

A visit to Rwanda: Enriching perspective, enriching skills

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Experiencing life as a foreigner has been an incredibly eye-opening opportunity. As a Master's Candidate in Counselling Psychology, spending the summer in Rwanda has profoundly enhanced my ability to empathize with what life is possibly like for immigrants back home in Canada.

Living in such a divergent environment for the first time, certain things have entered my mind that I have never had the opportunity to fully process until now. Being Rwandan is part of my heritage. My father was born in Rwanda and came to Canada in the 1970's. Like many immigrants who have been in Canada for an extended period of time, he fiercely preserved his identity as a Rwandan while still feeling very Canadian. However, I've always felt that coming from such a small country in East Africa is kind of like having secret; very few people in Canada can share this experience. Membership was limited to a few people I knew through my father and we gathered and conversed in a way that no one else could. But during those two months, being Rwandan wasn't a secret anymore. It was a way of life that I could share with millions of people. I was no longer the expert in my milieu of all things Rwandan. I was a novice surrounded by a wealth of learning opportunities.

This realization has made me very excited to commence my internship in the fall and to begin my practical training as a counseling psychologist. Working with immigrants is an undeniable part of the practice experience for Canadian mental health practitioners. People born outside of the country now make up 20% of the population, and the number of immigrants in Canada is expected to reach somewhere between seven and 9.3 million by 2017. Each one of these individuals who seek psychological services brings their own culture with them, offering a portal into another set of life experiences that can enrich the psychologist's empathic capacity and broaden his/her worldview. Many will be provided the opportunity to share their 'secret' with the psychologist – a secret which is an integral to their functioning and growth.

Indeed, this travel experience has not only shaped my view of the globe while abroad but I believe it will enhance how I relate to other Canadians who have come from afar and my appreciation of how they balance where they've been and where they hope to be in the future.