

THEory into ACTion

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A New Looking Glass: Using Reflective Practice to Align Research Approach with Culture

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Soon after I arrived in Egypt to begin teaching, I was greeted by a Michael Evans' (2011) cartoon that depicts a "Western" woman scantily clad in a two-piece bathing suit who has just crossed paths with an Arab woman wearing a black niqab. They are giving each other sly gazes over their shoulders, and according to their thought bubbles, they both pity each other for being from a "cruel male-dominated society". This served as both a reminder and a promise that if I were to do research with a population that is culturally dissimilar to mine, differences in perspectives on gender would arise; at some point, I would be required to consider these different views alongside the findings I have focused on.

Having lived in Egypt for less than six months, and having had the same amount of time to understand cultural aspects, I set out on an agenda to understand the challenges and facilitators Egyptian women encounter while doing pro-environmental work. I had learned that relationships would be an extremely important factor in reaching the women I wanted to meet, and I was grateful to be introduced by my students and colleagues to the women that I eventually interviewed. The women were of a higher SES, and some were university-educated. Some of the women were volunteers with community-serving NGOs, some worked with environmentally-concerned companies and others were members of community organizations focused on protecting the neighborhood environment. Only one woman lived in a low-wealth community.

My first interviewee sat before me, perplexed by my question. I had gotten to an item containing a Likert-type agreement scale and the following statement: *I believe some of the difficulties I face in doing environmental work are because I am a woman.* Her immediate reaction was, "Why would it matter that I am a woman?" Ultimately, I wanted to get to how women work around such challenges, but this is where my interviewees and I would get stuck. In many of the interviews, participants responded in a similar vein. I did not perceive their return questions as defensive; indeed they seemed to be truly puzzled as to why gender might matter in their work. At this juncture, I was beginning to realize that, while I have a sustained wariness of the media and awareness of its bias, heretofore, I had not been particularly critical of its portrayals of Arab women.

Similar to Evans' cartoon, Abu-Lughold's (2002) work invites a more analytical perspective. She indicates that in the Arab world, as a Westerner, I am likely to be seen as 'vulnerable to sexual violence' and sadly 'driven by individual success rather than morality' (Lughold, 2002). She also explores the notion that Arab women need to be 'saved' and urges us to question if we have silenced the voices of Arab women in favor of our own. One key challenge is to embrace

the idea that the meanings applied to ‘freedom’ and ‘oppression’ are contextual and culture-specific. While Lughold’s (2002) critique was largely framed within the discourse that associated the veil with Taliban human rights violations, its particular relevance to my research was revealed during my reflective practice.

According to Experiential Learning Theory, experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting are elements of an iterative process that lead to new experiences (Kolb, 1984). Reflective practice, as a crucial piece of community psychology research and action, allows one to examine discomforts that arise in the work. These appraisals of discomforts can result in the construction of new conditions and relationships whereby complex phenomena can be further studied. Further, it can result in improved problem solving (Eyler, 2002) as well as professional and personal growth (Eyler, 2002; Shih-Hsien Yang, 2009).

Indeed, as I reflected on the connections between my interactions with participants and my chosen methodology, both Evans’ (2011) and Abu-Lughod’s (2002) commentaries on impositions of Western ideas of empowerment and oppression spoke to me. For instance, although my stated interest was in the challenges *and* facilitators experienced by women, I noted that the structure of my survey and the amount of exploration I did to follow up on particular forced-choice items mirrored my assumption that these women would regard gender-based challenges as the more salient part of their experiences.

I also thought about how some women needed more prodding than others to contemplate on gendered experiences. The small sub-sample of women who were university-educated was more forth-coming and easily shared personal challenges related to woman-hood. However, those who were volunteers were more likely to talk about the challenge as being a lack of environmental awareness within the communities where they worked. When I pressed them for a more gendered response, these women chose to speak about what they supposed women of poorer communities faced when *they* worked to improve the environment. Thus, I came to understand variation in participant responses were likely due to differences in experiences particular to their social class and perspectives shaped by education – perhaps including increased exposure to Western ideals. In any case, I am now aware that I had unintentionally regarded Egyptian society as monolithic, and in doing so, I was very wrong.

When I connected my research experience to Evan’s (2011) and Lughold’s (2002) assertions regarding how Western women are viewed in the Arab world, this latter experience had a second implication. Glaring before me was another picture of assumed oppression, but this time, I was in it: I had assumed the oppression of the women I interviewed, and some of the women I interviewed assumed the oppression of the poorer women they worked with. Thus, someone, somewhere – perhaps even the woman sitting across from me - was assuming my oppression, too.

An important step within the overarching framework for reflection is to ask *now what?* This stage is an opportunity to consider additionally the lessons I’ve learned which include:

- the importance of understanding the various levels of empowerment and privilege within societies and of reflecting it in one’s research approach.
- the soundness of a community psychology practice that is grounded in reflection and allows for different conceptualizations of ‘problems’.

- the challenges presented by communities that are defined by common goals (e.g., healthier physical environment) rather than geographically *and* are difficult to access due to physical and language barriers. In this case, it resulted in poor representation of women working pro-environmentally in more rural and low wealth areas.

With these, my next goals are to enhance my cultural competence, namely by taking a more humble stance; to increase my network so that it extends to those who are connected to more remote communities; and to utilize a methodology that emphasizes the ‘voice’ from women from diverse backgrounds within Egypt. In this way, I can continue hard work of learning and reducing my bias as I deepen my study of this issue.

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This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Tabitha Underwood at underwoodtabitha@gmail.com.