, and second-hand. There was no gold standard in approaches to conversations about trauma, especially by affected parties, and I would learn this more and more every day through my interactions with local Argentines both inside and outside the health clinic’s walls.

* * *

I began to wonder how this time in history was reflected in Argentines’ present-day relationship with their government, with each other, and with outsiders. Many would argue that this tumultuous time in Argentina’s history shattered a foundational layer of trust this country’s citizens had once had with their
government, as the immense psychological terror bled into the most intimate parts of people’s lives – into their jobs, homes, and families. This difficulty with trust is one that has recurred in Argentine history, and is evident in Argentinians’ lack of trust in the volatile nation’s economic system (as reflected in the violently fluctuating value of the Argentine peso and in inflation), and especially in banks and the credit system since the devastating 2001 economic default.

Many of the same families that felt the terror of the military junta of the ‘70s and ‘80s now willingly open their doors to the medical professionals of CeSAC, especially in the most vulnerable of moments. I witnessed this sacred trust shared within a community between patients and their doctors, as well as the trust and respect shared between medical professionals. Although CeSAC itself was affiliated with a public, government-funded hospital, it was evident that its doctors and nurses did not consider themselves as “workers of the government” but rather workers for their patients, going far beyond the bare minimum to be there for their patients with whom they had built long-enduring relationships. This is largely due to the decentralization in Argentina’s public health care system, in which local health centers operate according to township policies. This was the new system of trust in Argentina – one that required a long time to develop, dedication to maintain, and a certain faith in humanity on a person-to-person basis to believe in. Understanding this was not instantaneous or easy, but reflecting on my identity as an outsider and how that translated into the way in which I was received was necessary in order to understand the context in which I was working in on a daily basis in La Boca, in CeSAC.

Finding Guidance in Alcira and Spontaneous Diagrams
“Here she is, the famous Alcira!” Jimena said, as she excitedly showed on her phone a black and white photograph of my internship coordinator, a woman I had yet to meet. It was my first day at CeSAC, and Alcira was on medical leave for the week due to arthritic wrist pain. She had asked Jimena, a psychology student in residency, to help guide me through my first day, since Jimena had spent the past few years working at the clinic.

Looking at the photo of Alcira, I appreciated that it was not a generic posed photo most people used for their professional work. This photo showed an unsmiling woman staring directly at the camera, with long brown hair framing her pale face. Despite the lack of a smile, Alcira did not appear unapproachable or harsh; rather, I felt a certain unapologetic sadness in her demeanor, embracing the emotions that she felt instead of hiding behind a smile that may not have reached the eyes. I looked forward to getting to know the person behind this photograph.

That first week, I received most of my daily guidance from Alcira through email. I would sometimes get responses from her past 11:00 PM, less than 12 hours before I had to be at whatever activity she was inviting me to be a part of. I had a difficult time adapting to the last-minute nature of my assignments, but was also surprised that Alcira’s dedication to her job extended way past her work hours and into her personal vacation and rest time. Walking through the clinic’s halls, I would hear her name among other medical professionals in conversation. It was clear that Alcira was someone who was vital not only to her patients but to the running of the clinic itself.

After a week of emailing each other back and forth about the logistics of my everyday tasks at CeSAC, finally meeting Alcira felt like a reunion with a distant relative whom I had not seen in a long time. We hugged each other the first time we met, an act unusual for Argentines who generally limit their greetings to a kiss on the right cheek. She was the first person in the clinic who I felt was able to fully
receive who I was and why I was there, as she was the only one at CeSAC who had reviewed my internship application and knew of my educational background and motivations. I often felt that she was one of the few people in La Boca who understood what my purpose was at the clinic, even when I myself was grappling with it. The process of getting to know Alcira came in bursts and spurts throughout my eight weeks working with her, in moments of calm as well as chaos.

One of the first questions I asked Alcira upon meeting her was what had made her become a psychologist in a city like Buenos Aires, where finding a job as a psychologist or psychoanalyst was incredibly difficult, since 50% of the nation’s mental health professionals reside in Buenos Aires.11 “It had always felt like the most natural career for me, and working in the public health field is where I believe the most rewarding results happen.” However, these results were hard-earned, as Alcira knew from having worked in the clinic for the past 12 years as the head psychologist. She approached her job at the clinic with an interdisciplinary lens, taking in each patient as a whole, complex human with physical and emotional needs and potential dysfunctions that revealed interconnected systems. Consulting with her patients’ psychiatrists, social workers, and even nutritionists, Alcira’s care and concern for her patients was evident in her ability to follow many of their narratives so closely.

During the first half of my internship, Alcira and I would meet every week and discuss the clinic’s mission and history, and address any questions I had. It became a habit for her to say “¿Te suenas?” every so often, asking if what she was explaining was ringing a bell for me. Aside from her verbal explanations, Alcira’s love for drawing maps and diagrams almost took on a comical tone. She eventually came to our meetings prepared with paper and pen, as my questions had the tendency to lead into conversations about the geographic distribution and dynamics of the different areas of La Boca. I learned the most from her during these meetings, which often went way past our scheduled time. As one still very much in the American mindset of punctuality and time efficiency, I felt much more aware of time and its passing far beyond the time Alcira had intended to allot to our conversation. I wondered how the people at her next appointments were handling this constant tardiness. Alcira, however, was not at all bothered, saying, “No pasa nada” – “it’s alright, nothing happened” – indicating that nothing terrible would happen if one was a few minutes late; everyone was, in one way or another. Getting used to this habitual late start to every meeting and event inside and outside the clinic was not easy for me. However, with Alcira’s reassurance, I learned to approach my work commute with less anxiety as I knew that Buenos Aires’ unpredictable bus breakdowns and changed routes were built into the “Porteño reality.”

Outside of the appointment rooms at CeSAC N9.

This reality was nearly universal with respect to tardiness, but it varied immensely in other areas. In our conversations, Alcira emphasized the disparity in experiences, resources, and quality of life for the citizens of Buenos Aires, varying from barrio to barrio. In illustrating this, she pulled up a map of the city on her phone, split into subsections according to the main neighborhoods such as Palermo, Belgrano, Recoleta, and La Boca. The city is split into North and South – rich and poor – by Rivadavia Street, with a 40-minute bus ride across the city revealing the stark inequality one could perceive just by staring out the window.

Alcira herself was born and raised in Barracas, a southeast neighborhood of Buenos Aires. She has lived in the same house her entire life, a home she inherited from her parents, who inherited it from her grandfather who emigrated from Spain. At the time that her grandfather immigrated to Argentina, Barracas was one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the city, with plenty of property for wealthy immigrant families to retain and then rent to other incoming immigrant families. “It shares a similar history to La Boca in both the past and the present,” Alcira explained, as these neighboring barrios both received a huge influx of Italian and Spanish immigrants in the 18th and 19th centuries, but their socioeconomic climate has drastically changed since then.

Although Barracas is considered a more safe and residential neighborhood than La Boca, both border villas miserias, shanty towns. Alcira shared with me that, “I, a local Porteña, get nervous about walking home alone from the bus stop at night… it becomes a different place in the dark.” I could wholly relate to this feeling, both here and at home in Chicago.

While Alcira faced the many injustices of socioeconomic disparity in her everyday
life professionally, she constantly reiterated that she was fortunate in many respects. While she was lucky enough to own her own home, many others could not. Given Argentina’s wildly unstable economy, the meager salaries of arguably “middle class” Porteños don’t stand a chance of covering rising housing costs. “You know Doctor Arias? Juliana the occupational therapist? They have been working in their professional fields for years and still rent their homes.” Alcira’s tone was one of incredulity when she described this to me, a tone similar to the one she used when she witnessed during monthly home visits the inhumane conditions in which many of the clinic’s patients lived. She took in these problems and complaints her patients shared with her not only as a clinical psychologist, but with the understanding of a member of the community – their problems were also hers, and she did everything in her power to address them.

It is only possible to gain Alcira’s trust through one’s own display of hard work and dedication, one that surpasses the superficial motivations of money and status. Initially, I looked up to her out of necessity, as she was my guide in the clinic. After eight weeks, however, I looked up to her not just because I lacked direction or purpose without her, but because of her incredible work ethic and dedication to this community.

Community Dynamics: Collective Struggle and Resilience

The medical professionals at CeSAC addressed the struggles within this community by supporting families, providing them with health care, informational workshops for senior citizens and new mothers, a weekly free milk program, and at-home visits for patients of urgent concern. The problems that plague the community are unveiled and dissected within the clinic’s walls, whether it is drug addiction, domestic violence, poor housing conditions, or the emotional distress caused by unemployment. While the medical professionals at CeSAC approach such problems seriously and with professionalism, the patient-doctor relationship is one of mutual respect, from one community member to another.

The medical professionals working at CeSAC include pediatricians, a dentist, a nutritionist, psychologists, a speech pathologist, a psychiatrist, social workers, nurses, and more. Most of these professionals only work part-time in the clinic, as many are still completing their residencies or working additional hours at a private office. The clinic employs more professionals than it has room for; the compactness of the space is felt during staff meetings of 15 people in rooms designed for a comfortable conversation of six. Despite the tight space in which chairs are sometimes shared and the residents often offer to stand, cookies and mate are passed around generously. Alcira explained that this constant snacking at every meeting is a form of therapy for the therapists and doctors, as they sat and discussed their patients in difficult personal or familial situations. Munching on sweetened corn puffs and sipping on the burning hot and bitter mate – unsweetened to avoid a complete sugar overload, as Julieta, the occupational therapist, explained to me – they sift through each of their notebooks and the main record file to study patients’ histories in the health clinic and at other public health facilities in the Buenos Aires area. There was rarely any sort of computer or other form of technology used as an aid to their recordkeeping, which was evident in the overstuffed crates stacked up in every office with aging files from years ago.

As the clinic operates with a family-oriented approach, every file is really a folder containing every member of a given family that currently attends the health clinic. Mothers are grouped with their children, and within their own histories there are also hand-drawn diagrams of every family member. Some of these trees are much more complicated, with branches extending and splitting due to deaths of family members, marital affairs that lead to the tense convergence of different family trees, as well as blank parts of certain branches in which fathers are unknown or unable to be found. The doctors in the clinic are accustomed to studying these visual depictions of complex situations, but I looked at these trees and had difficulty being able to connect the foreign names with the faces of patients that I may have
On the way to El Caminito with one of the beloved stray dogs of La Boca.

passed every day at work. It is a unique way of record keeping and conceptualizing patients at a healthcare facility, but it has worked for this clinic for the past 30 years.

Patients and their doctors address each other by their first names and kiss each other’s cheeks upon greeting one another, an Argentine custom for both acquaintances and strangers. To add to the informality in interaction, some CeSAC patients feel comfortable simply knocking on doctors’ doors when looking for their respective doctors, even when it is in the middle of a meeting or an appointment with another patient.

This clinic’s medical professionals approach their patients and the treatment they provide them with an interdisciplinary approach, consulting each patient’s other doctors to help improve the care the patients receive at the clinic. As I had the pleasure of working with such a wide range of medical health professionals, I would often would hear them speaking about the same patient. In one meeting, an elderly man’s nutritionist spoke with his psychologist, discussing his emotion-induced unhealthy eating coupled with his diabetes. In another situation, I spoke with Jimena, the psychologist of Marta, one of the senior citizens in the workshop that I helped facilitate, about ways that we could work to make her feel more included in the workshop’s activities. Her increasing deafness, coupled with her depression-induced insecurity, made it difficult to enjoy singing tango songs with the rest of the group.

There is no apparent hierarchy felt between the different medical professionals at the health clinic, although there is a power dynamic between residents and their mentors that nevertheless maintains mutual respect between both parties. While residents still attend to their own patients, they often discuss and debrief each patient encounter with their superiors, learning as they practice the theories they were taught at university.

Although they take their practicums seriously, at times I would hear residents discuss their patients’ histories of trauma as though they were reciting grocery store lists, mentioning rape and domestic abuse as though they were casual occurrences in daily life. The first time it happened, I was shocked as Juana, one of the resident psychologists I shadowed during mental health admission interviews, described a patient struggling to verbalize her fears. In expressing her impatience with her patient, Juana said, “Finally, in the last five minutes of the appointment, she decides to quickly mention that she was raped by her uncle when she was 14 years old. Just what we needed, right?” I was shocked by the insensitivity of her tone. I wondered how patients could ever trust their therapists if they then demeaned and belittled their problems with others. However, the other psychologists in the room nodded their head in understanding, sympathizing with Juana’s frustration, which I realized went beyond her patient to how problems such as domestic abuse and rape went unchallenged in economically disadvantaged communities. This conversation that Juana had with us was less about educating and informing us about her particular patient, but more about a community coming together to listen and share the collective problems the larger community of La Boca faces.

The presentation of such problems was not limited only to the victim’s perspective, since the clinic’s patients also included the perpetrators of these situations. I would notice a hardening in Alcira’s eyes when communicating with those on parole for domestic violence or drug abuse, listening to them with the same attention but through an underlining filter of skepticism, deliberating on how much weight and trust she could place on certain elements of their narratives. Some would come to their appointments only because it was legally required in order to regain parental custody rights or governmental welfare benefits. Others would attend their appointments in moments of convenience, although the clinic’s waitlist for receiving psychotherapy continuously grew during each week of my internship.
The clinic can only do so much to help this community, since their efforts and suggestions in workshops, therapy sessions, and home visits can only go as far as their patients are willing for them to go. There is little the clinic’s professionals can do to hold their patients accountable. The challenges many face in regularly attending therapy, as well as support groups for problems such as drug addiction, frustrate many doctors at CeSAC.

Home Visits: Attending to the Root of the Problems
CeSAC’s at-home patient visits grew to become a neighborhood-wide outreach program, checking in with patients with serious medical problems who have not frequented the clinic as often as they should. In the windy Argentine winter, similar to New England’s colder autumn days, teams of doctors walk through the streets of La Boca, past the decaying conventillos of their patients, unfazed by the stray dogs following closely behind. Without needing to use any navigator or map to locate each patient’s home, the oldest doctors lead the rest of the team of medical professionals from a range of fields of health care. When conducting these at-home visits on a weekly basis for years, visiting patient’s homes becomes second nature, as though you they are visiting the home of a longtime friend or family member – though the living conditions of these patients generally differ greatly from those of the medical professionals. My own role during these home visits was that of an active observer, focusing my attention on the patients as well as taking in the surrounding details of the living space.

During these visits, it was evident that many members in this community live in incredibly inhumane circumstances, often sharing between eight family members only a few rooms with no heat, and with a recent rat problem that has been plaguing much of the community’s poorly kept housing units. Walking out of the homes and back on our way to the health clinic, doctors debrief by not only discussing their visit with the patient but also expressing their disgust, not at all directed at the community members, but at the way in which they are forced to live, paying so much to their exploitative landlords as a price for renting illegally in these conventillos. I felt this frustration from Alcira and other medical professionals at CeSAC, knowing that every time a medical problem was solved, the dangerous environment in which many members of La Boca live would likely create another problem for that same person or family. In focusing on community problems and ways of combatting them on a case-by-case basis, individualizing the solutions accordingly, was social change on a broader scale possible? While the roots of such problems were discussed at length, what was the best way to prevent a domino effect from occurring, when certain issues stemmed from systematic problems that required change in both law and policy for the people of La Boca?

In many cases the problems facing the community of La Boca had a cyclical tendency, with the neglect of one facet of the neighborhood’s well-being eventually seeping into the homes of CeSAC’s patients in both new and old ways. One of the first home visits in which I participated, accompanying Alcira and the rest of the CeSAC team, was to speak with Alma, a mother and grandmother whose family had faced recent heartbreak when her son’s infant daughter died in a neighborhood fire. The fire began in the shared backyard of a poorly kept conventillo, causing eight other deaths, including two firefighters who had tried to put it out amidst the immensely cluttered and densely lived-in space. The reason for the visit was not specifically to console Alma about the death of her young granddaughter, but to speak about her son’s increasing truancy and missed therapy appointments at the clinic. The conversation took place in a backyard very similar to the one in which the deadly fire had taken place, with a collection of rotting doors stacked on one side of the space, enclosed by the walls of the conventillo that housed several of La Boca’s families. Contrasting with the solemnity in Alma speech and demeanor, a young boy and girl from a neighboring family joined us and competed for our attention, fighting over their rusting bike I felt this frustration from Alcira and other medical professionals at CeSAC, knowing that every time a medical problem was solved, the dangerous environment in which many members of La Boca live would likely create another problem for that same person or family. In focusing on community problems and ways of combatting them on a case-by-case basis, individualizing the solutions accordingly, was social change on a broader scale possible?
and joyfully laughing when the front wheel of the bike occasionally fell off. Focusing my attention back to Alma, I noticed the exhaustion in her dark brown eyes, the deep-set dirt ingrained in the wrinkles of her hands and sandaled feet, and how unfazed she appeared to be by the seven clinic visitors in the backyard of her home. Her current struggling familial situation had left little room for feelings of pride or a desire for privacy, and she listened closely to Alcira’s questions and instructions. Long-term solutions were what Alma needed in order to guide her family in a more hopeful direction. However, this was made more daunting by the fact that Alma herself worked over 60 hours per week as a house cleaner, making it difficult for her to find the time and energy to also ensure that each of her children were attending school as well as getting the mental health treatment they needed after such a traumatic experience.

Both the tiredness behind Alma’s slouching frame and openness to CeSAC’s suggestions made sense – she was exhausted and in the middle of a problem growing much larger than she could deal with on her own, but trusting the medical professionals such as Alcira went beyond dire necessity and was founded on years of past support.

Navigating My Place

During these home visits, I saw the way in which struggling members of the La Boca community lived. Encountering such dire living conditions was shocking and upsetting, making the bunk-bedded room I personally shared with five others seem like a lifestyle of luxury and privilege. In many ways, this indeed described my place within the community – as an American outsider looking in.

Starting with my first day at the health clinic, my status as an outsider and more notably as an American shaped my interactions with the staff members of the health clinic. My coworkers were hesitant to give me responsibilities to do, even the simple task of helping with patient paper work, as many were reluctant to trust a stranger whose reason for being in the clinic was not completely clear. I initially felt frustrated by just how much my role within the clinic’s walls involved observation, as I was eager to be an active participant in the clinic’s dynamic community. I didn’t fully understand why I was received with such hesitation, and only began to understand that the basis of this distrust was not necessarily a product of their impression of me personally, but of a general tendency to distrust outsiders, especially those from a country with historical tensions with Argentina.¹³

I learned to savor the moments when I did feel trusted and let through the intimate doors of people’s lives, both literally during at-home patient visits, and figuratively through getting to know the CeSAC staff in between meetings. In these moments, I was amazed by their willingness to trust me in their most vulnerable states, and it felt like a privilege to be able to bear witness to such resiliency. Although initially struggling with my role as an observer, I learned to use my perspective as an outsider to my advantage, since at times I was able to notice details that others at the clinic perceived as normal. While CeSAC doctors would focus their attention on communicating with their patients and making the proper recommendations, I would take in the spaces around me, taking note of poorly concealed black eyes, children that CeSAC’s records did not account for, and the way in which the patients reacted to doctors. I may not have felt like I was contributing as much in the moment, but through discussions with Alcira and other medical professionals, I found satisfaction in being able to express my observations and ask follow-up questions in regards to the patient interaction we had just had. My own conceptions of the relationship between the patient and mental health care provider were constantly being challenged and refined, as the patients of CeSAC exhibited...
an openness and unashamed nature in their interactions with their therapists and with interns like me. This unapologetic honesty contrasted greatly with the secrecy and privacy I was accustomed to witnessing and participating in regarding mental health treatment in the U.S.

When Realizing That “Talking the Talk” is Not Enough

“Have you personally ever seen a psychologist?” Mechi, the radio talk show host asked me candidly, with the same light tone in which you would ask someone whether or not they had had dinner yet. This was the first question of the interview, four weeks into my time in Argentina, as a guest speaker on “Con Otro Acento,” translated as “With a Different Accent,” a public radio program for the listeners of the southern barrios of Buenos Aires.

Even before the interview had begun, I was nervous, unsure of just how profoundly Yankee I would sound on a radio program meant for local Argentines. I took comfort in the fact that my outsidersness was precisely why I was invited to speak on the show, sharing my thoughts and experiences on Argentina’s public mental health care system while comparing it to the one I knew in the U.S. Upon meeting that afternoon, Mechi and I had gone over a list of basic questions she would ask me, ranging from my educational background, to my first impressions of Argentina and La Boca, and the daily activities I participated in at the health clinic. I knew to be cautious about respecting the privacy of patients with whom I had interacted at CeSAC. I prepared general statements about my daily intern activities without giving away the intimate details of what I had observed within the walls of the clinic during psychotherapy sessions, holistic health workshops, and staff meetings.

I very quickly felt at ease in Mechi’s cheerful presence, with her energy evoking an almost childlike eagerness despite the fact that she was a 27-year-old full-time, sleep-deprived medical student. She had grown up in the southern barrio of Soldati, Buenos Aires, and she hoped the radio show would strengthen community engagement within the southern area of Buenos Aires.

I had been prepared to answer her questions to the best of my ability, as well as being willing to admit when I did not know the answer. “Don’t worry, we all will probably mess up and end up laughing!” Mechi reassured me, as she passed the bubbling mate cup my way.

I was prepared to laugh, to mess up, to feel self-conscious of my gringa accent; it was the very personal realm of my life that I had not been prepared to delve straight into, if at all, during a public interview with a woman whom I had just met on the air. While I had spent a large portion of my first four weeks in awe at how trusting and open La Boca community members were with one another, I felt comfortable and safe maintaining a low profile about my own identity and background. Having Mechi turn the tables on who got to listen and who got to ask questions was not something for which I had fully prepared myself.

I felt something heavy drop in my stomach as an instant response to this question. It was as though time had frozen momentarily, as a thousand thoughts raced through my mind. I felt so scared and conflicted in that moment, as conversations regarding mental health and treatment were considered very personal, if not taboo, in American culture. While it is generally acceptable to see a doctor for a physical ailment, seeking out treatment for mental health is viewed as a sign of weakness or inferiority, impeding many from engaging in productive and healthy dialogue about their own experiences with mental health treatment and ways to improve the system based on that experience. Yet I resented this stigma, one so deeply ingrained in how my society approached mental health.

As a student of psychology, a community advisor at Brandeis, and a passionate advocate of self-care, I wanted to be an agent of change in how my American community viewed and discussed mental health. This was part of my purpose in Argentina, learning and exploring the way in which Argentine culture viewed and discussed the topic of mental health and treatment. As exemplified by Mechi’s spontaneous interview question, one that provoked an instinctive discomfort and hesitation in me, it was clear that the Argentine perspective was very different on how directly and openly an individual might discuss the question of whether to seek mental health care.

Despite wanting to promote a more honest and open dialogue about mental health in my own community at Brandeis and back home, in that moment of indecisiveness...
During my summer in Argentina, there were moments of a kind of panic, brought on by what I perceived as my relatively inactive role as an observer within the clinic’s walls. Where was the social-justice-brought-into-action I had been entrusted with executing by the Ethics Center at Brandeis University?

I felt the deeply internalized stigma when asked a question of this sensitive nature (or what I was taught to perceive as sensitive). Would admitting that I had sought out therapy at one point in my life cause me to lose credibility in the eyes of the radio’s listeners? Would Mechi and the other two radio station hosts, Elisa and Ramon, jump to conclusions about my current state of mental health and see me in a different light? Knowing that this interview would be recorded and made available on the radio station’s website, would a future employer – after translating the interview from Spanish to English, of course – find this recording and reconsider hiring me after finding out that my overwhelmed 18-year-old self had spoken to a therapist during the first few months of my freshman year of college?

Was the horrible feeling that often came with lying worth it to preserve my imagined image? What would I be promoting by succumbing to the societal stigma I was working so hard to fight against? I thought about the patients I had just spent the day getting to know through observations, the mental health professional staff meetings I had participated in just a few hours before, and the clinic’s overall honest and welcoming nature in getting help in all ways for one’s holistic health. I thought of Alma’s ability to be vulnerable and honest in her family’s darkest of times. If I lied about my own experiences with therapy, what was I actually getting out of my time interning at the health clinic, where patients were wholly encouraged to trust their psychologists and psychiatrists with their deepest concerns and problems? To feel open to not only continuing with therapy but also involving their family members in the collective healing process that can come through psychotherapy? These questions raced through my head almost simultaneously, inciting a physical fight-or-flight instinct at being asked to disclose elements of my identity that I was used to keeping to myself and the few I wholly trusted.

With my heart racing, I looked over at Mechi’s expectant gaze and knew that the way in which I chose to answer this question would make a much greater impact on me than it would to anyone else sitting in that room or listening to the radio station. To lie would be doing an injustice to myself and my objectives, to the students I worked with at Brandeis, and to the CeSAC community that was constantly teaching me that the stigma surrounding mental health was only as strong as a community would allow it to be.

“Sí…” I replied, trying to maintain a casual, unaffected tone as I gave my answer more context. In reality, I felt anything but calm and composed, as though I had ripped a Band-Aid off of a cut that was not fully healed. In giving context to my experiences in therapy, it felt more like a tactic of defense against how exposed I felt in my honesty. I wish I could say that this public radio announcement brought on instant empowerment and feelings of relief in choosing to answer this question so openly and honestly. However, it was clear that the internalized stigma I detested surrounding mental health was one that had permeated deeply. In learning to embrace and experience my own vulnerabilities, which were heavily guided by my own societal upbringing, the after-shock gradually lessens as does the stigma surrounding topics of mental health and self-care that Americans are only in recent years beginning to acknowledge.

The Representativeness of My Experiences and Impressions

On my last day at CeSAC, I took the bus home and was accompanied by Mabel, a doctor in her residency. We spoke about my eight weeks in the clinic and what my next steps would be. I explained that I would return to university, and would then process my experience through a paper about my internship. “I guess I should probably tell you, then, that most public clinics do not operate at all like CeSAC does…” Mabel said, unaware that this statement completely shook my perception of mental health care treatment and access in Argentina. She continued by explaining that most health clinics in the nation were much more underfunded than CeSAC was, as it was located in the center of Buenos Aires, Argentina’s capital. “What our team does at CeSAC, the interdisciplinary nature of our staff meetings…this is rare in comparison to the way most clinics run, and that’s why it’s so hard to get a job here.” Aside from this being my last interaction with a member of CeSAC, it was one that really challenged my
newly-developed perceptions of public mental health care in Argentina. While it does not disprove my observations on how this clinic and community operates, it serves to show that eight weeks of fieldwork is obviously not enough to fully cover the complex scope of public health care in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Through my eight weeks, four of which it took me just to begin feeling like I understood the dynamic of the clinic, I did my best in observing how the clinic operated while also grappling with my own purpose for being there. Recognizing the impact of my presence during those eight weeks was mostly possible only in retrospect. While eight weeks may sound like a long time, it simply wasn’t enough to fully integrate myself into the clinic’s work culture, which Mabel reassured me takes years to truly do in a meaningful way. As I don’t have a different clinical experience to which to compare this one, I can only wonder how my experience of integration would have been in an American clinic. Would a lessened degree of outsiderness have allowed me to gain the trust of my coworkers faster? Or would other factors, such as my age, have made it harder for me to engage in so many different meetings and workshops of a sensitive nature?

During my summer in Argentina, there were moments of a kind of panic, brought on by what I perceived as my relatively inactive role as an observer within the clinic’s walls. Where was the social-justice-brought-into-action I had been entrusted with executing by the Ethics Center at Brandeis University? As difficult as it was to come to understand the reasons behind my role as an often-silent listener, there was a certain empowering element to this silence, as it provided me with the space to truly watch and try to make sense of my surroundings. With my mind constantly absorbing and processing the externalities around me, my noticing the unnoticed – ranging from the clinic’s underlying dynamics to black eyes during home visits – was part of my contribution to medical staff discussions. Those observations also helped me begin to refine my understanding of what constitutes holistic health, as well as how to approach the dialogue on mental health. I arrived in Buenos Aires impatient to fully immerse myself in the city I had previously only experienced through reading historical papers and novels by Argentine authors such as Manuel Puig and Jorge Luis Borges, consuming Argentine films, and perusing the blogs that provided me with a fair share of descriptions of cultural norms and warnings about being a foreigner in Argentina. It was my first time in South America, and my first time traveling and living alone for an extended period of time. As a young woman in a foreign country, deciding whom I could trust was initially my main concern. But soon after my arrival, my focused shifted to the journey I would face in gaining the trust of others around me – ranging from the staff at the clinic to my international flatmates. My own process of forming these bonds of mutual trust was similar to the one CeSAC cultivated with its community, as it took time, evident dedication to the work, and a certain faith in the good of humanity.

Throughout my time in Argentina, grappling at CeSAC with what it took to trust and be trusted pointed me towards the level of trust required to treat patients and be treated by professionals, to integrate oneself into a working environment, and to interact with a community in a meaningful way. This exploration of trust itself resonated with the story of the creation and refinement of Argentina as a nation; Buenos Aires, as exemplified through La Boca and its history of civil war, is a city dealing with contemporary and historical challenges in which there are constantly decisions being made about whom to trust. The building of community strength that CeSAC helps facilitate – and from which I learned – is a microcosm of the work needed to meet these challenges.

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**Bibliography**


Notes


5. Translated by Regina Roberg.

6. One who has disappeared, commonly used, especially in Latin America, in referring to a person who has been secretly imprisoned or killed during a government’s program of political repression.

7. For more information: http://www.museodelamemoria.gob.ar/


Wondering where the receptionist was, I forced my attention to return to the article that was pinned on a board at the very top, leaving the corners of the paper to curl in whenever it was hit by the breeze that often blew into the office. From the center of the clipping, I could make out the details of a gray-scale picture of a slender, middle-aged woman with her arm around a young boy whose features very clearly resembled hers. My curiosity about the article soon overcame the discomfort of being in a new place; I left my seat and walked towards the board. “My autistic son is 11 years old,” the article read. “When he learned how to tie his shoes a few months ago, I was almost as happy as I was the day he was born.”

It was not until a few days into my internship that I met Zemi Yenus. “Zemi could not come in today,” Henok, the lead psychologist at the Joy Center, told me on my first day. I attempted, apparently unsuccessfully, to disguise my disappointment. “She’s pretty busy, but she comes in a few times a week, so you’ll get a chance to work with her,” Henok commented reassuringly as though he had read my thoughts.

Henok wore a gray V-neck sweater on top of a dark blue collared shirt. That was his signature look. His thin-framed, rectangular glasses, once yanked away from his face by a child who was upset about losing his book bag, gave him the appearance of a professional without compromising the youthfulness of his features. Immediately after our introduction, he started making light conversation about my trip to Addis Ababa and about my course of study at Brandeis, quickly dissipating my anxiety. As Henok led me towards the classrooms on my tour of the compound, I witnessed how his demeanor had the same effect on the children and the staff at the center. He had nicknames for everyone. Terms of endearment that accurately captured aspects of each person’s behavior rolled off his tongue as he poked fun at some of the staff members with playful humor.

During my tour, Henok gave me a brief explanation of autism, one that I imagined he had perfected with many previous tours. “Autism is a developmental disorder that is diagnosed usually within the first 3 years of life, and affects the brain’s development of social and communication skills. Children here mostly experience difficulty in developing language and social interactions and often exhibit repetitive behavior.” After dropping me off in the pre-academic classroom where two special-needs educators worked with twelve students who had started working with shapes, colors, letters and numbers, Henok returned to his desk job.

As I waited to meet Zemi in person, Henok became my point of contact in my attempt
to blend into the structure and practices of the center. On my fourth day at Joy, I was watching the children running around on the playground when a voice from behind called, “Bezaye?” I turned around to face an average-sized woman in her late 50s. She wore a long, dark brown skirt that fell to her ankles and a black cardigan with yellow and orange stripes at the bottom. Her voluminous, dark hair, parted slightly to the left, framed her face and rested on her shoulders. “It is so nice to finally meet you in person,” she spoke as she engulfed me with a hug. Her voice had a distinctive ring to it that was almost majestic; I thought I would recognize it anywhere. Her face, however, was rounder than I remembered and more black spots had found their way to the top of her cheeks. But then again, it had been nearly 10 years since I had seen her beauty school commercial on TV — a lot could change in 10 years.

Zemi was born and raised in Addis Ababa, but she left for Italy during the Red Terror, a time of violent political unrest in the late 1970s. She became employed at a refugee service agency where she worked with immigrants entering the USA. Briefly returning to Ethiopia in 1981, Zemi was accused by the military government of assisting wanted criminals to escape through her work with the refugee services agency. To avoid the threat of being on the government's blacklist, she emigrated to the United States. In California, where she resided for fourteen years, Zemi completed a course in cosmetology, and eventually established her own beauty salon in Los Angeles.

In 1992, soon after the military regime changed, Zemi returned to Ethiopia for vacation. Dismayed to see so many young girls who had turned to sex work to support themselves and their families, Zemi ultimately decided to move back home and use her skills to give back to her country. It was with the hope of creating a better alternative for these girls that Zemi established Niana, a pioneer beauty school, which trained over 6000 young men and women in beauty professions along with financial planning and reproductive health (www.ethioautism.org).

Meanwhile, at home, Zemi faced the challenges of raising a child with autism. Unable to find schools equipped to work with children with autism spectrum disorder in Ethiopia, Zemi was forced to re-evaluate her decision to return to her home country. “Every morning, I would drive my older son Bilal to school on my way to work; and my younger son Jojo would wave at us through the window as we left. There were times when I would drive out of my house and not be able to stop crying because I felt as though I wasn’t doing anything to help my child.” Zemi spoke quietly when I inquired how the Joy Center came about. She then told me that she began an autism awareness program by including the issue in the beauty services and products exhibitions she organized. During interviews related to her work in Niana, she often talked about autism and her son’s experience with the disorder.

Zemi’s outreach program soon attracted other parents in similar circumstances. Before she recounted the story of a mother she had met years ago, Zemi looked down for a moment as if to gather her thoughts. Alem, Zemi said, was a single mother who made a living by doing housework. Because she had no one to look after her autistic daughter, she would tie her child up in the kitchen as she left for work so that the girl wouldn’t run away or harm herself. “She told me that a part of her died each time she untied her daughter at the end of her work day.” Zemi shook her head and took a deep breath. “And that’s when I realized that advocacy alone was not enough. We needed to take action.”

When Zemi interacted with the children at the center, however, her shield of intimidation instantly peeled off. Her eyes lit up with compassion as children gathered around her car and asked her if they could drive it, or when their small fingers curled around her hand as they sang nursery
rhymes with her. Watching her give her son Jojo a tight hug before heading into her office, or laugh hysterically at the selfies he had managed to take on her phone when she was not looking, transformed Zemi from a no-nonsense leader to a caring mother.

The Joy Center
As the largest project under the Nia Foundation, an indigenous, non-profit organization, the Joy Center for Autism and Other Related Developmental Disorders was the very first institution in Ethiopia to work with children who have developmental disorders. Established because children with developmental disorders had no access to academic and skill training that were tailored to their needs, and parents had no support while navigating life with a special-needs child, Joy incorporates several forms of therapy to enable autistic children to develop cognitive and communication skills and enhance their quality of life within and outside of an academic setting.

The Joy Center is the home of eight programs that work to bring about holistic development in children with autism. The attending program receives newly enrolled children and provides behavioral and basic hygiene training. The occupational therapy program helps children improve their fine motor skills; speech therapy allows them to develop language; and sensory integration therapy conditions them to respond to environmental changes accordingly.

As a transition towards engaging with academic content, the pre-academic class (in which I would be placed) focuses on teaching the children to work in a group setting, sit for extended periods of time, and complete certain tasks upon verbal prompts, while the academic program is geared towards simple math and English lessons. The children also participated in music and TV programs to engage their imaginations. Each program under the center has a team of three to four special-needs educators.

much like the other programs, the pre-academic program had a structured and color-coded schedule of activities posted on the wall for the entire week. the classroom was equipped with Legos and puzzles of animal pictures used during cognitive therapy, and alphabet and number sheets used in academic training.

In addition to the teaching staff, three other women work in the kitchen and another two as custodians. The administrative staff consists of Zemi as Managing Director, an Assistant Manager, a Financial Administration Head, a Project Coordinator, two Project Officers, and an Accountant. Except for Henok, who assumed the roles of both psychologist and project officer, the administrative staff had limited daily interactions with the children and with the caregiving staff.

As the first organization to bring the issue of autism to the public’s attention in Ethiopia, the Joy Center has managed to start a productive dialogue and create awareness about developmental disorders. Over the course of their time at the center, most children show improvement in behavioral, social, self-help, and communication skills. Since its foundation, the Center has managed to mainstream four children into government-owned schools with which the Center has established partnerships.

One of the Joy Center’s biggest achievements, however, is its effort to create a suitable atmosphere that supports the development of the children at home. The Center has been able to create change by supporting not only children with developmental disorders, but also parents and guardians who often need sound information on how to help their children. Support groups assist parents with the trials of balancing parenting and work responsibilities, creating a safe and healthy environment for their child, and helping to further their child’s progress at home. In addition, by recognizing the fact that a child’s disability often also nearly incapacitates parents, especially single ones, Joy has created partnerships with microfinance establishments to allow low-income parents to financially support their families through small business ventures.

On a larger scale, the Joy Center has secured land from the Ethiopian government and has elicited the support of international organizations, such as the Global Fund for Children, UNICEF...
and UNESCO, in gathering funds for the construction of a new international-standard treatment center. Upon the completion of this new center, Joy hopes to be able to accommodate the children it currently has on a waiting list due to the lack of space and resources, and begin admitting children outside of Addis Ababa through a boarding program.

Culture and Biomedicine: Autism in Ethiopia

“I have always felt that the action most worth watching is not at the center of things but where edges meet,” Anne Fadiman writes in _The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down_. “There are interesting frictions and incongruities in these places, and often, if you stand at the point of tangency, you can see both sides better than if you were in the middle of either one” (Fadiman, 120). Fadiman’s book narrates the compelling story of Lia, the Kao family’s daughter, who was diagnosed with epilepsy, and the complex mix of language barrier, cultural beliefs, and lack of compromise that profoundly influenced the trajectory of her treatment.

Lia started experiencing seizures at a very young age. Convinced that the sound of a slammed door caused the onset of her symptoms, Lia’s parents held her older sister responsible. Moreover, they believed that the seizures manifested when Lia was in a trance state in which she communicated with spirits of an invisible world. While the potential for supernatural communication earned her an honored position amongst the Hmong people, it was evident to her family that Lia was suffering. When the Kaos sought medical attention for their daughter, the doctors had no way of learning that Foua and Nao Kao had already diagnosed her problem as a loss of soul, an illness where a spirit catches you and you fall down. Similarly, the Kaos had no knowledge that the doctors recognized Lia’s condition as epilepsy, a common neurological disorder caused by the misfiring of brain cells (Fadiman, 28). To each group, Lia’s symptoms represented a different illness with a different cause and a different treatment.

The views of biomedicine collided time and time again with those of the Hmong culture. The inability to create a communication between these two systems emerged not only from the apparent language barrier, but also from the lack of awareness and the mistrust in the intentions of the other system. The doctors struggled to get Foua and Nao Kao to comply with Lia’s medication regimen, while the parents feared the social consequences of sacrificing animals to their deity in order to cure their daughter. The medical professionals at the children’s hospital failed to find a way to communicate the concept of side effects and dosage to Lia’s family, while Lia’s parents often missed check-up appointments. This complex set of issues often left the little girl in harm’s way, and unfortunately led to her tragic death.

Reading this book and participating in discussions about it made me realize that medicine is not a discipline that can exist in a vacuum. Rather, in order for it to be fully effective, it needs to be informed by the knowledge and consideration of culture, psychology, and socioeconomic life. The multifaceted relationship between these factors can profoundly influence disease diagnosis, patient treatment, and ultimately, the life and wellness of a human being. As I began my internship at the Joy Center, I wanted to explore how the culture and socioeconomic background of families affected by autism had come to shape the impact of medicine and therapy. I wanted to learn about the efforts, if any, that the organization had made to provide holistic treatment to patients while creating a supportive environment at home.

Autism and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are both general terms used for a group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders are characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties with social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication, and repetitive behaviors. Following the May 2013 publication of the fifth edition of the _Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders_, distinct subtypes of autism disorders such as childhood disintegrative disorder, pervasive developmental disorder, and Asperger syndrome were merged into one umbrella diagnosis of ASD.

While autism appears to have its roots in very early brain development, its most obvious signs tend to emerge between two and three years of age. Research shows that there is no one cause. Over the last five years, scientists have identified a number of rare genetic changes (mutations) associated with autism. While a small number of these are sufficient to cause autism by themselves, most cases of autism likely appear as a result of the combination of autism risk genes and environmental factors that influence early brain development. Advanced parental age at time of conception, maternal illness during pregnancy, and birthing difficulties — particularly those involving oxygen deprivation to the baby’s brain — have been found to increase the incidence and severity of autism in children who already have susceptible genes.

Despite the fact that autism appears in one out of 68 children with varying degrees of severity, autism awareness in Ethiopia is very minimal. Due to the nature of their symptoms, autism and other related neurological disorders are largely attributed to supernatural causes in several regions of Ethiopia. Many children with autism have very limited capacity for language, which often only leaves them
with gestures and undecipherable sounds to express themselves. When unable to be understood by others, children often get frustrated and harm themselves or the person next to them, usually by biting or scratching. Most children on the spectrum are hypersensitive to certain sensory stimuli and are therefore more affected by sudden motion, loud noise, or the touch of a soft object than other children would be. An overload of such stimuli can cause these children to separate themselves from a crowd, plug their ears with their fingers and rock back on forth, or produce a sound repeatedly in an effort to ease their sensory chaos.

The lack of an alternative explanation, coupled with the high percentage of Ethiopia’s population affiliated with some religious sect, mean that most Ethiopians view these symptoms of autism as a curse from a supreme being, rather than as a medical condition with a yet-to-be-identified cause. This association of autism with supernatural causes unfortunately ties the disorder to immorality, leading it to be perceived as the result of the immoral actions of parents. This not only causes parents to feel ashamed to speak about their children’s disorder or hold themselves personally responsible for its occurrence, but also leads to the unfortunate disenfranchisement of children with the disorder.

This association of autism with supernatural causes unfortunately ties the disorder to immorality, leading it to be perceived as the result of the immoral actions of parents. This not only causes parents to feel ashamed to speak about their children’s disorder or hold themselves personally responsible for its occurrence, but also leads to the unfortunate disenfranchisement of children with the disorder.

According to Fadiman, the kinds of language that we use to describe something say far more about us, and our attachment to our own frame of reference, than they do about what we are describing. As such, in Ethiopia as elsewhere, the language that frames the discussion of autism has often perpetuated the stigma that was engrained in people’s attitudes. The Joy Center has focused on reconstructing the language used to discuss autism, in order to remove the moral stigma that excluded children from several facilities and services.

For instance, Joy attempts to break the association that is established between health and autism by using the terms “autistic” and “non-autistic” to distinguish between children who manifest symptoms and those who don’t, as opposed to “autistic” and “healthy.” The presence of the disorder does not mean that the child is any less healthy in other ways, or has any fewer of the other needs that children have. Furthermore, Joy attempts to disentangle autism from the concept of stagnancy. With many cognitive disabilities, the perception of the lack of progress closes many off from treatment and intervention options. Disabled children are then further silenced and excluded from society when not given the chance to become a part of a community, to harness social relationships, and to partake in activities other children have the opportunity to participate in. By using slogans such as “Listen to us. Understand us. Include us,” Joy reflects the importance of a paradigm shift in public opinion in order to make real strides in the movement for autism awareness.

Moreover, the name of the center, Joy, was a derivative of Zemi’s son’s name, Jojo, but also reflects the literal definition of the world: that this was a place that was where
Perhaps the most significant integration between treatment and culture that I observed at Joy was the Abugida phonetic language the center created to teach its students how to read. By noticing that children with autism had an easier time assimilating information into their pre-existing frameworks, and accommodating those frameworks instead of having to create new ones, the Center used a system that allowed the kids to use the language that they already knew to learn new information.

Much focus in Joy’s work has been placed on programs raising awareness in order to create public spaces that are friendlier to children with autism, to have health care providers who are more knowledgeable, and to help parents be better equipped to assist their children. By decreasing the taboo about discussing developmental disorders, the Center enables more parents to receive help for their children and emotional support for themselves. Creating a distinction between moral condemnation and a physical disorder that happens to manifest itself behaviorally, Joy continues to create public forums that further the public’s knowledge of their various projects.

Similar to Lia’s case, we encountered compliance issues in maintaining consistency of expectations between center and home. In addition to cognitive and motor skills trainings, the children at Joy receive extensive behavioral training to increase their social skills, to encourage them to listen to instructions, and to help them recognize verbal and non-verbal cues on how to interact with others. A couple of weeks into my internship, I learned that many children would follow guidance and behave well at the Center, but challenge their parents at home. Families often failed to maintain the disciplinary methods that were used at the Center or to follow all of the dietary restrictions that were in place to moderate the children’s moods.

Psychiatrist and medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman says, “…‘compliance’ is a lousy term. It implies moral hegemony…Instead of looking at a model of coercion, look at a model of mediation” (Kleinman, 261). In this vein, it became clear that getting parents to further the center’s efforts succeeded only when a compromise could be achieved.

For example, Abdu’s mother frequently sent her son to school with sugary snacks (or after having eaten them at home) despite the fact that the teachers had informed her repeatedly that such a diet made him hyperactive and unable to concentrate in the classroom. He would have a snack before coming to school and remain restless and fidgety for hours. Because his constant activity distracted the other children, Askal, one of the teachers I worked with, would sometimes instruct me to take him out of the classroom and sit with him in one of the isolated therapy rooms. In spite of the efforts the teachers made to communicate this to Abdu’s mother, she failed to say “no” to her son, because she just “could not deny him what he wanted.” In her mind, giving him the snacks he requested was the way she made up for all the other things she was unable to do for him. It was only when the teachers understood this that they were able to more effectively sit with her and recommend snacks with lower sugar content. The recognition of the mother’s need to take care of her child by not denying him what he wanted led the teachers to attempt a method of compromise in which the mother still gets the emotional fulfillment of honoring her child’s request without significantly affecting his productivity at school.

Perhaps the most significant integration between treatment and culture that I observed at Joy was the Abugida phonetic language the center created to teach its students how to read. This language allowed for the rearrangement of English words to use a similar phonetic system as Amharic, the most widely spoken language in Ethiopia. Since the Amharic language has symbol for every sound, all words are pronounced exactly as they are written. Although it took some getting used to, writing “one” as “wan” or “ball” as “bol”, this phonetic approach made it easier for the children (who thrived on consistency) to absorb information. Paying attention to the patient or student experience reveals factors that can influence treatment and...
learning but would otherwise be left unnoticed. By noticing that children with autism had an easier time assimilating information into their pre-existing frameworks, and accommodating those frameworks instead of having to create new ones, the Center used a system that allowed the kids to use the language that they already knew to learn new information.

Throughout my internship, I noticed how the very intricate interaction between culture, health care, and education makes it difficult to influence one without affecting the others. It became evident to me that centering oneself in culture or in the purely biomedical processes results in information being lost, often leading to miscommunication that harms both sides. Finding a place at the tangent where these two factors meet, however, makes for a holistic treatment that leads to rewarding outcomes.

The Orange Swings

“Do you mind taking him to the swings?” Blen asked me as she moved the table by the classroom door to let Aron, a 6-year-old boy, out of his seat. He had been crying uncontrollably since his mother dropped him off that morning. Getting him water or taking him to the bathroom had not made the slightest difference. Blen, the teacher I was assisting, looked at me encouragingly, extending the little boy’s arm towards me. “The swings usually calm him down,” she explained. I was stunned to be entrusted with the responsibility of independently caring for a child on only my second day at the Center. I reluctantly took the boy’s arm and walked with him out of the pre-academic classroom. “I’ll be up there in just a minute,” she reassuringly called after me.

We passed the kitchen and the speech therapy classroom to face a small incline that led to the playground. The boy’s voice was now breaking as he attempted to take short, shallow breaths. I let go of his hand and slowly placed my hand on his back; he did not recoil from my touch. “Shh,” I whispered, rubbing his back gently and hoping that he would soon start feeling better.

At the top of the concrete-floored incline were the administrative offices, situated in what must have previously been a domestic residence. To the left of the main building was an obstacle course consisting of ladders, small hills, and a slide. My eyes quickly scanned the large, forest-green gate and the tall trees that provided a generous shade to the playground. The top half of the wall closest to me was covered with a sign on which green paint casually lettered the same slogan as the one on the compound’s main gate: “A Special Place for Special Kids.” The shaded seating area in front of the wall had a plastic table and a few chairs where Blen and the other teachers liked to sip their morning tea and talk about the amusing things their students have done. A bit farther from there was the pair of swings.

Hanging from blue and red posts, the swings were painted a bright orange color that reminded me of a beautiful sunrise. The alternating rain and sun of the season were not so kind to the paint on the back of the swings, leaving small patches of grey metal exposed. I guided Aron towards the swings with my arm still on his back. “You’ll sit here and I’ll push you very slowly, okay?” I spoke to the boy. He sat down with his small fingers tightly coiled around the chains of the swing. “Good job!” I encouraged him. Anticipating his reaction, I pushed the swing, each time with slightly more force than before. Suddenly, the little boy stopped crying and started contracting and relaxing his back to make the swings move more. As I remember this moment, I often think about how the simple back and forth movement of the swing brought comfort not only to the little boy, but to me as well. With every cycle, he dared to swing a little bit farther and I dared to push a little bit harder. And although the swing was simply oscillating in place, the excitement on Aron’s face as it went up or the way he twinkled his fingers as it came down made that moment so rewarding.

Ever since my first day, those swings became my domain. I would sit on the horizontal bars when I arrived early in the morning or stay in the shade next to them during playtime and as the children were heading home. The swings were just as popular with the children as they were with me, and that gave me multiple opportunities to bond with the children, to identify what upset them and what made them happy, and to establish a rapport that allowed them to feel safe around me. I taught Aron, who at the time had been at the center for only three months and was just starting to use verbal language, how to say “gefiig” (push me); I persuaded another student to wait in line until the other children were done playing. I was even rendered speechless by the ability of a five-year-old to comprehend the idea of negotiation when he offered to give me a hug before asking me to push him on the swings. The swings were just as popular with the children as they were with me, and that gave me multiple opportunities to bond with the children, to identify what upset them and what made them happy, and to establish a rapport that allowed them to feel safe around me.
Despite my almost daily attempts, Aron never learned my name. He always called me “Blen”; he called every female-bodied person at the center “Blen.” I soon found out that every male was “Endale.” He would run into the compound when his parents dropped him off in the morning and look for me, Askal or Blen. Once he found one of us, he would throw his backpack to us and run to the swings. The only thing that ever kept him away from the swings was Sheba, the compound dog, which he was both terrified of and fascinated with. When he saw her, he would come and plead with me in the few words he could put together to get rid of her, and hide behind my back with his arms tightly wrapped around my waist. When Sheba was not looking, his fascination would manage to trump his fear and he would extend a shaky hand to pet her. He would then turn around and look at me with the largest grin on his face, his fingers twinkling like they always did when he got excited.

Aron was always the source of laughter in the pre-academic classroom. He was far more hyperactive than any other student we had, which meant that we spent a lot of time attempting to find activities that calmed him down and allowed him to focus rather than covering academic materials. He enjoyed putting Lego pieces together and loved taking them apart even more. If a phone were left out, he would grab it, and cry when someone asked him to give it back. But more than anything else, he loved dancing. He would return from lunch, turn on the TV and yell “eskis” (a shorter term for “eskista,” a famous Ethiopian dance) until someone played some music for him.

Observing Aron and so many of the other children at the Center gave me valuable insight into how autism manifests itself. Each kid had his or her own set of behaviors that made him or her distinctive. Aron didn’t like to sit for a long time; Lani rarely spoke at school, but recited everything that happened to her parents at home; Aman called the number twenty “twenty-zero” because he was a stickler for patterns; and Zena loved getting her hair done so much that she would tie and untie it multiple times a day.

Despite the wonderful interactions I was having with the children at Joy, I sometimes found myself wondering if my presence was having any significant impact. With the notion of linear progress haunting my perceptions and assessments, I found it difficult to deal with the regressions that happened every now and then. Words that were read correctly on Friday might be forgotten by Monday; children who were potty trained would urinate on themselves; or a child who was taught to not harm others would scratch a volunteer. “It happens with all of us,” Henok reassured me. “Sometimes you have to spend a lot of time to see a tangible change. But the process teaches you a lot and the children get the love and attention that they need.”

Henok was right. During my time at Joy, I assumed responsibilities ranging from administering therapies and academic lessons to organizing the peer outreach program under the organization’s fundraising campaign. Yet hearing Dani count to 100 for the first time, or watching Elda learn to move to the rhythm of a new song, or having Sehen point me out to her brother as “the teacher from my class,” were possibly the most fulfilling moments of this job. And just like the swings, there was much gained in the back and forth.

"It Concerns Me": Social Change Through Activism

Wednesdays at Joy Center were shopping days. After morning line-up, the teachers took the children out to a local mini-market to buy fruits or bread or, once every few weeks, to drink some fresh mango juice. Blen and Askal would always hold the hands of the more active children, the ones who loved to run around, for fear that because of my lack of experience, I might not be able to keep them with me. Holding onto the remaining children, I followed them as they made multiple turns through the cobble-stoned neighborhood to avoid the main street. As we walked, I often asked my nine-year-old student Lani to sing me her favorite song, “Etemete”, or my other student Dani to name the colors on his clothing.

Upon returning from my first trip, I curiously asked Zemi what the purpose of these trips was. “We want to help our children learn how to interact with the community outside of Joy.” She then explained how parents with children on the autism spectrum often face challenges while navigating public spaces, because they are afraid of having their children be perceived as spoiled, and themselves as unfit parents. “By training the children here, we hope to make parents feel more comfortable to spend time with their children outside of their homes,” Zemi added.

After my conversation with Zemi, our Wednesday trips became valuable opportunities for me to observe not only the behavior of the children in an unfamiliar environment, but also the reaction of the community to their presence. As we made our way through the quiet domestic residences, people from the neighborhood smiled and acknowledged us. Others who happened to walk the same path as us often followed us with their curious eyes. It was, however, when a child cried for a second round of juice or attempted to run out of the shop or even tried to communicate non-verbally, that reality sunk in for most of our observers and discomfort took over. And if discomfort was missing, absolute pity was in its place.
The lack of awareness about autism means that most parents do not have any information about the disorder until it appears in their own family. In fact, this had been the case with Zemi. Jojo was 4 years old when his father was watching a television program on autism and realized that his son had many of the symptoms associated with the disorder. Because of their economic privilege, Zemi and her husband were able to take their son to England where he was officially diagnosed, and they received professional help that better equipped them to assist their son. It was upon their return that Zemi started programs raising awareness about autism, only to realize so many other families, most of whom were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, remained helpless.

Joy has created and continues to create public forums where autism is discussed and destigmatized. Every April, during World Autism Awareness Day, Joy organizes a march throughout the city of Addis Ababa. The staff and students along with hundreds of people from the general public participate in this march by wearing the center’s caps and t-shirts and holding signs with slogans. Joy also takes part in the biannual citywide exhibition, where it not only promotes itself and its work to the public, but also finds sponsors that can either financially or materially support the organization’s ongoing projects. With the launching of its new fundraising campaign, “A Day’s Income for Joy,” the Center hopes to use its partner organizations, parents, and student volunteers to reach a wider public with an invitation to contribute one day’s income to the construction fund of the new center.

Since its establishment in 2002, Joy has operated with the belief that social change begins at an individual level. It is only when people, especially parents of children with autism, are able to voice their concerns about the social injustices of developmental disorders that they can inspire others to become advocates and informed citizens who will then contribute to change. “And change has so many faces, you know,” Zemi once said to me. “You can offer to watch your neighbors’ autistic child when they’re not around; you can fundraise; you can volunteer at organizations like Joy; you can lobby for more inclusive healthcare policies…and with each of these, it is your concern that is bringing tangible change.”

This idea of change has held true in Joy’s journey over the past 13 years. It was the concern for the lack of accommodation and resources for children with autism that birthed the center. It was investment in the continued development of the children at the center that led to the establishment of side projects that helped parents gain emotional and financial support. And it is the continued need to secure the wellbeing of children with autism that will continue to break the silence that has always surrounded the subject, and bring about education and health care policies that are more inclusive of special populations.

Small Changes

“I’ve always wanted to have a son,” she said in a tone that was barely audible. “When I thought of myself as a mother, I’ve always imagined having a son. I don’t know…maybe I wanted it too much.”

She forced her lips to part into a smile as her eyes fought to hold back the tears that glazed over them. My aunt had just returned from a trip to the hospital where the pediatrician had told her that her son was autistic. She got up abruptly, said she wanted to be alone and locked herself in her bedroom. Moments later, we could hear her sobbing uncontrollably from the other side.

Over the years, I have watched my aunt take her son to many medical appointments, search all over the city of Addis Ababa for pharmacies that carry the medication he needs, and stay up for hours to get him to go to bed. All the while, she has grappled with the idea of not being a good-enough mother for her autistic child or even for her older daughter, who was not getting enough attention.

“My autistic son is 11 years old,” I had read in the creased article pinned to the board on my very first day at Joy. “When he learned how to tie his shoes a few months ago, I was almost as happy as I was the day he was born.” I imagined the smile that colored her face, lifted her cheeks, and wrinkled the skin around her eyes. It was the same smile that colored my aunt’s face when her son called her “mama” for the first time at age four. It was the same smile that lifted her cheeks when her son finally returned her hug.

In that moment when I still had little idea of all that was awaiting me, I read the final quote of the article and understood: “There are so many milestones. And the smallest successes are the most joyous.”
Bibliography


Fadiman, Anne. The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of the Two Cultures Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997


Notes

1. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), is a guideline that offers standard criteria for the classification of mental disorders. It is used by clinicians, researchers, psychiatric drug regulation agencies, health insurance companies, pharmaceuticals, and policy makers. The DSM, now in its fifth edition, is the primary tool used for the diagnosis of autism. For more information on autism diagnosis, go to https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism/diagnosis/dsm-5-diagnostic-criteria.

2. Ametepee et al argue that the symptoms of autism can vary from place to place. The study has revealed that children with autism in Africa on average tend to display less aggressive behavior than those in the US. The reason for this difference remains unidentified.

3. “Just world fallacy” is the concept that refers to our faulty perception of living in a just world. This perception, reinforced by childhood tales, allows us to have explanation for event that would otherwise not make sense. This, however, often means that we perceive people in undesirable situation to be the causes of their circumstances. While this concept can apply widely across several phenomena, it is also the reason why we perceive disabilities as having a moral component: those who live with disabilities must have committed immoral acts to be the way they are.