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Cultural Humility in Community Practice: Reflections from the Neighborhood Story Project

Amie Thurber

Abstract: Although cultural humility is frequently emphasized in social work education as a lifelong commitment to reflection and action, there are few examples of what this looks like in practice—particularly outside the scope of clinical health settings. This paper situates the need for practitioner reflections on cultural humility and offers an autoethnographic case study of efforts to cultivate cultural humility in myself and among participants in a neighborhood-based action research project. I consider cultural humility from three relational positions: holding oneself accountable, creating conditions for cultural humility within groups, and acknowledging how group members co-create conditions for cultural humility.

Keywords: community practice, cultural humility, participatory action research, neighborhood change

Ms. TK¹: I was like, “Who are these people? What do they want?” Those was my concern. “Is they trying to put us in a trick bag or what? Can we trust them?”

Amie: And “these people” is me, right?

Ms. TK: “These people” is Amie. This is you, Amie, I’m talking about. You “the people.”

In social work classes, cultural humility is often introduced as a reflective stance, a process of lifelong learning, and a commitment to recognizing and—to the greatest degree possible—transforming unequal power relations. We caution students to aspire towards cultural humility much like following the North Star; the concept serves as a guide, not a destination. But what does cultural humility look like in practice, particularly in the messy practice of community work? While a good deal has been written about integrating cultural humility into social work education, there are few examples that consider what it looks like for seasoned practitioners. And yet, if cultural humility is truly understood as an ongoing process, reflections on its application must not be relegated to student assignments and in-class activities. After briefly exploring the genesis of cultural humility, the following account traces my experiences cultivating cultural humility in myself and within groups of residents as we worked together to improve community well-being.

The Genesis of Cultural Humility

“Cultural humility” emerged as an alternative to “cultural competence” in preparing health professionals to provide quality care, particularly to members of historically marginalized

¹ All participants were given the option to have their names or pseudonyms used. Their personal choices are reflected herein.

1 groups. Whereas “competence” suggests a finite set of tools that can be mastered to ensure
2 effective provision of service, the word “humility” conjures a recognition of one’s own fallibility
3 and an openness to continued learning. Physicians Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) first
4 introduced cultural humility as “a commitment and active engagement in a lifelong process that
5 individuals enter into on an ongoing basis with patients, communities, colleagues, and with
6 themselves” (p. 118) and describe the core elements of cultural humility as reflection on one’s
7 own cultural backgrounds and assumptions, respect for others’ cultural views, and recognition of
8 the power imbalance in the provider-patient relationship. In the years since, cultural humility has
9 gained traction across a number of health fields and helping professions, and definitions of the
10 concept have propagated (e.g., Foronda et al., 2016). Although most describe cultural humility
11 as an internal, individual process, social work scholars Fisher-Borne et al. (2015) suggest a more
12 holistic conceptualization, comprised of three elements: “reflection, institutional and individual
13 accountability, and the mitigation of systemic power imbalances” (p. 173). While maintaining
14 the core elements from Tervalon and Murray-García’s original framework, this definition
15 extends beyond individual reflection by linking thinking to action and recognizes that racialized
16 and other health disparities result from both individual and institutional practices. Given that
17 social workers are called not simply to observe systems of oppression but to endeavor to create
18 more just social relations, the tri-part definition of cultural humility offered by Fisher-Borne et
19 al. (2015) has particular utility for the field.

20
21 Over the last twenty years, the literature on cultural humility has facilitated an important shift
22 within helping professions. Rather than asking what they need to understand about marginalized
23 communities in order to provide effective service, practitioners increasingly ask, “What in my
24 practice and organization creates barriers to effective service, and how can I address those
25 barriers?” However, there are two noteworthy limitations in this body of work. First, the
26 literature on cultural humility overwhelmingly focuses on implications for educational settings
27 and the preparation of future practitioners and clinicians. The relative inattention to practice
28 settings and the experiences of current practitioners problematically re-inscribes the
29 “competence model” that proponents of cultural humility have sought to disrupt. It additionally
30 reinforces binary thinking around student/teacher and education/practice. Such framing suggests
31 that students—not current practitioners—should consider the relevance or applicability of the
32 concept and undermines the conceptual integrity of cultural humility as an openness to continued
33 growth. If cultural humility is truly a process of lifelong learning, then our progress will be
34 marked by insufficiencies and errors, by mistakes and difficulties, and it is our grappling with
35 these that informs our—and our colleagues’—growth.

36
37 A second limitation has been a narrow focus on the relevance of cultural humility in clinical
38 settings, where the roles between help-seeker and helping professional (i.e. doctor, nurse, social
39 worker, therapist) are distinct, and the ethical responsibility to embody cultural humility is
40 one-directional. That is, the social worker is expected to behave towards her client in ways that
41 reflect cultural humility, though the client may not in return and is not required to. There are few
42 examples of applying cultural humility in community practice settings, which often involves
43 complex interactions between and among various parties (cf. Curry-Stevens, 2012). Whether
44 working in community organizing, organizational change efforts, or policy change, the social
45 worker must center cultural humility in their interactions with others, while creating conditions

1 within which all members of a group attend to self-reflection, reciprocal accountability, and the
2 mitigation of power imbalances (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). Thus, in addition to the general need
3 for increased attention to cultural humility in practice settings, there is a particular need for
4 reflective case studies that make processes of grappling with cultural humility in *community*
5 *practice* visible—not only to our students, but to ourselves and other practitioners. The
6 following case study picks up that charge, offering my reflections on cultivating cultural
7 humility in myself and within groups of residents participating in a community project.

8 9 **Context of The Neighborhood Story Project**

10
11 In recent years, I have been particularly concerned with the negative impacts of gentrification
12 (the transformation of low-income neighborhoods into areas targeting middle- and upper-income
13 residents) on community well-being, particularly within low-income communities of color. My
14 interests in this area reflect entanglements of my personal and professional life. I grew up a
15 white child on the edges of one of the most robust black neighborhoods of Portland, Oregon,
16 during the early years of gentrification, and as an adult moved my white family into a rapidly
17 gentrifying neighborhood in Nashville, Tennessee. Along the way, I have witnessed, studied,
18 and been implicated in the constellation of harms that follow gentrification (e.g., Thurber, 2018):
19 As housing values rise, so do property taxes and rental rates, and low-income residents may be
20 displaced or cost burdened. Friends and family members may be forced out, corner markets
21 replaced by niche boutiques, and residents may lose their sense of belonging, even if they remain
22 in place. As I worked alongside residents, city-wide organizing groups, and policy-makers to
23 address these harms, I became increasingly troubled that those who were most directly affected
24 by the rapid economic and demographic changes in their neighborhoods are often the least
25 systematically involved both in defining the problems they experience and imagining possible
26 solutions. I designed The Neighborhood Story Project in response to this exclusion, as one way
27 to directly engage residents of gentrifying neighborhoods in responding to the changes in their
28 communities.

29
30 Each Neighborhood Story Project begins with the formation of a leadership team of eight to
31 twelve residents. This team participates in a facilitated twelve-week process to design and
32 execute a community research project. Over the course of weekly, two-hour meetings,
33 participants begin by getting to know one another and develop a collective line of inquiry related
34 to their neighborhood. In the second phase of the project, members collect data to explore their
35 research questions (such as interviews with the community members, contemporary and historic
36 photographs, and archival materials). In the final phase, they determine what they want to do
37 with what they have learned and disseminate their findings with their broader community.

38
39 Several practice traditions undergird the design of The Neighborhood Story Project: group work,
40 popular education, public humanities, and critical participatory action research (critical PAR).
41 The value of cultural humility is threaded through each of these traditions, though it is
42 particularly salient in critical PAR. Critical PAR falls under the broad umbrella of “action
43 research”; it is among numerous approaches to systematic inquiry that are designed to produce
44 actionable findings within a particular setting, such as a school, workplace, organization, or
45 neighborhood. Many of these approaches are considered “participatory” in that researchers

1 collaborate with members of the setting under investigation to design and implement the
2 research. Critical PAR is further distinguished by explicit attention to power, both in the subject
3 of study and the process of research (Torre et al., 2012). In the words of Torre and Fine (2011),
4 adopting a Critical PAR stance requires an “acute analyses of power, domination, oppression,
5 and resistance”; alongside this investigation of how communities are shaped by power, the
6 authors also call for the “complex wrestling with researcher objectivity, subjectivity, and
7 positionality” (p. 117). The simultaneity of looking outward and inward, to confronting systems
8 of oppression in the world around us and as manifest in our own practice, reflects a deep
9 commitment to cultural humility.

10
11 Over the course of 2016, I facilitated Neighborhood Story Projects in three gentrifying Nashville
12 neighborhoods. Only a couple miles apart from one another, each area historically had a robust
13 black community—including residential, educational, commercial, and spiritual
14 institutions—and high levels of affordable housing. In the last fifteen years, housing values in
15 these neighborhoods have rapidly increased, and the areas are now attracting younger, whiter
16 and wealthier residents. Reaching out to existing neighborhood groups, I advertised the
17 Neighborhood Story Project as a way for those who were concerned about the changes in their
18 community to learn more and take action. In total, twenty-eight people participated in one of the
19 three Neighborhood Story Projects. Though demographics varied by group, participants were
20 predominantly black women who had lived most of their lives in their neighborhood.
21 Participants ranged in life stage from high school seniors to elders and were nearly evenly split
22 between homeowners and renters.

23
24 Despite the similarities between the three neighborhoods and project participants, each
25 Neighborhood Story Project ultimately jelled around distinct action research projects: one team
26 was primarily concerned with the frayed social ties in their community and created an interactive
27 community exhibition where residents of various tenures came to learn and share from one
28 another. Another team, discouraged by damage-based narratives of their neighborhood,
29 completed a feature-length documentary film to retell their place-history. A third team homed in
30 on development-fueled displacement and created a set of community educational and organizing
31 tools to mobilize neighbors toward resisting unwanted development. Local grant funding
32 provided project support, including a modest stipend for all project participants in recognition of
33 their community work. (For more about these projects, see Thurber, 2019).

Study Methods

34
35
36
37 I played multiple roles in the projects, having designed the intervention, facilitated the three
38 projects, and also studied the process and outcomes. As a scholar-practitioner, I wanted to
39 understand how participants experienced the Neighborhood Story Project, and how this model
40 might be of use to other communities (see Thurber, 2019). Following constructivist design
41 principles, I studied the project through close observation of naturalistic processes over the
42 course of each twelve-week project (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, I
43 conducted a focus group with each team at the conclusion of their project, followed by
44 interviews with each team member three to twelve months after their project ended. A
45 collaborating researcher participated in each project and contributed to data collection and early

1 analysis. The resulting multi-case study of three Neighborhood Story Projects produced a rich
2 corpus of data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes from each weekly session,
3 focus group, and interview.

4

5 Given my multiple roles, this inquiry was necessarily something of a self-study. As the
6 renowned community psychologist Seymour Sarason (2004) notes, “[T]he community
7 interventionist is a very complicated variable” (p. 276). Following Langhout (2015), I
8 endeavored to make myself visible as an interventionist and to critique my own practice in field
9 notes, deliberations with collaborating researchers, and data analysis. Here, I focus on how I and
10 members of the Neighborhood Story Projects grappled with cultural humility during our work
11 together.

12

13

Tracing Cultural Humility in Community Practice

14

15 I offer reflections in three parts. First, I consider my efforts to hold myself accountable to
16 cultural humility. The second section examines my efforts to create conditions for cultural
17 humility between members. The final section explores how members reciprocally created
18 conditions for cultural humility within the groups. My intention is to surface points of tensions,
19 learning edges, and moments of grappling related to the core dimensions of cultural humility:
20 self-reflection, accountability, and the mitigation of power imbalances. At times, the challenges
21 described herein are generic (they could arise in any group, with any facilitator). Others are
22 specific, resulting from my particular strengths, weaknesses, biases, and positionality. My aim is
23 not to offer “fixes,” but rather to make transparent my imperfect processes of reaching toward
24 cultural humility in community practice, so that others might anticipate similar dilemmas and
25 contemplate their own possible responses.

26

Holding Myself Accountable to Cultural Humility

27

28
29 Implementing Neighborhood Story Projects in three gentrifying neighborhoods required gaining
30 entry into each community, building relationships with community partners to host each project,
31 recruiting participants, and ultimately facilitating each three-month action research project.
32 Holding myself accountable to cultural humility required working to earn team members’ trust,
33 consistently interrogating my own biases and assumptions, and actively realigning power
34 relations within the groups.

35

Expect That Trust Will Be Earned

36

37
38 Though I had some connections in each neighborhood, I entered the Neighborhood Story
39 Projects as an outsider. I have much more in common with those moving into gentrifying
40 neighborhoods than those who have remained or been displaced. Unlike most of the participants,
41 I had no longstanding ties to their neighborhoods. I was one of the only white people in each
42 project (five of the twenty-eight participants were white), and though about half of the
43 participants were homeowners, I was likely the only person who could have afforded to buy a
44 home in any of the neighborhoods in the current housing market. Further, my engagement with
45 the Neighborhood Story Project was part of my doctoral work, and I was working in

1 communities where academic researchers have a history of over-promising and under-delivering.
2 In one neighborhood, for example, I was asked what ever happened to the oral histories that had
3 been collected some years prior. Unfamiliar with the study, I looked into the question only to
4 find that a former professor in my very own department had collected a series of oral histories
5 with residents—many of whom were respected elders who had since passed. The stories had left
6 town with the researcher and were not archived in a way that allowed for open access. The net
7 effect of these differences in social location between myself and program participants was that a
8 number of members entered the Neighborhood Story Project with a healthy skepticism toward
9 the project and me.

10

11 At times this skepticism was expressed as curiosity. Before sitting down at the first gathering,
12 one member wanted to know my motivation for starting the Neighborhood Story Project. He
13 said, “Everything has a nucleus. Nothing can live without a nucleus. So, what’s the nucleus?”
14 Others were more overtly suspicious of my involvement in their communities. At another initial
15 gathering, a woman asked pointedly, “I want to know how this is going to benefit the
16 neighborhood, and not just be some project that helps you get your degree.” The epigraph at the
17 start of this essay was a particularly pointed expression of this suspicion. Months after the
18 project concluded, I asked Ms. TK if she had initially had any concerns about participating:

19

20 Ms. TK: I was like, “Who are these people? What do they want?” Those was my concern.
21 “Is they trying to put us in a trick bag or what? Can we trust them?”

22

23 Amie: And “these people” is me, right?

24

25 Ms. TK: “These people” is Amie. This is you, Amie, I’m talking about. You “the people.”

26

27 Although Ms. TK did not explicitly mention my whiteness, several others did. During our
28 follow-up interviews, one woman explained that she had initially wondered, “Who’s this white
29 lady?” Establishing my trustworthiness necessarily took time. I navigated this by being
30 forthright with members about my own concerns and commitments, tracing my own experiences
31 growing up in a gentrifying neighborhood in Portland, Oregon, and my worries about the way
32 gentrification damaged communities. As a relative newcomer to Nashville, and an outsider in
33 two of the three areas, I deferred to members’ knowledge of their neighborhoods. My
34 transparency and demonstrated respect for members’ expertise helped to create a foundation for
35 relationship-building.

36

37 ***Interrogate Internal Biases and Assumptions***

38

39 Throughout the projects, I strove to be vigilant about how my own biases affected my
40 perceptions and interactions with members, intentionally interrogating my reactions in field
41 notes. For example, as we began the second session in one Neighborhood Story Project, I was
42 disturbed that few people from the first week had returned. That night, I wrote in my field notes:

43

44 I was feeling some anxiety at the start of the meeting . . . *where is everyone?* Thoughts
45 flashed through my mind: *Had they got scared away somehow? Had they only come for*

1 film, I reflected:

2

3 I asked about how to organize the film—over time or by theme. In the interest of time, I
4 heavily suggested that we organize it historically, which made sense to the group. I
5 played a more decisive/leadership role here than I would have liked should we have had
6 more time. While I think the group would have come up with the same outcome—we
7 have been circling around this plan for a while—in the end it felt a bit like ‘my decision’
8 or at least my suggestion.

9

10 At other times, I was aware of member suggestions that I did not take up or encourage the group
11 to consider. Critical reflection, both independently and with collaborating researchers, helped me
12 to discern when I might be overusing my influence or when additional structure and leadership
13 was necessary. In addition to maintaining vigilance regarding my use of power within the group,
14 I also sought structural realignment of power.

15

16 In traditional social science research, the stories and images that researchers gather often become
17 the property of the researcher. When a community member consents to be interviewed, they
18 “give away” their stories, often to the great benefit of the researcher—whose career is built on
19 publications. Given the guiding values of the Neighborhood Story Project, I sought to maximize
20 community members’ control over how their personal stories were used and stored and to ensure
21 open access to that data. Each Neighborhood Story Project was an action research project, and
22 team members were the primary researchers. It was they—not I—who collected data to answer
23 the questions they had generated, often through interviews with their neighbors. Team members
24 provided interviewees with the opportunity to copyright their interview under a Creative
25 Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License. With this license, the
26 interviewee maintains ownership over their own interview while setting the terms under which
27 others can access and use their material. With participants’ consent, all data collected by the
28 Neighborhood Story Project teams are now archived at the Nashville Public Library.

29

30 **Creating Conditions for Cultural Humility Within the Group**

31

32 Facilitating any small or large group process involves both navigating one’s relationship with
33 participants and creating conditions within which participants relate to one another. A lack of
34 cultural humility between members can undercut group cohesion, stifle collective learning and
35 action, and replicate asymmetrical power relations. As we worked together over twelve weeks, I
36 strove to hold group members accountable to cultural humility by addressing dominant
37 behaviors within the group and by encouraging the consideration of alternative perspectives.

38

39 ***Address Intergroup Dominant Behaviors***

40

41 Microaggressions are understood to be seemingly small acts of oppression, such as a man
42 dismissing the contributions of a woman, a white person interrupting a colleague of color, a
43 straight person making light of the safety concerns of a queer friend. Such behaviors
44 may—regardless of intention—function to marginalize, silence, or diminish another person.
45 Further, given the degree to which microaggressions permeate the lives of members of

1 marginalized groups, such experiences accumulate and often have demonstrated deleterious
2 physical and mental health effects (Sue, 2010).

3

4 Although two of the three Neighborhood Story Projects were fairly homogenous, the third,
5 located at a high school, was particularly diverse in ethnicity, gender, and age. The opportunity
6 to work across generational lines was unique and ultimately deeply appreciated. However, this
7 diversity also heightened the possibility of inter-group tension. Mindful of the possibilities for
8 microaggressions, I facilitated a caucus activity where youth and adults (many of whom were
9 elders) separately considered what members of the other group could do to demonstrate that they
10 are respected and valued. Each group then shared these reflections with one another. For
11 example, the youth caucus wrote, “Listen to us and don’t treat us like we are inferior,” and a
12 member of the adult caucus shared, “Don’t think I’m too old to relate or assume I won’t listen.”
13 Many participants appreciated this foundational conversation. Just two weeks into the project,
14 Jaime, a high school student, commented,

15

16 I like how the group is very respectful of each other because I feel like yeah, I’m in a
17 group of adults, but they don’t look down on me because I’m seventeen. They see me as
18 their peer, not a child. I definitely like that.

19

20 Several weeks later, Gary, an alumnus, reflected, “I remember when we first came together and
21 how we were kind of separated, young and the mature . . . It’s no longer ‘these are kids and
22 we’re the adults,’ and ‘listen to us,’ . . . That’s my favorite thing . . . we’re all a family.”

23

24 And yet, despite the high value the group placed on working together across generational lines,
25 the adults frequently interrupted the youth. As facilitator, I interpreted these interruptions as
26 evidence of the adults’ enthusiasm to engage in the activity at hand. And yet, this behavior
27 marginalized the voices of youth team members. At times, I indirectly managed these
28 expressions of dominance by redirecting the conversation back to the young person who was
29 interrupted. Other times I was more direct. During a particularly animated discussion in which a
30 pair of adults were continuously interrupting youth, I stepped in, saying, “Hold up—kids aren’t
31 talking.” The adults quickly self-corrected and became more mindful of their participation.
32 However, the challenge to hold space for youth voices—despite the strong ties that had formed
33 over the twelve weeks—demonstrates the persistence of this pattern of dominance, and the
34 importance of creating conditions within which group members can attend to their own biases,
35 beliefs, and microaggressive behaviors.

36

37 ***Encourage the Consideration of Other Perspectives***

38

39 Any community work involves insiders and outsiders; within the Neighborhood Story Project it
40 was important to cultivate conditions for cultural humility between participants, as well as
41 toward the broader community in which our work occurred. Given that the projects involved
42 data collection, members often gained information that spontaneously caused them to challenge
43 previously held beliefs. For example, after interviewing several people on her block, an elder
44 black woman participant voiced her surprise at the economic vulnerability of her young white
45 neighbors. She reflected, “You may think, well, okay, honestly, you’re Caucasian and never

1 would I have thought that you were concerned that you might have to leave out of this
2 neighborhood because you can't afford it." Listening to her neighbors helped her to reevaluate
3 her assumptions and nuanced her understanding of how gentrification was impacting her
4 neighborhood.

5

6 Other times, I played a more active role in helping participants remain open to alternative
7 perspectives. For example, the Stratford Story Project centered around a high school and was
8 primarily concerned with countering the dominant, stigmatizing narrative of the school and its
9 students. However, as members collected interviews, they encountered conflicting views of the
10 school from alumni, students, teachers, and neighbors. At the close of one weekly meeting, a
11 student offered that his hope for our project was "that we just get the, finally get all the facts
12 straight. Get the true story." In response, I offered:

13

14 Your hope is that we get the facts straight and tell the true story, and I appreciate that.
15 And, where I sit, there is no true story, and there are no "facts"—there are many stories
16 and there's many ways of interpreting data . . . My hope is we can tell a different story,
17 not because it will be the *only* story or the *right* story but a different story, and it's one
18 that hasn't been told.

19

20 We returned to this distinction—between telling "a" Stratford story and telling "the" Stratford
21 story—time and again. Conceptualizing the project as a counter-story (rather than a "true" story)
22 prepared the team for some critical responses from viewers who felt the documentary film was
23 incomplete. In each of the three projects, cultivating a spirit of cultural humility required helping
24 members develop a thoughtful analysis of their neighborhood while recognizing that their own
25 understandings will always be partial.

26

Recognizing Reciprocity in Cultivating Cultural Humility

27

28
29 The previous sections focused on my efforts as a facilitator to foster cultural humility within
30 myself and the group. Although a community practitioner bears unique responsibility for
31 creating these conditions, it is also true that group members actively shape their environment,
32 calling on one another—and on facilitators—to reflect on one's blind spots, to create more
33 equitable social relations, and to modify practices in order to more fully disperse power. Indeed,
34 a key aspect of cultural humility in community practice is letting others take the lead and letting
35 oneself be led. Over the course of the Neighborhood Story Project, I was continually impressed
36 by how members created conditions for self-reflection for one another and how members
37 supported and invested in my development and growth.

38

Recognize Ways Members Cultivate Humility for and with One Another

39

40
41 Within the first few weeks of each Neighborhood Story Project, I began closing each meeting by
42 inviting members to share a personal highlight from our time together. These ritualized endings
43 became opportunities for members to appreciate one another and to articulate what they were
44 learning from their collaborators. The following exchange among members occurred in the
45 second week of one project:

1 Suzie: I just really appreciate the depth of knowledge within the group here. It's
2 invigorating.

3
4 Mary: I think I was a little surprised of the stuff that I knew that I didn't think I knew,
5 especially since I'm the youngest one here, as far as I've been living here about ten years.
6 I've been involved. I've definitely been involved.

7
8 Avy: That's great.

9
10 Amie: Others?

11
12 TK: What I like about the group is it's a loving group. We're not rude to each other and I
13 really like that. That means a lot to me.

14
15 Shirley: I like how everyone listens to me when I'm talking. Everyone is just really nice
16 to me. I like that. It makes me want to come here instead.

17
18 TK: You're right. You're right.

19
20 Mary: What's not to like? There you go.

21
22 Austin: I would echo that. I go to a lot of meetings. To me, this doesn't feel like a
23 meeting. I like that, that it feels like we're just sharing with each other and learning from
24 each other and it doesn't feel like a meeting.

25
26 Avy: Now by the time Shirley said what she said and Miss TK and then Austin, I just got
27 chill bumps because Austin is so, he's right... I am so excited and I am just floored with
28 how well we are working together and the respect. It's like there's already camaraderie.

29
30 Notably, in just the second week, members were already deeply appreciative of one another, and
31 of the conditions they were co-creating to learn from and with each other. Though I as facilitator
32 created space for the appreciations to be verbalized, what members were appreciating were their
33 own collective efforts.

34 35 ***Acknowledge Others' Investment in Your Own Development***

36
37 Despite the high premium Western academic traditions place on seemingly individual
38 intellectual contributions, all learning is relational. It is not possible to do justice to all that I
39 learned from members of the Neighborhood Story Project. Their place-stories deepened my
40 knowledge of Nashville and transformed my experience of living in the city. The ways that
41 members talked about the effects of gentrification heightened my sensitivity and honed my
42 scholarly interests. I am a different neighbor, researcher, and practitioner because of what I
43 learned from these collaborators. The degree to which members encouraged and supported me is
44 also noteworthy; just as they invested in one another and in their communities, they invested in
45 me.

1 My first session in one of the Neighborhood Story Projects offers an example. As the room filled
2 up with twelve people I did not know, Ms. Mary—who I had met only minutes before—caught
3 my eye and said, “It takes courage to show up at a group you don’t know and invite people to be
4 part of something.” Nearly a year later, as we met to review an early draft of my dissertation,
5 Ms. Mary reflected back on this initial encounter: “I remember that first meeting, you was the
6 only little white girl there, and most the rest of us already knew each other. It was obvious to me
7 that you were the one that needed encouraging.” She was right. Having my vulnerability seen by
8 these team members was both affirming and reassuring; they buoyed my resolve to keep pushing
9 myself and the projects forward. Part of recognizing the reciprocal nature of creating conditions
10 for cultural humility is letting people know the difference they make to you. During the tearful
11 closing session with the first Neighborhood Story Project team, I tried to put some of this into
12 words:

13

14 If I get a PhD, it’s because of you. Seriously. This is my dissertation research, and I’m
15 doing this project to see what do these kinds of projects do, what difference do they make,
16 and this is the first one . . . I’ve been the leader in some ways, but I am a student and you
17 are my teachers here. I’m learning from you how this works, if it works, if it makes a
18 difference, how to make it better, and so I’m incredibly indebted to you for this
19 opportunity. You are all part of my—what we call—committee. You’re all on my
20 committee . . . You’re helping me grow in huge ways, so thank you for taking the risk and
21 making the commitment and investing the time and investing your heart.

22

23 As the projects progressed, I continued to feel grateful, indebted, and lucky to be mentored by
24 such an outstanding group of neighbors who invested in me, as well as their communities. And
25 though not formally on my Dissertation Committee, a number of the Neighborhood Story Project
26 participants came to my dissertation defense, some many months after our formal work together
27 ended, to celebrate the collective learnings from our work together.

28

29

Conclusions

30

31 The above reflections are specific—I am a single practitioner, with a distinct history and
32 positionality, who facilitated a particular neighborhood intervention with a unique set of
33 collaborators. And yet, others may find resonances in these reflections with their own projects
34 and community contexts. Moreover, community practitioners may find utility in considering
35 cultural humility from three relational positions I have traced above, considering how we can
36 hold ourselves accountable to cultural humility, create conditions for cultural humility within
37 groups, and acknowledge how group members co-create cultural humility for one another.

38

39 Where many accounts of cultural humility suggest an internal, individual process, adopting a
40 more relational understanding of cultural humility better aligns with group and community work,
41 which is—by design—dynamic, unpredictable, and multisystemic, in that it reflects interactions
42 between individual, intergroup, and community levels (Rubel & Okech, 2017). Ethical
43 community practitioners must be accountable to themselves, critically interrogating and
44 amending their practices as they contend with their biases and imagine how to redistribute power
45 in their collaborative work. They must also be accountable to those with whom they work,

1 offering leadership when needed to create conditions for all members to reflect on their
2 assumptions and to consider how inequities manifest both within their own collectives as well as
3 within the larger community. And they are equally accountable to follow the leadership of their
4 collaborators, to remember that in community practice the roles of teachers and learners, leaders
5 and followers are often shared, and though they may be facilitating change, they simultaneously
6 will be guided to greater learning by those with whom they work.

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