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The Social Work Diaries: Reflections on my People-to- People Trip to Cuba

By Estelle Krumholz, LCSW

This summer I participated in a Social Workers' People-to-People Group Program to learn about social work and healthcare in Cuba. Our days were packed visiting healthcare facilities and community centers and meeting with social workers and other health care providers and community workers. We visited mental health and community based clinics and educational and cultural centers, and met with doctors, psychologists, nurses and social workers, all of whom graciously shared their knowledge and experience. Also included was a day trip to Las Terrazas, a UNESCO-designated Bio Reserve and model rural community in the mountainous region outside of Havana. It is not possible to discuss all that we did and learned but I will attempt to highlight some of the activities and my impressions.

David Strug, PhD, Professor Emeritus of the Wurzweiler School of Social Work and in clinical practice, led our group of twenty-three, including a few spouses. David has led prior social work groups to Cuba and has published extensively on health care and social work in the country. We were fortunate to have him and our Cuban guide/interpreter as leaders. We were a mixed group of private practitioners, agency and hospital social workers and educators.

Upon our arrival in Cuba we were taken for lunch to the home of renowned Cuban artist Jose Fuster, whose home served as his fanciful Gaudi-like studio and gallery, with colorfully designed walls and

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pictures, many of which were for sale. Fuster's was a combination private gallery and *paladar*, or privately owned (as opposed to government-owned) restaurant that are patronized primarily by tourists. The government allowed a small number of private businesses to start in the early 1990s but then stopped this policy. However, private businesses have been flourishing on the Island since the government introduced economic reforms in 2008 and it has issued close to 500,000 licenses to small entrepreneurs. (Strug, email communication). Artists, restaurateurs and others have found creative ways to be entrepreneurs with government approval. Most operate from home, as was the case with Fuster, but sometimes, if their owner is able to get the financing, they may be housed in elegant pre-Revolution mansions.

Paladares are significant to understanding Cuba, as they are an example of the changing economic and social structure. I am referring here to an emerging class of people who are more economically comfortable than the average Cuban, who by contrast is paid meager government wages in a currency of lesser value than those who cater to the tourist trade. It is not uncommon for many doctors, for example, to moonlight as taxi drivers in order to make ends meet.

Never was the difference between those paid by the government vs. those in tourist-related work more apparent than when my husband and I went to dinner one evening in a highly recommended *paladar*. When the taxi dropped us at our destination we thought we had been taken to the wrong address. Crumbling buildings of a by-gone era were all around, and men were loitering on the street with

seemingly little to do. A large man directed us to climb three flights of marble stairs with barely any exterior walls. Yet, when we arrived at the top we were seated in a small trendy space that was filled with well-heeled diners and felt more like South Beach than Havana. This was a startling juxtaposition to our daytime dialogues with government-paid healthcare professionals.

Cuba's commitment to healthcare, education and social security for the elderly is exemplary. Even after support from the Soviet Union ended in the early 1990s, and the Cuban economy nearly collapsed, the government continued its commitment to provide healthcare and education to all at a high level.

Cuba's ever-evolving health system, which includes care for psychiatric and emotional problems, emphasizes prevention and participation starting in the community. Although psychiatric hospitals treat more severe cases, the emphasis in health care is to provide services in the communities. The focus is to decrease the need for institutional beds by providing community mental health services at local *policlinicos* (polyclinics).

We had the opportunity to visit several polyclinics and a home for at-risk pregnant women. There are approximately 500 polyclinics throughout Cuba each serving approximately 30,000-60,000 persons. In Havana, approximately 82 polyclinics offer 24 essential services plus 22 specialty services (Strug, e-mail communication).

The polyclinics' team approach to mental health includes a psychiatrist, nurse, psychologist and social worker. Psychologists use cognitive behavioral models of psychotherapy to treat less severe

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problems. Individual and group psychotherapy as well as dance, yoga and other ancillary therapies are available, but there is limited availability of psychotropic medications. The emphasis is on re-integrating the individual to be a productive member of the community as soon as possible.

Despite the cooperative working relationship as a team there seem to be rigid lines of role differentiation. For example, only psychologists are allowed to function as psychotherapists and there are no training institutes. CBT is the preferred methodology because societal values require the individual to be all that he can be for the good of the community. Psychoanalytic values of individuation and strong self-agency do not translate well into Cuban society. Nevertheless, there is the beginning of a small group of psychologists with an interest in psychoanalysis.

Social workers function as community organizers and, in the traditional medical model, as liaisons between the patient, family and other support services. Social work education has gone through variations of education and training since the Revolution, which would require its own paper to describe. For example, it was disappointing to learn that the University of Havana has eliminated its program in Social Work, which previously awarded the equivalent of a Master of Social Work in the United States. Instead, "starting in September 2015, high school students will be offered the possibility of studying social work in a new professional-technical program." (Strug, email communication).

Volunteer organizations such as Committees for the Defense of the Revolution and the Federation of Cuban Women are strong and

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contribute to public health by providing prevention services through outreach programs about alcohol and drugs, HIV/AIDS education, and sex, among other areas. There is close collaboration between medical personnel and volunteer organizations with the emphasis on promoting health in order to avoid more serious illness. Cuba's life expectancy is the highest among the Caribbean countries, 77 for men and 80 for women (meeting with Elena Diaz, Professor Emerita of Social Development, University of Havana), and maternal and infant mortality rates are similar to those in developed countries. Abortion is legal.

The emphasis on community participation also contributes to the low crime level. Connection with others serves as support and helps ostracize unacceptable behaviors. Members of the community identify persons at risk if the individual does not seek healthcare services himself/herself, thereby insuring that all persons in the community are cared for. It is typical for social workers from polyclinics to make home visits.

Music is everywhere. Cubans embrace their rhythm with dance. One of our activities was a visit to "Proyecto Paloma," a studio where therapists use dance as a form of therapy and support. The instructor led us through a version of dance which was great fun and is used therapeutically, especially for special needs and chronically mentally ill populations.

Fortunately, our trip took place during Cuba's 12th Biennial, a month-long series of art exhibits housed in various vintage buildings throughout Havana. It is sad, however, that many exquisite buildings continue to decay because the government lacks funds to repair them.

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Although the government assures housing for all families, many live in crowded spaces and unsafe conditions. Word of mouth informs people of the latest *derrumbe*, or collapsed building. According to Professor Diaz, the priority societal problems are food, housing and transportation.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the resulting end of support to Cuba's economy, the government was forced to cut back on much expenditure in order to continue free healthcare, education and services for the elderly. During the years (1992-1998) known as "The Special Period," living standards that had improved following the Revolution were substantially reduced and, according to Professor Diaz, Cubans are still recovering from this period. As noted, tourism and limited privatization of small business have become the few vehicles by which some Cubans are able to raise their standard of living.

It is important to know something about the history of Cuba in order to understand what the long-in-coming 1959 Revolution was about when Fidel Castro and his compatriots, notably Ernesto "Che" Guevara, took control of the government from Sergeant Fulgencio Batista. It is not possible to miss the visual images of Che throughout Havana, especially his iconic photograph. As chronicled in the Museum of the Revolution (housed in the former Presidential Palace), Castro's initial revolutionary ideas were focused on lifting marginalized rural Cubans from a life of poverty and illiteracy. The importance of this goal becomes clear in light of the history of Cuba's wealthy agrarian plantations that were built upon the foundation of slavery, similar to the

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plantations of our pre-Civil war southern states. Cuba's large African slave population worked the sugar and tobacco plantations in the nineteenth century while owners lived in opulent wealth. After slavery was abolished, planters could not sustain their businesses and US investors subsequently acquired many.

By 1905, shortly following independence from Spain, U.S. citizens or companies owned 60% of Cuba's rural land and 90% of Cuba's main trades and utilities (Chomsky, pg. 27). It is indeed striking how inextricably Cuba and the United States were bound together following that time. Indeed, the severing of ties between the two countries following the Revolution created a deep emotional loss analogous to a disapproving parent severing his/her relationship with a child who has had the audacity to follow a different path towards self-actualization.

Jose Marti, the father of Cuban independence from Spain, is revered for his belief in inclusion of people of all colors, "with all and for the good of all." (Chomsky, pg. 22). He stands for the "new man" who is driven by a strong moral fiber rather than material acquisition. These two historic figures embody the values of contribution and participation in the community and society. An example of this that we visited was "Arte Corte," the brainchild of Gilberto Valladares. Known as "Papito," this barber created a unique salon filled with antique barber chairs and art. Importantly, Papito seeks to interest aimless youth in the art of barbering at no expense to them. With money earned from his business, he also beautified his street and helped fund a playground for neighborhood children.

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The longstanding argument continues to rage as to whether Fidel was saint or sinner. Cuba is not yet where it wants to be. The Revolution is a young fifty-six years. Cuba is economically poor but rich in the humanistic values oriented towards the common good of the community, altruism and responsibility toward one's fellow man. Whether Cuba will be able to maintain these intrinsic values remains to be seen if and when relations with the United States are normalized. Meanwhile, there is bated breath on both shores.

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Recommended Reading:

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