Internship at the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) in Minnesota, USA

I did an internship for three months at the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) in Minnesota (USA) from February 1st to April 22nd, 2016. The internship was part of my studying (M.Sc. Psychology).

CVT is an independent nongovernmental organization that provides multidisciplinary rehabilitative services to survivors of politically motivated torture. These services involve social work, psychotherapy and medical services. Besides the Healing Center in Minnesota, CVT also works internationally in different countries (e.g. Uganda, Ethiopia, Jordan). Moreover they try to advocate for torture survivors and work on a political level in Washington, D.C.

My motivation to do the internship was to work in an interdisciplinary team and to deepen my knowledge about psychotherapy with refugees. I also wanted to get more practice with English language in the workplace. Furthermore I wanted to gather more experiences about working in an NGO that works both on an individual level and a political level.

With the help of my professor, I got connected to the Center for Victims of Torture in Minnesota and had a Skype-Interview with them. The internship was not paid for. I organized accommodation, visa, medical insurance and flight on my own.

I spend most of the internship time at the Healing Center in St. Paul, Minnesota. During my internship with CVT, I was involved in different tasks and projects. I had the opportunity to do measures (clinical interviews) in a research project with Karen refugees (“Healing Hearts”). Moreover I observed a group therapy (psychoeducation and building safety), serve as a scribe in one-to-one trauma therapy sessions and attend meetings with potential clients. I also participated in different staff meetings (e.g. Information and Referral Meeting, All Staff Meeting, Clinical Staff Meeting, Wellness Meeting) and did some administrative work (for example updating closure resources). The different tasks that were committed to me were a good mixture of observations and own responsibilities. They were also a good combination between free times
for own readings, research and processing and appointments and meetings. My working times were Monday to Friday, 9 am to 5 pm.

At the end of my internship I also visited the office in Washington, D.C. to learn more about the political work of the organization.

I highly appreciate all the opportunities to grow and learn at CVT. I learned to do clinical measures and other sessions in English language which gave me confidence to continue with diagnostic or therapy in English language in Germany, too. Moreover, I got knowledge about different cultures and gathered information about the conflicts and circumstances in different countries. I also learned what is important in working with interpreters. Furthermore, I learned a balance of containing clients (e.g. in measures) and encouraging them to speak openly and freely. I got more experience how to assess and deal with crisis situation, e.g. suicidal or homicidal ideas or plans. Of high value for me was also the observation of the group therapy. It was great to get to know how such a therapy form can be structured and what is important to be attentive of. Being able to join different one-to-one therapy sessions gave me a great insight in different presentations of clients. In the PC meetings I was able to see how clients tell their story on the first hand and how they first seek for help. I learned how to keep a good balance between gathering the important information from clients and helping them to feel safe and relieved in a first meeting. The weekly staff meetings additionally gave me a great insight into organizational structures and work procedures.

It was also important for me to learn how to deal with a high exposure to extreme traumatization and what impact secondary traumatization can have in such a workplace. The internship helped me to focus on good self-care in the workplace and outside of work.

I really felt that staff members at CVT are willing to include me and eager to provide me great opportunities to learn. Though I also had to be initiative and self-organized with my day-to-day logistics. Single staff members took great responsibility for helping me to get trained and feel well supervised. Though there have been different people who supervised me in different tasks, it would have been great if there would have been one person who is supervising in whole and checking in from time to time.

The internship at CVT was of very high value for me and my professional learning. I would definitely recommend it for students that already have experiences with trauma therapy and the work with refugees. As the work at CVT involves a high exposure to severe trauma and catastrophic losses, I would not recommend it for students that do not have these experiences.