

COMMUNITY RESIDENTS' MOTIVATIONS

Exploring Community Residents' Motivations for Interacting with American Field School

Undergraduates in South Africa

Abstract

Background: Learning by experience in field schools (FS) depends implicitly on the willingness of local residents to engage with students. While critical perspectives have highlighted the potential harms of study abroad on local people, their views are less frequently investigated. **Purpose:** To explore the perspectives and motivations of local residents who agreed to be interviewed by American undergraduates undertaking a five-week FS in community health research methods in Cape Town, South Africa.

Methodology/Approach: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 residents to explore their perspectives on why they, and others, were willing to be interviewed by students. These were thematically analyzed. **Findings/Conclusions:** Emphasis was given to the status implicit in being “a student” and “a visitor” and the respect, hospitality and support this status engendered. To be a student was to be a child and not in a position to help. However, expectations were that help would come later. Residents valued the conversations they had which were seen as opportunities for enjoyment, exchange and bridging social divides. **Implications:** In experiential learning programs such as these, local residents are a key community learning resource. Certain design features appear to help optimize the engagement and relationship-building valued by students and residents alike.

Keywords: Africa, community settings, field school, higher education, interview methods

Introduction

Field school (FS) describes a type of experiential education (EE) involving hands-on learning of a broad range of educational topics including farming, healthcare, archaeological excavation, human or physical geography, and ethnographic fieldwork. FSs are often held in a different location than participants' countries of residence, and so may be one among many options undergraduates have for studying abroad. A number of benefits to local communities have been identified including wages for community-based employees and sales for local businesses (Nelson & Klak, 2012; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004), opportunities for cultural exchange (Abbott, 2006; Lansing & Farnum, 2017), confidence building (Doerr, 2017), learning new skills (Larsen, 2015), and increased networking for local staff (Robson, 2002).

However, critical perspectives also highlight concerns such as the potentially exploitative, neo-colonial and harmful relations between powerful northern and marginalized southern partners (Abbott, 2006; Epprecht, 2004), the environmental impact (Dvorak, Christiansen, Fischer, & Underhill, 2011), and even the risk of inadvertently reifying culture and reinforcing othering (Doerr, 2017; Lansing & Farnum, 2017; Ramirez, 2013). With the potential to both benefit and harm, understanding the perspectives of people who host FS programs is important.

Field School Background and Design

The FS is modeled after the ethnographic FS genre (Iris, 2004) and emerged from a friendship between a professor based in South Africa (CJC) with ties to the sending university in the USA, and a Pastor and activist living in a peri-urban township of Khayelitsha. Township describes areas that were designated for non-white racial groups during the Apartheid regime. Though the Group Areas Act, which separated racial groups geographically, was abolished in the early 1990s, in Cape Town many neighborhoods' racial

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demographics continue to reflect the past. Khayelitsha was, and continues to be, a predominantly black township and is the largest in Cape Town. It is on the periphery of the city in an area called the Cape Flats characterized by flat, fairly treeless land exposed to flooding, high winds and temperature extremes. Residents face daily struggles with poverty, crime, access to essential services (water, sanitation, electricity, healthcare), and transport.

At the time of this research, students spent four to five days a week in a neighborhood of Khayelitsha where the Pastor lived and acted as local coordinator. Students worked in small groups of four to five, to define a research question within the broad theme assigned to them, and carried out fieldwork including methods such as observation, participant-observation, mapping, and ethnographic interviews. The broad themes for students' research were faith and health, chronic illness, and adolescence. Students devised a research focus, questions, and a methodology. The group studying the first topic examined how people choose between spiritual or traditional healing and biomedicine, the second studied how people make sense of diabetes and hypertension, and the third focused on gangsterism. Each day began with an isiXhosa language lesson before beginning fieldwork. Each student group was always accompanied by a guide and a mentor. Guides lived locally and acted as gatekeepers, translators, and interpreters and were a source of local knowledge. Mentors were graduate students and postdoctoral researchers with backgrounds in social science and community-based research. Interviews were an important source of data for students. Interviewees were usually identified by guides (from their networks) after students decided whose views they needed to understand to answer their research question. When fieldwork concluded, students presented their research at a public presentation day in the neighborhood. Fieldwork was supported by pre-travel videoconferencing calls with university and local staff, readings and evening seminars, journaling, and a three-night homestay (in a smaller township). The undergraduate student group in 2015 was approximately two-thirds white and

two-thirds female, typical of US students studying abroad (Institute of International Education, 2017).

Here to Learn, Not to Help

The foundation of the FS's pedagogy at the time of this research was the motto that students came humbly to learn, not to help. Students were encouraged to think of, and present themselves, as students *learning* to do research. This here to learn, not to help philosophy was driven in part by concerns raised in the broader study abroad literature about American students studying in developing countries because of an implicit desire to help and save the poor and marginalized, thus framing local communities as victims, and foreign students as white saviors (Larsen, 2015; Mathers, 2010; Onyenekwu, Angeli, Pinto, & Douglas, 2017). While a service-learning model (Bennett, Sunderland, Bartleet, & Power, 2016; Hartman & Kiely, 2014; Iris, 2004; Nelson & Klak, 2012) can help address the issue of reciprocity by ensuring that students undertake activities and research prioritized by local partner organizations, it still embodies the idea of service and help, and thus runs the risk of "perpetuating connotations of superiority and of a donor-recipient culture" (Martin & Griffiths, 2012, p. 916). For this reason, the FS has so far not adopted this model.

Host Perspectives

By exploring local community residents' motivations for interacting with American undergraduates, this article contributes to a growing literature on host perspectives (Hawthorne, Atchison, & LangBruttig, 2014; Larsen, 2015; Nelson & Klak, 2012; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004; Wainwright, Bingham, & Sicwebu, 2017). Many study abroad programs, not only FSs, include an EE component where students undertake research and conduct interviews with residents without formal ties to the program (Boateng & Thompson, 2013; Guinness, 2012; Hawthorne et al., 2014; Hutchins, DiPrete Brown, & Poulsen, 2014). However, the voices of such community members are infrequently the explicit focus of

research. Rather, host perspectives tend to be limited to those with formal ties to programs such as community partners, local collaborators or organizations (Hawthorne et al., 2014; Nelson & Klak, 2012; Wainwright et al., 2017), host country students who also participate in the course (Mizrahi, Kaufman, & Huss, 2017; Solis, Price, & de Newbill, 2015), or members of the homestay family (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004). Many of the benefits described earlier relate especially to those with these formal ties to programs. Some have looked beyond this group of residents, like Larsen (2015) who noted the silencing of host-community members in research, and conducted interviews with community members without formal ties such as people working in local shops, taxi drivers, and street leaders who interacted with students. Responding to calls in the literature for more work on host perspectives (Ujitani & Volet, 2008) to better understand benefits and impact on host communities (Nelson & Klak, 2012; Martin & Griffiths, 2012), and what makes cultural encounters positive and meaningful (Ramirez, 2013), we explored the perspectives of the local residents who had directly engaged with students. First, we present thematic findings to our overall question why do people engage with students?, followed by a discussion of this article's contribution to debates in the field of EE.

Methodology

Participants and Data-Generation

During FS mentors kept note of the names and addresses of all the people with whom students conducted interviews (37 in total). During the three weeks following the FS in 2015, three interviewers (including MW and NS) carried out semi-structured interviews with 21 residents (in two cases two were interviewed together). Reasons for not being able to follow-up with the remaining 16 included that they were working, were out of town, or unreachable. The evaluation field work period was limited to three weeks for practical, logistical, and resource reasons. The research was led by MW, a white Canadian female postdoctoral

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researcher at a South African university, who was a mentor in 2014 and 2015. She was assisted by two graduate students - a black female South African Master of Public Health (MPH) student (NS), and a black female MPH student from the US who was a FS student in 2013. The interviews explored motivations, perceptions of the influence of nationality and race, and reactions to students being there to learn, not to help.

An additional research activity with mentors and guides helped define the subset of residents we interviewed. Mentor-guide pairs were provided with the names of the people their students interviewed (one name per cue card). They were asked to place the names on a poster board and draw lines between them denoting who introduced or recommended that person, while also including an annotation of how these people knew each other. From this, we concluded that all 21 people we interviewed were amongst the guides' social networks.

Analysis

Four interviews were up to 15 minutes long, six were up to 25 minutes, five were up to 35 minutes, and four were up to one hour long. The shortest interviews were carried out by the least experienced interviewer. NS being a fluent isiXhosa speaker carried-out six interviews in isiXhosa (participants' mother tongue) which she transcribed and translated to English (other interviews were conducted in English with interpretation support from guides). Considering these six a rich starting point for analysis, MW and NS co-coded them using principles of thematic analysis (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Starting first by reading them through, and then together drafting an initial list of codes, MW and NS then systematically coded each transcript on paper, compared coding, reached consensus, and entered the coding tree, code definitions, and coded transcripts into NVivo11. Ten broad codes (e.g. status of students, social impact) were applied to the rest of the interviews using the Audio-Coding approach (Wainwright & Russell, 2010) starting with the eight most in-depth English interviews. Analysis of this sub-set led to additional codes and sub-codes in our coding tree

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(e.g. the parent node 'status of students' included sub-nodes 'children', 'students', and 'visitors'). The five shortest interviews were coded cautiously, looking primarily for confirming and disconfirming data. The completion of analysis and writing-up occurred iteratively. Here we focus on findings that relate to the research question: why do people engage with students? Since we did not target people who had refused to be interviewed by students, it is perhaps unsurprising that perspectives reported here are overwhelmingly positive. We reflect on this in the limitations section. The project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town. All names are pseudonyms.

Findings

Status as Students

When responding to our questions, participants frequently emphasized what status (role, category or identity) students occupied in the community. Two overarching categories emerged: "students" and "visitors". When their status as "students" was evoked, it was often accompanied by reference to them as "children". Noluvo likened the students to her own children who she hoped might one day study overseas. When asked if she would mind being visited again next year, she responded, "Hayi, no [I don't mind] children who are schooling! They study like mine; maybe they [her children] might be able to go and study overseas, you understand?" When prompted for reactions to the goal of students' research not being to change anything or improve anything in the community, again reference was made to their status as students. For example, Pastor Lundi implied that their student status contained expectations:

For me it is a good thing. I didn't expect them to do anything, because they told us they are students and here to learn. It was good for me because I didn't think about them changing [anything]. They want to know about how we live.

When asked whether attitudes towards the students would be any different depending on nationality or race, their status as “student” was again emphasized. Rose, saying that locals or foreigners of any race would be treated well because they are students, qualifies the position: “Like us we didn't study, so we will see them in a different way. [They are] at the university, they have more knowledge than us”. Similarly, in response to being asked if, and how, race may play a role in how students may be accepted in the community, Zanele responded: “Not really, you know, in our culture we respect people who are studying at university. We respect that”. Pastor Sonwabo echoed this explicitly:

Here in South Africa if you are from university the people respect you, you see they don't take you for granted, they respect you. So, they will pay attention, because of status. Here in South Africa, the status speaks, you see.

The virtue of studying was iterated by older and younger participants alike. Two young men, Sipho and Sithembile agreed that: “Like what is good about it, is they are still studying, they are in school, that is a good thing”.

We did glean the sense from some participants that race could be important. Two participants pondered whether white South African students would be as easy to open-up to, with one theorizing that some may still have “Apartheid in their hearts”. Others, like Phosiza, who did evoke race qualified their statements by saying that while not their view, the fact that many of the students were white shaped community perceptions in some way:

In our township, it is rare [for white people to come here], other people don't like to come here, because of the things that are happening [inferring crime]. Maybe they [residents] feel great that they see whites walking on our streets...On the other hand, we learn something, and we are one. So we are so grateful to speak, we are one, to see them walking here on foot.

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The novelty of having “whites” in this particular township walking on the streets cannot be disregarded considering the continued geographic and economic divides along racial lines.

Nonceba put it the following way:

People are nice, according to how I think, mainly because this is the first time they interact with white people who are able to immerse themselves to such an extent with people, since we are black. These are things that we are not really used to. You only meet a white person at work, you see?

While race was significant, it was mentioned less readily than the fact that they were students and visitors. Having time to chat with students and welcoming them into their homes appeared to be tied to codes of behavior surrounding how one should behave towards a visitor. On a couple occasions, students were referred to specifically as the coordinator's visitors, but more frequently, they were described not just as visitors, but visitors “from far”, and “from America”. Sipho and Sithembile agreed that people were generous with their time because: “It's just that they come from far. They are like visitors. We know how to treat a visitor”. Ziyanda said that the fact that they came from overseas was important because they heard so much about the place and people from television: “To hear from other people who come from overseas. So now when they came to you, you realized you enjoy it because now you don't only hear it from the news, you saw it yourself when they came here”. Nwabisa, when asked if it mattered to her that the students were from another country, said: “Yeah, I asked them questions about America, and they explained. Because I've seen Americans on the TV, I've never been”. Race emerged again in relation to the excitement some expressed about meeting African American students because of an expressed admiration for African American music, vernacular and fashion.

Power of Conversation

Several participants spoke about how a conversation could make a positive impact on how they felt, or how having a conversation had the power to make a difference to marginalized people in the community. Zanele thought that what was good about having the students come was:

You can call the boys who smoke tik [crystal meth], ask them why are they smoking, we don't give them the chance, we just call them names. They will be honest. Like me, when I share my story, I feel better, at least I shared this. The gangsters, you'll ask them why are they fighting, you'll find out it was nothing, they will realize “we are fighting over nothing”, to let them talk, that is a very good thing.

Mpumelelo, an elderly man staying with family in the neighborhood while getting medical treatment, was adamant that students *are* helping people. He went so far as to say that it is God who sends these students to talk to people.

Talking is the most important thing. Even though it might not heal physically [...]. Talking about health is what heals the most. Everything helps, small things help, talking helps. The incentive of drinking [taking] the medication, someone talking, every conversation helps.

Nolitha, said this about why she welcomes students into her home: “We are happy because they engage us in a conversation, where the conversation centers on your health...eh, we enjoy that...Even if there is nothing that we get”.

Participants also valued conversation because of the exchange of information and learning it enabled. For Pastor Sonwabo, interviewed by the group studying faith and health, learning about the students' research helped him learn more about the community he is

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serving: “It's a platform to know the needs of a community as a Pastor. How can I help a community? And know how the people think about God, you see. You [the students] make me to be creative”. For Pastor Lundi, interviewed by the same student group, the experience increased his confidence: “I learned to meet people from different areas [countries], and to talk [to them], because I've never been in other areas, I met them and learned how to communicate, and see their lives as well”.

Others, especially those who participated in the chronic illness group's interviews like Nonceba, felt that they gained knowledge about their health. She explained:

I gain because there are things that I didn't know what to eat...they tell you when you question them, they are able to say veg is right, something else is right, something else is right. So then there is something that you get. What you know is that they also have some knowledge. They do not do research without a little knowledge that they have that they can use to help you.

Though we mentor the students to be very cautious about giving health advice, from the perspective of Nonceba and others, their interactions with students also gave them the opportunity to share insights into healthy habits.

Expectations of Future Benefit

As noted above, the fact that students were seen as “students” by residents, which in turn likened them to “children”, meant that none expressed surprise or offense that their research activities did not have the objective of helping solve problems in the community. There were more subtle descriptions within some interviews (like the one in the previous paragraph) of getting help, but for the most part, the expectation was that any possible benefits would come later. Thandiwe had assumed, or misunderstood, the students to be studying for medical degrees and said:

And according to me, at the end of the day, these kids are studying in order to help us because we never had the chance to study and progress. It's even more with them because they are studying to be doctors. Tomorrow, they will be doctors that will heal us or heal...you understand?

We also asked participants for suggestions of future FS topics. Sipho and Sithembile suggested students do research on Tik use. When we asked why they responded, "Because it is mostly used here. I would love some changes in that. It kills people, it kills a lot of people", implying an indirect expectation that student research could change this. Pastor Sonwabo was most explicit about his expectation that while students cannot help now, one day they will.

If you go there [the informal settlement where he works], I know that someday you will help that community. I don't expect at the present moment that you can help that community, but maybe someday, because you will know the whole information about that community and maybe you can refer the need to someone, that "eh if you can go to the community, and help those people". Me as a Pastor I want those people in that community to see that they're helped.

We interpret "refer the need to someone" to imply how students may go away and tell others about that community, and its needs. By doing so, help may come from students or from their contacts and networks.

Discussion

This study and its findings contribute to the field of EE in three ways. One, the findings expand upon the question of how power is configured in study abroad (from white privilege to the privilege of student and visitor status). Secondly, the study highlights the importance of unpacking the category host perspective and, bringing to the foreground the

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key role of local residents in place-based education as community learning resources (Greenberg, 1978). Thirdly, the findings reflect how certain intentional strategies in the design of this FS appear to achieve some degree of reciprocity in terms of engagement (e.g. promoting the motto here to learn, not to help, encouraging conversational interviews and empowering guides to draw on their networks).

Issues of power and privilege abound in the study abroad literature. When considering what motivates people in host communities to interact with students, unequal power relations based on past and present race relations and colonial and neo-liberal politics are undoubtedly at play in complex ways (Abbott, 2006; Epprecht, 2004; Guinness, 2012). For example, our findings do highlight how white privilege came into play in terms of the relative novelty of having a predominantly white group of students in the neighborhood for a sustained period of time. However, we believe the findings are especially interesting for the way they highlight other, less frequently discussed axes of power, namely the privilege inherent to being a student, young adults, and visitors. In the cultural and political context that was South Africa at the time of this research (a time of student protest against racial and economic exclusion), being a university student was a status that commanded considerable respect and power. While we encouraged our students to present themselves as humble students, this did negate how their power as university students played itself out in peoples' willingness to engage. Linked to this was age. Many of the students' interviewees were mothers at home who likened them to their own children in need of care and support to succeed with their studies. Finally, students benefitted from a cultural code of behavior that welcomed visitors from afar. Mizrahi et al. (2017, p. 905) argue that this asymmetry must be minimized as the hosts often do not have the means to become the privileged visitors in exchange. In addition, field courses in Africa "can suffer from visitor overload" (Robson, 2002, p. 334), and so not overburdening peoples' hospitality is a priority for programs like ours.

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The residents' willingness to be interviewed by students learning how to conduct community-based research exemplify the idea put forth by Greenberg (1978) of the community as a learning resource in EE. For Greenberg (1978, p. 25) "every community contains skilled and talented persons who enjoy teaching others, but whose primary occupation is outside the academic community". The residents were such talented persons who contributed their enthusiasm and patience to the benefit of our students. The terms hosts and community, though frequently used, are often insufficiently defined. Our decision to reach out to residents without formal ties to the FS was motivated in part by a desire to deconstruct the catch-all terms community and host perspectives.

Linked to this is the issue of engagement and relationship-building. Researchers and pedagogues have argued that community engagement and fostering community-student relationships is key to achieving their goals (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2015; Hawthorne et al., 2014; Hutchins et al., 2014; Nelson & Klak, 2012; Robson, 2002). Spending more time in communities is a way of increasing bonds and fostering meaningful relationships (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2015). Spending full days in the same neighborhood four to five days a week for five weeks is a relatively novel structure for a study abroad opportunity and echoes the epistemological commitments of place-based pedagogy outlined by Pipitone (2018, p. 69-70), including cultivating "forms of relationality that transcend categorical differences" and recognizing "engagement with place as fundamental to learning about someone else's local". Continuity in community partnerships underlying FSs leads to deeper connections between students and community members (Hutchins et al., 2014) and more positive attitudes and perceptions within host communities (Nelson & Klak, 2012). We believe the positive experiences of residents we spoke to relates to their personal relationships with guides, and in turn the longstanding relationship between the program convener and the local coordinator. Guides are supported to draw upon their local networks to assist students and this helps

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embed the FS in relationships. A certain degree of trust is thus built-in to the encounter from the outset. This also enabled the flexibility, serendipity and interpersonal network development which enriches experiential learning of the research process (Emo, Emo, Kimn, & Gent, 2015).

The ethnographic emphasis we give to rapport-building, and qualitative, conversational interviews also help to foster deeper connections between students and residents. As relationships are formed, experiential learning becomes more meaningful for both parties (Bialka & Havlik, 2016). Like in other research, some respondents found they could reflect on their community and its needs through conversations with students (Hutchins et al., 2014). Considering the geographic, social and economic imprints of the Apartheid regime, it cannot be denied that this community is both actively part of a globalized world while at the same time cordoned off from full participation in it, both financially and in terms of relationship-building. Residents we spoke to also saw some benefit to the opportunity these encounters offered for briefly crossing divides of race, class and power. In order to maintain a here to learn not to help pedagogy, while at the same time being fair to residents' expectations of future benefit, the course convener (CJC) has developed projects outside the FS to give back to the community.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several important limitations to this study. Firstly, these perspectives cannot be taken as representative of the whole community. They are a select group of people within the social networks of the guides who are employed by the field school. We know anecdotally that this might motivate participation. For example, MW in her role as a mentor, remembers accompanying the students to a woman's home who said she wanted to speak with students even though feeling unwell because she did not want the guide (a family member) to lose his job. Future research could explore these subtler motivations through

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other methodologies such as participant-observation by a mother tongue isiXhosa speaker. Conversations among us suggest that NS, a black South African fluent in isiXhosa, is the member of the team most likely to be told peoples' grievances in the community.

It is likely that the status of this study's interviewers as university students and researchers, in this case white foreign, black foreign, and black South African, led to a reporting bias where participants wanted to please us by withholding critique or expectations, and instead focused on reporting positive stories. The privilege of relative youth and the status of students and the university we uncovered in this research applies equally to us. Despite this we do not believe what was said was false or not heartfelt, but only that this is unlikely to be the full story. For instance, NS spoke to one man more recently who expressed his feeling that only the coordinator's social network benefits from the students' presence. Future research should also look more widely at the question of expectations beyond the group of people who agree to be interviewed by students. Research could investigate the relationship between local staff and community members (including those who are not approached or refuse to participate), as well as how the status of students may be mobilized as a form of social capital.

Conclusion

Hearing the reasons people have for wanting to interact with foreign students (learning and exchange, reflecting on community needs, therapeutic effect of conversation, traversing social divides, possible future benefits, and fulfilling the role of good host and parent), opens an important question for EE programs such as ours. How do we think about the meaningfulness of the encounter from the perspective of local people as presented here, while at the same time, not dismissing important critiques of privilege and extraction, not turning the students into white saviors, and not discounting local perspectives as false consciousness? We continue to grapple with these questions as we deliver and evaluate this

FS. From this research we conclude that a here to learn not to help motto, a place-based rather than tour-based model, an ethnographic orientation emphasizing conversation, and employing local guides who draw on their social networks, are explicit design features which appear to optimize the engagement and relationship-building valued by students and residents alike. We encourage others to consider these in their programs and to include host perspectives in their evaluation research.

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