

Narine N. Kerelian

Title: Placing Diversity: Graduate Encounters with Group Work

Title for running head: Placing Diversity: Graduate Group Work

As a first generation Armenian-American growing up in California, I have been acutely aware of difference. I grew up with other dash-Americans. We had an unspoken sense of solidarity in the art of crafting our new identity pallets and being different together. I became acquainted with diversity through multicultural encounters that instilled in me a sense of wonder in being human in this world. The importance of the *placedness* of our experiences only became clear to me when I moved to Hong Kong. Despite my self-perceived openness to difference, I had unwittingly reified my North American *placed* multiculturalism and diversity, wanting to pack it in my suitcase and carry it across the Pacific.

The Graduate Encounter

The last time I can remember being assigned to be a member in a group in an educational context was when I was in middle school when I had the chance to select my own group members for class projects . That is, until I took my first graduate course in Hong Kong. As part of my graduate school core curriculum, I was required to take a course called “Social work and applied social science research methods: theory and application.” The professor assigned all the students to a research project on the topic of Mainland Chinese university students in Hong Kong and divided us into groups. We had to work together with each of our groups for the entire semester to produce a presentation.

The aim of this group was to put together a research puzzle by creating research questions, a brief literature review, a theoretical framework, selecting methodology and implementing our proposal through a pilot study. We divided our group into parts of the project, where each group member took on a task (e.g. research questions, literature review, etc.) At the end of the course each group was expected to combine all the parts into a group presentation.

I knew that this course was imperative to prepare us, PhD students, for our own research. The project was an invaluable exercise to enable us to learn the fundamentals of research. Nevertheless, I still had a tough time as I felt that I lacked agency in the group member and topic selection process, as I did back in my middle school days. And, the intercultural process was a challenge that I did not anticipate.

The Umbrella Movement and the Right to Vote

Being educated in the West, my desire was to choose whom to work with in the group work and to have autonomy in selecting the topic for the research project. Furthermore, as I would learn, none of my cross-cultural trainings and lived experiences prepared me for this group. To frame the geo-political context of this experience, I was taking this graduate-level course as the Umbrella Movement was unfolding in Hong Kong with students taking to the streets to call for the democratization of Hong Kong's universal suffrage or right to vote.

At the end of September of 2014, students organized a mass protest, known as the Umbrella Movement, by occupying roads outside of the government headquarters and in a few

other key districts in Hong Kong to voice their concerns over what they thought of as a restriction on universal suffrage.

In 1997, Hong Kong transitioned from being a British colony to being a Special Administrative Region of The People's Republic of China. One of the stipulations in the handover to Mainland China was that universal suffrage was promised to the Hong Kong people. During the Umbrella Movement, major roadways were blocked for 79 days, the duration of the protest. Students camped in tents, gave talks, created make-shift areas for studying, and crafted political art to call for a more democratic Hong Kong.

As I walked through the protest grounds, I felt a sense of hope and despair all at once – hope because the students envisioned a better tomorrow and despair because of the powers in opposition to their movement. The true feelings of my graduate school Mainland group members were not clear to me. Even though we had a class discussion on the Umbrella Movement where some of my peers shared their thoughts, the restrictive political situation on the Mainland seemed to incite fear from being completely open about sentiments regarding their levels of participation in the protest in Hong Kong. I never really knew if they protested or not or even if they did attend the protests in secret because of the sensitivity of political activism in China.

A tense feeling lingered on campus. There were proponents of the movement who set up posters on the university's walls in support for democratizing Hong Kong, and opponents who took the posters down or posted counter statements. There was a deep need, yet seemingly few takers, to discuss the feelings of the different groups on campus: Mainland

Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese, Hong Kong ethnic minorities, and international students. The dynamics of this turbulent political situation permeated the corridors of the university.

My fellow group members in the course included five students from Mainland China and one student from Hong Kong. From the start of our outside-of-class group meetings to divide the presentation sections of the group work, I picked up the role of the default group leader—in hindsight a role with cultural affinity—collecting each member’s section, which included our interview tool, the literature review, methodology, research questions, and theoretical framework. No one objected to my volunteering as the group leader. As I started to receive the first few sections, I wrote an email to the group sharing my frank sentiments:

“Everyone - I know we are getting a lot of comments from [professor], let’s try to be as academically professional as possible when we do our sections. That means spelling/grammar/context, etc.” - Email correspondence excerpt,
11/2/2014

This email triggered a string of emails back and forth between me and the five Mainland Chinese students, who had selected one student among them to represent their thoughts. The Mainland students thought that I had undermined their hard work by writing the email noted above. The Hong Kong students read the emails as a neutral observer with one mediator type of reply, later sharing his feeling of being ‘caught’ in the middle and questions regarding his identity in a post-handover Hong Kong. Even though Hong Kong is no longer a British colony, the identity of Hong Kong people is complex and appears ever shifting.

A Change in Leadership

In my understanding, some Hong Kongers feel a strong identity with a hybridized British-Chinese orientation, some feel a Chinese identity linked to Mainland China, others a localized Chinese identity linked to Hong Kong, as well as identities in between and beyond the above-mentioned orientations. After numerous emails the Mainland students got together and decided to make Ming* the new group leader. I accepted their request as the course was coming to a close and all the sections had mostly been completed.

“Mandarin was spoken as if I did not exist in the room.”

Although we all worked in a shared office, there was little verbal discussion until I approached the representative of the emails, Ming, and had a long conversation with her while sitting on the office floor near her cubicle. I reiterated that my intention was not for the Mainland colleagues to feel any personal offense from my emails, but that there seemed to be cultural differences being expressed by our different communication styles. I also confronted my unspoken grievances and feelings of isolation in our group meetings where Mandarin was spoken as though I did not exist in the room. It was not enough for me to think about my own cultural competency; I needed to communicate these thoughts with my colleagues to work through the challenges of our diverging expectations of what it meant to work together.

“My body acted quicker than my mind...”

After having the long talk with Ming, I gave her a hug. My body acted quicker than my mind because my mind would have reminded me of the lack of ‘touch’ as a tenet in

interpersonal relations amongst Chinese colleagues, especially with foreigners in Hong Kong and the Mainland. However, I wanted to express the radical authenticity of my intentions with an affective gesture as an olive branch. Ming seemed to understand my gesture as she had previously studied in Canada and was aware of hugging in Western culture. Her reaction was to give me a few taps on my shoulder. I felt sincerity in her gesture, although it must have felt strange for her to be so direct. Ming seemed to also want to express reconciliation despite the awkwardness in the means of reciprocating it with some form of 'touch'.

How can what seems like a simple email about checking our grammar become so convoluted in interpretation? The emotive dimensions of the political movement were penetrating our group's work without any explicit recognition of its impact on our work by the group, hindering the potential for cultivating authentic encounter. During the Umbrella Movement, there seemed to be a "you're either with us (Hong Kong people fighting for democracy) or against us (allied with the Chinese Communist Party and its constituents)" mentality.

Apart from Ming, the rest of the Mainland group members seemed to avoid contact with me even though we were in a shared office. They seemed comfortable with communicating their grievances with Ming who would then email me their feelings and thoughts. However, when it came to face-to-face discussion about the issue, apart from a brief run in with a female Mainland member of my group work, there was no meeting in person to discuss what had just happened until a few weeks later when the situation had cooled off. It

takes bravery, trust, and a belief that there is something rewarding in opening up ourselves to other perspectives and realities.

Airing it Out

Ming was brave enough to send me those emails to express her feelings and those of the Mainland students. She took the role as the messenger of the generally subjugated voices of Mainland students on campus who seem to be stuck between a rock and a hard place with the current political environment in Hong Kong, which appears bifurcated into proponents vs. opponents of the Umbrella Movement. I wanted to articulate my point of view within my own value orientation just as much as my fellow group members wanted to express their own through the context of their cultural norms. By expressing difference, it felt like our roots were becoming unearthed and exposed by questions from those unfamiliar with each of our ways of knowing.

In retrospect, it was the pure state of vulnerability that became the wonder, the beauty of encounter, which made my group colleagues and I human together. The group took place in a territory with a transitional political system in the Asia-Pacific, which has aroused emotions from its denizens, as well as those in Mainland China. It is not enough to just 'know' or be aware of different value orientations, but also to know something about the history of the places in which they take form and are practiced.

Learning in Place

Reflecting on this critical incident awakened in me the importance of *placedness* in my understanding of diversity. The taken-for-granted assumptions about understandings and

approaches for working in diverse groups do not clearly translate within all geo-social milieus. What this experience taught me was to treat every diversity experience as a new encounter, in its place. Being able to feel the richness of diversity also involves confronting its complexity with wonder, face-to-face with one another. Although diversity trainings are invaluable for broadening awareness, I was not prepared for the intricacies of this experience in Hong Kong. I learned only by living through them. I had perceived myself as a diversity proponent. In identifying in this way I had become blind to the *placedness* of my diversity value orientations.

Engaging in diverse contexts does not mean giving up your unique sense of self, but it is about being able to translate your intentionality to cultivate a deeply trusting environment. Price (2013) highlighted the centrality of place in being human by stating that “human beings are not simply social animals; we are too spatial animals, inasmuch as territory – knowing it, owning it, exploring it – matters a great deal” (p. 119) In this respect, diversity is not a series of steps to take or a framework to master, rather it is an attitude, a detachment from the lexis of personal hubris to the gift of authentic encounter.

Practicing in Place

When I enter the student research hub I am enveloped by a sea of cubicles and the continuous clicking of keyboards. I walk past my cubicle and if I see my Mainland colleagues, we greet each other with a “Hi.” Sometimes there is a smile and if one of us is near the entryway, we help open the door for the other. We share our research progress in the kitchenette and even provide consolation at times of immense grief, such as in the case of the support I received in the recent passing of my grandfather. In these small acts, there is an understanding

beyond tolerance. Through this continued practice of engagement, relationships grow. In California, my comfort of being different was the feeling that everyone else was different around me too - that was the thread that connected us. The people and institutions surrounding me had celebrated difference positively, as though we all had something special to contribute.

Territorial transition was an 18th century memory unlike the current state of Hong Kong. I am thankful for being pushed into discomfort by my professor and group colleagues for I may have chosen group members holding value orientations similar to my own, defeating the purpose of being a PhD student in Hong Kong. In this new place, the residual complexities of a post-colonial territory absorbed into Greater China in conjunction with an unfolding political movement brought me a completely different diversity experience. If I had retreated into the expatriate bubble of certainty, I would have robbed myself from the richness of difference that this *place* has to offer. Practicing in place allows me to walk into new lifeworlds and with every new encounter; I rediscover my place in diversity.

*Note: The name Ming is a pseudonym in lieu of the real name of the group work member discussed in this paper.

References

Price, P. (2013). Place. In Johnson, N., Schein, R.H., and Winders, (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to cultural geography* (pp. 118-129). West Sussex, England:

Wiley-Blackwell.

Narine N. Kerelian is PhD Candidate, Department of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong, Contact: kerelian@connect.hku.hk