Self-Awareness and Cross-Cultural Development

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Introduction

My anticipation rose as our plane circled the small airport in Entebbe, Uganda. Just a few months before, I had agreed to take a trip to Uganda to teach a pastor's conference with a missionary from my hometown. As the idea of going on a mission trip became a reality, anxiety and self-doubt came up within me. What would I see? What would I experience? Could I really help? Would I get sick? Will we be attacked by a group that is hostile toward Christians? All of these thoughts were still swirling through my mind as the plane came to rest on the dark Ugandan runway.

As the team disembarked the plane, there were strange sights and sounds everywhere. Soldiers walked the runway with assault rifles, the bright lights I was used to in the United States were nonexistent, and everything was darker than I was accustomed to. It was hot; I could smell smoke; and the airport was full of people pushing forward trying to get to the border booth to purchase their visa. It felt as if I was in some sort of dream.

Over the next few days, the team traveled to a number of different orphanages in Uganda. Hundreds of kids ran toward the bus, screaming with excitement to hold the hand of one of the team members. Once off the bus, kids hung off each of my arms while the adults hugged and welcomed the team members. We sat in a place of honor while kids danced and sang to entertain us. The missionary from our hometown gave a short speech before giving away money—large sums of money. Thousands of dollars were given to buy food, build new buildings, fix wells, and pursue numerous other projects the missionary was working on. The team handed out candy to the kids, which caused a chaotic scene where I feared the older kids would trample the younger ones. My time spent at the orphanages was a beautiful experience, and although I fell in love with Ugandans in the first few days of my trip, something did not seem right.

I went to Uganda not only with my physical self, but also with years of thoughts, beliefs, and motivations from my American culture. Growing up, I watched television advertisements showing kids with flies in their eyes, distended bellies, and snotty noses, children I could feed for a small fee per month. My mother taught me to eat all the food on my plate because there are "starving kids in Africa." Cartoons I watched showed Africans in loincloths with bones in their noses. I was taught about the rampant HIV in Africa and how I could catch it from a toilet seat if I were not careful. I grew up in the Deep South of the United States where racism was strong when I was a child. It did not help that the missionary leading the trip warned us of how things in Africa would harm us, including robbers, food, malaria, and germs. As a result, I landed with the assumptions that Ugandan people were sick and needed to be better, that becoming better meant becoming more like me, and that Ugandans wanted to become more like me. In other words, I went to Uganda with the presumption that Ugandans needed to become better Americans. But Ugandans are not Americans. Ugandans don't want to be Americans, and Ugandans don't need to be Americans. They need to be Ugandans.

When I returned from Uganda that first time, I could tell friends and family what I saw, but I did not fully understand how my prior assumptions would impact my experience. I thought I was seeing things factually and objectively, but nothing could have been further from the truth. It wasn't until I returned to Uganda (and continued returning year after year) that I realized the stark differences in how the Ugandan people and I perceive one another.

Community development workers often skip the process of self-awareness, and as a result they become frustrated, often leaving the work they were once passionate about without realizing why they are frustrated. Sometimes they end up blaming the host culture, calling them lazy, apathetic, or other derogatory terms. These frustrations develop due to a gap between how the worker sees the work and how the locals see the work. If the two views do not match, frustrations can arise.

All over Uganda there is work that was initiated and abandoned by missionaries and development organizations with good intentions. Pastors who were once supported by churches now struggle to survive because support has been cut off due to cultural misunderstandings. There are buildings that sit empty or unfinished because construction costs were more than what was originally quoted (usually due to Ugandans' trying to please their American supporters by asking for as little as possible). All of these things could be avoided if workers going to Uganda would first reflect upon their own cultural, spiritual, and motivational beliefs. After careful consideration, this reflection could lead to relationships with people who live in Uganda and allow for development to grow and prosper from healthier relationships.

The following pages are the findings from research I've conducted for my Master of Arts in International Community Development, along with eight years of personal and professional development. The reader will come to understand that in any cross-cultural community development work, self-awareness on the part of the development worker is essential to the success of the mission. If workers do not have a deep understanding of themselves and their own worldviews, they cannot begin to understand those with whom they work, thus limiting their effectiveness to serve.

For the purpose of this paper, *self-awareness* is defined as one's ability to be aware of how their culture of origin, spiritual beliefs, and personal motivations influence their decision-making process. These factors impact one's worldview and create dynamics that can cause friction in relationships. This friction is caused by protecting a worldview from change that may be incorrect. Cross-cultural relationships must be built on common truths, and those truths must be sought out through self-awareness in order to build relationships.

Each development worker is born in a specific location and family environment which influences the way they see life. This is culture. Culture exerts a strong influence in everyone's life, as it determines what they eat or what they define as non-edible. It determines how they vote for their elected officials and what people groups they see as "in" or "out."

Spirituality is a vital component and a common theme in all of humanity. The spiritual convictions of a person determine his or her actions. Whether one has an official religious affiliation or whether religion was scoffed at, all of humanity is influenced by a personal view of spirituality in one way or another. For example, development workers are often motivated by their religious conviction. Other workers are influenced by the way they view humanity, while some see development work as a business opportunity. No matter what their motivation is, every worker is being propelled by something.

The first section of this paper will focus on the self-awareness of the development worker. Three questions will be addressed to lead the reader toward self-awareness First, what from my culture causes me to adopt the behaviors I have? Second, how does my spirituality influence my decision-making process? And finally, why do I choose to engage in development work? Successful development can begin upon thoroughly asking these questions and making an honest evaluation of the answers. Some tools that have been helpful in doing self-evaluation will be shared to help the reader start the journey toward better understanding themselves.

The second section of this paper will shift off of the development worker and onto the people of the culture they choose to work with. Once the worker is aware of his or her own cultural, spiritual, and motivational trappings, they will be better equipped to also understand how culture, spirituality, and motivation shape the lens of each person with whom they work. This step is vital to not only shrinking the gap of misunderstanding but strengthening and deepening the relationship between the worker and each person they serve.

Just as the worker asks questions about their own behavior, beliefs, and motivations, they should also ask three similar questions about the people of the culture being worked with. First, what cultural influences cause this person to behave the way they behave? Second, how do their beliefs about God, gods, or spirituality impact their behavior? And finally, what are their expectations of the development worker? Once these questions have been answered, developmental success is much more likely. Therefore, the next step becomes learning how to uncover those answers in the context of the indigenous peoples.

In the conclusion, I will share a few encouraging insights that I have found throughout my research and through my work. The path of the development worker is not easy, some are in front of me, while others are behind me. It is my obligation to learn from those in front, and encourage those behind.

This paper is the result of many years of inward reflection along with eight years researching Ugandan culture. During my research, I observed Ugandans at religious gatherings, public gatherings, orphanages, and schools. I conducted over 18 interviews among a diverse group of people, which revealed a broad spectrum of views on the impact of self-awareness, cultural awareness, and motivational awareness on development in Uganda. I interviewed seminary professors, former witch doctors, a Muslim sheik, teachers, pastors, business owners, government community development workers, and a university professor. The following stories, interviews, research questions, and observations are a result of this process of inquiry.

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Understanding Others

The development worker must spend time knowing themselves by reflecting on personal behaviors, beliefs, and motivations. Likewise, spending time understanding the behaviors, beliefs, and expectations of the people in the culture in which the practitioner works is equally important. Every human being has behaviors, beliefs, and expectations inherent to their own culture. The importance of understanding differing behaviors is founded on the need for relationships. Development work happens when the other person ceases being a subject to be studied or converted, and becomes a fellow human being in need of love and relationships. Relationships with the development worker should be based on love, respect, and kindness.

Creating relationships is about finding commonalities between humans. While there are many things people from other cultures do not have in common, there is one thing all people have in common; humanity. Barbara Brown Taylor declares,

> What we have most in common is not religion but humanity. I learned this from my religion, which also teaches me that encountering another human being is as close to God as I may ever get – in the eye-to-eye thing, the person-to-person thing – which is where God's Beloved promised to show up. Paradoxically, the point is not to see him. The point is to see the person standing right in front of me, who has no substitute, who can never be replaced, whose heart hold things for which there is not language, whose life is an unsolved mystery. (102)

Humanity is the single most common thread that the development worker shares with all people. Therefore, it is humanity where one must begin to build relationships.

Development work is two stories becoming one. Bryant Myers writes, "The development process is a convergence of stories. The story of the development practitioner is converging with the story of the community, and together they will share a new story for a while" (55). The story that comes from the relationship with the poor is where development has the best chance for success. However, the convergence of stories cannot happen until relationships are formed, which requires time, commitment, and acceptance.

Anyone who has been married for an extended period can recognize the merging of two stories becoming one and the importance of relationship. For each member of the marriage to thrive, a strong relationship between the two parties must exist. If either person involved in the marriage experiences closed-mindedness or selfishness, the marriage will struggle and possibly fail. Marriage is similar to development work, though development work might be even more difficult. Married couples generally have similar backgrounds, but when the practitioner enters into another culture to do development work, he or she is entering into a world different from their own.

Airplanes are full of well-meaning people who routinely travel to developing nations to help "poor people." These affluent people believe that they must go to these nations in poverty out of the poor's necessity for them. While helping people is an admirable cause and the people may have pure intentions, damage can be done when there is a misunderstanding of cultures. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert write, "As we work with materially poor people, it is crucial that we are not coming to them as blank slates" (87). Poor people in developing nations are viewed as problems to be fixed and not people to be known. Sometimes development workers travel to do development work while viewing the local people as a blank canvas to be created into something better.

Working with poor people is not about fixing those in need, but making relationships with those who share a common humanity. Workers must avoid seeing themselves as higher, smarter, or more affluent and must instead see themselves (and the local inhabitants) as imperfect humans in need of redemption. Meyers makes the observation that "The world tends to view the poor as a group that is helpless[,] thus giving ourselves permission to look down on them and even play God in their lives" (105). Development workers are not above the poor; indeed, all of humanity is interrelated and dependent on one another for life. The development worker is seeking to merge his or her resources with the culture's knowledge to create a new life for both worker and beneficiary.

There are three questions the development worker should ask to better understand the people within a culture. First, what cultural influences cause this person to behave the way they behave? Second, how do their beliefs about God, gods, or spirituality impact their behavior? And finally, what are their expectations of the development worker? Once these questions have been answered, developmental success is much more likely. Therefore, the next step becomes learning how to uncover those answers in the context of the indigenous peoples.

Behaviors of Indigenous Peoples

Every person in every culture has deeply embedded behaviors that have been firmly established for years before an outside development worker arrives on the scene. This is true for varying socioeconomic groups across towns and for people living thousands of miles away. These behaviors come through years of social evolution and become normal in their eyes. Understanding these inherent behaviors will help the worker make connections that can bring about lasting development.

I saw the importance of understanding the behaviors of people during my fieldwork in Uganda. The population growth of Uganda is a subject I have struggled to understand for years. This struggle, at times, brought up feelings of resentment in me. It was difficult to understand why many Ugandans keep having children when they struggle to feed the ones they have. The population of Uganda in 2010 was 30.52 million, in 2017 it was 37.67 million, and is projected to reach 43.73 million by 2022 (*Statista*). These numbers are mind-boggling given the country's rate of unemployment, death from starvation, and the staggering presence of orphans. However, equally perplexing was the answer to a question posed during an interview.

Lawrence Wanyama is an educated, soft-spoken, Ugandan man and the principal of Bright Hope Orphanage and School in Lumino, Uganda. I interviewed Lawrence to gain his perspective on the issues of poverty and population control in Uganda and to ascertain ways to propagate change. At an event a few days before what is called "World Population Day," President Museveni had addressed the residents of Busia, Uganda. During his address, President Museveni told the crowd he was praying for more babies, citing China's growing population and growing economy. The rationale of wanting to grow a population that is already struggling was hard to understand. When I asked Lawrence about the comments of the president, he told me:

> The whole problem of the alarming increase of population has its origin from the days of slave trade. Even after my grandparents used to narrate, that during the time when the slave traders used to come here, the collaborators, from Myamwezze from Kenya, the Kamba, and the Baganda collaborating to buy people to take, the only valuable resource that was around was people, population. If you are many and built you a good homestead around and dig a fortress around, the slave traders would fear to come there, and then you would be safe. And therefore from that time, people developed a belief, that if you want to be strong, if you want to be known, if you want to survive, then you need to be many. (Wanyama)

Lawrence's words were shocking. While I saw population growth in Uganda as a problem, it was seen as an asset for Ugandans and was used to protect themselves from slavery. I had an interesting perspective. I am a white American man and was looking down on Ugandans as ignorant. I was also learning of the real reasons for this perceived problem: Western slavery was the reason for the population of the country. Africans feel a higher population is the key to survival and success. I was shocked and humbled by my own ignorance. However, it was only through a willingness to get at the deeper layers of cultural behaviors that the ignorance was uncovered.

Creating programs for development without taking culture into consideration is akin to putting a Band-Aid on a mortal wound. Geert Hofstede states, "While cultural change sweeps the surface, the deeper layers remain stable, and the culture rises from the ashes like a phoenix" (26). Those deeper layers are what the development worker is trying to uncover. As long as those layers are left unnoticed by the worker they will continue to appear. As the worker attempts to make change, they will find themselves frustrated by what seems like stubbornness or apathy, when in fact the worker is struggling against layers of deep cultural principles.

The development worker is not trying to change those deeper layers, as this can be even more frustrating than leaving them unnoticed. They should instead seek to understand the reasons behind seemingly eccentric behaviors. These workers should also attempt to understand the people by forming relationships. As he or she develops the community, the worker should look for teachable moments and connection points to help the community evolve organically. This transformation should come from within the culture, not as a system imposed by the worker.

Development is happening before the worker gets to their destination. The work may not look like what the development worker would do, but it's the work the people are doing based on their culture. This unique work is an important place for the practitioner to start. Myers writes, "The poor are people with names, people to whom God has given gifts, and people with whom and among whom God has been working before we even arrived" (106). The people of the culture have the knowledge to change themselves, whether they realize it or not, and the worker is researching that knowledge, capitalizing on it, and supporting it when necessary.

Hofstede affirms, "Nobody can develop a country but its own population. Development is in the minds, not in the goods. Foreign money and foreign expertise are effective only to the extent they can be integrated into local knowledge" (417). The minds of the people are the only place development can and will happen. Change will only occur in the deep layers of a culture when those layers are recognized and acted upon by the people of the culture. In this paradigm, the worker acts more as a consultant, social entrepreneur, and investment broker. The worker stops looking to change the culture and instead looks for fertile ground where the culture has potential for change.

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