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The Importance of Protecting Cultural Capital in Community Development

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Community Psychology and Community Development

▶ Community Psychology

- ▶ Focuses on individuals' well-being and quality of life (QOL) within the context of the groups, institutions, communities, organizations, etc. to which they belong
- ▶ Individual well-being within context and ecology
- ▶ How to work with individuals and communities to improve the well-being and QOL of people

▶ Community Development

- ▶ Focuses on improving, enhancing, and supporting communities
- ▶ Indirectly improves the QOL of people by improving community structures and institutions
- ▶ Increase the **agency** and **solidarity** of a community (Bhattacharyya, 1995)
- ▶ Should be localized and sustainable

International Community Development – The Money

- ▶ Much government money is spent globally on international community development and aid. Just an example from the USA:
 - ▶ USA provided US\$28+ billion in foreign aid in 2018
 - ▶ USAID carries approximately US\$49 billion in obligations for other countries
- ▶ NGOs also provide huge amounts of funds
 - ▶ Save the Children = approximately US\$2 billion annually
 - ▶ Thousands of smaller international NGOs with finances that collectively would surpass billions of annual spending

International Community Development – The Time and Work

- ▶ In addition to the financial aspects, governments and organizations have created infrastructure to send volunteers around the world
 - ▶ Peace Corps
 - ▶ Study Abroad
 - ▶ Medical Missions
 - ▶ Habitat for Humanity
 - ▶ Voluntourism
 - ▶ Religious Missions
- ▶ Usually done by well-intentioned yet poorly trained/prepared volunteers who do more harm than good

To clarify – many do this kind of international work ethically and effectively. But that doesn't diminish the negative impacts of those who don't

The “Dark Side” of Community Work

- ▶ Community work should be motivated by a desire to improve the well-being of recipients
- ▶ However, good motivations are never enough
 - ▶ Must be balanced with the obligation to allow people and communities the **agency** and **solidarity** they deserve
- ▶ Scholars have used various terms and concepts to attempt to describe how and why well-intentioned community work can cause and does cause harm
 - ▶ Neoliberalism
 - ▶ Neo-colonialism
 - ▶ White Savior Complex
 - ▶ Cultural Imperialism

(Ashdown et al., 2021; Ashdown & Buck, 2018)

A Few Examples...

- ▶ U.S. teenagers accompanying a medical mission "prescribing" aspirin to community members (who thought they were being served by medical professionals)
- ▶ Medical professionals providing prescription-strength delousing shampoo with instructions printed in a language that the local community did not speak/read – and who were not checked for lice to begin with
- ▶ Buildings painted multiple times a month simply to provide a task for visiting volunteers
- ▶ Teenagers "teaching" formal classes to students the same age or older than they, because they are Americans and Europeans in an "under- developed" country

Generative Entrenchment Theory

- ▶ Argues that if interventions are to be long term, the values, thoughts, and behaviors related to interventions must become 'entrenched' in the receiving community
 - ▶ Thus, when providers leave the community, the intervention has become necessary for life to continue as it is for the receiving community
- ▶ Example: Railroad system in Ghana, developed by the British during colonial rule
- ▶ Unfortunately, too many argue that community interventions should to be like the railroads in Ghana
- ▶ We want community development to be sustainable, but not in this way!
 - ▶ Similar to the idea of "cultures of dependency"



Community Capitals Framework

- ▶ One framework that can help avoid darker side outcomes is the Community Capitals Framework
- ▶ CCF describes different forms of “capital” that exists within all communities:
 - ▶ Social Capital
 - ▶ Nature Capital
 - ▶ Material Capital
 - ▶ Cultural Capital
- ▶ CCF can provide a theoretical way to think about all the different capitals (systems) that interact within a community and how community development can have unintended consequences

Cultural Capital

- ▶ Cultural capital is not necessarily social, financial, or physical capital yet has a vital role in the social, financial, and physical well-being of communities and their members



A Case Study: Guatemala

- ▶ Why Guatemala?
- ▶ I have almost 20 years of field work experience in Guatemala, providing a solid understanding of the culture, history, and politics as well as the chance to witness a lot of development work there
- ▶ Guatemala is a common destination for short-term American voluntourists because of its relative closeness to the USA and attractiveness as a tourist destination (Maya culture, ancient history, ecotourism, etc.)
- ▶ Large scale consequences of community work in Guatemala include:
 - ▶ Less government support for medical care because of medical missions
 - ▶ Evidence that the primary goal is to "entrench" services rather than provide what the community desires
 - ▶ The kind of entrenchment we don't want!
 - ▶ By entrenching services, organizations guarantee long-term presence and long-term funding...

A Case Study: Guatemala

- ▶ 30 interviews:
 - ▶ 10 Guatemalans
 - ▶ 10 non-Guatemalans who have engaged in short-term voluntourism there
 - ▶ 10 non-Guatemalans who live and work in Guatemala as long-term community workers
- ▶ Interviews investigated topics related to international community work based on participants' own experiences
- ▶ Interviews lasted 30-60 minutes, were transcribed, and Spanish interviews translated to English
- ▶ Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ashdown, 2022)

Guatemalan Participants

- ▶ What is the motivation of voluntourists and where do they come from?
 - ▶ “We would have to investigate these people and where they come from. That way we would know if their intentions are good or if they are here to bring problems. It is good for people to receive aid, but we do not know where they come from...one becomes interested to know about this. It is important. I want to know where they come from.”
- ▶ Guatemala needs the aid; Guatemalans cannot succeed alone
 - ▶ “because there are countries that can help the poor. The people here cannot because they need help.”

This is an example of concerns regarding a cultural of dependency

Guatemalan Participants

- ▶ One participant had received land and a home from an international organization, only to have it stripped away because she left the house empty for longer than the organization allowed (she left to spend time with her son who was in the nearest high-quality hospital in a far-off city):

“They asked me why I did not take care of the house....I was in the hospital with my son so I could not take care of the house...They...told me to get out of the house and that I would not be allowed to return.... I took all my things out of the house, but now the house is in someone else’s name. The person is living in the house now and they threw me out. You do not even treat an animal like that. They treated me very badly. They gave it to me first, they put me there, and then they take it away from me. So, I would only trust people that do want to work and if it’s legal. I will not trust just words.”

Short-Term Voluntourists

- ▶ Self-focused; their own experiences
 - ▶ “I did it for several reasons. You know, the Catholic Outreach portion of it was a part. The adventure of going to a third world country, the chance to learn about their culture and their language...all of that, there’s just a lot of reasons I wanted to do it.”
- ▶ Recipients should only be involved in decision making to a certain point: “I really do think it has to be kind of driving by the individual [volunteer]...it was nice when we were there, there was another group that was at the site...we were at and...so every day we had options as far as what type of work, like if we didn’t feel the physical work that was there to do you could opt to do something else that was less physical...”

Long-Term Community Workers

- ▶ Many recognized major issues associated with ill-prepared short term voluntourists:
 - ▶ “This desire that we have...as North Americans and Westerners on a broader level to, you know, I need to go help...I need to go do something, I think, can be a very short-sighted and ignorant perspective. We don't understand the broader context, we don't understand why this community is suffering in the way that it is, we don't even know [whether] the community considers itself to be suffering or needing...and even with the greatest intentions of 'I'm here to help'... 'I bring resources'... 'I bring a big smile on my face' can be racist, it can be...very ugly and, again, you know, just short-sighted.”
- ▶ Frustrated with having to worry about donors' and volunteers' perceptions and feelings more than community's needs
 - ▶ “a short-term volunteer, in terms of impact, in a lot of ways the impact is more on the volunteer than it is on the community.”

How to Protect Cultural Capital

- ▶ International community development and community psychology can learn from some of the best practices of cross-cultural psychological and anthropological research:
 - ▶ Local community members should be ultimate decision makers
 - ▶ I argue community members should have “veto” power over any aspect of the process
 - ▶ “Safari” volunteers should be actively discouraged
 - ▶ Thoroughly investigate the organizations they are considering working with
 - ▶ Requires some understanding/expertise on how to judge such organizations
 - ▶ No requirements or expectations (implied or explicitly stated) that communities abandon their own cultural capital
 - ▶ There is nothing wrong with simply visiting a place as a tourist, spending money in the local economy, and enjoying what a community has to offer – respectfully and responsibly, of course!
 - ▶ Do not engage in short-term voluntourism or mission trips simply to justify visiting a new place
 - ▶ Suggest donating the money for a mission trip to a localized, long-term organization in the community – they can do a lot more with the money than they can with the unskilled, unprepared, or potentially self-serving visitors

Conclusion and Next Steps

- ▶ Community development and community psychology have a lot to offer most communities and have been successful at increasing communities' and individuals' well-being and QOL
- ▶ Good intentions are not enough
 - ▶ We should pay better attention to the “darker sides” of international work and research
- ▶ Experience, expertise, and appropriate process matter
- ▶ What roles can an awareness of community capital in general and cultural capital specifically play in not only international community work, but also:
 - ▶ Local, domestic community work?
 - ▶ International business administration?
 - ▶ Social science research (cross-cultural and otherwise)?
 - ▶ Education and pedagogy?