

Transformative Learning and the Development of  
Cultural Humility in Social Work Students  
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### **Abstract**

Cultural humility is increasingly important in social work literature given its emphasis on mitigating power imbalances in helping relationships, particularly across cultural differences. Consequently, there is a need to understand whether and how cultural humility can be taught in social work education, both through traditional classroom instructions and cultural immersion programs. Guided by the Transformative Learning Theory and relying on ethnographic observations and reflective journals, this study explores the process of developing cultural humility among 19 U.S. social work students who studied abroad in Ghana in the years 2016-2018. To summarise how the learning process required to develop cultural humility manifests at each of the TLT stages, we identified three major themes: 1) confusion and discomfort, 2) re-moulding, and 3) humility in action. Specifically, this process seems to depend on the experience of a disorienting dilemma, meaningful connections with others, and the ongoing readiness to function beyond one's own cultural frame of reference. We suggest TLT can serve as a guide to social work educators and study abroad coordinators in planning, facilitating, and evaluating transformative learning experiences which can help students begin this life-long journey.

*Keywords:* social work education, cultural humility, transformative learning theory, study abroad, qualitative methods, ethnographic observations

### **Introduction**

Culturally responsive and inclusive social work practice is one of the ethical responsibilities of the social work profession globally (AASW, 2020; CSWE, 2015). Personal beliefs, values, worldviews, along with professional training shape the way social workers engage with culturally diverse clients and the decisions they make, which often have powerful implications in their clients' lives. In the settler-colonial countries such as the United States or Australia, the general education system often does not sufficiently address topics related to culture, ethnocentrism, race, and racism (Farrugia et al., 2018, Olcoñ et al., 2019). Therefore, the profession is charged with effectively preparing future social workers to work across racial and cultural differences.

The concept of cultural humility is increasingly discussed in the social work literature (Bennett & Gates, 2019; Fisher-Borne et al., 2015; Gottlieb, 2020) as a potential model for engagement with diverse populations. Defined originally as “a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and critique, to redressing the power imbalances in the physician-patient dynamic, and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations” (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998, p. 123), cultural humility has found a variety of applications in the social work context. It has been recommended as a framework for the delivery of child protection services (Ortega & Faller, 2011), serving LGBTQI Aboriginal communities in Australia (Bennett & Gates, 2019), and improving the engagement of diverse clients in counselling (Mosher et al., 2017), among other applications. Consequently, there is growing interest in whether and how cultural humility can be taught in social work education, both through traditional classroom instructions (Rosen et al., 2017; Sanchez et al., 2019; Sloane & Petra, 2021) and cultural immersion programs (Luciano, 2020; Schuldberg et al., 2012).

Cultural humility was first introduced in late 1990s in response to public healthcare disparities in the U.S. and the need to improve physician multicultural training outcomes (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). Many have argued that this concept captures the complexity and the necessary components of working across racial and cultural differences more adequately than the commonly used cultural competence model (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015; Hook, 2014; Ortega & Faller, 2011). Cultural humility is built on the recognition that culture is often used as a tool of social, economic, and political power of one group over another (Pon, 2009), and, if left unaddressed, the cultural oppression can be perpetuated in professional encounters between service providers and recipients. By emphasising that the most important sources of guidance for practitioners are the families and communities they seek to serve, cultural humility becomes a way of life - an ongoing process that does not entail an outcome (Foronda et al., 2016). Based on a concept analysis, Foronda et al., (2016) listed openness, self-awareness, egoless, supportive interactions, as well as self-reflection and critique as the attributes of cultural humility. If effectively incorporated into practice, cultural humility leads to mutual empowerment, partnerships, respect, and optimal care.

Cultural humility has received some attention in study abroad and cultural immersion literature (Ferranto, 2015; Isaacson, 2014; Luciano, 2020). Such programs have been found to shift students' ways of seeing and interpreting the world (Isaacson, 2014), enhance their self-awareness, and require them to take personal responsibility for prejudice and bias (Ferranto, 2015). Social work literature further highlights the potential of study abroad to strengthen students' awareness and acceptance of cultural differences (Kreitzer et al., 2011; Ranz et al., 2015), enable personal growth (Bolea, 2012; Jones et al., 2018; Schuldberg et al., 2012; Voss et al., 2015), raise awareness of power and oppression (Cordero & Rodriguez, 2009; Fisher & Grettenberger, 2015; Larson & Allen, 2006), and enhance professional growth (Bolea, 2012;

Willis et al., 2019). Despite this growing body of work, there remains a gap in understanding the learning process required to develop cultural humility.

Given the significant interest it has gained in study abroad (Chwialkowska, 2020; Dorsett et al., 2019; Strange & Gibson, 2017) and social work education literature (Bay & Macfarlane, 2011; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014), Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) is the selected theoretical and analytical framework for this study. TLT is an adult learning theory that captures the deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and consciousness which Mezirow (1978, 1991) termed as shifting one's personal frame of reference. Mezirow (1991; 2000) proposed that transformative learning can take place when the following ten elements are met: (1) experiencing a disorienting dilemma; (2) self-examining, with feelings of anger, guilt or shame; (3) critically assessing assumptions; (4) recognising that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared; (5) exploring options for new roles, relationships, and actions; (6) planning a course of action; (7) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan; (8) provisionally trying new roles; (9) building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and (10) reintegrating new perspectives and capacities into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by the new perspectives. Overall, this kind of dramatic and permanent alteration of our way of being in the world is perhaps a necessary dynamic for cultural humility.

Guided by the TLT and relying on ethnographic observations and reflective journals of 19 U.S. social work students who studied abroad in Ghana, this study aims to answer the following research questions: 1) what are the learning experiences required for students to begin the life-long journey towards cultural humility? and 2) how does the development of cultural humility manifest at each stage of the transformative learning process? We hope this research can provide guidance to social work educators on how to design and facilitate learning experiences that can assist students in developing cultural humility.

## Methods

### Study Background

The study is based on a secondary analysis of data collected from students who participated in a three-week summer Ghana study abroad program, offered collaboratively by two southern U.S. universities in 2016, 2017, and 2018. The study abroad curriculum was designed and taught by two African American professors and focused on the topic of human rights and social justice. It incorporated classroom-based learning, service-learning projects with local service organisations, visits to local museums, social service agencies, art markets and other attractions, exposure to rural village life, and excursions to former slave dungeons. Students' pre-travel preparation included participating in group and individual orientations, learning about the concept of cultural humility, as well as reading Yaa Gyasi's (2016) historical novel *Homegoing*, which describes the impact of colonialism and the slave trade over several generations. While in Ghana, a variety of formal and informal activities allowed students to interact with Ghanaian people and learn about the local context. Students were required to reflect critically upon these experiences through daily journaling and debriefing circles.

### Description of Sample

Over the three years of data collection, 39 students enrolled in the Ghana study abroad program, and 27 consented to participate in the study. This study focuses on the sub-sample of 19 social work major students. The sample was primarily female (89%) and of the undergraduate level (73%). Eight students identified as White, eight identified as Latino/a, two identified as Black, and one identified as Asian American. Students' age ranged from 20 to 40, with 25 as the average. The number of students was equally divided between those who had never travelled abroad before, those with some international exposure, and those who had extensive international experiences, including having lived and studied abroad. None of the students had previously visited an African country.

### **Data Collection**

The study was approved by the ethical and institutional review boards at all involved universities. The second author conducted ethnographic observations and recorded extensive fieldnotes during the Ghana immersion program in the years 2016 and 2017 with two cohorts of students for a total of seven weeks. Ethnographic observations (Creswell, 2018) were valuable for this project as they gave insights into the social implications of the physical surroundings (Bailey, 1996), and allowed to document the daily reflection circles while students were immersed in the new cultural setting. The fieldnotes captured the students' discussions and interactions during program activities, group meetings, and debriefing circles (Emerson et al., 2011).

Another source of data were 323 reflective journals, which students wrote as part of the study abroad course. Each student was required to submit a total of 17 written reflections: one pre-departure, 15 while in Ghana, and one upon return. During the time in Ghana, the prompt questions "*Reflect on something that you experienced or learned today: What was it? How do you feel about it? Anything surprised you?*" were provided to guide students to reflect on anything they found important without channelling them in any direction.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analysed using a deductive thematic approach (Braun et al., 2018) and managed through QSR NVivo 12 software. Deductive thematic analysis is driven by a specific theoretical orientation and involves approaching the data with "various ideas, concepts, and theories, or even potential codes based on such, which are then explored and tagged within the dataset" (Braun et al., 2018, p. 853). Specifically, the first author coded all data sources using the Mezirow's (2000) ten transformative learning elements. The second author reviewed selected parts to develop a richer reading of the data and ensure multiple interpretations (Tuckett, 2005). Collaboratively, the authors generated themes which contained central ideas

addressing the research question. Strategies such as data triangulation and keeping a reflective diary were employed to ensure rigour and credibility of the analysis (Houghton et al., 2013). The similarities in the results between the ethnographic fieldnotes and the reflective journals confirmed the validity of the findings and maximised the potential that “as complete picture as possible of phenomena is portrayed” (Houghton et al., 2013, p. 13). Recording personal histories, beliefs and interests in the diary and frequent team meetings helped to monitor researchers’ assumptions and biases.

Finally, all authors have reflected on their positionality during the data collection and analysis process (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). The first author is an international student from China studying social work in Australia who completed this project as part of her honour’s thesis. The second author, a Ph.D. student of social work at the time of data collection, identifies as White and an immigrant to the U.S. from Poland and is currently residing in Australia. The third author, an African American professor, directed the Ghana program in the three years of data collection, and the fourth author, also an African American professor, established and directed the Ghana program over several years. The authors frequently engaged in discussions about how their identities and positionalities may influence their interpretations of the data and collectively corrected for potential biases.

### **Findings**

We constructed three major themes based on the data: 1) confusion and discomfort; 2) remoulding; and 3) humility in action, which summarise the process of the development of cultural humility in the context of a study abroad program. Statements from the students’ reflective journals and ethnographic fieldnotes were used to support each theme. Table 1 summarises how the three themes correspond to the TLT and how cultural humility is manifested at each TLT element.



**Table 1 Summary of Findings**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Corresponding Transformative Learning Elements</b>	<b>Manifestations of the Development of Cultural Humility</b>
<b>Confusion &amp; Discomfort</b>	Experiencing a disorienting dilemma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disoriented by new cultural environment and unfamiliar cultural practices</li> </ul>
	Self-examination with feelings of anger, guilt, and shame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Realisation of one's own positionality, privilege, and power imbalances</li> <li>Searching for own cultural roots and identity</li> </ul>
	Critical assessment of one's basic underlying assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Critically assessing the meaning of concrete and abstract concepts in a different cultural context</li> <li>Being attuned to covert cultural practices (one's own and of other cultures)</li> </ul>
	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sharing the journey towards cultural humility with others</li> </ul>
<b>Re-moulding</b>	Exploration of new actions, roles and relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moving away from an ethnocentric orientation</li> <li>Experimenting with "getting out of my comfort zone"</li> <li>Practicing genuine listening to others</li> </ul>
	Planning a course of action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased focus on meaningful human connections</li> <li>Resisting the culture of waste, consumerism, and materialism</li> </ul>
	Acquisition of new knowledge and skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gaining practical and interpersonal skills</li> <li>Learning about the impact of history on current social and economic global realities</li> </ul>
	Provisionally trying of new roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Striving to eliminate power imbalances between workers and communities</li> </ul>
<b>Humility in Action</b>	Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ability to function outside of "comfort zone"</li> <li>Engaging and connecting with others with humility</li> </ul>
	Reintegration of changed perspectives into one's life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Embracing cultural pluralism and cultural relativism</li> <li>Commitment to lifelong self-reflection and critique</li> </ul>

### **Confusion and Discomfort**

In the early stage of the study abroad program, students found themselves out of their comfort zone and disoriented due to both overt and covert, unfamiliar cultural practices. After experiencing initial confusion and frustration, students started to self-examine their

positionality, and the assumptions they were making. They started to become aware of their frame of reference and meaning-making structures, or what some called the “cultural baggage”. This initial phase of the development of cultural humility was manifested through a variety of experiences detailed below, all of which took place in the context of collaborative learning.

During the study abroad program, students had many opportunities to experience cultural differences firsthand. Shortly after arrival, during the program orientation, they were introduced to the culturally appropriate body language and gestures in Ghana. For example, using the left hand to shake hands or pass things, crossing legs and doing a thumb up are all considered rude and inappropriate in Ghana. One student reflected on her difficulties in adjusting to these overt cultural practices in the following way:

We went to the store and one of my peers was about to pay, but she handed the money with her left hand I didn't realize what was happening. The lady wouldn't take the money and I couldn't really hear what she was saying. I later realized that she would not take the money unless it was handed to her with her right hand.

This example depicts the students' experience of disorientation and confusion when they were initially confronted by a foreign frame of reference. Having had ingrained the U.S. social habits, the students become aware of their taken-for-granted behaviours for their first time and made an effort to avoid inappropriate behaviours in the new cultural context. Students also found themselves disorientated in various unfamiliar environments such as outdoor and street markets. The way of shopping, where bargaining was commonly practiced and vendors engaged in numerous selling and negotiation tactics, felt “overwhelming” and “intense” to the students. Although they had been introduced to bargaining as a cultural practice prior to arriving at the market, students had difficulty understanding and practicing it themselves. They reported being uncomfortable when receiving attention from the vendors, and felt “underprepared”,

“overstimulated” and found it difficult to say “no”. This disorientation is illustrated in the following excerpt:

The phrase I keep hearing people say is “things cost what you think they’re worth”. It made me wonder what all determine the worth of the products in the United States? (...) I felt the most uncomfortable at the thought of having to bargain for the souvenirs and gifts I want to take back home.

Here the student expressed feeling uncomfortable about bargaining yet recognised that her unease was caused by her Western frame of reference about objects having a fixed price.

This cultural disorientation provoked some questions for the students, both in terms of their own cultural background and their social position. In formal and informal discussions (e.g., during a bus ride), they frequently talked about privilege and the many things they took for granted in their lives back home such as Wi-Fi or air-conditioning. Experiencing another standard of living resulted in guilt for judging others based on their own privileges: “I was angry at myself for looking badly at their lifestyle. But I really thought about it and it is just because I am not used to it. I realized how much privilege I have.” Many students discovered that they had never thought carefully about their positionality. White students had a variety of reactions to their newly enhanced awareness of race and global racial oppression ranging from discomfort, defensiveness, shame, and “White humility” (to read more see Olcoń, 2020). All students were shocked by realising how they were perceived as U.S. citizens, both in terms of the privileges and the imperialistic attitudes that are often attached to it:

I am discovering that I may have internally carried and probably still do carry an imperialistic perspective while I am travelling abroad. Acknowledging this idea makes me extremely upset at myself, but I am happy to have been made aware of it so I can address it when it arises.

In addition to examining their privileges and positionality, students started to realise their limited knowledge of important global historical events, leaders, and international policies and practices. Students expressed frustration and shame for not knowing electronic waste is frequently dumped and burnt in developing countries, important historical figures such as W.E.B. Dubois, and the impact of colonisation and ongoing international policies on Africa. . Overall, students discovered their enormous knowledge gaps and their need to learn more.

Another expression of self-examination was the desire to explore one's own cultural roots and identity. Particularly, the Latino/a, Black and Asian students felt motivated to better understand themselves and where their ancestors came from. Many confessed to having "lost" their culture and felt the need to recover their loss. Here is an example from a Latina student:

Coming on this trip has made me want to trace my roots and get to really know where my family came from. I know very little about my roots but that is something I definitely want to change. I would love to know where the traditions I had close to my heart come from. I want to know why and where they began. The encouragement to trace my roots has been the greatest gift I have received from this trip!

This student's journal entry, like many others, highlights that although their ancestors might not have come from Africa, being in Ghana prompted the students to question where they were from and sparked the desire to connect with their origin more closely.

Closely related to self-examination was the students' critical assessment of their assumptions. By being exposed to another culture, students became aware of many assumptions they were making about both concrete (e.g., water, food, beach), as well as abstract concepts (e.g., time, relationships). For example, students' taken-for-granted understanding of time and scheduling was challenged during the program, often resulting in frustration and anxiety. The time needed, for example, to commute to places or dine in a

restaurant, could never be accurately calculated due to a variety of reasons beyond students' control. Many students struggled with the different time orientation in Ghana:

I feel like the hardest one to overcome was the concept of “time doesn't exist in Ghana”.

Because I am a very structured person, I enjoy time management and scheduling my plans for the day. While in Ghana, I noticed that the individuals were much less focused on time than that of what I am accustomed to.

Students became more attuned to the covert cultural practices such as the value placed on interpersonal relationships or the importance of hospitality. They frequently made comparisons between the way people interacted with each other in the two cultures, thus expanding their previous understanding of relationships. Students reported that wherever they went, they were “welcomed and greeted by everyone” and felt that “they genuinely wanted to know about me”. Similar behaviours were observed among their Ghanaian peers and other locals who treated each other with “stillness, quietness, solitude and patience”. Witnessing how much value was placed on social interactions in Ghana allowed students to develop a new appreciation of human connection, having a genuine interest in others, and taking the time to learn about another person.

Students experienced different levels of disorientation and reacted differently to the same events and situations, for example, those who had prior international travel experiences were able to overcome the disorientation phase quicker than others. Nonetheless, the data suggests that everyone's learning was enhanced by the presence and conversations with others who were going through a similar transformation. As documented in the fieldnotes (2017): “The students said they felt grateful for building a sense of community and family with the group, connection, learning from each other, tackling difficult conversations...”. The support from others in the learning process was visible in things such as reminding each other about inappropriate gestures and body language (e.g. no leg-crossing during welcoming ceremonies),

and pairing up when visiting local markets to learn from each other respectful communication and bargaining skills. Most importantly, ongoing conversations with their peers and group debriefing circles, helped the students to gain a wider perspective on their personal tensions and struggles as well as on their emerging professional identity.

### **Re-moulding**

As the study abroad program continued, students started to move past their initial disorientation and discomfort. While acquiring new cultural awareness, knowledge and skills, students' worldviews, attitudes, and behaviours started to gradually shift away from an ethnocentric frame of reference. Although these changes were challenging to make, students felt a sense of achievement and relief that they had begun the process of "re-moulding" their way of thinking, doing and being.

As they continued to increase their awareness of their former cultural frame of reference, some students started to experiment with "getting out of my comfort zone" by engaging in new behaviours, roles and relationships. They ordered unfamiliar foods, participated in a drumming session or danced and sang in front of others. One student reflected on her growth in this process: "I used to shy away from any chance of being uncomfortable but over the past few weeks I have realized how much beauty and growth can come from times of discomfort." Moreover, the hospitality and genuineness they experienced from the locals, motivated the students to be less reserved and more person-oriented in their relationship with others. Most importantly, they started to test cultural humility in their interactions with others. As one student summarises in her journal: "Today I tried to listen more, observe more, and try to hear more. To stop taking upon the privileged role of 'I know more'".

As a result of the immersion in another culture, many students planned to make various changes in their lives upon returning home. Their personal priorities focused on enhancing

their interactions and relationships with others. They wanted to become more genuine with and dedicated to spending time with other people:

I hope that when I return home that I'll take the time to genuinely appreciate conversations, not engage in small talk, love my relationships with others, and have a deeper understanding and love for human relationships and use this as I navigate through the world and social work profession.

Strengthening their human connection, which they realised is often overlooked in their life back home, thus became the top priority for many. Another personal goal for many was resisting the culture of waste, consumerism, materialism, and convenience back home. Even though some students initially complained about the lack of access to convenience and comfort they were used to, as time progressed, they began to challenge their habits and expressed wishing to “rely less on the materialistic luxuries” and be more cognisant of their use of resources such as water or electricity. In addition, having witnessed the burning of electronic waste dumped in Ghana from highly industrialised countries, they felt the urgency to decrease their own contribution to the amount of waste produced by their country.

Students gained new knowledge and skills by having conversations with the local people, listening, and asking questions during lectures, guided excursions and completing their service-learning project. They developed various practical and interpersonal skills such as bargaining and culturally appropriate body language, ability to communicate across cultural and language differences, and engaging a productive dialogue with others even if it revolved around difficult topics. Students' knowledge about the history of Ghana, colonisation and slavery grew exponentially. For example, in one of the debriefing circles, a student reflected on how it felt “beyond my reasoning how people can treat each other this way” while walking through the slave dungeons. She then made a connection to the U.S. education and how it minimised the content on slavery: “I was angry that it was breezed over” (Fieldnotes, 2017). Throughout the

program and in their journals, students frequently talked about having developed a new understanding of the impact of history on current social and economic global realities (to read more see Olcoñ et al., 2019).

Finally, students were able to provisionally try new roles during the study abroad program. In particular, the service-learning project provided an opportunity to embrace the principles of cultural humility and test their emerging professional identity. For example, they spent time listening to and consulting with the school staff as to what the school needs instead of making a judgment themselves. Students realised that as future social workers, they need to take on the role of a learner when working with communities to respect people's values and promote their self-determination:

I learned that in order to be effective in helping a community, you have to keep the community's values, wants and needs as the main focus instead of placing all your own values on a community... Maybe they don't want a yoga class, even though I think they would? Am I placing my values on them?

This demonstrated the efforts of being self-reflective, moving away from an ethnocentric orientation, eliminating power imbalances between workers and communities, and committing to learning from others.

### **Humility in Action**

This theme merges the two final transformative learning elements: 1) building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships and 2) reintegrating new perspectives and capacities into one's life. After being exposed to and testing out other frames of reference, students gradually overcame their fears of the unfamiliar and became more confident in "navigating outside of comfort zone". They found themselves to be more "courageous", "flexible, patient and understanding". For example, one student described in her journal her newly developed appreciation for inviting some "unknown" into her days:



I typically live my life by a detailed schedule and prefer to know what to expect from each day, but I have learned to see the beauty in the unknown. I have begun to appreciate the unfamiliarity and the learning that can take place when I don't know every little detail.

In addition, students showed more humility when interacting with others who came from different cultural backgrounds by accepting that people may have different perspectives and lived experiences. Being able to test the cultural humility-driven attitude and behaviours increased students' confidence in their ability to effectively manage cross-cultural professional encounters. As one student wrote: "As I move forward in this world—especially in my practice as a social worker—I am going to always remember to solicit and keep close the expressed needs of the people I am with."

The transformative learning experience in Ghana changed students' perspectives of themselves and the world, and they showed willingness to integrate this changed view into their lives. This included a better understanding of their social position and cultural assumptions that formed their frame of reference. Students realised that their realities and values may not be the realities and values of others. They shifted away from using their own culture and its values as the single standard and to the idea of cultural pluralism, by realising that groups of people have the right to live according to their standards and values. They also embraced cultural relativism, by recognising the influence of culture and life experiences on each person's beliefs and actions. This newly developed perspective can be seen in following journal's excerpt:

But, at the same time I can easily become frustrated because I like having right and wrong ways to do things too; it makes it easier. However, critically thinking of solutions, and seeing situations and people in their uniqueness is such a beautiful and worthy task...

Moving beyond one's own idea of "right and wrong" and instead immersing oneself in listening and learning about the experiences of other people became a crucial revelation for students. Finally, they realised that as outsiders they can never fully understand the nuanced values and perspectives of another culture, thus recognising the need to commit to lifelong humility, self-reflection, and critique.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The study findings demonstrate that the TLT is a helpful framework for understanding and organising the process students need to go through to start developing cultural humility. Specifically, the study identified how the development of cultural humility is manifested at each of the stages of TLT, e.g., realisation of one's positionality and a search for own cultural roots are essential for self-examination whereas getting out of one's comfort zone and practicing genuine listening to others are crucial aspects of exploration of new actions, roles and relationships. The findings suggested that it is difficult for students to challenge cultural beliefs and practices that stem from their upbringing. Being temporarily removed from their cultural frame of reference allowed them to start developing new perspectives, attitudes, and behaviours. It was necessary for the students, however, to critically assess the meaning of abstract and concrete concepts in their own and others' cultures because it helped them explore beyond the surface of the overt cultural practices. The realisation that human behaviour is far more complex and dynamic than one can comprehend with his/her cultural frame of reference is the core of cultural humility (Ortega & Faller, 2011). This realisation seems also to be closely linked with students' ability to move beyond an ethnocentric orientation. Through an exposure to other ways of living, students can recognise and accept that "their worldview is not the only worldview and the way they live and practice their profession is not the only way to do this" (Kreitzer et al., 2011, p. 260). As shown in this study, it is only after the students acknowledged their own cultural frame of reference that they were able to make sense of the initial

disorientation and appreciate cultural differences at a deeper level. Furthermore, they saw the necessity to embrace cultural relativism by promoting the idea that culture or worldview inform solutions to life's problems, or as Krajewski-Jaime et al. (1996) framed it "culture defines solutions to universal problems of life" (p. 29).

There are several limitations to note in this study. First, due to the small sample size, participants coming from two universities in the U.S., and the majority being White or Latina females, the results may not be transferable to other student groups. Moreover, the conclusions drawn in this study rely heavily on students' self-report as recorded in their journals. The authenticity of these reflections might be influenced by the social-desirability factor and the requirement to complete the journal entries as part of the course. Finally, the study did not allow for conclusions about the longer-term impact of this experience on students' ongoing development of cultural humility.

We believe that despite these limitations, this study has some valuable implications for social work educators who aim to expand students' cultural humility. It echoes the work of Dorsett et al. (2019) and Strange and Gibson (2017) in promoting the usefulness of TLT in the program design and evaluation of learning outcomes in intercultural contexts. Specifically, interactions and relationships with others are the key to developing an awareness and appreciation of cultural differences. Direct exposure to different lifestyles, ideologies and values can facilitate both the initiation and the continuity of students' cultural humility journey. Social work educators thus need to strive to create learning opportunities for students where they are exposed to and can interact with people who come from different cultural backgrounds. However, given that students who can study abroad are only the minority, deliberate interactions with diverse classmates and ensuring a diverse teaching teams can serve as helpful steps in this regard. The systemic approach to the development of cultural humility provided in this study can serve as a guide for educators in designing social work diversity curricula and

teaching activities that will assist students in expanding their cross-cultural understanding, skills, and attitudes. We agree with Dorsett et al. (2019) about “the importance of the unsettling experience” (p. 575), and thus educators need to intentionally create teaching experiences that provoke confusion and discomfort by challenging students’ taken-for-granted cultural meanings and behaviours. Moreover, it is important for social work educators to acknowledge that international students travelling to and studying in countries such as the U.S. go through a similar process of “culture shock” (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013) and they need to accommodate their initial disorientation and learning of how to function outside of their comfort zone.

The findings also indicated that the development of cultural humility is depended on emotional learning. Mezirow (1991) proposed that a person requires emotional strength and an act of will to continue to bring about an authentic transformative learning experience. Similarly, Krajewski-Jaime et al. (1996) believed that an authentic and multicultural base for practice requires both cognitive and affective learning. The data revealed emotions such as anxiety and frustration in the initial disorientation phase, shame and guilt in the self-examination phase, and a sense of hope, joy, achievement, and relief resulting from the students’ “re-moulding” of their frame of reference. This echoes the argument made by Larson and Allen (2006) that emotional responses are vital for learners: “developing a new awareness or conscientization [is] full of emotional turmoil, but positive and transformative” (p. 517). Social work educators thus need to prepare for this “emotional turmoil” student may go through on their journey to cultural humility and create a supportive environment where students can overcome the potential emotional resistance and blockages.

Finally, the findings demonstrated that the process of developing cultural humility had an impact on students’ conceptualisation of themselves as future social work practitioners and professional social work practice broadly. Students realised how their own cultural values,

assumptions, biases, and stereotypes can lead to microaggressions and culturally harmful interventions with their clients (Davis et al., 2016; Shepherd, 2003). Their newly developed awareness of privilege and positionality as U.S. citizens, enhanced their understanding of the power imbalance between social workers and their clients and the need to be constantly adjusting for it. As students started moving away from ethnocentric orientation, they also became more critical of the predominantly White social work theories and interventions (Tascón & Ife, 2019). Changing the dominant professional discourse from cultural competency to critical multiculturalism, anti-racism (Nylund, 2006), and cultural humility is thus essential to prepare future social work practitioners to engage effectively across cultural differences. Multiple perspectives and epistemologies thus need to be taught in social work classrooms, and traditional theories and paradigms need to be challenged and evaluated based on their applicability to diverse populations (Dumbrill & Green, 2008). Cultural pluralism and relativism should be a part of the explicit and implicit social work curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

An art installation and landmark in Duisburg, Germany, *The Crouching Tiger and Turtle, Magic Mountain* is a staircase that allows the climbers to view the surrounding panorama from unexpected angles that they would not have experienced otherwise. Surprisingly, once the visitor starts climbing, they realise that the staircase has no end. This is a good analogy for the journey of cultural humility, that it needs to be viewed as an ongoing process as opposed to an outcome (Ortega & Faller, 2011). As the study findings demonstrated, the students were transformed by the opportunity to expand their cultural horizons and view themselves and the world from a different angle. Yet cultural humility requires being in the position of a constant learner, always exploring and searching, and having the awareness that there is no end point to this journey. Thus, there is a need for future research to clarify what

this lifelong learning implies and what maintaining cultural humility looks like in social work practice following diversity education and cultural awakening experiences.

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