Midterm Reflection Paper

Working with Lutheran Community Services Northwest (LCSNW) has been a great honor and an incredible learning experience for me. I feel like I’ve hit the jackpot as far as undergraduate psychology internships go. I have two primary responsibilities at LCSNW. The first is evaluating the International Counseling and Community Services (ICCS) program and the second is assisting with the Refugee Health Promotion Project (RHPP). The work environment at LCSNW is wonderfully positive and I’ve received excellent supervision and support.

The ICCS program provides behavioral health, complex medical case management, and community support to refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers that have been marginalized by language, culture, persecution, and trauma. My goal within the program is to track the progress of clients receiving these services at the South King County office. So far, I have chosen the variables I want to focus on, determined how I will operationalize and measure them, and found a random sample of cases to include in the evaluation. Now I am analyzing the selected client files to see how much the clients’ symptoms and situation have improved since they first started treatment. My goal is to have the project completed by the end of May. I hope that it will help LCSNW provide even better care for the marginalized individuals that it serves.

The Refugee Health Promotion Project is one of the complex medical case management services the ICCS program offers. LCSNW partners with Harborview Medical Center and other voluntary agencies (World Relief, etc.) to help newly arriving refugees receive proper medical care once they are here in Washington. Resettlement is extremely stressful and chaotic. All too often, the physical health needs of refugees are left unmet. Newly arriving refugees usually do
not know how to obtain medical insurance, complete stacks of paperwork, schedule appointments, find childcare, find transportation to a clinic or hospital, and/or fill and refill prescriptions. Resettlement agencies attempt to help them with these things, but if an appointment is missed or a prescription left unfilled, it may go unnoticed since there are so many other needs that the case worker is trying to meet. Thus, the RHPP was designed to help make sure that these refugees’ physical health needs do not fall through the cracks. Several of LCSNW’s staff follow up with these individuals to make sure that they have access to health insurance, are making it to their appointments, and are adhering to any medical advice they are given. Because I speak Ukrainian, my role is to follow up with the Ukrainian refugees enrolled in the program.

One of my favorite things about LCSNW is the diversity of the work environment. The staff at the South King County office represent ethnic groups from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, North Africa, East Africa, and North America. Collectively, they speak 10 distinct languages. A work environment that diverse requires a great amount of mutual respect and open-mindedness, which is exactly what the staff of LCSNW have. They are eager to learn from each other and practice open communication and collaborative problem-solving. The work environment is nurturing and supportive. There are no barriers between the counselors and case workers and the directors and supervisors. Everyone works together to get the job done and have a good time doing it.

LCSNW does a great job of balancing skills training and learning by experience. I get adequate support from my supervisor and other staff, but I also have the freedom to try things on my own. I learn best if I am guided once or twice and then allowed to practice on my own. I also appreciate that various staff members regularly check in with me. This helps me get questions
answered if I do have them because I am hesitant to approach someone first. One challenge that I’ve had is building relationships that extend beyond work. I’ve had to step out of my comfort zone and initiate conversations that wouldn’t otherwise happen. It’s given me a great opportunity to face my fears and grow. Another aspect of the professional work environment that’s been challenging is sitting behind a desk all day. My days usually involve a lot of movement, so office work has demanded quite the adjustment. In the future, I’d like a job more like that of the counselors and case workers at LCSNW, their day involves more variability.

**Final Reflection**

**A Rekindled Passion**

Interning with Lutheran Community Services Northwest’s (LCSNW) International Counseling and Community Services (ICCS) program has given me invaluable insight into both the world of human services and into myself. I have had the opportunity to work in an office setting, witness the behind-the-scenes work of counselors and case managers, get to know the incredible stories of local refugees, and discover my own strengths and weaknesses as an emerging professional. LCSNW has helped me rediscover my passions, clarify my interests, and crack some doors open for the future.

The part of my work with LCSNW that impacted me the most was getting to know the stories of the refugees and asylum seekers that make up their clientele. I was dumbstruck and awestruck by the immense suffering each individual experienced and by their incredible courage and resilience even in the face of unfathomable adversity. Each of these human beings deserves utmost respect and it is heart-wrenching to think that these very immigrants and refugees are
often treated as second-class residents in our society. During my time with LCSNW I realized that the challenges refugees face even after they leave the area of conflict are extremely complex. Many suffer from severe PTSD which is exacerbated by the stressors of migration and acculturation. Immigration-related stress is in and of itself enough to leave an individual with negative psychological outcomes, but the experiences of these individuals seem to dwarf the challenges of ordinary immigration. Five hundred and eight of ICCS’s clients from the last few years have been survivors of torture. Others had been a part of or fled violent conflicts, experienced severe domestic violence, and/or experienced other forms of trauma. The counselors and case managers who work with these individuals must have a high level of competence in order to successfully help them rebuild their lives.

In addition to learning the stories of the refugees, I have learned important field-related office skills, observed the interworking of human services agencies, and gained insight into myself. Over my time at LCSNW I completed multiple professional trainings, designed a method to evaluate the ICCS program, figured out how to best operationalize and track client progress, learned how to navigate client charts quickly and efficiently, re-taught myself how to use Excel and track data, practiced making phone calls to clients, and gave my best effort at technical writing. I also quickly realized that human services staff are people too and that effective inter- and intra-agency communication is key to the success of every project. I was surprised to see how much team work mental health therapy requires. Even though each client was assigned to a particular counselor, collaboration between counselors was the norm.

Regarding discoveries about myself, I realized that I can hear difficult stories and be touched but not devastated. Counselors often suffer from vicarious trauma and burnout if they cannot cope with the painful stories they are constantly exposed to. Fortunately, this does not
seem to be the case with me, which is important to know as I consider the area of mental health I wish to pursue in graduate school. Furthermore, I realized that I am a strong independent worker. I can think critically, draw from many areas of knowledge, and use available resources to teach myself new skills and solve problems effectively. I am also good at picking up on context clues and playing attention to detail. The flip side of these strengths, however, is that I am not good at asking for help. Sometimes, it would have been more efficient to have someone show me how to do something instead of trying to figure it out on my own, but I am always afraid to inconvenience others. Likewise, I can get so bogged down in little details that I don’t manage my time well and end up having to strain myself to meet deadlines. I also need to learn to practice self-care or I will burn out despite my resilience. And finally, I realized that it is a challenge for me to spend nine hours per day in an office chair. Overall, I have become more aware of the areas I need to work on, but also gained confidence in my ability to take on any responsibility I am given and learn to perform it well.

LCSNW has certainly been an asset to me, but I hope that I have also been an asset to them. Our society values quantitative data and measurable results. Donors want non-profits to be able to defend their work with progress reports and concise tables and graphs. The work I did has already been and will continue to be used to help ICCS apply for grants. It will also be used to help the staff identify areas of strength and areas in need of improvement. Ultimately, my hope is that my evaluation project will make the program even stronger than it already is. My work with the Refugee Health Promotion Project also helped lighten the load of some of the program case managers and saved them the hassle of finding Ukrainian interpreters. I hope, too, that my presence at LCSNW brought joy to the people who work there.
At this point in my journey, I believe that I am called to meet the inner, emotional needs of individuals marginalized by their minority status and the trauma they have experienced. In particular, I want to help people heal and recover from the devastating effects of traumatic experiences and battles with addiction. My hope is to begin by working with refugees right here in Washington, but eventually to move into areas of conflict around the world. I want to work holistically, empowering communities, but I especially want to offer hope to adolescents, young adults, and women. My internship experience with LCSNW reawakened and strengthened many parts of this dream that I had somewhat stifled in recent years. I have long felt as if God is guiding me in this direction. I believe that it is a way to redeem the trauma and pain I have experienced and witness in my own life. Additionally, as an immigrant myself, I feel drawn to other immigrants and refugees and I know that I am better able to understand them because of my own experiences. At times, I have doubted my calling and my ability to fulfill it. I thought that maybe I wouldn’t be able to handle this work or maybe I just want an office job, but because of my experience with LCSNW, I have decided to recommit to my old dream and pursue a master’s degree in social work with a concentration in mental health. I believe that this is how I will be able to “do what I am.”

I am very fortunate that my calling overlaps closely with multiple careers I am interested in. Whether I work as a counselor here in the States, or do development or reconciliation work abroad, I know that I will be able to find a way to live out my calling in all of these settings, just as Sittser was able to live out his calling across a variety of careers. I hope that my sense of vocation will help me be an especially compassionate and effective social worker. When other people look at refugees, even those who are compassionate towards them, they often focus on different problems than I do. Maybe they see their unemployment, or their need to learn a new
language, or their need for basic supplies and medical care. I see these things too, and as a social worker, I am sure that I will be helping refugees meet these needs, but I also see more than that. I see the inner pain that ravages their being and affects every other part of their life. I hope that my calling will enable me to help immigrants and refugees find healing that reaches beyond mere survival. Healing that reaches deep inside, restores life, and brings flourishing. I hope that my sense of calling will allow me to develop deep personal relationships with the people I serve so that they feel dignified and empowered by my presence in their life. I hope that I will be able to show them the unconditional love of God that does what even the best social work and professional therapy cannot do.

I am grateful for SPU and the SERVE grant that made my internship with LCSNW possible. My experience with this organization has helped me rediscover my calling and also commit to some big steps towards my first career. I trust that my rekindled passion will be life-giving to both myself and others for many years to come.