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Reproductive Rights Activist Services Corps 2017 Internship Report  
Liberation Institute

This summer I was assigned to work with the Liberation Institute in San Francisco, California. The Liberation Institute is a grassroots mental health organization whose aim is to fill the gaps in availability of easily accessible professional support for issues related to mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. In essence the organization worked under the combined guiding principles of Buddhism and Socialism. As an intern I was assigned three primary assignments which included updating a referral book, analyzing the DSM-5 Cultural Formulation Interview Questions, and assisting in supervision groups.

My referral book project involved updating a list of the organizations that the Liberation Institute has connections to in order to refer clients in case the client has needs that the Liberation Institute is unable to meet. In addition to updating the book, I was in charge of contacting the organizations to help maintain and build a space of coalition. As a native of San Francisco who was born and raised in the city, I was largely unaware of the social justice organizations that existed here. While growing up in San Francisco’s Mission District I witnessed a lot of health disparities that negatively affected the community. While living in a food desert my health was negatively affected and I had no means to escape these conditions and help those around me. It was not until I started attending Humboldt State University that I began to gather the tools necessary to fight for liberation from the tentacles of the colonial regime. As a student activist and aspiring epidemiologist I have taken on leadership roles in organizations such as M.E.Ch.A and the American Medical Student Association, where I led and contributed to various campaigns, from Mental Health First Aid classes to making the City of Arcata a Sanctuary City, which have created positive change in Humboldt County for historically
marginalized communities. It was my involvement as a student activist that really prepared me to take on the referral project as well as the other challenges of the internship. When I returned to San Francisco and started working on the referral project I was initially surprised by the amount of organization there were in San Francisco that are social justice oriented and that serve the people. Prior to this revelation I only knew of a few revolutionary organizations, such as Mecha de SF State, the American Indian Movement, and the Party for Socialism and Liberation whom are involved in educating the mass and preparing for the revolution. Although this project involved a large amount of time devoted to research behind the computer and phone banking, I found that it was a meaningful task because it led to me meeting comrades when I visited other organizations.

In addition, my exposure to these organizations allowed me to consciously reevaluate what is considered the Bay Area based on the fact that I found organizations in cities that I did not know existed in the Bay Area. When contacting organizations I confirmed that their information was up to date and organized times to tour their facility. The organizations that I toured and visited outside of San Francisco allowed me to perceive the Bay Area as smaller than it appears especially considering that I used Bay Area Regional Transportation (BART) to travel to various places for networking. For example, within the first few weeks of working with the Liberation Institute, I was scheduled to attend an organizing meeting with several organizations in Oakland, which is located in the East Bay. While attending these meetings I was introduced to revolutionary spaces with incredible people who were involved in revolutionary campaigns. One of the organizations that attended the meeting was the local ACLU chapter, who discussed what they were doing in terms of proper sexual education in public schools and local clinics. During meeting breaks, I met comrades who exposed me to their library which consisted of various
pieces of Marxist literature from authors such as Rosa Luxemburg. This exposure allowed me to examine how much I still need to train myself in radical organizing and implementing socialism. As a native of San Francisco, traveling to these organizations was beneficial as I was able to take the time out of my day to visit extended family members around the bay area. While connecting with organizations in San Jose I was able to attend my cousin-in-law’s graduation from the MPH program at San Jose State.

In my second large project I worked on analyzing the DSM-5 Cultural Formulation Interview Questions from a social justice perspective. The DSM-5 Cultural Formulation Interview Questions are a series of questions that therapists use to clinically evaluate patients. As I worked on the analysis, I gathered resources from sources that utilize similar interview questions. While conducting my research, I specifically searched for literature that focused on oppression and liberation. During this process one of my co-workers introduced me to the concept of liberation psychology, which is a concept that focuses on decolonizing the field of therapy in a way that strategically helps liberate the masses from capitalist exploitation and oppression. In other words, the concept is similar to of Fidel Castro's “each one, teach one” educational policy. After being introduced to the concept of liberation psychology, I bought a book on the subject written by Taiwo Afuape, a liberation psychologist, title *Power, Resistance and Liberation in Therapy with Survivors of Trauma*. I also found an international organization called the Radical Psychology Network whose primary goal is to help liberate the masses from oppression. While writing the analysis my supervisor and I strategized on how to publish the article and ways of presenting its concepts during and after my internship. As a result of working on this project, I am now consciously evaluating how I can apply the concept of liberation psychology into my activism and academic career path. In connection to this research I started a
sub-project researching mental health disparities in the Bay Area. Although I did not find existing data I did recommend a few proposals for conducting an independent research study which may be taken up in the future when the Liberation Institute receives a research grant.

My third assignment was participating in a supervision group which consisted of therapists led by a supervisor who met with the goal of helping each other in creating strategies to assist patients with their mental health needs. In each session we were presented with several cases and were told the patient's cultural background, their origins, health background and anything other information that pertained to their case. Through participating in the supervision group’s discussions, I learned a lot of psychological theories and practices which allowed me to reflect on my own personal experiences in terms of family dynamics and the activist campaigns in which I have participated.

Besides helping the patient, the best part about the conversations that was held during the supervision group was the fact that we were able to explore some of the guiding principles of Buddhism and socialism. Under the concept of liberation psychology, these principles can be utilized to help with the liberation of oppressed masses. In addition, the supervision group was a safe space to express our anti-capitalist sentiments and collectively learn the structure of the Liberation Institute. The structure of the Liberation Institute operated on a model in which clients would pay for services via a sliding fee scale, which is based on the client's income; however, no one is turned away by lack of funds. An example of no one being turned away for lack of funds would be if someone was homeless and did not have the means of paying for a mental health service. Since the Liberation Institute is one of a few organizations that is organized under the model of socialism, many members of the community were thankful for the services that were offered and felt empowered by the relationship they developed with their therapist. The best part
about this system is that the Liberation Institute is supported by nonprofit grants when they are available, which helps to sustain certain projects within the organization such as research. Although the Liberation Institute did not receive a grant within the last year there was an unspoken model of self-sustainability in which everyone contributed to helping the organization run more smoothly which involved several tasks. In fact I took a few tasks myself which included filing, setting up the Wi-Fi, and assisting my supervisor in assigning clients to therapists.

The model of liberation psychology was evident when we were presented cases in which the patient was trying to unlearn toxic behavior, such as greed, that originated from the values of the capitalist regime. During the supervision sessions we often had cases revolving around the theme of reproductive health, which included cases of sexual trauma, such as incest, overcoming the patriarchy, and finding solutions for issues among the queer community. Although the majority of the time spent per case was focused on developing strategies on how to delve deeper into healing the patient psychologically, there were often times where we had to link the patient with other community resources that would help them further. As the “referral specialist,” I assisted the assigned therapist by connecting the patient with an adequate community organization that would fit their needs, such as the Women’s Resource Building if they expressed a desire to join a women's circle.

When I was not working on any of my main projects I helped out at the community events and workshops that the Liberation Institute sponsored. These events usually revolved around the spiritual and mental health of the community which included yoga night, Kirtan night and meditation night. The purpose of these events was to bring together individuals from the community to produce the effects of mental healing through a collective experience. While
attending these events I met many community activist with a focus in mental health, racial justice, etc.. The most amazing aspect of these community events, other than the spiritual component, was the fact that they were not culturally appropriated but instead were actually taught by Indian Buddhists who taught the history of Kirtan and Yoga by including stories of the Buddhist deities. The essence of the spiritual practice was truly powerful because at the end of each practice everyone was capable of finding community. This was reflected when we all came together after the practice to eat traditional Indian dishes and mingle. The revolutionaries whom I met were a part of a diverse set of revolutionary organizations, some of which existed on the east side of the Bay Area, such as the New Black Panther Party. These comrades were truly powerful in what they were doing in the community.

To the future interns who are interested in choosing the Liberation Institute as their host organization, I would say that this is a great organization if you are interested in mental health and learning how to apply the principles of Buddhism and socialism in various aspects of your life. However the best advice that I can give is to take advantage of all the self-care options that are offered through the Liberation Institute such as the Kirtan sessions. Although this organization may at times be slow paced, especially with the projects you may be working on, you will definitely need to learn to take care of yourself.