

# **Survival of the Interventionist:** The Personal Cost of Immersion and Social Change

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I A M A community psychologist. Similar to traditional approaches to psychology, community psychology seeks to modify, control, and predict behavior and mental states. Unlike more conventional approaches, community psychology moves beyond the individual to explore the impact of environment on personal development. In the process of delivering service to the person, the person's environment also becomes a focus of intervention. Intervention refers to activities designed to address the disempowering social conditions that are, then, the subject of action research, the goal of which is to bring about social change that, ultimately will prevent problems in personal lives.

This article explores the personal distress that interventionists-community psychologists and others whose work requires immersion in a foreign culture-must survive. Considering that an interventionist acts to bring about social change, the article asks whether the issue of burnout has been adequately addressed. This is particularly critical with projects operating abroad because team members must simultaneously learn about and facilitate change within a new culture. Such traumas may not be considered adequately when designing a project and anticipating the shape of the intervention. Furthermore, they historically may not have been considered relevant to reporting findings. Yet the contemporary shifting of paradigms from reliance on quantitative, objective analysis to acceptance of qualitative, subjective inquiry has seen more frequent calls for reports on the human element of community intervention as well as the measurable outcomes (Schumacher, 1973; Trickett, 1984, 1991; Chavis, 1993). To meet the needs of team members, program development should be holistic; that is, personal cultivation and skills acquisition should receive equal attention (cf. Denise & Harris).

The Social Action Project, a community development and action research project, can serve as a model to demonstrate the importance of careful orientation and training to mitigate the problems of entry for

anyone, professional or student, into a new culture. Students on the project's intervention team are undergraduates who receive study abroad course credit for their participation in the community-based practicum. They are interracial (black, white, Hispanic, Asian) and interdisciplinary (psychology, political science, general studies, education, sociology, English), and include both genders. In the field they work with residents and professionals from various areas of expertise.

The very collaborative nature of action research can be a source of great tension. Preparing student interventionists to enter and be activists within a foreign community is analogous to orienting students who will study abroad and immerse themselves in a new culture.

### Social Action Project

The Social Action Project (SOCACT) is an action research project operating in two communities, one in southwest Michigan and the other in southeast Abia State in Nigeria (Iboland). The objective is to design and implement activities to address psychological and sociological problems associated with urban decline.

The project collaborated with residents in both communities to identify the needs to be addressed. Theater and culture are used as the mechanism to meet the U.S. community's expressed need for youth activities. The youth community theater targets young people averaged twelve years old, who receive technical and artistic support from elders through an intergenerational program. The theater productions incorporate Nigerian folklore, art, and dance through a cultural exchange between the youth and the elders of the two nations. (For further discussion of this component of the project, see Bryant, 1994.)

A model primary curriculum was designed in response to the identified need for improved education in the Nigerian community. A curriculum notebook was developed to train teachers in techniques that will better prepare their students to compete successfully on standardized national academic exams. In addition, Ibo culture and history were incorporated into the lesson plans and a community library was to be established.

An intervention team, including U.S. undergraduates, works in the field to implement SOCACT objectives. Team members operate as

participant observers in the communities where the work takes place. As participant observers, team members actively seek to establish relationships with residents. The success of this participatory approach depends on how well team members become comfortable with the norms and expectations of the community. Furthermore, team members must learn to work within political realities very different from the democratic process in the United States.

### The Participatory Approach and Program Development

By definition a community psychologist is not only a therapist but also an interventionist or activist. For the activist, action research is an important tool that increases the body of knowledge about social systems as they interact with the lives of individuals. The participatory approach is fundamental to this type of community research.

Despite the advantage of relevance to the community where it is conducted, the collaboration necessary to action research can lead to tension. Montero (1994) referred to internal and external researchers. Internal researchers are those from the community itself who are the most knowledgeable about its dynamics and needs; external researchers are those who have come from outside the community and wish to be acculturated. The participatory approach draws upon the expertise of professionals (the SOCACT team) and the "mother wit" of residents to produce an ecologically valid intervention.

### *Establishing an Action Research Project*

Site selection involves both practical and emotional considerations. Questions about the feasibility of operating in the international setting must be asked in conjunction with concerns about the scope of culture shock the team might experience. To focus on the former and leave the latter to chance invites problems that can be avoided.

In the case of SOCACT, administrative links to the Nigerian community were established as a result of professional networking. Through these contacts the project director presented a paper at an international conference on establishing bridges between the university and community.

Administrative agreements to implement SOCACT in the new setting flowed naturally from contacts at the conference. Because

attendees were both academics and practitioners, it was possible to begin immediately to deal with entry issues and identify on-site staff for the project.

On the subjective side of the programmatic formula, expanding the SOCACT work into Nigeria invoked its own emotional impact. Prevailing stereotypes in the United States about life in Africa-nourished by National Geographic documentaries about rural villages and jungle safaris-could not be discounted. Supporters and potential team members had to be educated to the fact that the research would be done in an urban setting. Addressing the preconceived notions directly was the only way to ease anxieties that materials would be lost or lives would be in jeopardy. Training and orientation, discussed more fully below, were critical tools to alleviate the concerns.

Identifying team members is critical to program development because they not only collect data but also represent the project in the community. To this experience each person brings his or her own history, sensitivities, foibles, and capacities. The objective is to match the characteristics of the team member and the circumstance in which that person will work. An appropriate match benefits both the individual and the community; concomitantly, a mismatch can result in damage whose ripples may extend far into the community (Bryant & Mettetal, in press).

Most teams that SOCACT has fielded have successfully entered the Ibo community and have been accepted in time. One team's members were poorly suited for work in the new culture. They were unwilling to lay aside their sense of superiority, being the Americans in Nigeria. The on-site staff had to do damage control, meeting with the offended families individually to make amends. In some cases this required the director to "spread money"- giving token amounts of cash to individuals in a household. Although such expenses make perfect sense to the interventionist in the field, they are often difficult to justify to grant sources. Thus the mismatch was costly in many aspects of the project operations.

An action research project has both a development agenda (what the community needs) and a research agenda (what the study wants to find out). The two sets of demands often conflict under the best circumstances; the situation is further complicated when the project is

abroad. The dilemma is illustrated by the truism that social problems are culturally defined and culture specific (Best, 1995). In the United States, crime is a pervasive urban social problem. Team members traveled to Iboland and assumed that because the setting there was also urban, crime would be problematic. In reality, residents reported that they handled "hooligans" with direct social sanctions: they were banished by elders of the community. Consequently, although it would have been methodologically elegant to study crime in both settings, the Ibo community had no need for such a study. The research objectives had to give way to the development agenda.

### *Curriculum Design and Academic Content*

SOCACT has a classroom component that complements the fieldwork by preparing students with technical skills and enhanced awareness of cultural issues (Gondolf, 1989). The classroom experience acquaints team members with the basic theories, models, and techniques of community psychology and applied research. Because project work is done overseas, students must also develop an appreciation of the impact that cultural context can have on a problem and its possible resolutions. By way of orientation, the class does a simulation exercise in which they develop a program for a country chosen by lottery. To do the assignment, students must first learn about the nation through a bibliographic search of its culture and history. The program is then designed in consideration of this cultural information.

Students from the class become members of the field team and, in the process, learn to translate theory into practice. At the same time, they are thrust into situations that test their cultural sensitivity. In the United States it is often assumed that the powerful people hold public office, have visible social status, or are organizational leaders. Prior to entry into the Ibo culture, a bibliographic search into its norms revealed that power is determined in significant part by age and by social connections. On-site team members had to develop relationships with people who could then make the introductions to community elders. The team avoided the typical American mistake of trying to go directly to the person in charge, presuming they could identify that person and that they would be welcomed.

*Process Evaluation to Determine Effectiveness*

Evaluation is the key to the survival of international community development programs (Korten, 1990). Therefore, evaluation is the key to survival of the interventionist since the project provides the on-site structure within which team members operate. For SOCACT, this has sometimes required explaining Nigerian culture to the U.S. community and institution. The project uses several mechanisms to do this: a regular newsletter, information sessions geared for nonacademic audiences, and promotional items such as videos, and T-shirts.

To ensure that objectives are being met, the overseas arm of SOCACT is monitored on an ongoing basis using a spectrum of sources, including observation. Findings from the different sources are compared to determine the degree of agreement between them on key dimensions. In this way the on-site staff and members of the field team can separate the facts of the matter from the affect of the matter.

Team members find themselves immersed in a completely new culture trying to implement a multidimensional research project. Tensions are inevitable. The team logs and observations by on-site staff constitute a process evaluation to identify the friction as administrative problems or personality differences. Cultural expectations come into play and often cloud the situation further. During one site visit, an African male and an African American woman came into conflict. To resolve the problems, the staff had to determine whether the root of the conflict was about national loyalty, gender politics, or unclear roles. Research data were used with lengthy discussions with both parties to determine what factors were at work. In time it became clear that clarifying who was in charge of what aspect of the fieldwork would resolve the issue.

Team building as a part of predeparture orientation can lessen the friction that builds between people in the community and on the team. During this training period, SOCACT participants are coached on conflict resolution, with special attention to the impact of culture on conflict styles. Although the African American woman in the previous example did encounter difficulties working with Ibo men, the orientation helped her better understand the cultural determinants of the reception she experienced. She reported that the training had

helped her resist the urge to assume the conflict was entirely a personal attack.

### *Recommendations for Program Development*

SOCACT was created to research and conduct activities that will help people change their lives. In the process, team members immersed into this new culture need to be equipped to handle the emotional demands as well as the technical ones. Working in communities can be especially traumatic when the condition being studied is the result of oppression. The field team does not have the luxury of detachment from the physical conditions produced by social injustice. Certain practical techniques can mitigate the impact of being thrust into the midst of human suffering. For example, Freire's (1989) process of consciousness-raising (becoming aware of situations or facts previously unknown or minimized) can help both research and residents counteract feelings of powerlessness. But like the problems themselves, the feelings can return in another guise and with greater intensity.

A well-defined program can facilitate the team's effectiveness by providing the following components:

1. Develop a project manual that can be given to new team members. In addition to instruction about the research design and instruments, the manual should contain cultural information (historic and contemporary) about the international setting. SOCACT members report that the most informative section of the manual contains stories from team members who have returned from the field about entry into Ibo culture and reentry into the United States.

2. Use a holistic approach to prepare team members for work in the field. Their predeparture orientation should go beyond which shots to take and what clothes to pack. Each community setting has its own character and history. Before beginning any intervention, U.S. project staff should invest time in learning as much as possible about the community, its major stakeholders, previous experiences with foreign visitors, and related information that might clarify the dynamics at work. Events or attitudes in the larger community influence the intervention and, therefore, the interventionists. When the result is constructive and can be viewed as a victory for community-university partnerships, team members are in less jeopardy of culture clash than

when the opposite is the case. The holistic approach should include experiential opportunities such as supper at the home of an Ibo living in the United States; trips to museums of culture and history; discussion groups to air their concerns, fears, or stories they have heard; and tutorials on how to use the currency.

3. To make the transition into the new culture easier, foster a sense of collaboration between the project team and the on-site staff abroad. Focus on exploring the complexities created when members are linked to each other, and the community, through hundreds of interactions. Use a variety of mechanisms to develop the capacity to see the larger pattern. SOCACT has a project archive of clippings from newspapers in both the United States and the Nigerian community. Part of each team meeting is devoted to reviewing events in the communities so that team members are informed about events and important residents.

#### Demands of Participatory Approach on the Interventionist

The member of the SOCACT field team is a participant observer immersed in the foreign culture. The individual must build rapport with residents. In the laboratory this can be accomplished with a few minutes of chatter intended to put the subject at ease. In the field, building relationships involves an expectation of reciprocity not present in the laboratory. Team members must invest some part of themselves in return for what they are given by their community contacts.

As part of their entry process, team members report a spectrum of social encounters. Team members may be invited to stay the evening on the family compound, discussing politics and village plans for pipe-borne water. The time invested might also require commiserating with teachers about the dire lack of educational supplies while being shown from room to room in the building. At other times a team member may provide social support for a young woman whose career plans are at odds with her family's wishes.

#### *Emotional Demands and Personal Costs*

Participatory fieldwork is inherently fraught with personal demands on the researcher, who does not have the luxury of maintaining scientific detachment. These strains are complicated by working in a

culture other than one's own, and yet again for a project consciously designed to bring about social change.

For the SOCACT team these personal costs have taken many forms. Each time the field team travels to Nigeria someone experiences life in an authoritarian context for the first time. The restrictions impact on the psyche of those accustomed to the individual rights and freedoms of the U.S. political climate.

The road from the airport in Lagos to the community in Iboland is peppered with checkpoints and roadblocks stationed every five miles or so. It is not uncommon for police at these checkpoints to roust passengers from the car, search their belongings, and scrutinize research materials. Often, payoffs must be made before the team can continue the journey.

The Nigerian nationals on the team are accustomed to being rousted by armed guards, but the U.S. members are not. The psychological impact is intensified by the realization that while diplomatic assistance is theoretically available to an American abroad, in reality the consulate is a distant irrelevancy, being one hundred miles and at least four hours to the west. The realization that this guard at the checkpoint is the final arbitrator can be very disturbing for an American more at home with the concepts of due process and protection under the law.

For white members of the field team, the trip to Nigeria meant they were a racial minority for the first time in their lives. Nigeria's history of colonization and recent independence is only a generation in the past. Consequently, sentiment against whites in authority positions stills runs strong. After a lifetime of skin-privilege the impact of being denied those benefits, also on the basis of skin color, can be traumatic.

The extended stay in Nigeria meant that team members had to deal with these issues on a daily basis in myriad small ways: at bus stops, on neighborhood porches, in conversations, at the market. They reported feeling angry and sometimes afraid because everything they did was interpreted through a stereotype because of their skin color. Team members also reported being outraged that so many people chose not to learn about them as individuals, believing their preconceived notions were accurate. On-site staff were always available to help members process their feelings about these encounters. All concerned reported

that it was an enlightening experience in race relations that transferred to their lives back in the United States.

Whether justly or not, an American abroad is at times held personally accountable for the country's policies and social problems. Americans in the SOCACT project were often lambasted for U.S. government policy. As whites they were called to account for the actions of European missionaries who colonized Nigeria. As African Americans they were expected to explain why there is not greater collaboration between the two peoples, especially given the common ancestry. Team members could not simply remain silent until the trip was over because the site visits last several weeks. Rather, they had to develop a level of comfort over responding to these questions while avoiding the burden of guilt they implied.

Finally, a common experience for the team has been that of expecting unconditional welcome and being questioned with great suspicion. Team members deal with community contacts who are less than welcoming. They remind project staff that Americans have been coming for generations with claims they will improve Nigerian society. They were called colonizers, missionaries, oppressors-and they were not well received. Once entrenched, they have done one of two things. They have made sweeping promises in order to achieve their goals, or they have ignored the needs of the local culture and implemented prepared programs (Korten, 1990). On finishing their work, the Americans simply left, leaving promises unkept and resentments untended.

This is the legacy that SOCACT members inherited and within which they must operate. In a very real way, all team members also must explore their own personal views of their new status as potential oppressors. Considering that many would feel this label in no way represents their intentions, resistance from their newly adopted culture can do much to dampen enthusiasm.

### *The Personal Costs of Politics and Intervention*

Community interventions abroad exist within a political context just as much as concomitant efforts in the United States. The Nigerian setting is more problematic because relations between the United States and Nigeria are mercurial. When the Congressional Black Caucus

supported Abiola in the 1994 election, the SOCACT team felt the impact in the field. Thus, politics-not necessarily one's own-can exact personal costs for the members abroad.

Emotional demands are exacerbated by the intransigence of the social problems commonly addressed (Sarason, 1978). Unfortunately, many research projects continue to operate as if the solutions are simple and as if, once solved, the problem will never resurface. In the field a great toll is exacted by repeatedly finding that, for reasons likely beyond direct control, the problem has grown a new head. Instead of being rational and logical, events are driven by numerous agendas such as unbridled jealousy, debilitating addiction, consuming pessimism, and crippling insecurities.

Ethical codes and the decisions they are meant to codify may not transfer neatly from the United States to an international setting. Resolving apparent contradictions regarding the appropriate action can be the source of much distress for on-site staff and team members. In laboratory research the problems are more easily solved because the environment is controlled and the forces at work are more readily identifiable. In community settings, where the question of ethics is embedded in a web of often competing relationships, resolution can be a convoluted task.

At times the requirements of the project design clash with the loyalties of personal relationships. Since team members are immersed in the culture, nurturing those relationships is a vital part both of the research and of daily life. The staff member is now in a quandary. Should confidences shared on the basis of perceived friendship be detailed on the project logsheet as data? Is doing so a betrayal of friendship, or is failure to do so a threat to the integrity of the design? Where is the distinction between scholarly rigor and social obligation?

Repeatedly the team faced matters of conscience dealing with the contradictions inherent to applying ethical codes designed for a different reality from the one where project activities take place. There is often an enormous gap between the assumptions underlying the ethical prescription and the experience of those in the study. Codes developed for relatively liberal, economically stable, politically "safe," and literate societies may not be a good fit (Goduka, 1990; Montero, 1994). Middle-class privilege and opportunity is irrelevant in an

impoverished community; individual freedom and choice means little in an authoritarian political climate.

Beam members deal with suspicions regarding the informed consent document required by U.S. professional codes of ethics. Some residents worry that there are hidden agendas whose threats will not become apparent until later. In the Ibo culture a person's word still carries more weight than any legal document because formal institutions, it is generally felt, are not interested in the needs of people. Consequently, the informed consent letter was considered superfluous and was often discarded. In either case, the team member had to respond so as to preserve the integrity of the intervention and at the same time nurture the social relationship. Emotionally, this balancing act places great stress on the individual.

Many interventionists must learn about the limits of their ability to create change. The SOCACT staff are regularly faced with how best to monitor the inclination on their part, or the expectation on the part of the community resident, that the project will solve all social ills. At times these lessons are harsh and inflict emotional wounds that must somehow be processed if the person is to continue working in communities.

In the Nigerian setting, for example, basic goods such as books and school materials are scarce. As the SOCACT staff were making arrangements to establish a community library and set up a model school, they encountered the messiah principle. It made little difference that the informed consent form stated only that "we will help establish a library." Many contacts in the community expected sweeping outcomes that would significantly change all aspects of their quality of life. The challenge for project staff was in part to help contacts form more realistic expectations about the pace and scope of the proposed activities. For team members themselves, such acclaim and its ascribed power can be seductive. Finding an equilibrium can be difficult.

### *Recommendations for Managing Personal Costs*

Professional training and the conventions under which we practice too frequently do not prepare interventionists for the personal toll that will be demanded. In the naturalistic community setting, wits and intuition count as much as, sometimes more than, scientific

methodology. Graduate programs, professional workshops, and academic conferences address objectively perceived needs (those collectively agreed to be necessary for professional competence) but more generally ignore psychologically perceived needs (those the individual feels to be necessary for professional competence).

If informal conversation at places where professionals gather is any indication, community interventionists need to explore methods to survive the personal costs of their work. These suggestions are offered to open the discussion.

1. Rethink our notions of what fieldworkers "need" to be effective. Cultural immersion can be an all-consuming personal experience. Emphasis should be on helping members through both entry into the foreign culture and reentry into their own. Philosophies to manage the anxieties and competing loyalties of being both a scholar and a human being should be included in the implementation plan. A time for catharsis can be just as important as appointments to submit project data. These sessions, which should be intentionally therapeutic, can be held individually or with the entire team. They can become restorative times for on-site staff and team members, providing refuge from the existential turbulence of social change and culture shock.

2. Create opportunities for individuals to explore their individual philosophical and/or religious perspectives. While the metaphysical is an area that psychology has traditionally shunned (Sarason, 1993) there is no gainsaying that people's beliefs drive the decisions they make. This is especially true with work involving social causes or that sets out to change social conditions. If work in a community setting has psychological impacts, it is a reasonable progression to assume that there are spiritual impacts as well. Ignoring this reality may be a comfortable academic position, but it is a myopic approach to conducting applied research. When the project operates abroad, it is vulnerable to members' existential crises when belief systems collide. Be prepared to help the team member who just realized that many Judeo-Christian rituals have roots in African animism and pagan rites.

3. Create a forum where team members can talk to one another about their practical experiences: frustrations with key informants, fears about harassment at checkpoints, disillusionment over being rejected rather than welcomed, role reversal as the white minority.

Through frequent team meetings members can examine their own reactions and listen to their peers as they grapple with the slow pace and unpredictable nature of change. If this sounds very much like a self-help group, it should be. The stresses generated by community work are chronic, and their cumulative effect can be debilitating. The danger of breakdown is no less real simply because the reasons for the stress are socially acceptable, even laudable.

4. Expand training in cultural awareness and sensitivity to include critical thinking about how theoretical issues will transfer into the international setting. The rhetoric of the participatory approach emphasizes linkages and building bridges; however, too often fieldworkers lose sight of how much their work is limited by cultural considerations (Bryant, in press). Since members are linked to each other and the community through hundreds of interactions, encourage the capacity to ask about appropriate transfer. This may help an individual resist making presumptions that will

5. Pay more attention to the practicalities of using the ethical code during postgraduate training. Students should begin early in their professional career moving beyond the textbook into processing real ethical dilemmas posed in a practicum. This implies that a range of practicum settings should be available to diversify the range of experiences. This will enable the neophyte professional to build a repertoire of skills, and the confidence to use them effectively, rather than be lockstepped into a rigid ethical script (Goduka, 1990).

## Conclusion

Interventionists must survive in their newly adopted culture if the projects are to be successful. This thought may seem incredibly obvious, yet there remains an imbalance in how community research is currently conducted. Professionals invest much time and energy to protect the subjects. This is as it should be. Now equal care must be taken of those who are members of the field team.

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