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Tackling Cultural Blinders:

Towards an Understanding of a Sexuality, Adult Education, and Intercultural Dynamic

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Abstract: In this chapter the author engages with Herdt's (1997) use of "cultural blinders" that tend to neglect sexuality in cultural settings. This neglect of sexuality reifies the problem of heteronormativity and homophobia and, concomitantly, pushes positive, cultural representations of sexuality and sexual minorities to the periphery. In light of Herdt's argument that sexuality is understood differently everywhere, through the use of autoethnographic vignettes this chapter interrogates how sexuality emerges within an intercultural adult education setting. The author argues for a critical reflection on the (a) sexuality and the self, (b) sexuality and the situational, and (c) sexuality and the social as a form of intercultural adult education.

Gilbert Herdt (1997), in his book, *Same Sex, Different Cultures: Exploring Gay and Lesbian Lives*, writes in the preface, "To know of the existence of persons who have loved and have been intimate sexually and romantically with the same gender in other lands through divergent cultural practices and social roles is to know better what it means to be human" (p. xv). With this statement, Herdt raises awareness of the possibility to advance knowledge when intercultural perspectives include notions of same-gender desire. As Herdt points out, outsiders to specific cultures "must want to understand the Other sufficiently to overcome her or his own biases or *cultural blinders* of her or his own background [italics added]" (p. xvii). Interpreting Herdt's point as a call for action, this chapter discusses and analyzes some of the "cultural blinders" that exist due to heteronormativity and homophobia and, as a result, marginalize

homosexuality in intercultural adult education spaces. Heteronormativity, which is a term that refers to social regulation, is a response to how “institutionalized heterosexuality is consciously and unconsciously accepted and reproduced” in society (Yep, 2005, p. 395). Heteronormativity can be found everywhere and is often located among social arrangements, dialogues, understandings, and rituals (Yep, 2005). The term ‘homophobia’ refers to “heterosexuals’ discomfort of being in close proximity to homosexuals and homosexuals’ self-hatred and self-denigration” (Elia, 2005, p. 3).

As a result of silencing discourses like heteronormativity and homophobia, homosexuality continues to sit on the cultural periphery. And yet, homosexuality is everywhere and has been documented in much of human history (Herdt, 1997). Attitudes towards same-gender relationships changed over time from being socially accepted to being rebuked in public discourse. The world continues to experience violent acts towards non-violent, informative, and public expressions of same-gender love, such as prides, teach-ins, or information campaigns (Mizzi, 2010). These violent encounters, which often occur under the banner of cultural beliefs, proliferate heteronormativity and homophobia and, concomitantly, push positive representations of same-gender sexualities to the periphery. As adult education scholar Robert Hill (1996) points out:

Culture is a site of struggle in which particular forms of knowledge and experience are the basis of the contests that occur there. Heterocentrism, the hegemonic practice of those individuals who hold heterosexuality as normative, influences the learning community of gay women and men, bisexuals, transsexuals, and the transgendered. (p. 274)

Indeed, the work of intercultural adult education is clear in this regard: cultural *exclusion* of homosexuality sustains social inequity. Cultural *inclusion* of sexuality creates dialogue about difference and an understanding of, as Herdt (1997) says, “what it means to be human” (p. xv).

The purpose of this chapter is to prepare educators with an orientation of inclusion towards sexuality in their teaching practices. Such an orientation would be sensitive to how social groups, such as sexual minorities, thrive under circumstances not often located in classrooms (Nilson, 2010). ‘Sexual minorities’ are defined as individuals with same-sex sexual orientations and/or same-sex sexual behaviours. An orientation of inclusion means acknowledging in theory and practice that sexual minorities, like members of other social groups, “share distinctive values, norms, background experiences, and a sense of community that set them apart and make them feel set apart—and not always in a positive way” (Nilson, 2010, p. 14). For example, as Dumas (2010) describes in her Canadian study on sexual identity in an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom, sometimes the learning context is not constructed in a way that promotes a positive discussion about sexuality. One study participant, who is an ESL teacher in Alberta, noticed the absence of (homo)sexuality in curricula, and reflected that “Because Alberta receives so many immigrants and sexuality is viewed so differently ‘from country to country and from culture to culture,’ she felt it would be valuable for students to know the appropriate vocabulary and idioms for talking about sexuality” (Dumas, 2010, p. 11). An orientation of inclusion locates a place and space for sexuality in intercultural adult education settings. My work proposes some further direction towards creating this inclusion, but is not meant to exclude other approaches or considerations of sexuality (for example, the impact of cross-sex relations in intercultural spaces). Through the use of autoethnographic vignettes and high engagement with texts, I espouse notions of “culture” and “sexuality” in theory and practice from the vantage point of being an adult educator in an intercultural learning scenario.

This chapter begins by defining core terms used to frame my experiences and arguments. I then draw connections between (homo)sexuality and intercultural education theory through using the notion of culture as the bridge to launch a comparative analysis. Afterwards, I introduce the context of international development, and more specifically, Kosovo¹, as the lens to view this work. I offer three vignettes which illustrate how sexuality becomes a part of intercultural adult learning. Through these vignettes I introduce three considerations of an intercultural adult education scenario as interpreted through a sexuality lens. I name these considerations as follows: (a) sexuality and the self, (b) sexuality and the situational, and (c) sexuality and the social. Since these vignettes appear as episodic snapshots, the “experience” that I am introducing is not locked into structured phases of a specific project, but is more connected to the process of examining the intersectionality of social realities and building social relationships over an extensive period of time. In other words, although some forms of intercultural adult education can indeed be structured within formal learning situations, because of the controversial nature of homosexuality, the pedagogical², personal, and professional experiences that I depict rely on a series of trust-based, respectful, and collaborative transactions that took place over time (Mizzi, 2009). I selected each of these vignettes, which were based on my own encounters in Kosovo, because they illustrate how (non)dialogue over sexuality creates different overtones, subtleties, tensions, questions, and assumptions in adult learning. Examples of an intercultural adult education perspective in an international development context could mean co-facilitating with a local counterpart some skills-building workshops, creating spaces for

¹ Following the pattern in English-language texts about the Balkan region, I use the term Kosovo, rather than Kosovë or Kosova.

² In addition to how a teacher teaches, the term pedagogy means that there are “visible and hidden human interactions between a teacher and a learner, whether they are in a classroom or in the larger community” (Wink, 2005, p. 1).

mutual mentorship and safe social gatherings, and having informal conversations on particular subject matter.

I conclude this chapter with an analysis of these vignettes. I ultimately argue for a queer critical focus whereby adult educators examine their positionalities in relation to issues of ethics, justice, and freedom (Grace, 2001; Hill, 2004). The questions that ultimately drive this discussion are as follows: (1) Based on an intercultural adult education experience, what kind of concerns and challenges surface that cause inequity and injustice for sexual minorities? (2) What could be some useful steps that intercultural adult educators might employ in order to address this inequity and injustice? Through these two questions emerges a sociological response that analyzes life experience and human struggle and calls for an inclusion of sexuality within intercultural learning. Given the frontline nature that makes up much of adult education, understanding the contextual realities that shape human lives remains an important concern for adult educators who cross cultural borders.

Defining Terms

On one hand, there is a Western context whereby the struggle for freedom over sexuality has led to naming and categorizing a “sexual identity.” Notably, the terms “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” “transgender” and “questioning/queer” (LGBTQ) have been deployed in much of the literature to articulate the life struggles of persons who possess same-gender desires and to call for an end to homophobic violence in workplaces, families, schools, and communities. Typically, these terms can be found in many forms of social policy in order to include and address LGBTQ issues and concerns. The recent “It gets better” campaign, which tells LGBTQ teens that life gets better after adolescence, emerged out of the rash of LGBTQ teen suicides in the United States. This campaign is an example of the urgent demand (again) for policies and programs that

promote and protect sexual identity-difference and stamp out homophobia (for more information, see <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>). Adult education is not absolved from this ethical responsibility.

On the other hand, there are also non-Western contexts whereby gender roles often define sexual practices – rather than identities – and these roles are often tied to notions of honour, religion, family, and tradition (Mizzi, 2009). For example, in an Islamic context, Islam considers heterosexual marriage, and the act of reproducing children within that marriage, as the only acceptable type of relationship that gains currency in social relations and status (Bouhdiba, 1985/1998). Persons with same-sex desires must adhere to religious expectations and, at the same time, develop subjectivity as a person with same-gender desires (Boellstorff, 2005). I use the term ‘sexual minorities’ to shift dialogue away from this polemical debate around sexuality and identity and offer this term to facilitate this intercultural discussion around different interpretations of sexuality. The term enables a critical discussion that cuts across power, history, and sociality in adult education contexts.

Education as Interculturalism

According to David Coulby (2006), who writes about intercultural education theory, education is inherently an intercultural activity through the presence of having students and teachers from various backgrounds work together. Coulby also writes that education is not bound by time or specific phases of educational activities, such as programs or projects, because there are rich backgrounds and behaviours that extend beyond specific time frames. As such, “interculturalism is a theme, probably the major theme, which needs to inform the teaching and learning of all subjects” (Coulby, 2006, p. 246). This means that intercultural educators do not only add one perspective (for example, a Western perspective) in their teaching practices, but more so, “draw on a range of histories, contexts and practices and put alongside another in order

to facilitate understanding and, potentially, development” (Coulby, 2006, p. 246). Keeping these principles in mind, “histories, context and practices” can be explored through literary devices, such as books and films, as well as through conversations, seminars, and cultural immersion practices. During this exploration, as Deborah Britzman (1998) points out, educators might struggle with their commitment to the learning scenario as they try to identify with the social context. Sometimes knowledge can be “difficult” and, as a result, overwhelm educators to a point where they do not want to teach particularly uncomfortable knowledge in an attempt to shield students from experiencing negative emotions (Britzman, 1998). In such a case, educators need to be persistent and sensitive when they (re)conceptualize their theory and practice through an intercultural lens (Coulby, 2006).

This perspective holds particular meaning for engaging with sexuality issues in an intercultural learning context. Given the pervasiveness of heteronormativity and homophobia, intercultural educators could confront harsh values and perceptions, minimize cultural blinders, and deconstruct oppression. To elaborate on this point, Grace (2006) adds,

Given that heterosexism and homophobia are so culturally ingrained that they are residual even when some struggles for LGBTQ inclusion are won, this political and pedagogical work focused on greater accommodation and respect is taxing. It involves educational activism and cultural work to problematize LGBTQ-exclusive educational policies and practices, enhance communication in the intersection of the moral and the political, and monitor the state of the struggle, the extent of transformation, and the need for further social and cultural action. (p. 137)

These tasks that Grace identifies are not without some difficulty and for some educators this means coming to the realization that sexual minorities are not the deviant beings that they have

been – and continue to be – broadly constructed as in the global society. An inquiry into a context of sexuality questions some of the cultural assumptions that screen out sexuality and provides an opportunity for educators to, as Coulby (2006) asserts, “facilitate understanding” and “development” for learners. In doing so, a broadened understanding of human experience could reveal a plethora of insights and understandings that would advance dialogue in classrooms and elsewhere. For example, educators could include a discussion on gender roles in their teaching practices and on how such roles impact and shape curricula, coursework and conversations in the classroom. Keeping Coulby’s principles as reference points, I now introduce the international development context which frames and informs the intercultural work presented in this chapter.

International Development Context

International development generally refers to the fact that foreign assistance flows from the global North (that is, wealthier countries) by way of aid agencies to the global South (that is, poorer countries) (Gibson et al, 2005; Owusu, 2004). International non-governmental organizations, missionaries, universities, and/or intergovernmental agencies usually facilitate international development assistance as types of aid agencies. Development assistance is usually facilitated alongside local stakeholders through diverse projects such as working to provide clean drinking water, managing farms and creating other forms of microenterprise, training medical personnel on new treatment options, and so forth. Their job as aid agencies is to set up operations and to implement projects in countries located in the global South that lead to material, human, political, and/or economic “development.”

Facilitating projects as a form of international development reflect an intercultural practice that is deeply entrenched in world history. Loomba (2005) describes Western nations as having colonized non-Western nations for the purposes of “development” dating as far back as

the fifteenth century. She adds that these “development” practices resulted in Western nations marginalizing, occupying, and destroying cultures as an exercise of superiority and dominant power (Loomba, 2005). In response, some international development scholars, such as Mikkelsen (2005) and Nuyatno (2009), have called for a political push by the West more recently to ensure these “development” projects are “participatory” in nature as a way to sidestep neo-colonial tendencies in international development. “Participatory” practices are widely understood as having the active involvement of global South participants in the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages of specific projects. Although such “participatory” approaches may appear more equitable to local populations, an uneven, Western-oriented power relationship staunchly remains in this type of development approach. A key point about this specific work context is that the very nature of the interactions is intercultural, whereby foreign consultants are often working within multi-cultural situations and alongside local counterparts (Chang, 2007). Educating adults, through the use of foreign and local trainers, advisors, or mentors, characterize some of the development work taking place (English, 2004; Mizzi, 2011).

There have been two observations made about international development by scholars. First, the involvement of foreign aid workers situated in international development has led to calls for cultural competence as a necessary skill for aid workers to continuously learn (Chang, 2007; Verma, 2011). Chang (2007) defines cultural competence “as a process composed through experience of internal discovery and external adjustment. Faced with a new culture, adults discover cross-cultural similarities, differences, novelties, and difficulties, or even their mindsets to help themselves work more effectively and comfortably” (p.190). Although cultural competence is indeed a necessary skill in this work circumstance, the second observation is that international development is considered a heteronormative discourse that strips away sexuality

from the work (Jolly, 2011). Developing cultural competences within international development largely excludes references to sexuality. For example, in Mizzi's (2011) study, the training of aid workers largely left out homosexuality from orientation topics that relate to family, HIV/AIDS, gender, and cultural sensitivity because it was too "controversial" for the aid agencies. Consequences of this discourse can also be found among the turbulent experiences of exclusion documented by sexual minority aid recipients (Correa & Jolly, 2006) and aid facilitators (Wright, 2000).

Cultural (Re)Interpretations Through Sexuality

A cursory search through the literature on intercultural adult education reveals very little consideration of sexuality. Where there have been some important insights gained has been through the exploration of sexuality and queer perspectives in adult education. Queer scholars raise awareness of a "gay subculture" that has accompanied gay-rights movements in Western contexts that distinguishes political, educational, cultural, social, and gender differences in this culture. The problem is that a "gay subculture" becomes unacknowledged in a dominant, heteronormative society (Dumas, 2010; Grace, 2006; Tierney, 1993). Tierney (1993) writes,

To assume that we ought to dissolve differences also overlooks the strength that diversity brings to society. Understanding differences affords individuals the possibility not only of understanding other people's lives, but also of coming to terms with how they are situated within society, how their specific identities are framed and shaped by society.

(p. 9)

With Tierney's point in mind, the work of adult educators to bring to the fore matters of sexuality becomes increasingly necessary. Adult educators are no strangers to the identity-politics that emerge when crossing cultural borders and they come equipped with pedagogical

strategies that propel discussions about equity, inclusion and justice. Learners and educators can work together to transform unjust and unequal power relations. For example, rather than being positioned as an “expert” in the classroom, an adult educator provides opportunities to open up dialogue about the differences that make up students’ and the educator’s backgrounds and interpretations and, responsively, adapt curriculum and teaching practices to welcome these differences (Freire, 1970/2008).

With dialogue at the crux of my interactions, I co-created a clandestine program to work with Kosovar and non-Kosovar sexual minorities in post-conflict Kosovo in an adult education scenario. Although I went to Kosovo employed under a different project altogether, I volunteered to produce a program designed to help Kosovar sexual minority volunteers of a local community centre to safely facilitate professional development activities, network with ally organizations, create resources such as a website or a library, and develop a peer outreach and support program. This work had to be considered clandestine because there was very little financial, political, and social assistance from Western nations for this kind of initiative. Also, Kosovo has been considered one of the most homophobic places in Europe (Algarheim, 2005) and therefore a great deal of trust and relationship-building was needed between me and the Kosovars, and among them. The types of activities that helped build this trust were meeting Kosovars on their own terms, being an active listener to their social realities, and possessing a degree of openness as they described their difficult lives to me. At times, I also opened up my private residence for Kosovar and non-Kosovar sexual minorities to gather for social fellowship and support. These kinds of activities led to being invited to create a peer support program through a series of workshops. An output of this program would mean having a team of peer counselors who were capable to help sexual minorities cope with living in Kosovar society and navigate through the

cultural expectations (for example, to become heterosexually married and have children) that were placed upon them.

Given the time that was required to earn the trust of the Kosovars, I provide three episodic vignettes that characterized this work. I use autoethnography to describe and analyze these vignettes. The use of autoethnography helps readers to imagine themselves in my experience. I am aware that experience is subjective and can be regarded as temporally and contextually-fixed; however, I argue that *learning* from experience can transcend fixed boundaries. Autoethnographic encounters described in the literature began with researchers evoking memories of significant life challenges and applying a present-day ethnographic lens to these experiences. To describe experiences through autoethnography crystallized what an ethnography sets forth to accomplish: to uncover, to evoke, and to understand the ways people react, adapt, and manage their day-to-day work situations (Van Maanen, 1979; e.g., Adams & Holman Jones, 2008).

Autoethnography scholar Carolyn Ellis (1998) writes that, “through describing concrete and intimate details of a particular life lived, autoethnographies also show social processes, conceptualizations, and ways of life experienced more generally by groups of people living in similar circumstances” (p. 49). And, while traditional ethnographic work can reveal much of the same aspects outlined by Ellis (1998), autoethnography simultaneously (a) questions the dominance of traditional ethnography and (b) illustrates that knowledge can be shared through many different social processes (Wall, 2006).

Autoethnography can be done in many different ways, such as through poetry, performance, texts, or in other artistic and critical ways that share knowledge. My preferred approach is through writing vignettes as a form of “evocative autoethnography” because I use

my own life experience in the Kosovar culture to examine more deeply self/other interactions (Ellis, 1997). Whereas academic citations of scholars are commonly used in ethnographies, in this evocative autoethnography academic citations also were based on my thoughts and feelings that surrounded particular situations (Ellis, 1997). My ultimate goal in using this autoethnographic approach was to evoke emotional experiences for the reader, to give voice(s) to groups of people often left out of social science inquiry, and to produce writing of high literacy and artistic quality in order to enhance critical thinking (Ellis, 1997).

Through these autoethnographic vignettes³, I offer three distinct perspectives on intercultural adult education from a sexuality standpoint. The three perspectives are: (a) sexuality and the self, (b) sexuality and the situational, and (c) sexuality and the social. I offer these perspectives to illustrate how sexuality infiltrates the day-to-day work of an intercultural adult educator. I first provide the vignette and then write a brief observation of each one. I offer a deeper analysis of the three vignettes in the following section.

Sexuality and the Self

To prepare to teach in an intercultural situation is often a complex activity because it contains mixed layers of uncertainty, excitement, intrigue, and confusion about what is to come. Preparation is also a learning activity characterized by understanding (a) how to navigate through foreign situations and (b) the organization's professional orientation towards matters unique to the context (Fechter & Hindman, 2011) Preparation also represents an opportunity to reflect inwards onto the self, that is, onto personal identities, backgrounds, values, and histories, and to conceptualize which aspects of the self might (not) be helpful towards integration in the new situation. The following vignette illustrates where sexuality might not be "on the radar" of

³To protect person and agency anonymity, details such as locations, names, and job tasks were changed in the vignettes.

employers in being prepared for the intercultural situation and explores some of the implications on the self. I refer to this vignette as *sexuality and the self* because, as Coulby (2006) says, cultural outsiders need to reflect on their own sense of values prior to engagement with the culture.

It was a warm spring afternoon when I decided to take time away from applying the finishing touches to my master's research project to have what I understood as an important meeting in a downtown Vancouver café. I was meeting the person who was an authority figure for the community development project in Kosovo that had accepted me to work with the project as an intern. I was excited about the meeting, and about the position as well, because I wanted to apply the theoretical knowledge I had gained in my master's degree into a practical context. James, who was based in Toronto, was visiting Vancouver for another meeting and "found some time" to meet with me to provide a "quick" orientation to the job in Kosovo. Although I wished that James had organized more formalized training sessions with useful topics such as cross-cultural differences and coping strategies, I was fortunate that I was living in Vancouver at the time so that I could receive some kind of insight into my job description. At the same time, I also felt discouraged because this meeting emerged because there happened to be another event for James in Vancouver. Our meeting was "ad-hoc" to his existing agenda. Despite this feeling, I did not want to "rock the boat" by asking for more appropriate training.

During the meeting, James described the history of Kosovo's civil conflict and the organization's project to improve communities there. He summarized our meeting with a rough outline about what I would be doing in Kosovo: starting up a youth organization and delivering workshops to non-profit organizations on topics that relate to client relations and leadership development. Nothing was mentioned about differences in gender, religion, or forms of culture

that could shape my own future job satisfaction or my chances for success. The fact that I was working part-time at a gay and lesbian organization, as noted on my resume, and yet now was set to relocate to one of the most homophobic places in Europe (Algarheim, 2005) was seemingly glossed over in our discussions. His perceived silence around sexuality, gender, and other cultural differences had me believing such considerations were not worthy topics for discussion. Rather, it was best to keep quiet about such things in order to not disadvantage myself in Kosovo.

James's silence around culture and identity-differences adroitly modeled a silence that I felt that I too must adopt. As a foreigner who had no historical or ethnic connection to the conflict in Kosovo, I learned that I must remain "neutral." By "neutral," I mean that any discussions around identity-difference that could be considered as controversial in Kosovar society were best to be locked out of the workplace. Kosovo is a region that has been preoccupied with a long, violent history of ethnic tensions and these tensions create quite a different work circumstance than what could be found in Canada. Despite then having deep feelings of fear, anxiousness, and uncertainty, I realized that "success" meant being dependent on international institutions for guidance and protection in exchange for "professional" behaviours. To me, being professional held an underlying expectation that I was to maintain a "neutral" presence in Kosovo. I felt compelled to adopt a professional code of silence when it came to discussing "problematic" and "culturally damaging" identities and behaviours. Despite this feeling of needing to remain silent, this silencing technique was much harder to adopt than I had anticipated. There could be serious ramifications to my sense of self, my success, and my satisfaction in the workplace as a result of being silent around sexuality.

Through this vignette, I realized that my own homosexuality could be a risk for my job success in Kosovo and I was looking for leadership and some initiative from my employer in this regard. Noticeably, his cultural blinders around my work at a gay and lesbian organization rendered sexuality a silent topic in this space, as well as in our other conversations around gender difference. Indeed this meeting was designed to be a type of training exercise: I informally learn from my employer about my new job in Kosovo so that I could better adapt to life there.

What unfolded during this pedagogical exercise was a series of anxieties that had me question my confidence and doubt the support of my agency to express my sexuality in a forthcoming intercultural experience. The crux of the matter was that cultural perceptions of sexuality might not match so well with my sense of self. Yet, once I was working in my job, a source of support for me was my clandestine, volunteer work with Kosovar sexual minorities. It was through this work that I learned of the possibilities and presumptions that construct being a foreign, sexual minority in a different cultural situation.

Sexuality and the Situational

Facilitating conversations around perceptions of sexual difference in specific situations raises awareness to some of the difficulties that shape the lives of sexual minorities. As Herdt (1997) says, sexuality is understood differently everywhere and, with this point in mind, people in different social situations might perceive and express sexuality according to their own cultural codes, values, and traditions. In this vignette, I explore how facilitating discussions around sexuality can provide an opportunity to learn about different forms of marginalization and some of the implications of these forms for adult teaching practice.

I walk into the office where the Kosovar sexual minorities have their meetings with my usual bag of tricks: flip-chart paper, markers, cue cards, pens, and paper. I have had a long day

in my regular desk job of travelling across the region visiting multiple stakeholders and, despite my fatigue, I am looking forward to the discussion today around media and its impact on sexual minorities. This workshop was largely organized through an internal network that the Kosovars manage. Some of the participants may claim a “gay” or “bisexual” identity, but most simply present themselves as they are, with some mentioning of their same-gender practices. I look around the room and notice that my colleague, Maria, who is a Spanish, bisexual, social worker, is absent, so I begin to set up the learning space. I am hoping that the electricity does not give out as it tends to do in Kosovo, but it certainly won’t stop us from having discussions about sexuality. Tonight we are talking about media relations in the gay community and how media, at times, construct sexual minorities as being deviant and that there could serious implications if the media does not take responsible action toward sexual minorities. I am confident Maria will be most helpful here given her background, but I can certainly contribute some of my own professional experiences at the gay and lesbian organization I worked at in Vancouver.

Slowly the participants trickle in. Everyone greets me with a handshake and the Albanian men avoid the Albanian greeting that men tend to do with each other. I often let people address me however they like. I also notice that the men do kiss and hug each other hello, but do not engage in the same ritual with the women in the room. I suspect that it is because this is a Muslim-dominated society, and cross-sex touch is not encouraged in this society. It is great to even have women attend these sessions because they often are restricted from leaving their homes at night. I acknowledge here that everyone speaks English, which may be limiting to most Albanian Kosovars in attending these workshops. I decide to address this issue to Sherif, the coordinator of the program.

“Sherif, is there any chance that Albanians who don’t speak English can attend. Some of the folks here are professional interpreters and perhaps can help with translation. I’m just concerned that not everyone is finding these workshops accessible.”

Sherif pauses. I can tell that he is thinking about my statement. “Yeah, other people can join, but they might not know about the trainings.” That word, “trainings” irks me. I don’t think I ever enjoyed that word because it assumes me as being the “trainer” and the Kosovars as being the “trainees.” It also locks me out of the opportunity to learn from the Kosovars and for them to take leadership roles in their own learning.

“Ok, well, perhaps you can pass the word along when you get a chance? I’d like to make sure everyone feels welcomed to attend and participate in our discussions.” Sherif nods. I don’t think he is convinced but it is still important to mention that non-English speakers are welcomed in these spaces. Maria arrives and after a quick discussion we begin our questions about what kind of influence the media has in Kosovo.

During this session, a provocative question is asked by Merita, who is one of the adult learners: “Robert, how can we help each other when we struggle to help ourselves?” I seriously think about this question because my response needs to be sensitive to the political environment that excludes this organization and to respect efforts that were made in the past to “bridge the cultural gap” between the social development and human rights. This question also exposes my “foreignness” in the learning scenario that is not an uncommon occurrence for foreign adult educators to experience in international development practice. Being an outsider, I need to remain sensitive to and respectful of the cultural values of Kosovo, but I also realize that not all these values are shared among everyone. For example, in this room there are sexual minorities who actively seek out same-gender relationships. Yet, outside of this room, there are individuals

who believe that this dedicated group of people should be punished for their “deviant” desires. Being a foreigner in this situation requires becoming aware of these tensions around sexuality and working with these tensions instead of ignoring them.

“That is a good question, and one that many sexual minority activists have stumbled across in many parts of the world...” I respond.

“I certainly did”, explains Maria, “even in ‘liberal’ Spain. But it is about taking risks when possible, and then allowing yourself to back off when safety is threatened and you need to recharge. We cannot be expected to do everything in one day, but we can keep the movement going.”

“As a woman, I cannot openly travel around the area like men do, but I am a part of a network of lesbian activists who also seek change for a better and inclusive Kosova. This network prevents me from going crazy” offers Merita. A lively discussion then follows about improving work-life balance for sexual minority activists based on the experiences in the room.

At the end of the session, I conduct a “check out,” which means that everyone shares their impressions, burning questions, or reflections on the workshop. It also provides a chance for Maria and me to evaluate the seminars to determine their relevance, since our conversations on sexuality often are based on our Western experiences and education. We are worried that the information shared won’t quite fit the culture here. A “check out” also leaves out a paper trail, which is important because sexual minority Kosovars are reluctant to write anything that could evidence their involvement in a forbidden activity. The “check out” tends to be about summarizing the Kosovar experience with what information we talked about and reflects the fact that the participants are excited to continue the discussion next week. I am pleased that everyone feels comfortable to add their voice and participate in the discussions.

In this scenario, I observe that having a “LGBT identity” can still be considered a very foreign concept and that through discussing sexual minority lives in Canada and Spain, my colleague and I are imprinting our foreign (Western) backgrounds in a different cultural space. Although this perspective can indeed be problematic, it does contribute a global view on sexuality and helps situate sexuality as a part of being human. An important strategy here stems from having a respectful and inclusive dialogue that follows Freire’s (1970/2008) point about bringing forth emancipation and freedom. For example, local adult educators and learners are quite familiar with the political context that could threaten efforts for social change. Trying to organize a safe space where teaching and learning can take place remains a challenge because participants are afraid that their open participation could result in them being “caught” by hostile, culturally blind individuals and agencies that oppose such supportive meetings around homosexuality. Oppression of sexual difference runs deep and sometimes it takes a great deal of effort from local community members to address and calm anxieties around coming together. A responsive foreign educator needs to address and include this anxiety within her/his pedagogical approaches. This inclusion is no easy task, but one that relies heavily on dialogue with local participants and a sharp awareness of the differences in particular sociocultural contexts. It may require some additional research, such as illustrating how homosexuality is part of the historical fabric of the society and not a Western imposition. For example, homosexuality has been documented in Kosovo since as early as the 13th Century (Malcolm, 1999).

With this awareness in mind, I now offer my final perspective that espouses sexuality and intercultural adult education. The following vignette describes an experience when I returned to Kosovo after an extensive absence to take up the role of Visiting Professor at a Kosovar university. In short, the vignette speaks to how dialogue produces the ability to compare and

analyze the struggles among adult learners who occupy the social margins and helps them to arrive at some deeper connections. I also highlight here how the “educator” and “learner” roles become fluid and interchangeable at times.

Sexuality and the Social

Mitrovica is a Kosovar city divided by a short bridge that is still being guarded by both Kosovar police and NATO peacekeepers. One half of the city contains Serbian Kosovars and the other half of the city contains Albanian Kosovars. I am working in the Serbian side. My purpose for this return visit was to teach a course on *Cultural Difference* to post-secondary students of both Serbian and foreign origins. I accepted this teaching position as part of my own professional development to learn how the conflict affected the minority Serbian population now that over a decade has passed since the 1999 conflict. My return to Kosovo also represents the fact that my work in this area of sexuality, interculturalism, and adult learning remains complex and ongoing.

I step into the cafeteria for the evening dinner with a sense of exhaustion. I have been teaching for three full days and my evenings are often filled with completing my teaching plans for the following week and writing drafts of the final exam. I never seem to be able to find some time to rest. Despite my fatigue, my adjustment to teaching in this context has been relatively smooth. I have more control over what I would like to introduce in the course, which is quite different than my earlier experience in Kosovo. I just need to find some time to rest so that I will feel more refreshed in the mornings.

Across the room, some of my students wave me over to sit with them. Three of the students are Serbian and two are international, from Honduras and Austria. Although at times I could use the break from my students, I realize that it would be culturally impolite to refuse their

invitation. So I make my way across the crowded room to the one spare seat reserved for me. I join an energetic conversation on life across the controversial bridge that divides Mitrovica.

“I have no problem crossing the bridge. It doesn’t bother me,” asserts one Serbian student. Another student, Dragan, offers a different opinion. “If I cross over, I am quite confident that 20 guys will attack me. That’s what Albanians do; they sit over at the other end of the bridge waiting to attack Serbs.”

I noticed that Dragan’s comment exposes my foreign unawareness of the scenario. The idea of 20 armed Albanians ready to attack Serbians in front of peacekeepers seems rather far-fetched to me, and yet, as a foreigner, who am I to disagree with him? I wonder how Dragan, who lives in Belgrade and has never visited Mitrovica before this course, acquired his beliefs.

“Why do you believe that, Dragan,” I probe.

“I’m Serbian,” he replies with a hostile tone in his voice. “If people there found that I was Serbian, I wouldn’t survive,” he explains. I notice how he didn’t quite answer my question.

“How would they know that you’re Serbian?”

“Well, as soon as they speak with me,” Dragan replies, and with such an intensity in his eyes that I can see that he seems well-convinced of this possibility of violence. The serious tone of his voice stops the group conversation. Everyone seems to reflect on his perceived fear. The conversation then shifts to that of the students describing their projects for their field study assignments. Some students are intending to cross the bridge to speak with Albanians about the conflict. I remain focused on Dragan’s fear. I certainly do not want to put any of my students in a position where they must choose between their safety and the assignment. I never introduced the concept of crossing the bridge for that very reason when explaining the assignment. This idea of crossing the bridge emerged out of their group discussions and started to now reveal some

students' vulnerabilities. What is interesting to me is that the international students are most involved with this dilemma for the Serbian students, and in some part, are adopting similar values to stay away from the bridge.

“Do what you feel comfortable with for the assignment, Dragan,” I advise. “You do not need to cross the bridge at all to successfully complete your field study assignment. Adjustments can be made by your group members for individual concerns.” He nods to me confirming that he understands my advice. The conversation continues with the students talking about their project plans, basic themes of the course, and potential excursions away. I am so pleased to hear their enthusiasm for the course.

As the first week draws to a close, I decide to take the weekend to myself, cross the bridge, and travel to the capital city of Pristina to visit old friends. One of these friends is Shaban, who is widely respected among the male, sexual minority Albanians for bravely resisting the social pressure to marry a woman. He was also one of my participants in the peer support program. He brings along a new friend for me to meet, Aferdita, who describes herself as “lesbian.” Over the course of our discussion in a popular coffee shop, I begin to probe both Aferdita and Shaban about changes in the queer life here.

“It’s completely different now than when you and many of the other gay internationals were here,” Shaban responds. “You and the other internationals were so great for opening your homes for us to meet and socialize with each other. We Kosovars have not come together now for almost a year and now our gay association is going to close up in March,” Shaban explains.

I immediately have mixed feelings about what Shaban shares with me. Although I appreciated that gay internationals here were able to, in the end, create some positive memories for some of the sexual minority Kosovars, I am still troubled by our involvement. There were

indeed “rescue attempts” to reconstruct a Western form of social organizing around sexuality. Yet, the fact that the gay association is failing may be indicative of a form of social organizing that is counter-cultural to sexual-minority Kosovars. Perhaps this current de-internationalized period can give rise to some other forms of establishing some indigenous ways to explore different articulations of sexuality.

“It is not like it’s terrible here now,” Aferdita explains, “but I think we don’t have options. If we gained asylum in another country, then at least we have the choice to stay there or return here.”

“It is not as much a matter of religion or economy here, it is more about gender. It is expected that we follow certain rules as being men and women in this society. We must get married in order to provide status to our families. The pressure to get married is very, very intense. But one positive aspect is that this pressure is not constant,” explains Shaban.

“What do you mean, Shaban? What do you mean that this pressure is not constant?” I ask.

“The pressure we feel is almost seasonal. We don’t feel it now - in the winter - because weddings do not take place at this time. It is more uncomfortable for us during the spring and summer seasons, when weddings are more frequent in our community. Then, we need to really put on a brave face and pretend. It’s like we have to be different and create elaborate stories about why we can’t find a girlfriend/boyfriend or pretend that we are in fact seeing someone. Of course, as you know, many of us can’t keep up this pretense forever and we eventually get married to satisfy our families.”

I am comforted by this seasonal aspect of feeling some degree of agency. I have not thought of the pressure to marry in such a way. At least it is somewhat of a break for them.

“How have you survived all these years, Shaban, without getting married?”

“I got good friends and we support each other,” he replies smiling at Aferdita. “We don’t meet as frequently, but we are there for each other.” The conversation continues about queer life here, in Canada, and elsewhere. I let my friends guide the conversation just so I don’t reflect a pressure to conform to a certain type of conversation. I think about the Albanians here at the table, and how “crossing the bridge” might seem like a similar metaphor for them. Crossing the bridge, for them, could be revealing their same-gender desires to their families. There are very serious implications for their livelihoods if they “crossed the bridge.”

Monday morning I arrive before the students to arrange the classroom and prepare for the work ahead. Dragan walks into class first to set down his books.

“Good morning, Dragan. How are you?” I ask.

“Good. Robert, you may be interested in knowing that I crossed over,” he quickly shares. Dragan is not a typical student. He is very serious and rarely smiles at me or his peers. I tend to go with whatever he presents in front of me, no matter how awkward it feels.

“Oh, the bridge to the south side? How was that experience for you?”

“It wasn’t difficult. I took a minibus to Pristina just to look at that city.”

“Well done, Dragan! That was very brave of you. You must feel proud of yourself.”

“Robert, you have no idea what it is like.” I pause and wait for an explanation. “To just pretend to be someone different. To live in constant fear. To speak with a language different than your mother tongue. To suppress my identity. I have to do all that when I cross that bridge. I have never felt this way before. I have to hide in order to live.” He looks at me on this final point with an exhausted expression that I recognized from the Albanians I had met during the weekend. I can sympathize with his concern. As a sexual minority living in a heteronormative

society, my behaviours and sense of self are altered, hidden, and silenced as well. But I can import queer issues, emotions, and themes into conversations without necessarily calling them queer. I can't deny what I feel compelled to share, but I can skirt around my life experience as a strategy to build connection with my students. I'll need some more practice with this strategy.

"Dragan, I have some indication what this is like," I respond without offering further elaboration. "But there can be some moments here for learning. You are in a context that is incredibly unique, and while you will always have the sanctuary of Belgrade, I'd encourage you to not only use this experience to articulate your marginalization, but to observe how forms of social difference interact with context. I know that you have read Foucault, so when he says that power is relational, perhaps this is one time in your life where you can understand what he means."

Dragan nods, "Yes, I guess so." I am not sure if he is listening to me, but, rather, still working through his experiences with being marginalized. That word, "pretend," still resonates with me. I reflect on many things about it: on how several of the foreign, gay men in my interviews stated that they needed to "pretend," on my own pretenses that were more dominant in my earlier experience in Kosovo, and now on my recent conversation with Dragan about having to pretend. To "pretend" means more than just giving a performance, rather, it becomes a matter of survival and an extension of identity. It almost seems that individuals with "other" orientations need pretend identities just as much as they need professional identities. I can't help but draw some connections here to my current work in Mitrovica. Most Serbian students are afraid to "cross the bridge," which is intimidating some of the international students. If they do cross, they make up false identities and communicate through non-Serbian languages in order to avoid being targeted for violence. Metaphorically, Albanian sexual-minorities also experience

fear when it comes to “crossing the bridge” and they too must pretend to be different. Feeling an urgency to pretend is largely due to gender and ethnic boundaries that define and limit roles in the Kosovar society. Meanwhile, the “bridge” and the social divisions that constructed it stand firmly in place.

Perhaps there is something here about being different that stretches beyond sexual minority identities, and includes identities that are generally unaccepted and dissident, such as the experiences of Kosovo Serbians. A common element is that context plays a pivotal role for both the Albanian sexual minorities that I met and for Serbians such as Dragan. Context for both these groups tended to determine expression of their dissidence and create a binary of what is socially acceptable and what is not in terms of different identities and/or practices. Removing cultural blinders draws on sexual-difference to interpret the human experience of being an unwelcomed outsider. Through this interpretation, an intercultural adult educator can build a closer relationship with students and expand on understandings of and draw important connections between subject matter and sociocultural phenomena.

Sexuality Perspectives on Intercultural Adult Education

In response to the information presented here, I am left with three questions: How can educators and learners work together to advance social change when it comes to sexual minorities? And what is the impact of change onto the people directly involved, and what do people do to change? These questions are meant to signal that discussions around a sexual, adult education and an intercultural dynamic are ongoing. Intercultural adult educators are just on the cusp in their considerations of how teaching and learning can include sexuality in an intercultural adult learning space, and clearly more research is needed. Through these vignettes, I offered three distinct perspectives that are designed to help interpret where and how sexuality becomes

situated in intercultural adult education. First, *sexuality and the self* means that personal understanding of sexuality may shape the development of intercultural dialogues. In this regard, the personal becomes pedagogical by way of learning how controversial aspects of the self and life experiences that result from these aspects may inform and shape acculturation practices in the new setting. Creative and critical thinking tended to be a dominant theme here, as evidenced by my desire to spend time with sexual minorities as a form of mutual support and education. This perspective invites educators to be self-reflective and critical of how their sexualities might have particular meaning in an intercultural learning scenario.

Second, the theme of *sexuality and the situational* is defined as specific social situations become opportunities to engage in dialogue about sexuality-differences. These situations are enmeshed in the building of relationships, mutual respect and trust over an extensive period of time. Through this vignette, I reflect on how there is a delicate and difficult balance between *needing to belong* and *resisting the need to belong* for an intercultural educator. On one hand, needing to belong to a group, such as a classroom of students, certainly can provoke collaboration and participation in the learning process. On the other hand, to resist needing to belong respects individual journeys and histories and minimizes efforts to imprint Western-oriented, “expert” opinions. Facilitating this balance is pivotal if intercultural educators wish to facilitate a meaningful learning experience.

Last, *sexuality and the social* means that knowledge gained about sexuality through an intercultural learning circumstance helps to better understand fundamental differences in human lives. Keeping open to very different lives and the necessary decisions that people have to make characterizes this work. When Dragan spoke to me about his fears of crossing the bridge, my awareness of the contextual realities that shape the lives of sexual minorities assisted me in

interpreting and addressing Dragan's fear. The practice of exclusion, unfortunately, is not limited to specific identities (e.g., only sexual minorities) and through a deeper understanding of difficult lives of one group, a deeper human connection can be made with *others*.

With these three perspectives in mind, in the future, practitioners and scholars in this kind of work could point towards bringing together issues that face marginalized people in order to compare some commonalities and differences. It would also mean re-creating project frames so that they include time to build relationships with oppressed peoples and finding ways to earn trust and respect. This approach ensures more relevant and sustainable efforts for social change and promote agency among marginalized people.

In sum, this chapter explored how sexuality is a concern of intercultural adult education and sought to promote sexuality inclusion in related theory and practice. It drew awareness to Herdt's (1997) reference to "cultural blinders" that seem to silence and constrain sexuality within and through heteronormative interpretations of culture. Through Herdt's work, I raised attention to how sexuality has been largely ignored in intercultural adult education literature and suggested three ways in which to conceptualize sexuality in terms of the self, the situational, and the social. Building crucial life connections around sexuality expand awareness around the differences that construct human lives, values, and relationships. Through the specific context of international development, I suggest that the intercultural nature of the work can inspire creative and critical thinking into the kinds of development practices taking place in the global South. For example, building relationships outside the confines of project time frames, using dialogue as the basis for the interactions, and evaluating knowledge in a culturally sensitive way all help loosen up some of the standardizing tendencies that nuance the work. The fact that there is no easy recipe for adult education around sexuality in intercultural contexts should not be mistaken as a

shortcoming; rather, this should be seen as an opportunity to creatively and critically collaborate across difference.

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