

# AUS Repository

## The Importance of Maintaining Cultural Capital in Community Psychology and Development

Item Type	Presentation
Authors	Ashdown, Brien
Citation	Ashdown, B. K. (2022). The importance of maintaining cultural capital in community psychology and development [Paper presentation]. The Annual Conference of the Society for Cross-Cultural Research, San Diego, CA.
Download date	2026-03-16 06:34:51
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/11073/23585">http://hdl.handle.net/11073/23585</a>

# The Importance of Maintaining Cultural Capital in Community Psychology and Development

BRIEN K ASHDOWN, PH.D.

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, PSYCHOLOGY

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF SHARJAH

SCCR 2022 – SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-  
NonCommercial 4.0 International License.



# 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 ecological psychology perspective
- ▶ 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

- ▶ Huge amounts of government money is spent globally on initiatives related to international community development and aid
  - ▶ USA provided more than US\$28 billion in foreign aid in 2018
  - ▶ USAID carries approximately US\$49 billion in obligations for other countries
- ▶ Non-governmental organizations also provide huge amounts of funds
  - ▶ Save the Children = US\$2 billion in 2016
  - ▶ Thousands of smaller international NGOs with budgets that would sum to billions of annual spending on their chosen issues (education, health, agriculture, etc.)

# 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
- ▶ Many times, this work is done by well-intentioned but poorly trained or poorly prepared volunteers who can end up doing more harm than good

To be clear – many people and organizations 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

- ▶ Obviously, community work should always occur based on the motivation to improve the well-being of recipients
- ▶ However, good motivations are not enough
  - ▶ Any aid or support provided must be balanced with the obligation to allow people and communities the **agency** and **solidarity** to choose their own worldviews and ways of life
- ▶ 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

# A Few Examples...

- ▶ American teenagers accompanying a medical mission "prescribing" aspirin to community members who thought they were being served by medical professionals
- ▶ Medical professionals handing out prescription-strength delousing shampoo to people who couldn't read the language of the instructions printed on the bottle – and who were not checked for lice to begin with
- ▶ School walls that are 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, with the assumption that they are qualified to do so simply because they Americans and Europeans in an "under- developed" country

# Generative Entrenchment Theory

- ▶ Argues that if aid providers desire their interventions to last for the long term, the values, thoughts, and behaviors related to the interventions must become ‘entrenched’ in the receiving community
  - ▶ This way, when the 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, many community development workers and psychologists argue that community interventions need 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 theoretical framework that can help us avoid the darker side outcomes of community development and ensure any entrenchment is ethical and appropriate is the Community Capitals Framework
- ▶ CCF describes different forms of “capital” that are interlinked within a community
  - ▶ Social Capital
  - ▶ Nature Capital
  - ▶ Material Capital
  - ▶ Cultural Capital
- ▶ While the CCF shouldn't be seen as a list of boxes to check, it can provide a theoretical way to think about all the different capitals (systems) that interact within a community and how community development programs can have far-reaching impacts

# Cultural Capital

- ▶ Cultural capital is not social, financial, or physical capital (per se) but plays a vital role in the social, financial, and physical well-being of communities and their members



# A Case Study: Guatemala

- ▶ Why Guatemala?
- ▶ I have been conducting psychological research in Guatemala for nearly twenty years, providing a solid understanding of the culture and witness to much international work there
- ▶ Guatemala is a common destination for Americans on short-term voluntourism trips because of its relative closeness to the USA and attractiveness as a tourist destination (Maya culture, ancient history, ecotourism, etc.)
- ▶ Large scale consequences of international community work in Guatemala include:
  - ▶ Less government support for medical care because of how many doctors and their helpers travel there for medical missions
  - ▶ Evidence that many organizations' primary goal is to "entrench" their services rather than provide what the community itself desires
    - ▶ Which is often the kind of entrenchment we don't want!
    - ▶ By entrenching their services, they guarantee long-term presence and long-term funding...

# A Case Study: Guatemala

- ▶ Interviews with:
  - ▶ 10 Guatemalans
  - ▶ 10 non-Guatemalans who have traveled to Guatemala to engage in short-term volunteer community development work
  - ▶ 10 non-Guatemalans who live and work in Guatemala long-term in the context of supporting local community work
- ▶ Interviews explored ethical and cultural issues of international community work based on participants' own experiences
- ▶ Interviews lasted 30-60 minutes, were transcribed, and Spanish interviews translated to English
- ▶ Thematic Analysis

# Guatemalan Participants

- ▶ Curious about motivation of voluntourists and where 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.”
- ▶ Some argued that Guatemala needs the aid, that 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 house from an international organization, only to have it taken away because she left the house for longer than was allowed by the organization – 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

- ▶ Focused on 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.”
- ▶ Many suggested the recipients should be involved in making decisions about the aid they received...but only to a 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 had enough time and experience to recognize the major problems associated with the 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.”
- ▶ They also spoke of the frustration of having to be more worried about donors' and volunteers' perceptions and feelings than the needs of the community
  - ▶ “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.”
- ▶ They argued that the outcomes of much community development work would not and could not last long enough to have a meaningful impact unless the work was directly based in the needs of the community
  - ▶ Some argued for entrenchment, but in a culturally and ethically appropriate way

# 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 involved in each step of the process
    - ▶ I argue community members should have “veto” power over any aspect of the process
  - ▶ “Safari” volunteers should be actively discouraged from continuing to engage in voluntourism, mission trips, etc.
  - ▶ People should thoroughly investigate the organizations they are considering working with
    - ▶ But this requires some understanding/expertise on how to judge the quality of such organizations
  - ▶ Obviously, there should be no requirements or expectations that receiving communities abandon their own or accept the providers’ cultural worldviews, religious beliefs, politics, social axioms/values, etc.
  - ▶ Remind potential voluntourists that there is nothing wrong with simply visiting a place as a tourist, spending their money in the local economy, and enjoying what a community has to offer – respectfully and responsibly, of course!
    - ▶ No one must engage in short-term voluntourism or mission trips to justify visiting a new place
  - ▶ Encourage potential voluntourists and mission-trippers to donate the money they would spend on the 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 – many have been successful at increasing communities' and individuals' well-being and QOL
- ▶ Good intentions are not enough to ensure appropriate and ethical community work
  - ▶ We really do need to pay better attention to the “darker sides” of international work and research in order to truly inform best practices
- ▶ Experience, expertise, and appropriate process are vital components of protecting cultural capital in community work
- ▶ 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?