Learning Task #1

Reflection Paper

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Introduction

To start, Dr. Schroeder, please accept my apology for opting to make a written response instead of a video for this reaction paper, being aware of your preference. Because of the sensitive nature of the assignment, I felt that a video (or the way my videos turn out) would not be as appropriate for this paper since this was a sensitive and a complex topic to tackle. Secondly, there were so many perspectives to consider that I knew midway through my draft that cutting this paper to under ten pages would be painful, so I opted to add headings that separate the sections within the scope of the assignment (the first two layers), from an additional one extending beyond (the third layer concerning the philosophy of life and anti-positionality as an aspiration). I tried to include all the requirements of the paper in an essay format and hope that I did not make a mistake by doing so (listing biases, how they affect my thinking, future courses of action at various levels of cognitive and metacognitive awareness).

All vignettes presented to us for this assignment gave me knots in my stomach, as my mind tends to opt for prescriptive solutions whenever possible, or at the very least provide some actionable steps that can be implemented immediately. Each of these vignettes is multilayered and complex in terms of variables involved, stakeholders and conflicting values, but I picked vignette number 3 arbitrarily since they are all equally perplexing.

Three layers of approach - in parallel.

Being thrust into a situation where the dominoes are about to fall, with no time to assess the situation carefully, is discomforting. Some action is needed to provide the necessary support. Still, there's no clear-cut course of action or how to approach it. Also, the consequences can vary

widely with each approach, so I need to think of several moves ahead and include all the stakeholders and their potential reactions in context with each course of action. I find that with complex situations, in general, it is sometimes better to work in parallel at various levels of analysis, up to three, in my case, from the more pragmatic and practical to the metacognitive and philosophical, vertically, in that order. The first level of approach I feel has to be to evaluate the immediate situation and the most concrete steps that would help to alleviate any potential harm, a type of emergency response. During my several years of work as a medic in remote camps up north in Canada, I learned some essential life skills that I adopted to my approach to life's uncertainty. Situational assessment, the evaluation of the safety of oneself and others during an emergency, is of utmost importance before approaching the scene. The adage of 'putting a mask on yourself first if the cabin depressurizes during a flight' is a life skill that applies to many other situations we face since the responder who compromises themselves is bound to compromise others as well. Next, the focus shifts to acting to mitigate any immediate risks quickly, and during Occupational First Aid training, those first steps are very scripted; a prompt response based on such scripted protocol is also likely the most helpful in the long run because the immediate response is sometimes more important than choosing the most appropriate course of action, particularly if overthinking would otherwise slow down the reaction.

For a psychologist, the parallel to a medical emergency response would be to make the mandated ethics of the profession second nature. To me, the professional code of ethics represents that scripted portion that would help us 'stay in our lane' when the urge is to get involved past our scope of competency or risk crossing boundaries to help someone in distress. By wanting to reach out and intervene beyond one's role, the psychologist risks allowing aspirations to go beyond the call of duty and unintendedly cause harm in the process. So,

reactivity must be subdued because the consequences may not be immediately apparent. This first level may be called "Putting Out the Flames, responsibly."

The second concurrent level of analysis, in my view, is the evaluation of one's competence in dealing with a specific situation. I would call this the "Anti-Positionality and Frame Adjustment" level, where we peek through that veil of ignorance by identifying our biases and look to expand our cultural understanding, in this case, as one way to expand our circle of caring. I will expand on each of these levels in the following sections.

The following third layer we engage in parallel is the more abstract and deals with understanding our relationship to our circle of caring. This level of understanding concerns the reasons we act the way we do and is one of continuous inner transformation that results from understanding our moral nature. More specifically, we may engage in counterfactuals through thought exercises, looking at the inconsistency in the level of concerns outside of the radius that affects us immediately and how that interacts with our moral reasoning. This last layer is more philosophical and intended to help us grow as individuals to understand how our immediate concerns feed into the black box of our moral reasoning about social issues that are distal to the circumstances affecting us personally. Let us call level the "Philosophy of Being in The World."

The Vignette and Initial Reactions

To flesh out the character in the vignette, I will assign a name and age to the individual to bring him to life and embody his experience. Let us call the youth in question Kim, a 16-year-old living at home with his first-generation immigrant parents who came to Canada from China. There are such layers to this story that my first instinct is to avoid; I react by feeling inadequate because of the situation's complexity and want to refer out, if possible. The reaction is not

entirely out of ignorance; as a first-generation immigrant myself, I understand Kim's pressures. The family arrived here fully aware of the challenges ahead and aspirations for a better life. Add to this the cultural pressure to perform academically well in school, yet not knowing who one is, will put severe pressure on Lee during a vulnerable stage of identity formation. Most of this pressure likely stems from the cultural expectations, which in Chinese culture are related to shame or the western equivalent of guilt. The pressure Lee feels stems from the sacrifices he feels the parents have made to get to this point and feeling like his actions may unleash irreparable damage to the family's honour and destroy the family unit. A part of identity formation during the teenage years can manifest as dissociation without becoming a disorder functionally. Still, in the case of Lee, the family environment is so strict that he has no outlet, and his suicide attempt is evidence of this.

Putting Out Fires, Responsibly

I am heterosexual, not gay, so I do not know what the process of coming out entails, the severity of the consequences, or even worse, if a person is 'outed' by others, aside from the cultural dimension of the vignette. At the risk of making assumptions about cultural expectations, let us assume that homosexuality is frowned upon culturally and even actively persecuted in China for the sake of this vignette. Culturally, shame and dishonour to the family are considered the worst offence a person could bring morally to their family in this culture.

If a student came to me as a mental health professional with such a scenario, one of the first questions I would like to ask Lee is whether they have anyone to talk to other than his parents. The extra-curricular activities make it difficult for Lee to seek out like-minded peers. Most of it appears to be by design, where the parents are controlling the environment for Lee,

allowing for little flexibility in his schedule. Lee needs some peer support to help alleviate the pressure of sorting this out. So far, Lee has seen explicit gay footage (but it does not sound that he has explored that side of himself outside mere curiosity). My next concern is whether Lee feels comfortable talking to me about it. In this situation, there is a reflexivity component to being a heterosexual therapist or psychologist because one brings that identity, as a therapist, into the session, and it is vital to be forthcoming about it from the beginning. So, I would do my best to ensure that Lee feels comfortable and supported during the session. Building trust in therapy can take time, yet it can be compromised suddenly. Suppose the psychologist has not accounted for their own biases. In that case, a micro-aggression or two can seep through unchecked (nonverbal language, word choice, and ignorance are hard to control) while interacting and may cause the client to lose trust and stop attending (more about personal biases in the next section).

An important question I would like to ask Lee is whether he has any friends that are gay or interested in someone in particular? Being a first-generation immigrant myself, I can relate to the pressures that Lee is experiencing and the seriousness of the situation; we are effectively talking about Lee eventually coming out to his friends and family, a very unsafe thing to do without a contingency plan. Lee may lose all family support in the future, judging from the uncompromising quality of the family environment and the cultural expectations. Sudden loss of family support is one of the main reasons why homelessness among LGBTQAI+ youth is much higher than for their heterosexual cis-gendered peers.

We also must remember that extended layers of family support may not exist for a recent immigrant family: the entire family is likely socially unstable, may not be as well integrated, to begin with, and are under pressure to fit in themselves. Likely, the outcome would be devastating for the son and their family, with few people to turn to once Lee is outed unexpectedly or outs

himself. However, my biggest concern still would be Lee's immediate safety, knowing that he was stashing pills and preparing for an exit from this life at the mere thought of dishonouring his family.

I do not think my attitudes towards Lee's sexual orientation factor into this situation as much since I consider myself an ally; I grew up as a minority and had plenty of exposure to diversity in Canada for a good decade before my parents arrived. My exposure to diversity was related to life circumstances, as most minorities, for better or worse (socially speaking), reside in city areas where they have to learn to coexist and rub elbows in day-to-day interaction. Hence, the embrace of individual differences is higher in such neighbourhoods, in my experience. Commercial Drive in Vancouver is one example, where exposure to other ways of being in terms of cultural or sexual orientation is omnipresent and perceived as the norm rather than the exception.

That said, I can feel that the perception I have of this situation is from the outside; hence feel ill-equipped to provide adequate guidance on the next steps that the Lee should take. I think it would be prudent to ask Lee to tell me more about his culture, as this would help clarify the seriousness of the situation and help enlighten me with culturally specific factors that I may have overlooked. Ideally, Lee would know that communities of like-minded peers exist online and, in the community, and would have encountered someone with similar circumstances to him. Connecting to individuals who have experienced the same thing can be tremendously valuable, particularly when Lee is experiencing an identity crisis, with nobody to turn to. In addition, I feel I should actively seek resources that address the issues that LGBTQAI+ face in our schools. Also, I should begin compiling a list of resources that would be helpful in case a student like Lee shows up at my office asking for help. One of the books I started reading as of a few days ago is

"The Educator's Guide to LGBT+ inclusion" by Kryss Shane (2020), which has a plethora of online resources and is organized by topic and offers practical scenarios that educators may face, and how to deal with them. The next few sections discuss additional, higher levels of approach that could help me with self-reflection on personal biases, and a philosophical component aimed at personal growth, by incorporating the gained understanding into the way of being in the world beyond the profession.

<div style="text-align:center">Frame-Adjustment: Exploring Biases</div>

Awareness of one's biases is essential to practice because understanding them can help with the frame of mind, where the aim is genuine concern for the individual we support. To best approach a situation such as the one in the vignette, I would need to catalogue my privileges to recognize the blind spots and the areas of concern I am likely to overlook. In retrospect, after I wrote the following section (as I edited the draft) it reads like a gratitude entry:

I enjoy the privilege of being considered a middle-aged white male, though I use the word 'white' loosely, as some privilege sheds off the moment I open my mouth, and an East-European accent emerges. As a cis-gendered, middle-aged white male with a physical presence that can be intimidating, I tend to worry less about my safety in public, such as walking alone late at night, for example. I am not worried that someone may attack me for my sexual orientation, gender, the colour of my skin or what I wear in public, considering that I am acculturated, secular, and indistinguishable in appearance from the mainstream population. With such an appearance, I am rarely stopped in traffic, suspected of shoplifting, or followed around in a store. In fact, in my twenty-eight years in Canada, not once have I been stopped by police, even in traffic (no tickets, no questioning, no suspicion or unreasonable stops and searches). I never

had a brush with the law nor felt desperate to engage in anything illegal to survive or feed my family. By contrast, the country I came from went through continuous political and economic turmoil and uncertainty, such that the black market was the only means of survival for many people due to corruption. It is important to mention that the people who engaged in such activity in my country of origin were otherwise decent human beings with high moral values, as morally particular as those choices were under the circumstances. I understand how life circumstances can change people, and I completely understand the 'banality of evil' slippery slope Hannah Arendt discusses in her books and talks. I was both unfortunate and privileged to observe the erosion of ethics and morality in the institutions that were supposed to protect people in Kosovo before the war broke out. Such lived experience is challenging to understand by reading about them. This experience gives me an advantage of understanding what some students arriving in Canada after similar experiences may be feeling and going through, having to learn to trust the institutions all over again. I speak more than one language and have the unique privilege of observing situations from more than one perspective. Being from a country of scarcity and war, I would consider this a privilege as well, in retrospect. Also, minorities in Canada often cluster together in neighbourhoods with more affordable housing, and after being immersed in such environments for decades in Canadian cities, I feel I have a unique perspective about the surroundings, the subcultures and the ways of interacting that can differ significantly from the mainstream society. I am both educated and consider myself fortunate to be in a line of work that is both rewarding (community support) and in line with my philosophy of positive community involvement. I am heterosexual, married, with a partner who also works and holds a graduate degree in education. We are a one-child household, which is a reduced financial burden relative to families with more children, particularly in recent times. I also am a homeowner, and we own

a joint vehicle which is also a privilege. We consider ourselves relatively comfortable financially, at least by living within our means and out of debt, aside from the mortgage; hence we are arguably better off than a good portion of the Canadian population. I am also enrolled in a post-secondary institution, which most people can't afford (I was able to save for my current studies by working throughout my undergraduate education so as not to go into debt). I do not have any mental health issues that affect my functioning, nor a disability that affects me somehow. I live in a developed country, a semi-safe city and neighbourhood (Chilliwack). I also believe I have a relatively good understanding of others, cognitively and socio-emotionally, and the community support experience has helped me appreciate the experiences of individuals with special needs up-close, knowledge and understanding which I can now draw on in my current education.

Anti-Positionality: A Philosophy of Being in the World

This level of analysis would run in parallel with the immediate actionable response mentioned earlier. According to dictionary.com, "Positionality is the social and political context that creates your identity regarding race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability status. Positionality also describes how your identity influences, and potentially biases, your understanding of and outlook on the world."

I became acutely aware and started reflecting on my privilege during my work in community support, but moreso academically during the first two years of my undergraduate degree, when I initially enrolled in the Social Work track before switching to a Psychology Major. However, a curious unsettling adjustment to my perspective occurred after the fact, where my awareness of the issues around social inequality and injustice had increased, but my

emotional reaction to those same issues became gradually subdued once I left social work. Why was this? I was somewhat disturbed by it, guilt-ridden, and did some research on my own to try and understand how we react to human concerns that are less relevant to our immediate predicament. Patricia Churchland, a neurophilosopher, explains that our brain circuitry has the ability to expand or shrink our genuine concern for individuals beyond our kin, and this shrinking and expanding of concern is influenced by many factors ("Philosophy bites: Patricia Churchland on what neuroscience can teach us about morality (originally on bioethics bites)," n.d.). One such factor is mere exposure to a social issue regularly, which may explain why I abruptly stopped eating meat, for example, during the time I was exposed to moral concerns involving animal welfare (student presentations in my Social Work classes), but have since begun consuming meat again, and now generally avoid documentaries discussing such issues. I still buy free-range eggs or opt for oysters as a protein source instead of red meat as much as possible because doing so makes me uncomfortable, knowing what I know. Still, I have not been able to sustain a diet without animal products, so I reverted back. Another book that explores our complex relationship with animals is Hal Herzog's book on the issue (Herzog, 2021). Peter Singer, another moral philosopher, describes how inefficient we are when guided by emotional reactions by presenting a 'Drowning Child' scenario (Singer, 2013). Through audience participation, Singer demonstrates in his presentation how most of us would not think twice about ruining an expensive suit to save a drowning child if we happened to walk by and witness the incident. However, we are more reluctant to donate the same amount today, knowing that many children are dying daily from malaria in some countries for lack of mosquito nets that the same amount of money could buy. Much earlier, Adam Smith, in his writing "A Theory of Moral Sentiments" (Smith, 1812), made a similar analogy by asking the reader to imagine a terrible

catastrophe happening in China. If a disaster were to occur in a distant country, where millions of lives are lost, that concern would immediately diminish if this person cut their finger the very next day. The attention would shift from sadness and anguish felt for human lives lost somewhere far away the day before to one's concern with the present issue of a finger cut, thus alluding to a proximal bias that determines our responses.

The relevance of the suffering to one's circumstances can move from a genuine concern for the welfare of others to a preoccupation with a very trivial discomfort felt by the person at the moment, suggesting that our sliding scale of empathy varies by circumstance and shifts pragmatically from one moment to the next. I can't help but wonder about the moral concerns and the biases that influence them - how reliable and objective our reactions are to various ethical situations when they can vary widely from one crisis to the next?

In his lecture "Against Empathy" (2015), Paul Bloom, a Canadian American psychologist, further makes the case that empathy as we know it today, one that extends beyond our immediate family, is a relatively modern phenomenon. Bloom explains, ' in our earliest hunter-gatherer societies if you saw someone drowning, you would not feel a thing.' Another example that Bloom gives of how misguided our thinking becomes when we get emotionally engaged. Bloom describes how one disturbing image is shown through the media (i.e., Aylan Kurdi washing ashore) can impact us much more than the lives of thousands lost (i.e., daily in Yemen), who do not make the news. If one were to add up all the mass shootings in the United States and make them disappear with a snap of a finger, continues Bloom, it wouldn't even be perceptible on a graph alongside the overall number of homicides that took place over the same period in the US. Yet, a lot less attention is paid to the overall crime rates by contrast.

In conclusion, even after deliberate exposure to social issues through my education in Social Work, I have accepted that my biases are deeply rooted and form a type of positionality profile that is difficult to escape. For this reason, we have to actively pursue our blind spots when working with others as psychologists; we need to account for them when we are dealing with situations involving persons or social issues that don't affect us directly or extend outside our immediate bubble of concern. For example, while I worry about Lee's predicament in my relationship as a psychologist, I am probably driving a different route on my way home to avoid the street where I know drug use and overdoses occur next to a homeless camp in my city. Is that a self-defense mechanism? A way to compartmentalize, under the guise of self-preservation, against compassion fatigue? Exposure to the concerns of others can expand to the degree that we genuinely care. Still, this genuine concern for another must be cultivated and actively pursued. Otherwise, our tendency to reach out beyond the immediate circle undergoes entropy, shrinks back, as Churchland would say, or is influenced circumstantially, as Adam Smith describes with the paradox of concern with something as small as a finger cut, all of a sudden. In addition to personal biases skewing our perception, we are also subject to cognitive errors when doing a moral cost/benefit analysis, as Peter Singer and Paul Bloom point out.

In sum, we are most likely to under-appreciate a situation that a fellow human goes through beyond mandatory ethics. The presentation by Hamel (2019) provides an excellent example of this shift in perspective, when the Venn diagram of genuine concern factors in our Positionality, becoming the vantage point that has us on the inside: it changes everything. A situation that does not affect us, in the same way can seem removed and distant unless we deliberately consider ourselves responsible for the well-being of fellow human beings on and off the clock, an aspiration at best.

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