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South Africa, ETW
Summer 2016

Thanks to the Experiencing the World fellowship from Kellogg, I was lucky enough to take part in the four-week Projects Abroad Human Rights Office Internship from May 9 to June 4, 2016 in Cape Town, South Africa. This experience allowed me to fully immerse myself in the reality of inequality in Cape Town. With my previous race seminar and political research in America, this immersion thus has deepened my understanding racial discrimination from a more global perspective.

During the four weeks, I mainly worked in the legal service department and participated in several workshops in the social justice department.

In regards to my work in legal service, our office was very understaffed. I worked on 17 cases in the fields of small claims property, divorce, abuse, crime and refugee status at the same time. One of the challenges for me was to carefully organize my time and follow up with each client in a timely manner. Once, I was unable to postpone a client's court date because I had not phoned the court in advance to make sure the affidavit stating that she would have a breast operation was delivered. She thus was considered to have an unaccounted absence. I was frustrated by my own carelessness. After this experience, I started to set up reminders before the dates of client appointments to try to make sure the client understood the process. I also learned to double check with the court and other governmental organizations that my clients' documents had been received. For the rest of my internship, none of my other cases were delayed in progress for a similar reason.

Organizational skills and the process of double-checking have been my rewards in overcoming this challenge. However, I soon realized that my carefulness was far from enough to make sure these legal cases go on smoothly. Clients often chose not to show up for scheduled appointments and sometimes did not respond to our notices. I was a little bit discouraged at first, but I learned to accept these limitations.

The biggest challenge for me was accepting the fact that clients lie to legal workers all the time. During the first consultation, my refugee client often hesitated when answering questions about the reason why and the process of fleeing here and choosing to stay here. I thought he was simply too shy or concerned to share details with me. I brought back his information to my supervisor, who is an experienced and well-respected refugee attorney in Cape Town. I was looking forward to her suggestions and empathetic comments. She said to me: "When a client acts like this, in nine out of ten cases the client is making up the story to cover something." "What can we do then?" I asked. Maria simply said, "There is nothing we can do to alter what they are willing to give us." I kept her answer in mind while I drafted my client's affidavit for a refugee application with his story from that day. I found myself unmotivated and, afterward, unfulfilled. This degree of dishonesty and vagueness seemed to challenge my belief in defending those who are

unfairly treated in the legal system. This also seemed to challenge my presumed association of “those who are unfairly treated and need legal assistance” with “those who are sincere”.

I shared my confusion with another intern, who was already a year-two law student in New Jersey. She listened to my thoughts and nodded, “Jiale, I understand what you are saying. I got lied to all the time, you know, and got frustrated sometimes. But then I told myself that they were just afraid. They did not know what would be best for them, legally. They were not sure whether you would take whatever they were holding back as a reason to give up on them. They were just afraid and that is perfectly normal as human beings.” I started to realize then there was a certain hypocrisy in my presumption that my clients need to stay 100% honest to me; as if those lies made my clients, who are indeed unfairly treated, suddenly not worthy of defending. The fact that my client lied to me could simply mean that he was afraid.

As legal workers, there is not much we can do aside from respecting the clients’ will and trying to defend their rights with the information they gave us. Although I am not totally satisfied with this underlying “rule”, more than ever I have realized that our clients are simply human beings with flaws. Being unfairly treated does not mean that they do not make any mistakes. That everyone has the right to legal defense was what motivated me through all of my learning about criminal justice in America. Although I am not sure whether there is more I can do to improve the situation where clients lie to legal workers, I would like to assist my future clients according to their need and try to build a firm trust and make them less afraid to share.

As mentioned above, my internship in Cape Town has helped me grow a lot as a legal worker. In addition to that, the experience of the social justice workshops there also informed my understanding of the townships in Cape Town and helped me develop as a human-rights-minded person.

As I had imagined before I went, racial segregation and discrimination were everywhere. When you travel in Cape Town, it is not uncommon to see only black or colored people living in townships and white people coming in and out of beautiful neighborhoods. The law no longer segregates people according to their skin color after Apartheid, but the deeply rooted prejudice among people keeps them segregated to a large extent. And it is not just about white people looking down on colored or black people. Subjective hostility and extreme affection both exist. I heard my black clients suggest that many of them would never trust white people, while many girls have told me that their dream was to marry a white guy. Between colored people and black people, discrimination also exists sometimes.

In regard to legal rights in Cape Town, governmental offices are rarely responsive. Those who live in the poor townships either lack the awareness of how to protect their legal rights, or become daunted by the complexity of the legal process. As a result, many of them continue to put up with abuse or owing on property, for example. Many children in townships end up in youth detention centers and feel they do not have a way out,

inevitably influenced by local gangsters and fights. The core issues of the inequality I witnessed in Cape Town were often, to be honest, a more exaggerated version of those I had seen in the States, if not the same. The current personal solution that I have found for myself is to share ideas of deconstruction of racial discrimination and ways of earning a better life through building individual relationships. In regards to a higher-level solution to such inequality and human rights protection, I still have a lot more to learn through my liberal arts education, research, and hands-on experience.

To sum up, this four-week internship in Cape Town enabled me to grow as a potential legal worker and as a curious person wanting to fight for human rights related to racial discrimination. I am indeed grateful for Kellogg's financial and mental support for this activity. I am looking forward to further delve into these issues at and beyond Notre Dame. I will always keep these reflections in mind when I further participate in human rights research and relative activities and gradually polish myself into a critical thinker who can make a positive difference on human rights issues.