

“Paralyzed by Ethics”: Reflecting on the Risks of Counselors Engaging in Capacity Building in
Developing Nations.

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Four years ago, a good friend of mine returning from a conference in Kenya inspired me to create and manage a non-profit organization with him. Our mandate is to assist children in poverty-stricken communities who are orphaned by AIDS. A sincere and highly motivated Kenyan man named Charles planted the seed for this initiative. He shared with us the plight of the children from his village in Western Kenya. Orphaned at a young age himself, he sympathizes deeply with children whose daily struggles evolve around where their next meal will come from, whether they will go to school like the other children, or whether their families—who have fallen prey to local superstition—will support them. Fueled by the communal belief that taking an orphaned child into one’s home “removes the blessings from the family”, it is not difficult to imagine the repercussions of a child living in an environment with such stigma—a stigma further exacerbated by severe poverty, inaccessibility to clean water and adequate sanitation, and insufficient resources to serve basic educational and medical needs. More critically, it is an environment with diminished social support amidst absent parental love and care for an already vulnerable population—children.

With tireless fundraising efforts and a growing collaboration with Charles in Kenya, our organization built two primary schools in his village, as well as a small kitchen to replace the open-air version that, needless to say, posed a few concerns about sanitation. The schools are housed on an acre of land that has also become home to two cows and several hens, mostly donated by grandmothers who—having witnessed their own children die from AIDS—are now the primary caregivers of their grandchildren. Crops, such as maize and sukuma greens, supplement the children’s lunch of rice or ugali—sometimes the only meal they will receive in a

day. And, of course, no education would be complete without up-to-date texts, notebooks, pencils, teaching aids, and salaried teachers. Charles' hope is that the school's advocacy for the children might mitigate the discriminatory belief that they are a burden to society. Their motto: "To make an orphan smile".

Reflecting on how my experiences in Kenya intersect with my professional role, I now conceptualize it through the lens of social justice. I perceive our organization as endorsing principles of social justice: more equitable distribution of resources crucial to human development and well-being, if not survival; accessibility to opportunities through education; full participation of all stakeholders in decisions affecting them; and honoring a harmonious approach where social change is not achieved at the expense of others.

It was praise from Charles, the village elder, and locals that helped me name my role in Kenya. "You have done great things for the community and for the orphans. We are happy with the community development that you have done," said Charles. "You have given us hope. I no longer feel forgotten. I have found a friend in you," said one of the grandmothers. I had never thought of myself as a "community developer". But there I was, a Canadian counselor, a White Westerner in unfamiliar territory generating new possibilities for a group devalued by its community—children chronically and unjustly oppressed by local lore. Grateful for the positive reception, I felt welcomed into the community. I basked in the kudos...but only fleetingly.

I began to notice a curious pattern in how I approached our partnership in Kenya. I was always playing "devil's advocate" with Todd, the other managing director of our organization. I felt suspicious about the outcome and even the feasibility of pretty much every initiative he proposed. "Does the school really need computers, internet, or electricity?" I wondered. I weighed every decision before us to the nth degree, bogging myself to a near standstill and, I

suspect, slowing Todd down significantly too. As conscientious as I wanted to be, I always had a “what if” at the back of my mind. Ethics discourse had taught me that it is not conscious action that gets us into trouble. More often than not, harm is unintentional. My greatest fear was imposing our Western values, possibly even contributing to the gradual cultural disintegration of Charles’ community. A self-appointed advocate for Charles, I insisted that he have the final say in every decision, believing that this measure would ensure his voice was heard and that we were “doing right by his culture”. Alarming, he always seemed to defer to us, politely saying “yes” to everything we proposed. I began to doubt his critical abilities, and became confused by his readiness to accommodate what seemed like *all* of our ideas. Were power and privilege at play?

One day I caught myself thinking, “I’m too cautious for my own good. If it weren’t for Todd initiating and following through, we wouldn’t accomplish a thing.” In discussing my observation with a colleague, I had an insight: I was worried that I was causing harm. My colleague asked, “How would you know when you’re causing harm?” I didn’t know the answer. She said, “You are paralyzed by your ethics.” This was pause for thought.

I concluded that my ethics training had not prepared me for counseling abroad. How does one discern harm when working as a minority in a new and unfamiliar environment? When former points of reference used to gauge risk may no longer apply? The definition of harm becomes elusive amidst different cultural and socio-political contexts, precariously positioning me to advance without a full grasp of the signs that will forewarn me of any transgressions.

I found myself wondering about the long-term effects of our organization’s presence in Charles’ village. The echo of “do no harm” haunted me. Kenya had obtained independence from Britain in 1963 after a long colonial history. I could not get rid of nagging questions: What are my blind spots? Am I inadvertently engaging in a microcosmic re-colonization of Charles’

community? A recapitulation of colonial dynamics despite my good intentions? Is it possible to do harm even with the support of Charles and his community? How might the presence of a White non-native woman intersect with Charles' colonial past? Was his apparent "obligingness" a manifestation of this past? I feel shame at the possibility that these wonderings, by their very nature, are paternalistic. Do they imply a view of Charles as fragile and buckling under "Western forces" and the "whims of well-intentioned humanitarians"? I believe abject poverty can be a strong persuader. My paralysis deepens.

I continue to reflect on best practices for counselors who wish to work in international settings. Despite the systematic and preventable human suffering in our global village, our counseling role in international contexts—particularly capacity-building in developing nations—remains unclear. My experiences in Kenya have sensitized me to how counselors might approach their work abroad to minimize a disempowering colonial stance. The presence of foreign counselors may cause duress on a community despite well-intentioned engagement with marginalized groups. As I outline the following implications, I reflect on the processes of *participation* and *harmony* in pursuit of the outcomes of increased *equity* and *accessibility*. I also reflect on the pertinence of social constructivism for counselors working in developing nations.

- It is easy to convince ourselves that our presence in a community is welcomed, particularly when we believe we are acting on sincere intentions. How might we know that the way in which we are engaging is beneficial for a community? How might we go about assessing the effect our presence is having, both in the short and long run? How can we ensure that our work is conducted harmoniously?
- In the spirit of deliberative justice, focusing on *how* we make decisions that can affect a group and its community requires attention. Are all stakeholders invited to participate in

the decision-making process? To what extent is the decision process an empowering one for stakeholders and the community as a whole? In what manner might cultural norms interfere with an empowering decision process? Might dynamics of power and privilege be reflected in the decision-making given the cultural and historical roots of the parties involved?

- Applying a social constructivist philosophy may mitigate a counselor's imposition of values or "taking over" of the decision process. Efforts could include honoring the voice of all stakeholders, utilizing a collaborative approach when identifying and addressing community needs, and drawing on local knowledge when co-constructing an approach to meet those needs. It may require that we suspend our values and beliefs, or make them known through transparency for the careful consideration of others. This stance speaks to the "how" of participation.
- When working with marginalized groups, we may be tempted to engage in a paternalistic "I-know-best" stance. Social constructivism acknowledges that there is no objective truth and that "truth" lies in the uniqueness of any given context. Paying attention to the truths of others may require that we momentarily let go of the comfort and familiarity of our own truths. It is through our tolerance to ambiguity that meaningful and contextualized decisions can emerge.

I seek solace in the fact that Charles sought our collaboration. However, I have learned that maintaining a truly collaborative stance requires ongoing diligence from all parties.

Culturally-defined beings that are constantly negotiating subjective truths, I assume a chronic position of "genuine curiosity" and "not knowing". I suspend all assumptions to the best of my ability so that intended meanings can emerge from our conversations. I ensure all stakeholders

weigh in on decisions that will affect them, for better or worse. Ultimately, I may never know the repercussions of sincere intentions. But I have learned so much from Kenyan neighbors and I eagerly await the next step in our journey.