THE VIEW FROM HERE: ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY LEGAL CLINICS

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Introduction

Community legal clinics offer important perspectives on access to justice because of their proximity to, and relationships with, the people and communities who are so often the subject of the debate. In this article, I focus on three broad and interrelated insights about access to justice that I have gained as a result of my work at Community Legal Assistance Services for Saskatoon Inner City (CLASSIC), and through my reading of the "community lawyering" scholarship. First, from a community legal clinic perspective, access to justice cannot be understood "out of context". That is, close attention to historical, economic, political, and social context is a crucial part of grappling with the problem of access to justice. Second, a community legal clinic perspective reveals that an engaged consideration of "community" is foundational to any conception of access to justice. Third, the struggle for access to justice demands "long-haul" commitment by advocates at community legal clinics. Overall, these insights reveal the problem of access to justice as only one thread in a complicated web of social injustice, impossible to untangle without addressing the larger web. These insights also tend to unsettle dominant visions of access to justice, which often focus on access to formal dispute resolution institutions and to disassociate access to justice from other social, economic and political problems. Ultimately, these insights have implications for the ways in which lawyers working in the community understand their place in broader struggles for justice.

CLASSIC and the Model of the Community-Based Legal Clinic

CLASSIC was founded in 2007 as a result of the efforts of a small group of University of Saskatchewan law students. Seeking to establish a clinical law program, these students were inspired by the community-based model of long-

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¹ I have taught the clinical law seminar since the inception of the clinical law program in January 2007, and served as CLASSIC's supervising lawyer and Executive Director from 2007-2008. I currently am on faculty at the University of Saskatchewan College of Law, with responsibility for the academic portion of the clinical law program. Karen Tokarz et al describe the body of clinical law scholarship that focuses on "community lawyering". See Karen Tokarz et al, "Conversations on 'Community Lawyering': the Newest (Oldest) Wave in Clinical Legal Education" (2008) 28 Wash UJL & Pol'y 359 [Tokarz]. See also Christina Zuni Cruz, "[On the] Road Back In: Community Lawyering in Indigenous Communities" (1998-1999) 5 Clinical L Rev 557 at 572. In this article I reference American and Canadian scholarship, and note that American clinical law scholarship is broadly applicable in the Canadian context.

² This is a reference to the term used by Susan D Bennett in her piece, "On Long-Haul Lawyering" (1997-8) 25 Fordham Urb LJ 771.

standing legal clinics in Canada, including Parkdale Community Legal Services in Toronto.³ From the outset, the students sought to build relationships with various community groups and especially First Nations and Métis organizations: this emphasis on relationship building is a factor that CLASSIC points to as a crucial aspect of its success.⁴ Indeed, as writers such as Nancy Cook and John Calmore have pointed out, it is crucial that lawyers not assume their right to enter into communities, but rather must work to ascertain whether there is an invitation to participate.⁵ By intentionally seeking out invitation and location within the low-income community that it serves, CLASSIC is similar to many other community legal clinics in Canada and beyond. As Nancy Cook describes, a key feature of community legal clinics is their location in neighbourhoods that are home to the people they seek to serve.⁶ Originally, CLASSIC was located within the White Buffalo Youth Lodge, a multipurpose youth and community centre. CLASSIC soon outgrew its original location at the White Buffalo Youth Lodge and moved to a storefront space a few blocks away in the spring of 2011.

At the present time, CLASSIC offers two main legal services programs. The first is the "Walk-in Advocacy Clinic". As its name suggests, the program functions on a walk-in basis, with clinical law students conducting initial client intake. If the client's legal matter falls into CLASSIC's areas of practice and the client is eligible financially, the case is assigned to a law student who works closely with one of CLASSIC's supervising lawyers on every aspect of the client's matter. CLASSIC represents people in summary criminal matters, residential tenancies disputes, immigration and refugee law, social assistance, prison law, wills and estates matters, and many other areas of law. The clinical law class is a full-year, 6-credit class with an enrollment of 25 students, and there is an additional advanced clinical law course as well. CLASSIC's second main program is the "Legal Advice Clinic", where volunteer lawyers assist clients with guided self-representation in family law, civil litigation and criminal law matters.

³ Victoria Coffin, Kyle Vermette, and Jodi Busch are the three "founding students" of CLASSIC. For information about Parkdale Community Legal Services, see online: Parkdale Community Legal Services http://www.parkdalelegal.org/. See also Shelley AM Gavigan, "Twenty-Five Years of Dynamic Tension: the Parkdale Community Legal Services Experience" (1997) 35 Osgoode Hall LJ 443.

⁴ As Nancy Cook points out, "inattention to relationship building at the inception can spell failure for developing organizational and leadership later on." Nancy Cook, "Looking for Justice on a Two-Way Street" (2006) 20 Wash UJL & Pol'y at 189 [Cook].

⁵ Cook, *ibid*, John O Calmore, "A Call to Context: the Professional Challenges of Cause Lawyering at the Intersection of Race, Space, and Poverty" (1998-1999) 67 Fordham L Rev 1927. I have also discussed this topic in Sarah Buhler, "Journeys to 20th Street: the Inner City as Critical Pedagogical Space for Legal Education" (2009) 32 Dal LJ 381.

⁶ Cook, *supra* note 4 at 169. See also Juliet M Brodie, "Little Cases on the Middle Ground: Teaching Social Justice Lawyering in Neighborhood-based Community Lawyering Clinics" (2008-2009) 15 Clinical L Rev 333 at 335. Brodie writes that community lawyering clinics are typically "located in their own offices, off-campus in low-income neighbourhoods."

⁷ In recent years, a large number of pro bono law students are also involved at the clinic.

Throughout, CLASSIC is careful that none of its services overlap with the services provided by the provincial Saskatchewan Legal Aid Commission. However, it has become very clear that there is a large

Students spend the majority of their time at the clinic working on individual legal files. However, CLASSIC has from the outset sought to engage in broader community-based initiatives. In this way, CLASSIC fits into the larger tradition of "community lawyering" clinics, which tend to have a commitment to responding to the legal needs of community members, and to working collaboratively and responsively with the community. Like the community-based legal clinics described by Tokarz et al, CLASSIC engages in "multi-pronged and widely varying types of work, ranging from litigation to administrative practice, mediation and dispute resolution to community education and legislative advocacy to transactional work and community economic development." It thus takes a "generalist" and diverse approach to its work. 11 For example, students and staff regularly accept invitations to provide public legal education presentations to community groups. CLASSIC participates in community consultations on a wide variety of issues and staff and students are frequently invited to attend community events including round dances and traditional feasts. CLASSIC students and staff have collaborated on a variety of projects with community partners on issues including harm reduction, prison rights and the residential school settlement. Another recent initiative is a collaboration between CLASSIC and Aboriginal high school students and teachers to implement an "identity document clinic" to assist people in obtaining birth certificates and other identity documents. 12

CLASSIC, like other community legal clinics, both fails and succeeds in its responsiveness and connection with the wider community in which is it located. Because the largest part of CLASSIC's student and staff energy is spent on individual client files and in traditional modes of legal representation, there is a tendency to isolate clients and their legal problems from their social context, to occasionally inappropriately "fetichize" the lawyer-client relationship at the expense of wider community solidarity, and to attempt to compress claims for social justice into the narrow framework of legal rights. 14 While CLASSIC's connection

population of people in Saskatoon facing legal troubles for which no government-funded legal aid is available, or who simply do not qualify for the extremely low eligibility cut-offs of the Saskatchewan Legal Aid Commission. CLASSIC's income eligibility cut-offs are higher that the bare social assistance levels of the Legal Aid Commission.

⁹As Michael Diamond states, community lawyering practices are "located in poor, disempowered, and subordinated communities and [are] dedicated to serving the communities' goals": See Michael Diamond, "Community Lawyering: Revisiting the Old Neighborhood" (2000) 32 Colum HRL Rev 67 at 75.

¹⁰ Tokarz, supra note 1 at 363.

¹¹ See JoNel Newman, "Re-conceptualizing Poverty Law Clinical Curriculum and Legal Services Practice: the Need for Generalists" (2007) 34 Fordham Urb LJ 1303.

¹² The difficulty that many low-income people have in obtaining identity documents was identified as a major barrier to obtaining social assistance, renting a residence, and even obtaining a public transit pass. ¹³ This term is borrowed from Muneer Ahmad. See Muneer I Ahmad, "Interpreting Communities: Lawyering Across Language Difference" (2007) 54 UCLA L Rev 999 at 1076.

¹⁴ See John O Calmore, "Chasing the Wind: Pursuing Social Justice, Overcoming Legal Mis-Education, and Engaging in Professional Re-Socialization" (2004) 37 Loy LA L Rev 1167 at 1173. See also Janet Mosher's critique of "anti-critical" lawyering practice at Janet E Mosher, "Legal Education: Nemesis or Ally of Social Movements?" (1997) 35 Osgoode Hall LJ 613 at 626.

and work with the community are frequently celebrated by those involved and by its partners in the community, patterns of what Gerald Lopez calls "regnant lawyering" continue to emerge at the clinic. For Lopez, "regnant" lawyers tend to insist on viewing social problems within legal frames, tend to assume the role of the "expert" in their interactions with clients, and ignore the possibilities for collaboration with community groups to work towards larger systemic change. ¹⁵ However, as Juliet Brodie and April Land both write, community clinics can often effectively balance a focus on individual client representation and larger, transformative community advocacy and involvement. ¹⁶ In CLASSIC's case, the rhythms of the community in which it is located and the stories and solidarities of its clients inevitably cause CLASSIC lawyers, students and staff to look beyond its walls and interview rooms, to the wider community. It is this "looking beyond" that fosters perspectives on access to justice that inform, and challenge, the practice of lawyers and law students working in community contexts.

Dominant Approaches to Access to Justice

Although an excellent Canadian critical literature about access to justice exists, ¹⁷ the dominant access to justice discourse within the legal profession is characterized by a persistent emphasis on procedural matters and access to formal institutions of justice and legal representation within those contexts. As Janet Mosher writes, the focus in the dominant discourse is much more on "access," and much less on "justice". ¹⁸ Thus, according to Mosher, this approach sees access to courts and lawyers as an end in itself, such that "[m]ore efficient access to institutionalized dispute resolution processes thus becomes both the means and the measure of enhanced access to justice."

The emphasis on ensuring access to formal institutions of justice is a model that Nancy Cook describes as the "one-way street" approach to access to justice.²⁰ According to Cook, the "one-way street" model imagines "justice" as a destination to which lawyers are superiorly equipped to direct and accompany clients. In other

¹⁵ Gerald Lopez, Rebellious Lawyering: One Chicano's Vision of Progressive Law Practice (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992) at 24.

¹⁶ See April Land, "'Lawyering Beyond' Without Leaving Individual Clients Behind" (2011) 18 Clinical L Rev 47. See also Brodie, *supra* note 6.

¹⁷ See for example, Constance Backhouse "What is Access to Justice?" in Julia Bass, WA Bogart & Frederick Zemens, eds, Access to Justice for New Century: the Way Forward (Toronto: Law Society of Upper Canada, 2005) 113; Faisal Bhaba, "Institutionalizing Access-to-Justice: Judicial, Legislative and Grassroots Dimensions" (2007-2008) 33 Queen's LJ 139; Janet E Mosher, "Lessons in Access to Justice: Racialized Youths and Ontario's Safe Schools" (2008) 46 Osgoode Hall LJ 807; Patricia Hughes, "Law Commissions and Access to Justice: What Justice should we be Talking About?" (2008) 46 Osgoode Hall LJ 773.

¹⁸ Mosher, ibid, at 808.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰Cook, supra note 4 at 170.

words, this model assumes that lawyers have much to offer low income and marginalized communities, but little to gain or learn from these communities that might inform or even transform their work. The "one-way street" access to justice model, with its central focus on the role of lawyers and the primacy of formalized justice institutions, fosters a view of legal practice focused on individual client representation and litigation, and a tendency to isolate clients from larger social and political issues.

From the vantage point of a community legal clinic, it becomes clear that the acontextual, "one-way street" approach to access to justice is simply deficient. Lawyers working in the context of community legal clinics quickly come face to face with some disappointing realities about the limits of an access to justice model that places its primary emphasis on access to legal representation within formal institutions of justice. They learn that rather than assisting clients in accessing the kind of justice that might transform their lives and circumstances, they are often simply helping their clients "stay out of harm's way" while in the territory of courts and the justice system. 21 As Nancy Cook writes, "[a]ccess implies the potential for gain; what we see in most cases is, at best, the possibility for damage control."22 In other words, all too often, in the context of poverty law practice, the panacean promise of access to formal justice transmogrifies into the work of helping a client select "the least drastic of available penalties" and attempting to stave off even greater "harm or disaster" from befalling him or her.23 Thus, access to lawyers and courts reveals itself too often as not much more than a fragile and temporary solution to the troubles that poor people experience, and often simply unsatisfactory in the context of the broader social injustice that shapes their lives.

The View from Here: Access to Justice in Context

What then, does the wider context look like for CLASSIC, and what does alertness to this context mean for access to justice? Saskatoon is currently experiencing an economic boom due to a variety of factors, including Saskatchewan's resource-based economy. However, homelessness has increased dramatically in recent years, and rates of poverty, particularly among Aboriginal people and recent immigrants, remain high.²⁴ Saskatoon remains deeply divided along racial lines, and Aboriginal people in particular continue to experience racism in the form of over-policing, overrepresentation in prisons, and in day-to-day interactions.²⁵ A historical

²¹ Ibid at 170.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ihid at 185.

²⁴ See Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership, "From Poverty to Possibility...and Prosperity: A Preview to the Saskatoon Community Action Plan to Reduce Poverty" (2011), online: www.saskatoonpoverty2possibility.com>.

²⁵ See for example, Joyce Green, "From *Stonechild* to Social Cohesion: Anti-Racist Challenges for Saskatchewan" in Carol Schick & James McNinch, eds, 'I Thought Pocahontas was a Movie:

perspective would note that the painful legacy of residential schools and other colonial policies continue to affect many people and indeed, that ongoing racism reproduces economic and social inequality at every turn. This political and economic climate produces what Paul Farmer refers to as "structural violence", where individual problems are often manifestations of larger social, political and economic forces. ²⁶

An understanding of the larger context in which individual legal troubles arise does not encourage the view that increasing access to courts, judges and lawyers would change very much for poor people. In terms of implications for practice, this perspective urges the view that lawyers who are committed to access to justice be prepared to learn about and engage with a multitude of other issues. Descriptions of politically infused, social justice oriented practice by lawyers who attempt to address the larger context of social injustice are found in the work of writers including Gerald Lopez, Lucie White, Anthony Alfieri, Sameer Ashar and more. These advocates of "critical lawyering" and "community lawyering", focus on the importance of solidarity with clients and working with clients in the "economic, political, and social contexts of their lives, beyond the immediate legal problems." The diverse and ever-evolving skills required for community lawyers, according to Tokarz et al, include:

interpreting the law, changing the law, creating law, interpreting public opinion, changing public opinion, creating public opinion, building alliances, breaking alliances, capturing resources, and releasing resources.²⁹

Of course, there remains a need for lawyers and law students at clinics like CLASSIC to continue to advocate alongside their clients in courts and tribunals. As Lucie White, Anthony Alfieri and others have argued, there can be social justice implications when marginalized people claim space and voice within formal

Perspectives on Race/Culture Binaries in Education and Service Professions (Regina: CPRC Press, 2009) 129 at 132. See also Les Samuelson & Patricia Monture, "Aboriginal People and Social Control: the State, Law and 'Policing'" in Carolyn Brooks & Bernard Schissel, eds, Marginalization and Condemnation: an Introduction to Criminology, 2nd ed (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2008) 200.

²⁶ For a description of structural violence, see Paul Farmer, Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) at 30. See also Maria A Wallis & Siu-Ming Kwok, "Introduction" in Maria A Wallis & Siu-Ming Kwok, eds, Daily Struggles: The Deepening Racialization and Feminization of Poverty in Canada (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2008) at 9.

²⁷ See Lopez, supra note 15; Lucie E White, "Mobilization on the Margins of the Lawsuit: Making Space for Clients to Speak" (1987-8) 16 NYU Rec L & Soc Change 535; Sameer M Ashar, "Law Clinics and Collective Mobilization" (2007-2008) 14 Clinical L Rev 355; Anthony V Alfieri, "Reconstructive Poverty Law Practice: Learning the Lessons of Client Narrative" (1991) 100 Yale LJ 2107.

²⁸ Tokarz, supra note 1 at 374.

²⁹ Ibid.

institutions of justice.³⁰ Litigation, or the threat of litigation, remains a powerful tool because "[p]owerful institutions make and implement decisions with real impact on peoples' lives, and lawyers are still generally seen as having advantages in obtaining access to and putting pressure on key decision-makers."³¹ However, a contextual and politicized understanding of the larger forces that shape and produce clients' individual legal problems is essential for lawyers in these venues. Such an understanding leads to an awareness that social mobilization, community activism and political advocacy are necessary tools for the struggle for access to justice. As Harry Arthurs writes, "I do not say that justice is hopeless or litigation is useless – only that the two are not closely connected....The best chance for justice...is political and social mobilization in aid of systemic change."³²

The View from Here: Access to Justice and the Importance of Community

Community legal clinics like CLASSIC tend to place a strong emphasis on collaborations and connections with the community in which they are located. This engagement with the community reveals new insights about access to justice and about the role of lawyers. In particular, it makes clear that an active discussion about justice is underway in low income and marginalized communities, and that there is an invitation for lawyers to become allies in this community justice work. That is, while community groups welcome and often request a legal perspective, they are also actively engaged in defining the issues of substantive justice that are important to them – from housing to poverty and from food security to racism. These issues form the basis of a robust substantive justice agenda, an agenda to which community groups often welcome the participation and contribution of community legal clinics. Certainly, many community groups have also enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to educate CLASSIC staff and students about their work and their understandings of justice.³³

The recognition that communities, and not lawyers, are in the process of defining a "justice agenda" decentres and de-privileges the focus on access to courts and lawyers and instead invites lawyers to explore the ways in which they can work collaboratively on these issues. I have outlined above some of the community-based projects and collaborations that CLASSIC has become engaged in. Involvement in

³⁰ See Alfieri, supra note 27 and Lucie E White, "Subordination, Rhetorical Survival Skills, and Sunday Shoes: Notes on the Hearing of Mrs. G" (1990) 38 Buff L Rev 1.

³¹ Cook, supra note 4 at 174.

³² Harry Arthurs, "More Litigation, More Justice? The Limits of Litigation as a Social Justice Strategy" in Julia Bass, WA Bogart & Frederick Zemens, eds, Access to Justice for New Century: the Way Forward (Toronto: Law Society of Upper Canada, 2005) 249 at 254.

³³ For example, a group called Str8-Up, who are ex-gang members who are working to change their lives, recently invited CLASSIC clinical law students to a presentation in which they served bannock and shared stories about their lives and experiences. Members of Saskatoon's anti-poverty coalition and many other community groups have also engaged in the education of clinical law students.

these projects, which are seldom focused on access to courts but rather are rooted in problems identified by the community, illustrate that for many marginalized people in society, the most meaningful approach to access to justice is one that centres on substantive social-justice oriented projects.

An emphasis on the importance of community also helps community-based lawyers to see that community connections should be a consideration in legal representation of individual clients. As Muneer Ahmad writes, it is crucial for community lawyers to move metaphorically beyond the "cramped and artificial context of the lawyer-client relationship" in order to recognize the larger communities within which their clients exist. Similarly, Sameer Ashar has encouraged an emphasis on working with clients in the context of their political and racial solidarities. By gaining an understanding of the communities in which clients live, lawyers learn of the histories of resistance to injustice among marginalized groups and gain perspectives on ways in which to bring these understandings into their legal representation. Thus, by seeking out "invitations to participate" from the community, lawyers in community legal clinics learn that communities are already actively engaged in working towards justice; that clients are not victims that need rescuing; and that the community is not impoverished in terms of its understanding of justice.

The View from Here: Long-Haul Commitment and Access to Justice

A focus on the contextual and community-based nature of access to justice leads to the recognition that access to justice is a deeply complicated problem that is knotted up with multiple other social, economic and political issues and therefore not easily solved. Since social change is at best "simmering, often slow-moving", ³⁹ it becomes apparent that the struggle will be a long-term one, likely with many setbacks along the way. This leads to a recognition that working for access to justice is necessarily a "long haul" project, requiring commitment characterized by patience, creativity and humility on the part of community-based lawyers. ⁴⁰ Susan Bennett writes that community-based legal practice is "unbounded, in both nature and duration." ⁴¹ In the harried world of legal practice, where lawyers have become accustomed to measuring the value of their work in tiny and urgent increments of time, such a recognition can be disconcerting, but also can open up new understandings about the

³⁴ See Ahmad, supra note 13 at 1077.

³⁵ See Ashar, supra note 27 at 356.

³⁶ For examples of such approaches, see Ahmad, supra note 13. See also Alfieri, supra note 27.

³⁷ See Tokarz, *supra* note 1 at 372.

³⁸ See Michelle S Jacobs, "People from the Footnotes: the Missing Element in Client-Centred Counseling" (1997) 27 Golden Gate UL Rev 345 at 352.

³⁹ Cook, supra note 4 at 182.

⁴⁰ Bennett, supra note 2, coined the phrase "long-haul lawyering."

⁴¹ Ibid at 773.

nature of the work of access to justice. Indeed, as advocates at CLASSIC have learned, success cannot simply be measured by the number of cases or even victories in court, and certainly not by the number of hours or minutes devoted to individual files. After all, as mentioned earlier, many clients win their legal case only to find themselves facing other barriers to justice at the next turn.

Community-based lawyers thus learn that "the case is not the point." Rather, a focus on community relationships and involvement in larger projects is key to long-term success. Of course, urgent evictions must be attended to, and limitation periods for filing documents must be respected. But this work, along with its successes and inevitable failures, must be done in the context of a long-haul commitment, putting it into perspective for lawyers. Rather than becoming discouraging, this "long-haul" view can in fact foster a healthy "utopianism" for legal advocates because it looks beyond the frustrations of day-to-day legal work. Recognition of the long-term and complex nature of access to justice, and of the importance of working alongside communities, which take the lead in defining the justice agenda, fosters an ethic of humility for lawyers. As William Quigley writes, only humility on the part of lawyers can lead to a kind of lawyering that "enable[s] a group of people to gain control of the forces which affect their lives...and [that] joins, rather than leads, the persons represented."

CONCLUSION

From the vantage point of a community legal clinic, access to justice appears as a complex and long-term problem, intertwined with multiple contextual issues and requiring long-term commitment and engaged collaboration with the community on the part of legal advocates. I have described some of the ways in which CLASSIC attempts to meet these challenges in its work. There remains a need for more research and writing about the ways in which other Canadian legal clinics engage in the work of access to justice on a community scale, and particularly for more research into the knowledge about access to justice held by members of marginalized communities in Canada. It is these insights that will lead to further understanding of how members of the legal community ought best engage in the ongoing struggle for access to justice.

42 Ibid at 772.

⁴³ William P Quigley, "Reflections of Community Organizers: Lawyering for Empowerment of Community Organizations" (1994-1995) 21 Ohio NUL Rev 455 at 459.

⁴⁴ For the role of utopianism in legal practice see RJ Condlin, "Tastes Great, Less Filling: the Law School Clinic and Political Critique" (1986) 36 J Legal Educ 45. See also William P Quigley, "Revolutionary Lawyering: Addressing the Root Causes of Poverty and Wealth" (2006) 20 Wash UJL & Pol'y 101 at 160-161.

⁴⁵ Quigley, *ibid* at 455-56. See also Jeffrey Ward, "One Student's Thoughts on Law School Clinics" (2010) 16 Clinical L Rev 489 at 502.