Northwest University

Guided Thesis: A Project Proposal for Cultural Integration to Improve the Healthcare Practices

of Karen Hilltribe Communities

Integrative project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in

International Community Development

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ESSAY #1: CONTEXTUALIZATION

One key element to effective community development is contextualization. Essentially, contextualization is a shift in form to meet a given context. Forgive the crude example, but in the comedy film *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls,* Jim Carrey performs an entertaining and insightful performance of cultural contextualization. In the movie, Carrey portrays an American detective attempting to recover a stolen animal. He partners with an indigenous African tribe to investigate further. Showing visible discomfort, he enters the small confines of their hut, covered in sweat and bugs due to the humidity and exotic climate. After Carrey tells the chief he intends to find their sacred animal, the chief spits directly in his face. Excitedly, the translator informs the offended Carrey that spitting is a form of respect in their culture. The scene concludes by Carrey expectorating profusely on the chief's face, prompting immediate jubilation and laughter from everyone. While this scene could easily be reduced to mere comic relief for unsophisticated youths (such as my former self), I use this illustration, among others, to describe the critical role that contextualization plays in the work of community development.

The role and necessity of contextualization are hotly debated in the development sector. According to World Bank indicators, the vast majority of "High Income" nations are comprised of Western countries (Willis 4). Consequently, Western nations contribute the greatest financial amount to international aid. Yet, the cultural and sociological divide between the donors and recipients is massive. Most advocates for contextualization in the development sector still fall short in their understanding of the historical complexities that created the scenario that aid workers seek to alleviate. The need for deep contextualization is profound. In this paper, I will describe the nature of contextualization, its role in designing and implementing programs, the promotion of creativity and innovation, and use the Karen Hilltribe community as a case study.

A greater understanding of contextualization will promote its integration into the development sector and eventually become a standard practice among intercultural relationships.

Defining Contextualization

Many years ago, I was involved in my church's "Homeless Shelter" ministry. Our team would serve food and drinks to the residents of the local shelters and then join them, eating together and sharing stories. Jenny, our team leader, was a kind and thoughtful lady in her mid-fifties. As our team was getting ready to serve food one Sunday, she stopped me and asked: "Hey Bro, what do you think about…." I do not remember what she asked. I just remember that she called me "Bro." She must have heard me say and respond to that term countless times. In fact, she was trying to enter my world by using it. But at that time, my world was not large enough to include a fifty-five-year-old woman calling me "Bro" without laughing. Jenny's attempt to adapt was courageous and intentional, but she failed to achieve her desired outcome of deepening our bond.

Contextualization is a tool of nuance. By definition, it changes in each context. Had Jenny paid more attention to my vernacular around others more similar to her demographic, she may have chosen a different term of endearment. In development, the context carries even more significant weight. A contextualized approach to development challenges the nature of a strictly dichotomized positivist perspective that qualifies knowledge as either true or false. It requires an open mind and welcomes the influence of others. In his brilliant TED talk, Ernesto Sirolli describes his valiant and well-intentioned efforts in Zambia. His team of Italian development workers quickly began to solve the community's food shortage by planting imported tomatoes in the rich, fertile valley. As the fruit grows and his plans appear successful, he quips, "Thank God we're here!" (2:00-2:15). Just as the tomatoes were ripe and ready for harvesting, a herd of hippos came out of the water and ate everything. Shocked and frustrated, Sirolli turns to the

Zambian community and proclaims, "My God, the hippos… How come you didn't tell us?" The

Zambians simply reply, "You never asked" (2:00 – 2:50). Through his failure, Sirolli learned that

the greatest way to help someone is to actively listen and help them be the solution to their

problem. This form of mutual empowerment is understood as "copowerment."

Going back to the successful example of contextualization found in Carrey, there are

three attributes that contribute to effective contextualization. These attributes include a

willingness to differ from tradition, shedding one's perspective, and receptivity for influence. It

is also worth noting that Carrey's character is rather odd and eccentric, not belonging to any

particular community in depth. While this may seem disadvantageous, it is helpful to enter

another perspective when our own is not entirely cemented in tradition. Charles Vogl describes a

community as "a group of individuals who share a mutual concern for one another's welfare"

(9). He also argues that the success of a community will depend on the articulation and

understanding of these four features: shared values, membership identity, moral proscriptions,

and insider understanding (10). As a member on the fringe of society, Carrey's character is less

restricted from entering the world of the unknown other. That is the heart of contextualization:

inhabiting another world so profoundly that it becomes your own.

Contextualization in Development

The need for contextualization in development cannot be overstated. The history of development

is stained by years of harmful programs and initiatives that failed to account for the given

context. Sustainable solutions must involve local stakeholders and allow for complete localized

control. Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become leaders in

contextualization due to their flexibility and localized nature. Regarding the advantages of

NGOs, Willis notes:

It is argued that NGOs can provide services that are much more appropriate to local

communities. This is because they work with populations at the grassroots to find out

what facilities are required. In addition, they are able to provide such services more

efficiently and effectively through drawing on local people's knowledge, and also using

local materials. (108)

Because they offer greater autonomy and flexibility, many people view NGOs as the solution to

the problems in development.

Global trends are popularizing diversity and social justice, which is worth celebrating.

Unfortunately, many organizations espouse partnership and sustainability on a transactional level

but fail to implement their theoretical ideals at any level of significance or substance (Salter

McNeil 90). This is exemplified by organizations that advertise a racially diverse board of

directors, yet white males fill all positions of influence. Willis argues, "Rather than incorporating

individual and community views into programmes and projects just 'for appearance,' local views

should be prioritized in the development of any policies. In addition, rather than attempting to

consider and act at a 'global scale,' the focus should be on local views and actions" (126). Such

perspectives counter the positivistic idea of applying objective, technical solutions. Proper

contextualization challenges the need for control, creating opportunities for novel, creative

solutions.

A powerful example of personal contextualization is found in Dr. Seth Holmes. With

utter abandonment, Holmes entered the world of the Triqui migrant workers, suffering alongside

them for months on end. Despite the consequences, Holmes' commitment to deep

contextualization resulted in the otherwise indiscoverable insights into the life of the Triqui

migrant workers and solutions to improve their circumstances. He shares, "In my own fieldwork,

my bodily experiences lent valuable insights into social suffering, power hierarchies, and the implications of fieldwork relationships" (34). Paradoxically, the insights he gained came through his hardships, rather than despite them. As Holmes engaged in "deep hanging out" (32) with his Triqui companions, he became intimately acquainted with their reality and better equipped to help them on their journey to freedom. Only through such extreme contextualization was he able to understand the realities of the Triqui migrant workers and advocate for them.

Contextualization is not merely a valuable tool, but simultaneously an outcome in itself. Holmes contextualized his study of the Triqui migrant workers to discover an appropriate solution to their suffering. But through his contextualization, he became partner and peer of those he sought to study, lending them power and relationship. In *Walking with the Poor*, Myers presents a case for the chief aim of development. He argues, "Healing the marred identity of the poor is the beginning of transformation… Therefore, restoring identity and recovering vocation must be the focus of a biblical understanding of human transformation" (178). By entering their world of suffering, Holmes showed that he was not above his companions. When Sirolli's team of Italian development workers created and implemented their agricultural solution, they certainly believed they were superior to the local Zambians. In humiliation, they could have blamed their Zambian counterparts and dismissed their own errors of ignorance and arrogance. Instead, Sirolli learned to listen to local wisdom, even when his worldview could not understand their ideas. When people in positions of influence genuinely dialogue with others, power and information are shared. The simple act of foreign aid workers mutually partnering with locals is transformative for the identity of the aid workers and local communities and exemplifies the value of "copowerment."

In *Planners Versus Searchers*, William Easterly presents "Planners" as positivistic, technical workers in juxtaposition with "Searchers" as contextualized, adaptive workers. The dichotomy between the two positions is far more complex and non-binary than he describes, but his argument confronts the reality of most development work. He argues:

> A planner thinks he already knows the answers; he thinks of poverty as a technical engineering problem that his answers will solve. A searcher admits he doesn't know the answers in advance; he believes that poverty is a complicated tangle of political, social, historical, institutional, and technological factors. A searcher hopes to find answers to individual problems only by trial and error experimentation. A planner believes outsiders know enough to impose solutions. A searcher believes only insiders have enough knowledge to find solutions, and that most solutions must be homegrown. (Easterly 6)

The implications of the "Planner" mindset degrade the identity of recipients. Conversely, when "Searchers" honestly believe that only insiders have the necessary knowledge, they come as peers and partners rather than saviors and overseers. Thus, when developing and implementing systems for community development, contextualization must play an integral role.

Creativity and Innovation

In addition to enriched relationships and restored identities, creativity and innovation also accompany contextualization. As seen in the description and name of a "Searcher," contextualization requires obtaining new information and some form of creativity. Development workers must be willing to lay aside their preconceived ideas of good development, enter the given context, gain an understanding of the nuances, and then begin to co-create a solution. Again, the process of partnering with locals in their context is a positive shift toward transformation. In their book, *Creative Confidence*, authors Kelley and Kelley describe the

process of different parties sharing ideas as "cross-pollination" and suggest that such collaboration can be a great source of creative inspiration (81). They also illustrate the proper stance a development worker ought to take if they intend to understand the given context. They write, "Empathy means challenging your preconceived ideas and setting aside your sense of what you think is true in order to learn what actually is true" (90). It is no small task to genuinely challenge the legitimacy of our beliefs.

In development, contextualization is an ongoing process as environments continue to change. Father Richard Rohr teaches on the creative nature of God. He argues that "God seems to have created things that continue to create and recreate themselves from the inside out. It is no longer God's one-time creation or evolution; rather, God's form of creation precisely is evolution" (93). Similarly, the role of the development worker must embrace innovative iterations to the ever-evolving context. Researcher Ashely South presents one example of such innovation towards development. He notes the issues of ethnic minorities in Myanmar (Myanmar/ Burma are used interchangeably throughout) when he writes, "The aid industry's approach insidiously redefines the provision of public services to ethnic minority communities from being the site of political struggle into a "technical problem" of public administration, which supposedly can be solved through donor money and technical expertise" (455). He offers an innovative solution, suggesting that the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) use the current political circumstances to pursue federalism "from the bottom-up" (454). In addition to displaying exemplary administrative and governance capacities, the EAOs can "demonstrate their political credibility to domestic and international stakeholders [is] through the responsible governance of natural resources and the environment" (455). While searching for an avenue towards peacebuilding, the team of researchers recognized that "Myanmar contains the largest

forest reserves in mainland Southeast Asia" (South 3), prompting a viable, creative, and multifaceted approach to peacebuilding and mitigating climate change. When development workers and researchers take the time to understand the given context and listen to local wisdom, the creative process often produces a greater outcome than either party could have envisioned.

Contextualization and the Karen

The Karen Hilltribe community presented a brilliant opportunity for applying contextualization. Their heritage is rich with traditional healers and herbalists, accompanied by a vibrant culture that has endured much conflict. I was introduced to the Karen through Free Burma Rangers (FBR), an organization providing aid and relief to displaced ethnic minorities in Myanmar. They built and operate a hospital in the remote jungle of Myanmar called the Jungle School of Medicine, Kawthoolei (JSMK), where they train medics and treat patients. The FBR training staff recognized a significant gap between the material the medics were taught compared to the outcome of their care. Subsequently, this led to subpar healthcare practices of the surrounding communities. After multiple discussions with the operations manager, Katie Wierenga, she and I decided to investigate the cultural factors at play in relationship to healthcare practices.

Katie and I, along with two other Karen women, took a field trip to Mae Sariang, a Karen majority district in Thailand. I observed first-hand the routines and health practices of the Karen. The Karen instinctively prioritize natural, healthy living as their lifestyle is intricately interwoven to their surrounding environment. Their traditions and rituals depend on their environment. At almost every point on our two-day journey, someone was always foraging for herbs, plucking ripe fruit, or uprooting vegetation to replant in their gardens (Fieldwork). The Karen ought to be the examples of proper health practices, but the community near JSMK appeared to deviate from this norm. As I learned more about the medic training curriculum, I

noticed the content was heavily skewed toward Western medicine. In order for the healthcare practices of the Karen to be improved, the curriculum and teaching methodology must be contextualized. Fortunately, the Karen offer a vast trove of traditional healthcare practices, and any partnership would be mutually beneficial.

A contextualized healthcare curriculum for the Karen must be easily understood by the Karen medics, utilize a Karen worldview, and highly incorporate the usage of herbs and foods as the key elements of preventative medicine. Therefore, the content must be created in partnership with ethnic Karen and the attending physician(s). Language, food, and culture cannot be separated from healthcare practices, unlike the compartmentalized nature of Western medicine. Also, incorporating Western medicine will require adaptations to standard practices for the natural adoption by the Karen. Because herbs such as turmeric and moringa are versatile staples of Karen healthcare practices, their usage must also be included in the formal curriculum.

The social dynamics of changing demographics must also be accounted for when applying contextualization. Many Karen youth have grown up in refugee camps or been displaced to different regions of Thailand, prompting them to assimilate to Thai culture and forgo their Karen heritage. One creative response to rehabilitate Karen culture among the youth is through social media (Focus Group). Most Karen youth who have not grown up in their native homes are on social media. Karen-led community-based organizations (CBOs) such as KESAN (Karen Environmental and Social Action Network) have initiated this effort.

The displaced Karen community comprises a slightly different demographic than their non-displaced counterparts. Similarly, ethnic Karen living in Thailand make up a different demographic than their ethnic Thai counterparts. Hofstede notes the distinction when he shares:

Regional, ethnic, and religious cultures account for differences within countries; ethnic and religious groups often transcend political country borders. Such groups form minorities at the crossroads between the dominant culture of the nation and their own traditional group culture. Some assimilate into the mainstream, although this process may take a generation or more; others continue to stick to their own ways. (45)

The displaced Karen are forced into a difficult position. They must sufficiently integrate into Thai culture to manage a healthy lifestyle while maintaining their cultural heritage. Chuensirikulchai et al. note this burden when they argue, "In order for the Karen hill tribe to maintain their identity, they must review their roles, lifestyle, livelihood, and the awareness of being a hill tribe. And this must be done along with the triumph to change in order to be a tribe who remain in their own identity with endurance" (5). The Karen are a unique group with much to offer. The necessity of contextualization cannot be overstated, given the complexity and nuances of their history and circumstances. And the result of such a collaborative partnership will yield a bountiful harvest.

Future Implications

Contextualization is not a new concept to me. My work in India was heavily contextualized. In fact, I made the error of over-contextualization. I stretched myself beyond my capacity, and my family and community suffered as a result. Parker Palmer spoke to my heart when he shared the following words: "If we are to live our lives fully and well, we must learn to embrace the opposites, to live in a creative tension between our limits and our potentials" (55). Deep contextualization does not always equate to entering further into another person's world. Sometimes, it will mean that we trust our partners, even when we do not understand. I was forced into humiliation, acutely aware of my limits which I thought I could ignore. As I imagine

what contextualization may look like in the future, I envision deeper trust with national partners and an expanding worldview.

Systems and plans for development must include a significant measure of quantifiable outcomes and deliverables if people hope to make substantial improvements. Therefore, I will pursue a general vision for what any given scenario may need, but I will hold that vision loosely to create something even greater and more sustainable. Planning and objective markers are prerequisites to creative collaboration if we are willing to release our notion of control. Father Rohr offers spiritual insight regarding the dilemmic tension inherent to a contextualized approach. He shares, "Psychological wholeness and spiritual holiness never exclude the problem from the solution. If it is wholeness, then it is always paradoxical, and holds both the dark and light side of things. Wholeness and holiness will always stretch us beyond our small comfort zone. How could they not?" (48). As I integrate contextualism with my work in development, I hope to enlarge my capacity for contradictions and promptly acknowledge my limitations. Only through my own process of transformation will I be able to offer my experience to others. In collaboration with our partners, I hope to gently invite others to forge a fresh, sacred platform for development and transformation.

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ESSAY #2: QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Qualitative inquiry is a form of research that utilizes non-numerical data to provide a holistic understanding of a given phenomenon. Its counterpart, quantitative inquiry, heavily favors numerical data to provide statistical analyses and explanations. As with all polarities, each form offers unique advantages and limits. There is a broad philosophical continuum between a post-structural, emerging interpretation found on the extreme of qualitative inquiry versus the strictly positivistic, numerical analysis seen in quantitative inquiry. More often than not, the philosophies overlap. I recently noted a keen example of such crossover.

Despite the hazards and legality involved, I recently spoke with my mom on FaceTime while driving my two young children to school. Excitement was high in our car. The kids chatted with their grandmother, who was ending her day in California while we were just starting ours in Thailand. Suddenly, in a burst of astute observation, my mom exclaimed, "Oh! They drive on the wrong side of the road there!" With a chuckle, I presented the relativity of traffic directionality. My mom quickly countered my lofty rhetoric with an expected eye-roll followed by, "Whatever," and we proceeded in our conversation. Looking at this example, my mom made first-hand field observations regarding the driving practices in Thailand, employing qualitative inquiry tactics. Yet, her conclusion was analytical, positivistic, and quantitative, claiming the observed phenomenon as "wrong" based on her personal experience of "right" driving. This menial illustration presents the grand scope of qualitative and quantitative perspectives and the necessity to employ them appropriately and contextually.

Community development requires qualitative inquiry. The complex and dynamic nature of humans mandates an equally adaptive form of research to properly gain understanding. Qualitative inquiry offers researchers the flexibility to study and interpret their subjects outside

the confines required by quantitative analysis. In this paper, I will articulate the essence of qualitative inquiry and note the shared values with the International Community Development (ICD) program. I will also elaborate on the distinctives and applications of qualitative inquiry and why it is necessary for the community development sector. Additionally, I will use my project with the Karen as a case study to highlight the advantages and real-life applications of qualitative inquiry and the necessity of its use.

Defining Qualitative Inquiry

As implied in the name, qualitative inquiry is concerned with quality more than quantity. Qualitative research typically utilizes a smaller data collection than quantitative research, but the depth of information and exploration is significantly more profound. If you have ever received targeted advertisements on social media, you can thank quantitative analysts for their accuracy. Conversely, if you wanted to understand the psychological effects of social media and targeted advertisements, a qualitative inquiry would help articulate the nuances and complexities as well as display the larger picture.

Understanding the 'how' and 'why' is at the heart of qualitative inquiry. Authors Merriam and Tisdell clearly state, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (6). The research process is relational, interactive, and designed to be a living science. The goal is not to unearth hidden superlatives or prove a working hypothesis. Instead, qualitative research is intentionally subjective because, as Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater put it, "Meaning is a subjective experience" (102). Qualitative data points are not confined to numbers and words but can be found anywhere such as artifacts, performances, artwork, and more.

Another defining characteristic of qualitative inquiry is acknowledging the researcher as the primary instrument throughout the process. Qualitative data is often collected through the five senses. Therefore, the researcher must be aware of their own partiality during observations and participation. For example, as an adventurous extrovert, nothing excites me more than crowds, loud music, and a festive atmosphere. I also dislike the smell of fish sauce. So, my observations of a Thai wet-market would be vastly different than someone with alternative preferences. Rather than omitting personal bias in research, Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater advise fieldworkers to include their subjective perspectives in their writing (111). By stating their role, preferences, and desires for the study, researchers display greater accuracy and integrity.

The subjectivity, wide range of data, and personal involvement in qualitative inquiry can be criticized and dismissed as unscientific. As a researcher who prefers qualitative methods, I would argue that the omission of personal bias and lack of depth in quantitative studies presents an equal measure of subjectivity. Ethnographer Michael Jackson confronts this critique:

> In its antagonism to natural science and its privileging of literary criticism, textualism claims too much, just as positivistic social science does. By fetishizing texts, it divides— as the advent of literacy itself did—readers from authors, and separates both from the world. The idea that "there is nothing outside the text" may be congenial to someone whose life is confined to academe, but it sounds absurd in the village worlds where anthropologists carry out their work, where people negotiate meaning in face-to-face interactions, not as individual minds but as embodied social beings. (183-84)

The allowances found in the qualitative approach provide researchers with a greater understanding of such complex issues as human behavior.

Intersection of Values

The qualitative method is driven by a set of philosophical values. Different values overlap and contrast on the continuum of quantitative and qualitative methods. Three particular values that inform qualitative methods are relational partnerships, immersion-based learning, and understanding for the sake of serving. These three values align closely with the Northwest University International Community Development (ICD) program's values of "copowerment," collaboration, and contextualization.

Ethnography, a type of qualitative research that focuses on human society and culture, is designed to create relational partnerships. Challenging the practice of armchair academics, Merriam and Tisdell state the obvious: "To understand the culture of a group, one must spend time with the group being studied" (29). Likewise, good ethnography does not end with time together but extends into active participation and collaboration. Speaking from experience, Dwight Conquergood shares the results of practicing these values:

> The power dynamic of the research situation changes when the ethnographer moves from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer to the intimate involvement and engagement of "coactivity" or co-performance with historically situated, named, "unique individuals." (187-88)

Conducting qualitative research at such contextualized levels is demanding, but the potential yield is exponential. As researchers immerse themselves in the lives of their subjects, the subjects become partners. Ernest Stringer notes, "Researchers increase their effectiveness when they immerse themselves in the richness of group life, talking with people about general events and activities, sharing a birthday cake, participating in informal or leisure activities, telling jokes, and so on" (95). Not only does the researcher gain valuable insights, but the subjects are elevated

to peers, working collaboratively with the researcher. Even with more structured interviews, the purpose is to enter the other person's perspective (Merriam and Tisdell 108). As the researcher continues to learn and experience more about the new world they are studying, they can further contextualize their approach to gain an even greater depth of understanding.

Another deeply held value of qualitative research and the ICD program is the call to action. As seen in the Integrative Project Guide, "The best sort of knowledge is that which makes a difference in people's lives" (12). Research must be joined with action, particularly in community development. James Spradley poses a question and responds concisely: "Ethnography for what? For understanding the human species, but also for serving the needs of human kind" (16). Qualitative inquiry is a tool that pairs knowledge with action. Stringer articulates this point clearly: "The primary purpose of action research is to provide the means for people to engage in systematic inquiry and investigation to design an appropriate way of accomplishing a desired goal and to evaluate its effectiveness" (6). Although clear goals and deliverables must follow, the inherent value in relational inquiry cannot be overstated. Community development practitioners would be wise to remember the values which drive qualitative inquiry and integrate them throughout their research and practice.

Distinctives and Applications of Qualitative Inquiry

The various methods of qualitative inquiry offer unique distinctions, which, in turn, provide a range of valuable applications. The term 'scientific' can carry a cold and distant connotation. One beautiful aspect of qualitative inquiry is the importance of relational connection. As stated earlier, the results of qualitative inquiry tend to be holistic and multifaceted. Likewise, the research process is adaptive and complex, often lacking any delineation between life and study. A researcher can quickly become part of the community, leading to a plethora of unplanned

events and parties. Regarding celebrations, Stringer notes, "It not only satisfies the human, emotional elements of the experience but also enhances participants feelings of solidarity, competence, and general well-being" (207). While the lines between work and play may get blurred, it is a worthy cause. Mutually beneficial activities reinforce the values of "copowerment" and collaboration, deepen relational bonds, and lead towards greater insights and understanding.

Another distinct feature of the qualitative method is the ability to describe the unspeakable. Cultural values, expressions, and beliefs can be highly complicated to identify, especially without inside knowledge. The qualitative method creates a platform to capture and explain human behaviors. Spradley elaborates further:

> A large part of any culture consists of *tacit* knowledge. We all know things that we cannot talk about or express in direct ways. The ethnographer must then make inferences about what people know by listening carefully to what they say, by observing their behavior, and by studying artifacts and their use. (9)

Attempting to understand and articulate a behavior or belief which has yet been described is daunting. Yet this is the task of an ethnographer, and the qualitative method is their greatest tool. The issues that plague communities are complex, layered, and difficult to articulate or observe. Holmes argues for the use of ethnography in such cases: "Ethnography - with its thick description and nuanced analysis - is an especially important methodology for understanding the multilayered meanings and vertical slices of power that make up social and cultural life, including its inequalities and justifications" (185). The in-depth nature of qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to discover hidden nuances and patterns of injustice or harm that have

wreaked havoc on communities for ages. In collaboration with the researcher, the community also plays a crucial role in finding viable solutions among their existing assets.

Lastly, a vital distinction of the qualitative method is recognizing the researcher as the primary mechanism for collecting data. The qualitative researcher does not remove themselves from the process, attempting to control or sterilize the data. Instead, they fully engage with their participants, contributing to the human element, which is the focus of the study. Conquergood remarks, "Ethnography's distinctive research method, participant-observation field work, privileges the body as a site of knowing" (180). The qualitative method encourages the researcher to participate fully in their life and activities, creating further conversations, feedback, and adaptations. The researcher risks their own sense of control when they engage with the unknown of the other. Yet, vulnerability begets vulnerability. The direction of the study will likely divert from what the researcher had anticipated and develop into something far grander.

Qualitative Inquiry and the Karen

For my fieldwork, I visited Mae Sariang, Thailand, to observe the healthcare practices of Karen Hilltribe members. Although my two-day trip was short, I was able to engage with several people relationally. I was surprised at how much understanding and insight I gained in such a minimal time frame. Thankfully, I had several fantastic Karen guides who completely welcomed me and brought me into their lives. Even during the journey from Chiang Mai to our destination, I heard stories about invincible child soldiers protected by God, traditional child delivery practices, and the spirits which inhabit the earth (Crisp). With a giddy look on my face, I simultaneously gathered valuable cultural information, built friendships that we still maintain, and thoroughly enjoyed the moment. The lines between work and play were clearly blurred.

The field trip allowed me to collect data through observations and interviews, both structured and spontaneous. The interviews' relaxed and open-ended nature allowed the conversation to flow freely. One of the ladies shared about leaving her home in the village and living in a refugee camp. To my surprise, she had fond memories during her years living in the camp (Crisp). Keeping questions open-ended allows the researcher to listen deeply and follow up on details that seem rich with insight (Merriam and Tisdell 126). Had I maintained a rigid interview structure, I would have missed nearly all the essential and relevant cultural insights from our amusing conversations.

One key observation I made was how the Karen understand health. After critical reflection, I noted the Western understanding of health is rather compartmentalized and quantitative. A healthy person can properly 'check the boxes' according to their age, sex, and weight. Conversely, the Karen maintain a holistic understanding of health, actively acknowledging the connection between mind, body, spirit, and environment. The observation was a positive development in my research. It also presented a problem if I was to accurately understand the issues affecting Karen health practices. In their critical ethnographic and phenomenological study of Karen refugees and alcohol use, researchers McCleary and Wielding present the need for developing culturally relevant programs and including Karen voices in the discourse. Furthermore, they highlight the unique ways the Karen conceptualize behaviors in their culture, such as health and alcohol use, and call for a contextualized and culturally integrated approach to addressing such issues (McCleary and Wielding 1201-02). I observed the general practices of a Karen lifestyle which include rigorous daily activity, a diet rich in freshly picked herbs and vegetables, and a strong focus on relational connection. The Karen appeared to exhibit a wholesome and beneficial lifestyle. These observations caused me to suspect the issues

at the jungle hospital were primarily due to cultural barriers and difficulty integrating Western

medicine in the Karen context.

The project portion of my fieldwork called for integrating Karen cultural values in the

medical program and a compulsory cultural training program for expatriates who plan to work

with the Karen. The qualitative method will also provide a framework for effective program

evaluation. Program evaluators will utilize in-depth interviews and observations to determine

various outcomes and measure progress against historical data. The data will likely include a

range of holistic health markers which had not been previously measured. Especially with

relational factors, subjective measurements and observations will provide the greatest insights to

the success of the program.

Need for Qualitative Research in Community Development

The age of colonialism is dying a tenacious and painful death. The advent of the internet and

globalism has disrupted century-old systems of oppression, bringing unspoken injustices to the

forefront of all. Still, the patriarchal and racial hierarchies persist, and community development

practitioners must lead the charge in challenging these oppressive systems. Aid and development

workers undoubtedly possess a vast pool of resources and brilliant ideas. But without

cooperation and collaboration with local communities, their efforts will likely be detrimental.

According to Myers, "Our good intentions deepen the poverty we seek to alleviate" (214). He

then presents a poetic illustration of the hierarchical, positivistic history of development with a

quip:

All powerful uppers think they know

What is right and real for those below.

At least each upper so believes

But all are wrong: all power deceives. (215)

The real potential of these resources and ideas lies in collaboration between development workers and community members. When development workers integrate the values that drive qualitative inquiry and implement methods of qualitative research with curiosity and openness, anything is possible.

Often, communities are acutely aware of their needs. Radical change is sometimes far closer and simpler than expected. The first thing a community development practitioner must do is start asking questions and gaining understanding. Jesus of Nazareth modeled this when he asked the blind man, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mk. 10.51). The blind man not only received his sight. He also felt heard. The intangible, subjective markers such as 'being heard' are the building blocks of development. The evaluation standards in development must adapt and incorporate qualitative measurements at the core. Kraeler et al. showcase the complexities troubling displaced refugees and how quantitative analysis has prevented them from accessing appropriate aid and development (49-51). Without the incorporation and preference of qualitative measurements, at-risk communities will remain in poverty and anguish, despite the flow of outside resources and good intentions.

Holistic Inquiry

Development practitioners must keep humanity at the core of their work at risk of otherwise damaging them further. Admittedly, I like to see quantifiable results, especially when grants and donations are involved. But this only appeases my ego. True transformation happens with diverse collaboration. The culture in development must shift from demanding short-term quantifiable results to cultivating collaboration between outside resources and partners with local assets and communities.

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ESSAY #3: ICD VALUES

The International Community Development Program (ICD) at Northwest University captured my interest years before submitting my application. The content, curriculum, and values profoundly resonated with me. Before my family and I moved to India, I wanted to enroll in the ICD program because I knew I would learn the skills and theories necessary to accomplish our goals. After years of practice in community development, that desire morphed into an acutely felt need. Thankfully, I can share that I have significantly grown in my awareness and application of the core ICD values: contextualization, collaboration, and copowerment.

Along with the previously listed values, the ICD program emphasizes pragmatic knowledge and incorporating actions that make a positive difference in the world (IP Guide 12). Yet, we as a student body would be remiss if we were to neglect the academic rigor of a Master's program in lieu of (forgive the cliché example) building a well. The inherent tension between academia and application, and a host of other tensions, has illuminated the concept of polarities. A polarity can be defined as any problem which offers two or more accurate solutions. The ICD values welcome and integrate the complexity and simultaneous simplicity inherent in polarities. In this paper, I will discuss how my values have been influenced by the ICD program. I will share my process of transformation, my current understanding of social justice, and the importance of copowerment. I will conclude by articulating my current philosophy of service and my plans to integrate it into my professional and personal life, narrowing the gap between knowing and doing.

Process of Transformation

Any attempt to describe my personal transformation process must include my years in India. Without doubt, those were the most transformative years of my life. More specifically, I was

living with depression during the last year of our tenure in India. As I started to show signs of

recovery, we were abruptly displaced from our home due to COVID-19. Fortunately, I continued

to regain mental and emotional health in our new location. Nearly six months after our

displacement, I started the ICD program at Northwest University with fresh vigor and vitality,

pursuing a long-deferred dream. Little did I know that my painful experiences from India

brilliantly prepared me to receive, incorporate, and practice the material and values taught in the

program.

When I received the confirmation of acceptance to the ICD program, I was living day-by-

day in an unfamiliar country, away from home, and doubting every decision I made. The

acceptance letter was an exciting distraction from the daily chaos. But when I received the

welcome packet, which included a book by Parker Palmer, I felt assured that I had made at least

one good choice. Palmer often shares wisdom from his experience with depression, and his

writing was instrumental for me finding health. In his book, *On the Brink of Everything*, he

shares: "Wholeness is the goal, but wholeness does not mean perfection. It means embracing

brokenness as an integral part of life" (223). Due to my unrelenting stubbornness, I endured

much misery and suffering before embracing this truth. My two choices were to either push

through my agony, maintaining a tough façade, or walk away from India in utter failure. The

pain and brokenness, mixed with my desire for peace and joy, eventually generated a space for

me to maintain conflicting perspectives without resistance. In his book, *Polarity Management*,

Barry Johnson states, "Instead of contradicting each other's view, the task is to supplement each

other's view in order to see the whole picture. Each of them has key pieces to the puzzle.

Paradoxically, opposition becomes resource" (ch. 1). My resistance to embrace the unknown had

prevented me from the endless stream of resources that exist in, what I like to call, the messy

middle. To some extent, each of the ICD values encourages embracing polarities and minimizing the use of fundamental analytics and positivism.

The first step on my master's journey was engaging with and learning the presented material. The next step was to practice it. When classes started in Fall 2020, I realized I already possessed a certain degree of competence in the material. Over ten years ago, my mentor ingrained in me the significance of observing cultural nuances. Since then, I practiced deep contextualization in various contexts, conducted months of ethnographic surveys, and entered into multiple collaborative and copowering relationships. Therefore, I challenged myself by exploring new topics, delving further into familiar theories, and seeking additional advice from instructors. I attempted to apply the idea of deliberate practice to my research. In a study on deliberate practice, the authors argue, "Practice needs to be structured and adjusted to the current skill level to offer a sequenced constructive learning opportunity for advancement in subsequent and higher skill levels" (Schmidt et al. 357). Fortunately, I can share that I had a few "It worked!" moments when I realized my practice was producing the desired results.

Yet, some practices are consistently more demanding than others, especially regarding personal transformation. Another influential voice, Father Richard Rohr, spoke to my heart when I read this excerpt of his:

> I suspect that the "up there" mentality is the way most people's spiritual search has to start. But once the real inner journey begins—once you come to know that in Christ, God is forever overcoming the gap between human and divine—the Christian path becomes less about climbing and performance, and more about descending, letting go, and unlearning. Knowing and loving Jesus is largely about becoming fully human, wounds and all, instead of ascending spiritually or thinking we can remain unwounded. (134)

Unfortunately, my ego continually interrupts my journey towards embracing my beloved humanity. I found myself posturing when I would engage with my classmates and professors, attempting to portray a humble yet overqualified student who embodies the values of community development. In reflection, I felt shame and embarrassment about my behaviors. Even more, I failed to find a proactive measure to prevent my posturing. So, my solution is to embrace my shadow side, confess my humanity, and accept the process of transformation as a life-long journey.

A Lens of Social Justice

Views on social justice often differ and primarily depend on a person's worldview, beliefs, and context. My understanding is no different, except that it has evolved and will continue to do so. Author Julie Clawson concisely states, "Justice can thus be defined simply as the practical outworking of loving God and others" (21). Such a brief definition of a complex subject matter allows for significant latitudinal interpretation. Nevertheless, I agree with Clawson that justice is manifested through practical service to God and people. Regardless of one's faith, love and service to a deity ought not to cause undue harm to others.

Given my propensity for polarities, I prefer author Cynthia Moe-Lobeda's understanding of social justice. In her book, *Resisting Structural Evil*, she presents a compelling case articulating the unjust discrepancies and systemic nature of oppression accompanied by a hopeful and practical means toward freedom and justice. Incorporating a multifaceted approach, she argues that social justice and change must come through resisting what is evil and rebuilding what is good (242). Both aspects are essential and complementary. At times, I may focus more on building sustainable practices at home with my family, such as recycling and composting. I have also been encouraged to find creative ways to resist evil. For example, after learning about

socially responsible investing, I delved into my financials. As an ardent pacifist, I nearly cried when I discovered I held stock in arms dealers such as Boeing, Raytheon, and Lockheed Martin. I fervently found ways to transfer my funds into environmental, social, and governance (ESG) friendly funds. I then shared the good news of ESG investing with friends, hoping to spread my influence where I could.

Unfortunately, I did not win many financial converts. In fact, my influence tends to ebb and flow. I think my authenticity both attracts and repels others. At the risk of sounding arrogant, I think I regularly practice contextualization, collaboration, and copowerment. Often, my work looks much different than others who claim to hold and practice the same values. Nor do I shy away from confessing my faults, which often makes others uncomfortable, particularly when we share similar faults! Still, Palmer reminds me: "A good leader is intensely aware of the interplay of inner shadow and light, lest the act of leadership do more harm than good" (78). I hope to use my values and practice more as a form to encourage others than a threat to reject.

Significance of Copowerment

As with most subjective values, copowerment can be hard to measure. In the ICD program, copowerment is defined as "a dynamic of mutual exchange through which both sides of a social equation are made stronger and more effective by the other" (Northwest). Therein, copowerment posits an additional challenge. If one or neither party perceives a lack of mutual gain, copowerment is not achieved. Although difficult to quantify, copowerment is primarily based upon a feeling of mutual friendship and partnership. For example, imagine a boss who genuinely desires to create a flat hierarchy among the leadership team but whose fear of losing control is perceived by the employees. Conversely, picture an employee who is steadfast in maintaining a traditional, non-reciprocal relationship with their supervisor. The examples I share are not rare

but represent the norm. Nearly always, a genuine copowering relationship requires a mindset shift from all parties. In his article titled "Collective Efficacy or Toxic Positivity?" author Paul France argues that a façade of copowerment and collaboration can likely cause more harm than good. Instead, he argues for including three crucial practices: share power, embrace doubt, zoom out (France 36-37). When these three are present, responsibility is shared rather than given, trust is built, and unsustainable structures are replaced and improved.

The majority of my working relationships lacked the ideals represented by copowerment. Therefore, I treasure the relationship I have with my partner, Satish Kumar. The beginning of our relationship, however, was marked with multiple slights and hardships. After six months of difficulty, my teammate and I brainstormed ideas to improve our working relationship with Satish and his organization. We decided to simply connect with him as a person and let the business come as a secondary priority. That same day, we met Satish. We sat in his office for over an hour, *baat-chit karna* (small talking) and drinking chai. He shared about a recent event that had bothered him, and then he asked for our advice. Brother Satish is an accomplished businessman, entrepreneur, and engineer. He currently manages a successful NGO in Northern India and is old enough to be my father. Culturally, he should not be asking me for advice. But that was the breakthrough moment. That was the day our relationship changed. We finally set our agenda aside, and something far greater came about. Father Richard Rohr states, "Controlling people try to control people, and they do the same with God—but loving anything always means a certain giving up of control" (66). Without realizing it, I was trying to control Satish and the outcome of our partnership. I had to release control for our partnership to become mutually encouraging, empowering, and loving.

Everything changed after that encounter in Satish's office. But the shift was subtle—foundational rather. When I would coach their community outreach leaders, I incorporated community-building practices to gain deeper trust and relationships. Most of the participants traveled for hours by bus to arrive at the office early morning for our two-day sessions. After chai and breakfast, I would open our time with a breathing meditation to silence our racing thoughts. The Sufi poet, Rumi, tells readers:

There is a way between voice and presence

Where information flows.

In disciplined silence it opens.

With wandering talk it closes. (32)

I often told our leaders I did not have the answers. In the beginning, they did not like to hear that. Even when I thought I had answers, I learned to refrain and see how the group would present a solution.

After our meditation, they would share stories about their interactions in their communities. Some would share about success, and others about failure. The group would then highlight and praise the circumstances which lead to success and offer insight and feedback where improvement could be made in the future. Charles Vogl boldly asserts, "Stories are the most powerful way we humans learn" (75). Given my experience, I would agree. But we each had to be sensitive to our different realities and contexts. As the facilitator, I made sure that comments were positive and constructive, preventing unnecessary shame. Speaking on diverse group dynamics, Petra Kuenkel states, "The entry point for the trust-based co-creation strategy is humanity: mindfulness of difference and dynamics, balance between task and human encounter, empathy for the story that exists behind each person" (166). Once our group gained proficiency

in respecting each other's humanity, we expanded the scope to include the humanity of others outside of their religious communities. As a result, we witnessed Christians, Hindus, and Muslims joining together for the common good of caring for their communities together. The work of copowerment is slow and complex. It cannot be rushed or controlled. But our frustratingly difficult and mundane work of telling stories together led to changed communities. The copowerment learned and practiced in the office led to interfaith community development projects in the villages of North India.

Philosophy of Service

Similar to my views on social justice, my philosophy of service continues to evolve. I previously believed that service required sacrifice. Extrapolated further, greater service requires greater sacrifice ad infinitum. I subconsciously thought the inverse to be equally true; sacrifice equates to service. On reflection, my sacrificial lack of service was comically conspicuous. Needless to say, I harbored resentment when my "service" was unappreciated. I have learned that serving others can be consistently enjoyable, especially when we allow it. Though I hardly viewed myself as controlling, I desperately needed to release control of my inner world. I began to practice meditation daily, which profoundly influenced all areas of my life. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh shares: "The way of meditation only carries that personal disarmament we have already begun in essential step deeper— nonviolence not only in the face of governments and corporations and liberation armies but a nonviolent encounter with reality itself" (107). I am still learning to be easier on myself and to release control. Both lessons have helped me work with like-minded partners and serve others more sustainably.

My hedonistic perspective of serving others has paradoxically resulted in greater partnerships and outcomes. In *Creative Confidence*, the Kelley brothers articulate a similar

sentiment regarding career choice. They argue, "The goal is to find a vocation that you're good at, that you enjoy, and that someone will pay you to pursue" (162). I can do that! Lest I get carried away in the polarity of self-service and pleasure, I need to remember the value of sacrifice and hard work. In his influential book, *Flow*, author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explores brain plasticity, deliberate practice, and happiness. He observes, "Most enjoyable activities are not natural; they demand an effort that initially one is reluctant to make. But once the interaction starts to provide feedback to the person's skills, it usually begins to be intrinsically rewarding" (ch. 3). I have found this to be remarkably accurate. The hot season in North India regularly exceeds 100 degrees Fahrenheit, accompanied by sweltering humidity. I spent six months conducting ethnographic surveys, sitting with shop owners, sipping chai, and asking them questions in the blazing heat. Reluctance is an understatement of what I felt each morning in my airconditioned apartment before I left. Yet few things have brought me so much life and joy as when I am performing my best, speaking another language, and living out cultural nuances invisible to outsiders. My service to others incorporates my gifts, passions, and hard work. It requires all my attention and effort, but my reward, which exists in the work itself, is abundant.

Implications of Applied Values

I have been fortunate to have a diverse vocational history. Starting at twelve years old, washing dishes, I discovered the restaurant business was not for me. Since then, I have worked as a grocery bagger, wood framer, lumber salesman, medical equipment supplier, and development worker. Reflecting on my previous positions, I have always known that social justice is "something I can't not do…" (Palmer 25). Whether my career is directly or indirectly related to serving others, it is something I will always incorporate. My current goal stems from the Kelley brothers and involves connecting a career to my desire to work alongside others in need.

Yet, I spent the last six years in a career devoted to serving others, and I was largely unfulfilled. Through extensive reflection, debriefing, and the guidance of others, I have gleaned invaluable lessons and observed the incompatible factors which bogged me down. Again, I look to Palmer when he shares about true self and vocation: "We must withdraw the negative projections we make on people and situations—projections that serve mainly to mask our fears about ourselves—and acknowledge and embrace our own liabilities and limits" (29). I have been humbled and freed by confessing my limits to others and, most importantly, myself. With my limitations in mind, I long for peace at my deepest core. The work and writings of John Paul Lederach speak directly to my heart. He shares, "To reconcile requires a commitment to see the face of God in the other, to feel the world from their perspective, and to place ourselves not in control of but alongside the human experience and condition" (56). Not much excites me more than the opportunity to spend my career dedicated to making peace and reconciling conflicts. By definition, this career path will require me to voluntarily enter into others' conflicts, experience their pain, and understand their perspective. But this is what I love. This is my gift. All that remains is a career in peacemaking.

Iterative Resolution

Hopefully, by now, you have observed the irony of the paradoxical examples above: wholeness comes by embracing brokenness, spirituality deepens through becoming more human, releasing control allows for freedom, and peace is made by entering conflict. These events are not singular or linear. Instead, transformation occurs through an iterative and circular paradigm. The values taught in the ICD program are ideals to be practiced, not perfected. The goal is not to demand precise balance and implementation. It is to be fully present in the moment. Oftentimes, that simply means letting go. Author Rich Roll poetically shares about the mystery of surrender:

Surrender is a beautiful movement in which you gracefully, willing, languidly fall, only

to find midway that you have been gathered into some unimaginable embrace. Surrender

is letting go, whether or not you believe the embrace will occur. It's trust to the hundredth

power—not sticking to your idea of the outcome, but letting go in the faith that even the

absence of an outcome will be the perfect solution. (ch. 7)

Nobody will ever perfectly live out their stated values. I am certainly no exception to the rule.

Instead, I will continue to live out my values in every sphere of my life, receive feedback

through my community and personal reflection, and allow myself the grace to enjoy my mistakes

and successes.

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KAREN HEALTHCARE PROJECT PROPOSAL

Introduction

In February 2021, the Burmese military seized control of the country in a coup d'état, imprisoned members of government, including their democratically elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and threatened all who stood in opposition. International news outlets covered the story, highlighting the military's brutal and violent crackdown on protesters. Even ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) members uncharacteristically denounced the military aggression. However, for some, this was a new beginning. While lounging after our communal supper, *Saw** shared his harrowing perspective. "They are killing us and shooting us, and I am happy. I am" (*Saw*). In a cavalier and unassuming tone, *Saw* told stories about the Burmese military, descriptively sharing how they had been killing his people, the ethnic Karen, for decades. Nevertheless, this was the first time the world witnessed the atrocities he and his people confronted for years. Their history of conflict and oppression has resulted in various structural difficulties. As such, Karen villagers are often left with inadequate health care.

Thankfully, several NGOs have offered health care solutions to serve Karen villagers, including the Free Burma Rangers (FBR). They have built and operate a hospital in the jungle of Burma called the Jungle School of Medicine, Kawthoolei (JSMK). Unfortunately, many of the proposed solutions are not meeting the needs of the intended communities. After a series of interviews, fieldwork, and research, it became evident that the cultural component was lacking significantly. In order to improve the health care practices of Karen villagers near JSMK, the hospital must incorporate traditional Karen culture as an integral component of its core teaching and practice. FBR will implement a compulsory preparation course for all foreigners involved with the medic training program. The preparation course will be created and taught by ethnic

Karen, allowing them final say regarding the material and presentation style. The course will primarily be an introduction to Karen culture and language. The purpose will be to empower the international staff entering JSMK, and their Karen hosts mutually. The international staff will gain the confidence to practice medicine humbly with less concern about greatly offending their hosts, patients, or students.

The program will also empower the Karen by improving their communication and interaction with non-Karen visitors. They will also regain confidence as they blend a version of Western medicine with the efficacy of proven Karen treatments and lifestyles. Lastly, the program will minimize conflict and misunderstandings, leading to stronger relational ties. As the relationships grow, particularly among village leaders, health practices will improve as greater trust is built.

Historical Context

The sociopolitical realities in Southeast Asia have long been filled with conflict and controversy. Following the consequences of World War II and the dismantling of the British Empire in Asia, Burma (also known as Myanmar) gained independence in 1947. The majority Barmar people swiftly seized control of the government, placing the ethnic minorities in a vulnerable position. Prior to their independence, the rift between the Burmans and ethnic minorities, such as the Karen, had been steadily increasing. One article recorded, "From February 1942 to July 1945, the country experienced unprecedented levels of intercommunal violence, of which Karen communities in Papun district and the rural Delta were the main victims" (Garbagni and Walton 760). The Burmese military intensified the domestic conflict, attempting to consolidate their power. Unfortunately, after decades of war, the conflict persists. According to South, "The ongoing armed conflict in Burma constitutes the longest-running civil war in the world" (6). The

consequences of prolonged battle and hardship are devastating the minority populations. Among the many ethnic groups targeted by the Burmese government are the Karen.

Who Are the Karen?

The Karen are an ethnic group originally from Southeast Asia. Most Karen live in the semi-autonomous region of Karen State, also known as Kawthoolei. Although the territory is governed by the Karen, it is officially part of Burma. Due to ongoing conflict, many Karen have been displaced from their homes, finding shelter in nearby regions or internationally. There are multiple refugee camps along the Thai/ Burmese border, primarily funded by the Thai government. Despite the camps' existence and the severity of their circumstances, Thailand does not grant refugee status, thus preventing refugees from gaining legal status.

Although their present circumstances may appear daunting, the Karen proudly carry a robust cultural heritage rich with unique traditions, languages, history, and promise. The Karen are known for their love and care for nature and symbiotically live off the land. Unfortunately, many in the younger Karen generation have been raised in refugee camps, faced multiple displacements, or have significantly assimilated in Thai culture to integrate into another community meaningfully. One study quantified the diaspora population as of 2019, noting the challenges of maintaining cultural traditions. "Many Karen people have been born in the camps and some older migrants have been there so long they cannot remember their former lives in Myanmar. At least 3 million people have fled Myanmar over the past three decades, and more than 600,000 remain internally displaced within Myanmar" (Langteau et al. 24). Thankfully, numerous community-based organizations (CBO) have rallied to promote Karen culture, documenting and publishing material which has historically been passed down orally.

Fight for Statehood

Since the inception of present-day Burma, the country has been engaged in a civil war. After

being told to surrender their arms to the government, the Karen National Union (KNU) declared

war against the Burmese government, prompting a 60-year conflict. In 2015, the Nationwide

Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed, officially ending the war (Israelsen 176). With utter

disregard to the NCA, the Tatmadaw (Burma Army) battalions have continued their offenses

against the KNU and Karen-held areas using the "Four Cuts" strategy, which began in 1960. The

Karen Human Rights Group describes their actions. "They fired indiscriminately at Karen

villages, destroyed every food and aid item they thought was meant to support the KNU…

restricted medical aid in conflict-affected areas, arrested people they suspected of providing aid

and food, and arrested their family members… They also used widespread sexual violence and

forcibly relocated entire communities" (Fishbein et al.). The Tatmadaw employed identical

draconian measures against many other ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya, on a massive

scale in 2017.

Given their turbulent history, it would be difficult to underestimate the societal

repercussions affecting nearly all Karen communities. The conflict's severity and complexities

must be considered to understand the current nature of Karen healthcare practices.

Field Research

The healthcare needs of the Karen tend to fluctuate due to the unpredictability of military

advances and the lack of stability with ongoing displacement. The JSMK hospital has proved to

be a respite of health, education, and stability for the surrounding villages. I learned about their

focus during my initial interview with JSMK Operations Manager Katie Wierenga. "My big

drive right now is to improve our assessment of nutritional status, provide interventions, and then

provide follow up and continue to monitor kids' nutritional status" (Wierenga). After further investigation, it appeared there may be a significant communication gap between the Karen and international staff. Given the stark contrast between primarily American and Karen culture, this was to be expected. Hofstede offers excellent insight to begin understanding others from different backgrounds, noting that many groups fall outside the national cultural rubric:

> *Regional, ethnic, and religious* cultures account for differences within countries; ethnic and religious groups often transcend political country borders. Such groups form minorities at the crossroads between the dominant culture of the nation and their own traditional group culture. Some assimilate into the mainstream, although this process may take a generation or more; others continue to stick to their own ways. (45)

If the international staff at JSMK could improve their cultural understanding of the Karen, the treatment and healthcare education would blossom.

Mae Sariang

The borders between Burma and Thailand were strictly closed, preventing me from visiting JSMK. As an alternative, I joined two other Karen women and took a fieldtrip to Mae Sariang for onsite research. Our drive from the city center of Chiang Mai to the lush, jungle hills of Mae Sariang could not have been better. I took full advantage of our time in the car, listening intently to *Naw** as she freely and proudly shared about her culture. "See the scars in that hill?" *Naw* asked me. I turned and observed an otherwise inconspicuous construction site. "They are destroying the land, destroying the water, everything" (Crisp). Her innate connection with the land stunned me. She seemed like a personification of the cartoon superhero, Captain Planet. Her example illustrated the interwoven connection the Karen have with the earth. Their health and

livelihood come from living symbiotically with their environment. Unfortunately, outside actors are infringing upon their land.

As the beauty of the terraced rice paddies and rolling hills continued, so did her stories. She captivated us all with Karen myths and traditions, offering minimal and subjective delineation between the two. I began to wonder if I could gain superhuman strength if a village chief ceremoniously injected me with the gall bladder from a snake. As it turns out, the Karen (and many other environmentally attuned communities) were onto something. Studies have proven the clinical efficacy of animal gallbladder bile to successfully treat burns and battle wounds, along with a host of other various symptoms (Wang). Before the advent of molecular biology, the Karen had successfully identified a cornucopia of natural remedies and treatments located within their locale.

Surprisingly, *Naw's* Karen friend also heard these stories for the first time. She was born in Burma and displaced at a young age, growing up in a refugee camp in Thailand. She recalled her experience with fondness and appreciation, although she was visibly disheartened about the gaps in her Karen traditional knowledge. Hearing this highlighted the potential loss of Karen culture to an entire generation. Nevertheless, her cultural acumen was on full display when we entered her turf. Throughout our time in the Karen majority district, I often noticed the two women casually plucking random plants (Crisp). Everywhere they went, they looked for and gathered various plants, either for immediate consumption, to share with me, or to propagate in their gardens. What seemed so odd to me was completely natural given our context. *Naw* wisely believes such mentored foraging, accompanied by proper documentation, will help revive Karen culture among the younger generation (*Naw*). With a grin of anticipation and utter ignorance, I ingested every form of vegetation they offered me, secretly hoping to gain warrior strength.

Karen Medicine

The more I observed and researched, the more I understood the advantages and limitations of traditional Karen medicine. During a focus group with three Karen college students, the importance of preventative medicine was often repeated. They each shared personal stories about the superb health of their family members who live in the jungle. The village lifestyle necessitates fresh, healthy eating and rigorous daily activity. The girls politely chuckled when they mentioned the speed at which *gallawas* (foreigners) visit the hospital. Revealing their values, they offered the Karen perspective. "If we are injured a little bit [we] don't care. I feel like our Karen people are so strong" (Focus Group). Again, the girls giggled. This time more enthusiastically.

Sorrowfully, they later shared a personal story about a man shot in the foot. He was too far removed from any healthcare provider and died before receiving care. That story prompted more tales of horrific deaths, often including babies (Focus Group). The devastating reality was that all these deaths were likely preventable had proper healthcare been readily available. We all noted the necessity of remote trauma care, especially in the jungle villages of Karen State. Fortunately, JSMK's medic program is designed to train and equip "backpack medics" for such circumstances.

The contrast between the Karen and *gallawa* providers was evidenced again near the end of our conversation. Each girl had personal experience receiving care from a foreigner, either at a refugee camp or medical mission clinics. One girl identified the limitations of traditional Karen medicine, while another shared at an emotional level. "We trust foreign doctors more than our local doctors because we know they have more experience and graduate from medical school and

have done clinical research. So we know that we can trust them" (Focus Group). The girls all nodded their heads in agreement.

As a result of globalization, there has been a rising trend of traditional and functional medicinal practices among Westerners. This phenomenon is not without controversy. The evidence-based research of traditional medical practices pales in comparison to its Western counterparts. But the growing popularity of alternative health practices has generated a surge of peer-reviewed research regarding the efficacy of such practices. For example, Kakatum et al. investigated the safety and efficacy of a Thai traditional remedy call Sahastara. Their double-blind study concluded that Sahastara "can relieve the inflammation symptoms in OA (osteoarthritis) knee patients almost as effectively as diclofenac, with less minor side effects" (9). Another study showed the anti-inflammatory attributes of a Chinese herbal concoction (Hwangbo et al.). In the introduction to their study, authors Masui et al. detail the efficacy of *maoto*, a traditional Japanese medicine:

We and others previously reported in nonrandomized and randomized controlled trials that maoto has clinical efficacy for seasonal influenza, without severe adverse effects. In our study of adult patients randomly assigned maoto granules, oseltamivir, or zanamivir, analysis was done of the duration of fever, total symptom score, and viral shedding. The results showed that maoto was well tolerated and that it had equivalent clinical and virological efficacy to oseltamivir and zanamivir in a group of healthy adults with seasonal influenza. (1)

One study looked at the effects herbal medicine for treating psychiatric disorders. Their conclusion showed: "Improvement brought about by herbal medicine is usually mild and slow, but sometimes very drastic. Side effects are rare. Those that do occur are mostly allergic

reactions to natural substances. Therefore, herbal medicine is especially useful for elderly

patients and patients with physical complications" (Kanba et al. 331). These studies represent a

minor sample of the research on traditional remedies. It must be noted that the studies above are

limited in scope and context, and that the lack of regulations among herbal supplements, among

other concerns, prevent the widespread use of traditional treatments.

The database of traditional medicine will continue to grow as peer-reviewed research

continues. Fortunately, the Karen have an extensive history practicing traditional medicine,

giving them a significant advantage. Phumthum and Sadgrove note, "Because of their utter

dependence on natural resources, the Karen people have immense knowledge of medicinal

plants. Therefore, the Karen villages are a treasury of ethnomedicinal plant knowledge" (2).

Healthcare providers treating Karen patients would be wise to hear how the Karen would

traditionally treat themselves. Blending Western medicine with traditional Karen medicine

requires additional effort. But the Karen perspective must be accounted for to promote

sustainable care and responsibility of one's health. Additionally, the examples above do not

indicate the superiority of traditional practices compared to Western medicine or vice-versa. Nor

do these examples condone the use of all Karen practices. In fact, some practices are particularly

harmful and contextualized education on detrimental treatments ought to be a priority. Rather,

the examples illustrate the inherent value of multiple perspectives. If the goal is to promote

health among the Karen, treatment ought to include some form of Karen practices.

Project Proposal

The JSMK hospital has proved to be a beneficial resource for the surrounding villages. The

current challenge is to improve care at the hospital and provide education and resources to the

community. The proposed project would involve restructuring the current medical training

curriculum and implementing a compulsory cultural training program for foreigners. Admittedly, such a project would require a foundational shift from immediate, relief-based care toward ongoing, sustainable development. Willis acknowledges the tension as she argues:

> The need for rapid, quantifiable results, encourages project managers to focus on certain forms of project with tangible outcomes, rather than addressing deep rooted inequalities which cannot be easily measured... Dependence on external aid assistance means that many projects are more likely to react to the requirements and preferred activities of the potential donors (NGOs, foreign governments, and multilateral organizations) than local people. (118)

Aside from less quantifiable deliverables and delayed results, such a program would also assume a shift in power dynamics, promoting more localized control.

The program's initial phase would involve ongoing interactions between FBR staff and community leaders at and near JSMK. It will take time to build rapport and establish a deeper relational bond, but the results of such collaboration will pay dividends for all parties. The two primary physicians can begin a dialogue with the Karen leaders centered on holistic healthcare that best serves the villagers' needs. The current curriculum will be tailored for a Karen audience that promotes sustainable and ongoing healthcare. The plan will not be flawless, but it will build upon itself through improved iterations. Authors Kelley and Kelley offer advice when they write, "If you want to make something great, you need to start *making*. Striving for perfection can get in the way during the early stages of the creative process" (123). As such, this project is simply an iteration of the existing program. It will also be essential to visibly dispel the idea of Western superiority. Dwight Conquergood offers a compelling example from his experience with the Hmong when he writes:

I hoped to break the pattern of importing the knowledge of "experts" and distributing it to

the refugees, who were expected to be grateful consumers. I wanted to help demonstrate

to both expatriates and refugees that dialogical exchange between the two cultures, the

two worldviews and sensibilities, was possible. One of the things that worked well for me

as a health worker was to barter recommendations and health practices with traditional

healers. This kept the program from being too one-sided. (182)

Leaders would be wise to critically evaluate their own rubric for program success while opening

themselves up to the others' perspective, granting additional weight to the Karen.

The cultural training program will work congruently with the curricular adjustments at

JSMK. The material and presentation format will be created by a Karen team to ensure accuracy

and relevance. Because of the remote location of JSMK and the precarious nature of the

physically demanding, undocumented border crossing, FBR enforces a strenuous physical

prerequisite for all visiting foreigners. Given the existing requirements, an additional cultural

element is feasible. The cultural training program will range from an intensive 3-day or 10-day

event for international visitors, depending on their length of stay in the jungle. International staff

living in Thailand can opt for an extended version, covering the material at greater depth. These

figures can also be adjusted to fit the need.

The purpose of the cultural training program is multifaceted. The goal is to promote a

deeper understanding of Karen culture to enhance communication, relationship, and awareness

outside of the JSMK context. As the international staff gains familiarity with Karen culture, they

will communicate more intelligibly and effectively integrate Karen traditional practices into their

teaching. Such models of curiosity and humility will significantly increase rapport between the

Karen and international community. Conquergood offers a prime example when he shares,

"Getting to know the people well is important not just as a technique for collecting appropriate materials and dramaturgical ideas to be worked into performance programs but as a way of earning their trust and respect" (Conquergood 181). This project will promote collaboration between the Karen and foreigners, enhancing the working relationship between the two parties. The Karen will increasingly view themselves as medically capable as their confidence grows. Myers identifies this as a crucial development piece by stating, "Healing the marred identity of the poor is the beginning of transformation" (178). Consequently, the foreigners will begin to perceive their identity more accurately as partners rather than saviors.

Project Details

FBR staff, in conjunction with an outside consultant, will collaborate with the various members of the Karen community residing in Chiang Mai. The team will use the existing environmental, medical, and cultural resources available through KESAN (Karen Environmental and Social Action Network) and develop a tailored training curriculum for JSMK visitors. The material will be designed as an introduction to Karen culture and language. However, the teaching will be adaptable and appropriate for participants who have a greater understanding of such matters. The 3-day intensive curriculum will focus primarily on cultural values, covering such topics as: art, celebrations, education, family and relationships, food, health, language, and religion. The language component will be minimal, designed to emphasize the importance and value of culture. Participants will be asked to learn common phrases and anticipated terminology. The 10-day intensive program will be the preferred method of cultural training. The curriculum will cover similar topics at a greater depth. The language component will be increased significantly and it will emphasize medical terminology. Likewise, the extended version designed for Thai residents will dedicate an even greater proportion of the training to language. The training is not

necessarily designed to create fluency, rather as a means to strengthen relationship and understanding. As such, cultural and linguistic fluency will be a likely outcome. Again, these figures can also be adjusted to fit the need.

The intensive training programs will be taught in a cohort model. In proper Karen fashion, much of the teaching will occur outdoors. Participants will gain an understanding of Karen lifestyle through an immersive homestay experience. The Karen program leader, or nurturer, will present opportunities for participants to practice their newfound knowledge and language. Actives will include communal meals, foraging, farming, and hiking. At the end of each day, participants will meet in a small group setting with their nurturer. The nurturer will provide feedback based on the engagement with local community members, gently allowing for mistakes in a welcoming setting. Participants will also share key insights and learnings from their observations, followed by a daily journaling exercise.

Shortcomings

While the advantages of implementing the proposed project are plentiful, it must be noted that it does not address the systemic factors which exacerbate the plight of ethnic minorities in Burma. This proposal is designed specifically for FBR and scaling such a project would likely require significant alterations. If more significant improvement to the current situation is desired, we must factor in the daunting complexities and outside actors involved. An expert on the ethnic conflict and peace processes in Burma, researcher Ashley South shared his thoughts regarding the humanitarian imperative to prioritize the healthcare needs of the Karen:

> I would argue… some of the most needy, vulnerable, marginalized communities in Asia, and certainly in Myanmar, are found in conflict-affected, ethnic-nationality populated areas, including the Karen. And after the coup with the Myanmar army's attacks on Karen

communities, obviously those needs are particularly acute and international organizations

have virtually no access. (South)

The recent coup and COVID-19 have undoubtedly amplified the pressing needs of the Karen,

and smaller organizations such as FBR have been able to provide much-needed relief. However,

until cooperative legislative measures are implemented at the regional and national level, the

current structural issues will persist, if not greatly expand. South, along with a host of

international organizations and researchers, are actively working to resolve the ongoing conflict.

The convoluted nature of the crisis mandates a multidimensional, adaptive solution. This

proposal hopes merely to complement the long-term goal of conflict resolution while proving

sustainable relief to a distressed population.

Final Thoughts

The societal needs of the Karen have been negatively affected through decades of conflict,

particularly the healthcare needs of remote villagers. FBR staff are committed to partnering with

the Karen, using the JSMK hospital as an operational base. By implementing the proposed

project and increasing the cultural fluency of all stakeholders, healthcare practices among Karen

villagers will steadily increase. Consequently, dependence on the international staff will

eventually decrease, allowing more resources to flow into other projects. However, the need for

highly trained, specialized physicians will continue, allowing the Karen and foreigner

relationship to remain intact.

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