

WHO HELPS WHOM? MY SERVICE EXPERIENCE IN LIBERIA

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While serving as a volunteer social worker in a rehabilitation program for former boy soldiers outside of Monrovia, Liberia, the author was bombarded by cultural differences which led her to rethink many previous assumptions. Her experience provides another example that help cannot be provided without help being received, perhaps in greater measure.

Who Helps Whom?

Who helps whom in social work practice? We train and study, learn how to help others, how to communicate in curative ways, how to interpret intra- and interpersonal dynamics, and how to examine our own issues for intentional use of self. Clients don't go through any courses of study to learn how to be clients who spur the growth of their worker. But can clients ever be helped without the worker being helped? Who benefits more from the exchange? Who is really the beneficiary of social work practice?

Social Worker Practice Is Curative for Social Workers

Social work's ecological and person-in-environment perspectives indicate that our focus is on the interface between systems—that if there is a change in one part of the system, there is a corresponding change in the other. Applying these perspectives to social work practice makes it clear that treatment is a mutual process. There is no pure helper or one helped. If the exchange helps the client, there usually is a curative impact on the worker. The theory of intersubjectivity as applied to clinical practice suggests that client and worker are mutually influenced by the therapeutic relationship (Aron, 1996; Bowles, 1999). Many clinicians attest to the profound benefits they have reaped in their helping roles, so much so as to make any “scientific” comparison of who is helped the most, client or social worker, impossible

(Engels, 2001; Glezakos, 1995; Wall, 2001; Yu-Wen Ying, 2001).

Decision to Serve in Liberia

These questions of who helps whom became even more compelling after my volunteer social work experience in Liberia last year. I replied to an announcement posted by the American Refugee Committee (a small international aid organization) on the Internet requesting a volunteer to serve in a youth village for war-affected teenage boys. The position called for counseling and intensively interacting with 50 former “street kids,” many of whom were former boy soldiers during the seven years of raging civil war in Liberia. Furthermore, it involved consulting with the staff about program and daily operations and management issues, as well as providing training in counseling techniques and the emotional consequences of trauma. The announcement also called for a written report of suggestions for future development of the program as a final volunteer task. The enormity of the assignment gave me shivers, as did the political instability in the country and the lack of safe, healthy living conditions in the wake of the war's destruction. Despite all my reservations, however, I sent in my vita, hopeful that my limited time commitment would automatically disqualify me. This way I wouldn't have to confront the reality of backing away from an opportunity to help where the need was intense. It was far more ego syntonetic to apply and be rejected with a

feeling of relief.

My academic vita, purposely long, entangled me. The ARC Country Director was interested in interviewing me. Soon I was wrestling with whether I would accept the offer to go to Liberia or face the fact that I really wasn't willing to take the multiple risks of reaching out to people in very dire circumstances. Was I being a daredevil and foolish if I went? Would I make any difference that would outweigh the possible dangers? Could I really meet the director's expectations that I had the skills and understanding to work in a Third World country with violent youth and with staff who had personally experienced the fresh impact of severe trauma? Who was I to think that I could make a contribution in one month that would have any impact sufficiently lasting to warrant being in harm's way?

With dread and ambivalence, as well as resolve and desire, I decided that I soon would be Liberia bound. I thank my lucky stars that I took the risk to work in Liberia because it has given me a growth spurt in midlife that I didn't believe was possible, greatly enriching my life both personally and professionally.

The Youth Village

After a long flight from Kalamazoo, Michigan, to Monrovia, Liberia, I arrived at the youth village, which is approximately 25 miles from the capital city. The campus facility in the countryside served 50 youths, ages 13 to 20. There were more than 10 buildings, but all of them had been bombed out, and only some had walls remaining. Two of these buildings had been roofed. One was the trainees' dorm and classroom building, along with some rooms for staff members. The other was the staff boarding house, which included the nurse's station and additional makeshift classrooms. The trainees slept on the floor with only thin plastic mats between themselves and the cement. Mosquitoes flocked in, and

little red smears polka-dotted the walls where the trainees had smashed them during their disturbed and itchy nights.

The kitchen was outdoors, with only a torn plastic sheet over the cooking area. Since Liberia has huge rain forests, it almost always rains at least once daily. The cooks ladled the food into the trainees' bowls, but before they could take their first bites, the rain diluted their food. The material deprivation extended to the trainees' learning and training programs. In literacy class, they were short of paper, pens, and pencils. I observed a class in which 22 students, who were trying to draw the flag of Liberia, shared one red crayon and one blue one. During vocational training sessions in carpentry and agriculture, one hammer or one hoe was distributed among 15 teens.

Trainees and Staff

Amazingly, the teenage trainees had improved greatly in the three months since the program had begun. Staff reported that initially the swearing and threatening were continuous. Now the trainees' aggressive behaviors had subsided greatly, and there was some evidence that the boys were beginning to care about the staff, the program, and each other. Even during the month I was there, I observed this progress continuing.

The staff, who were all deeply traumatized by the war, were now helping the traumatized boys to recover. At night staff members often sat with each other, recounting their nightmarish memories of the war. One counselor told about a soldier who was peddling parts of a body in a wheelbarrow, demanding that he (the counselor) buy the body parts—otherwise he would end up in the wheelbarrow, too. Another described weeks of fleeing on foot to escape to neighboring Guinea and of the arrests and near-death experiences he had.

One very well-known and liked counselor talked about how he would intervene when soldiers were about to kill those they



suspected of belonging to the Krahn ethnic group (an "enemy" minority). He would intervene and tell them that the intended victims were his friends and were not Krahns, even if they were. Others reported how human intestines were used as rope to mark off areas and how corpses were decaying throughout Monrovia, the capital. No one could touch them to bury them because they might be killed. The staff who had survived these extreme terrors were now helping the youth who had been themselves drastically traumatized and conscripted into war, some as early as age six.

The Program: Help Given

English is the official language in Liberia and all the trainees and staff at Boys Town spoke English in addition to their own tribal languages. Because of differences in dialect, grammatical rules, and colloquialisms, I often had to listen carefully, but I lost comprehension only when trainees argued using rapid speech and slang expressions. For the most part, the language similarities enabled me to understand a great deal and be understood. Consequently, I believe I was able to make significant contributions in a month's time because of the rich culture of acceptance that almost immediately allowed me to be a functioning team member.

First, my mere presence, in the ostracized, isolated, war-ravaged country depleted of tourists, communicated, "You are not alone, and you matter to others on the outside." I conveyed interest in, admiration for, and acknowledgment of the trainees' accomplishments and listened to their stories, thoughts, and feelings in daily informal contacts. I had on-the-spot dialogues working with another counselor when a trainee presented difficulties. I joined in the trainees' daily activities, such as hauling sand, pumping water, and listening to the stragglers at night who could not sleep and who needed comfort, company, and perhaps some food to tide

them over until a late breakfast the following day. We took walks to the beach during which our talk would drift to life on the street and comparisons to where they were now in their lives and their goals for the future. I joined staff in initiating and organizing friendship gatherings and bonfires that provided the teenagers with times to talk about their remembrances of war. The trainees would take the guilt and remembrance of wrongdoing and would throw them into the fire so that they themselves could be free to be the good people they chose to be. I engaged trainees in recreational and group activities in an effort to help staff plan for their "down time" so that trainees would have an alternative to wandering off into town and taking drugs.

But overall, I directed most of my professional efforts toward the staff. Initially, I observed the program and interviewed the staff regarding their training needs and reflections on the program. During my first week, I observed the distribution of used clothing to the boys. At one point a near riot broke out as some boys were delighted with what they received while others were outraged: "This is a girl's shirt." "This is an ugly shirt." "America is a rich country—why isn't it sending us new clothing?" The boys pushed those who got the clothes they wanted, intimidated others to force exchanges, and screamed into the faces of staff who pounced back with advancing moves and angry shouts of reprimands and orders. The conflict intensified further.

My first training session to staff focused on analyzing this incident. What were the countertransferences that hooked them, and what were the responses that fueled the escalation? Before the war the counselors lived in a country that knew relative peace and prosperity. They had known a country in which they could trust strangers and a country that was relatively free from personal associations with extreme brutality. Counselors had known a country in which



there was running water and electricity, buses that ran through the city, and streets that were passable. Perhaps they angrily shouted at the children to be grateful for less than the children wanted in order to push down their own anger and anguish at having to settle for far less after the lasting and reverberating destruction of war. Counselors also spoke of countertransferences that arose because many of these children were perpetrators of the brutal violence that demolished social norms, human relationships, and possibilities for the future. It wasn't always easy to keep in their minds and hearts during intense conflict with trainees, that being conscripted into war was an extreme form of child abuse and that trainees had been victims even as they perpetrated violence. After talking about such countertransferences, we discussed how incidents, such as the recent explosion over the clothing distribution, could be de-escalated before they elicited trainees' negative behaviors. One staff member exclaimed that I was just saying words and what I suggested wouldn't work. Others said that this was Africa and the children were tough and couldn't be dealt with adequately in the ways I was proposing. Furthermore, they didn't want their children to be disrespectful and irresponsible as they perceived American children to be. The staff were right up front with their concerns so that they could be talked about and I could learn about their culture. But they also listened and reflected on what I said and were eager to put new learning into their own cultural context.

At the next day's training, some counselors reported trying the de-escalating techniques and declared them successful. Others started to analyze past events and consider how incidents could have been defused. Two staff members role played a situation to illustrate how they would calm and redirect the boys and leave the rational problem solving and moral learning discussion

for a less agitated moment. Their ability to be open and direct in their opposition, as well as their great ability to rethink and emotionally regroup, must assuredly be part of the reason for their successful program.

Other training followed based on staff interest and need, including learning behavioral programming techniques and responding therapeutically to the personal manifestations of trauma. I interviewed many trainees for their evaluation of the program. In response, I introduced group activities, such as relay races and focused discussion groups, as well as worked with the program manager and staff to develop a schedule with more planned activities. Providing consultation with the program manager enabled us to restructure and refocus supervisory sessions to more effectively direct and empower staff efforts. I left the Program Manager of the Youth Village and the ARC Country Director an evaluative report of my perceptions of the program's strengths and difficulties, as well as suggestions for future development and proposed changes. Staff listed some priority material needs, such as mosquito netting to protect the trainees from mosquitoes at night, recreational equipment, and over-the-counter medicines (and their prices within Liberia), to help me with fund-raising efforts when I returned to the States.

The Helper: Help Received

I might have contributed in an incremental way to the program at the Youth Village, but the contributions that they made in turn to my life were no less than transformational. How I look at the world, at my life, and at my professional work has changed dramatically. I am conscious of this difference each and every day. Here are just some of the many jarring, awakening reality checks that the Liberian experience has impressed upon my heart and mind forever.

Relativity of Time - One month was so packed with moments of being connected, alive, contributing, intensely involved in an effort so critical to human well-being and mental and emotional growth that it has lived on as a major time in my life. Naturally it begs the questions, What have I been doing during previous months that does not leave a legacy of vital memories and expanded understanding that continually enriches the present? How must I use my time now to do what is most meaningful, to serve and to develop my capacities and understanding?

Empowerment - Beside survival issues, I worried that I could not meet the clinical, consulting, teaching, program planning, and evaluation tasks expected—and all in one month. And yet I did perform all these tasks and consequently experienced a revitalized sense of my own skills, abilities, and professional worthiness. The Liberian culture of the youth village communicated acceptance and inclusion that allowed me to fully use my knowledge and skills and express my personality. It was a powerful, personal demonstration of how growth occurs in relationships: the need for such human support, permission, and encouragement for me to unfold and become all I could be in that month. I returned to the States with a greater sense of my own power, value, and worth and a deep sense of gratitude for so much help having been given to me.

Self-reliance - The idea that poor people in Third-World countries are unskilled and somehow less knowing is a cultural bias that to some extent I bought into. One day we were driving down to the beach in a pickup truck to gather sand that was brought up to the village to be mixed with, molded, then soaked and hardened in water to be used for roofing tiles. The lack of money and resources makes it essential that Liberians know how to create something from nothing, and they

ingeniously do so. They know that they have only themselves to rely on and can't call for a plumber, an electrician, a contractor, or a tow truck. When the truck got stuck in the sand, which entirely covered the two back tires, I thought that there was no hope of digging out (we didn't have a shovel either) and wondered if we could get a tow truck. But the staff member didn't waste a second thinking of what help he could get outside of himself; he started problem solving immediately. Amazingly, he used reeds found about the beach, the strength of the trainees pushing, and his own skills at using the power of the vehicle to dislodge the truck. When I returned home and my washing machine broke, I—amazingly!—didn't immediately walk away and think what it would cost for a service call. Rather, I pulled the machine out, looked for how it was hooked up, and fixed it myself. The Liberians' modeling of self-reliance and ingenuity was another way they empowered me.

The Poor - En route to Liberia, I saw a United Nations poster requesting donations for the world's poor people: A woman in scant, tawdry clothes was bent over, cooking food on the mud ground in a flat pan with some grains beside her. I was struck by the extreme deprivation and poverty depicted in the photo. The poster jumped out at me on my return from Liberia. This time I wondered about what food she was cooking, whether she was a good cook, how the food might be very tasty, and how competent she must be to make something from so little. It's not that I didn't see the poverty, but it's that I didn't see the poverty exclusively. There was a human being in that poster, someone with focus, mastery, beauty, and personality. Being poor is not the sum total of who that woman is; it doesn't define her. Now people living in abject poverty don't appear to me as caricatures of their living situations.

American Poverty - Liberians have a culture of sharing, so if one person in an extended family of 40 works, that salary may be divided in 40 ways. As a result, Liberians often can outwardly hide their poverty. There are layers of degree of poverty, and I wasn't exposed to the most severe depths because I spent almost all of my time on the grounds of the youth village. I did not view the most horrific poverty in Liberia "up close and personal." Perhaps for that reason, or perhaps for others, I grew sorrier for poor Americans.

In Liberia, where up to 80% of the population is unemployed and illiterate and an average monthly wage is between 10 and 15 U.S. dollars, people do not blame those who are poor for their poverty. They know better. Public messages that poor people are lazy, immoral, stupid or in some way deficient, and not as inherently able and worthy as those who are not poor don't fly in Liberia. Poor people don't get vilified, excluded, or ostracized. They aren't at risk of having their self-esteem worn thin by public denunciations and rejections. I felt even sadder for those in America who are poor when I saw the Liberians intensely interacting in support of one another in their conditions of material deprivation. They didn't have to simultaneously endure the absence of survival necessities along with a thwarted sense of belonging, as do people who are poor in America. Liberians who are poor are respected, valued, accepted, and comforted by others who often are experiencing and/or understanding the same hardships.

Acculturating to Poverty - The trainees had only two meals a day because the sponsoring agency couldn't afford to provide them with three daily meals. I began to think that this wasn't so bad because there were others in Liberia who were actually starving and many more who were always hungry. And I rationalized that the trainees could climb the trees in the early morning (as indeed they did)

to get mangoes if they were hungry before the purposely late breakfast, set at 10 o'clock to shorten the time span to supper. Even in the short period I was in Liberia, poverty became relative and by different standards than I had had when I arrived. It seemed so unjust that these excellent social workers and counselors were being paid 2,000 or 3,000 U.S. dollars a year and that was okay because by Liberian standards that was an extremely high salary. Here I was in Liberia less than a month and already thinking that it was okay that teenage males could not get the amount of food they wanted and needed. Catching myself at the very dynamic that I condemn in others was humbling.

"My Son" - I suspect American youth who committed acts similar to the atrocities these boys had been responsible for during war and the criminal behaviors they continued to perpetrate on the streets would be incarcerated. Many of the trainees had been much feared fighters and commanders in the Small Boy Unit (SBU) during the seven years of "civil" war. Conscripted, drugged, and trained, they were ordered to commit atrocities—atrocities that had traumatized the very staff who now, in a sense, worked with the perpetrators of these acts. These Liberian youth were not placed in a punitive, detention, jail-like facility. They were placed in a strongly nurturing environment *and* were expected to become exemplary citizens and leaders for their nation. I heard each staff member say "my son" when he talked with a complaining trainee. When a staff member wanted the trainees to do something or understand a position, he would say, "I beg you." Appealing to the heart and expecting mutual compassion were underlying parts of many interventions. The staff would often communicate to the teens that they needed to get their behavior and emotions under control and to learn skills to be the future leaders of their country—that they were important to the well-being of the

beleaguered nation.

A worker in charge of construction, who did not work with the children directly, explained to me, "They don't have to become human beings—they began as human, they were human before they acted as savage soldiers." Later he restated his philosophy directly into the face of a teenager who was haunted by extensive experience in battles. Two nights before, around a bonfire circle, the teen had talked of a skirmish in which he and a childhood friend confronted each other with guns. It wasn't clear whether he had killed his friend. The teen was sullen, unfocused, and withdrawn and left the recounting of this episode unfinished. "Do you really believe that?" he asked after he had finished. "Yes, I do," the construction worker responded with straightforward, convincing honesty. The boy began to zestfully eat his bowl of rice covered with bean sauce. These youth, who had perpetrated and witnessed unspeakable atrocities, were regarded as the future promise of their nation. They were not throwaways; each was "my son."

Nature of Treatment - Even without traumatized staff and extreme material deprivations, social workers face enormous challenges in making a difference with youth who have been traumatized over long periods of time without treatment. It was therefore remarkable that the youth were changing their behaviors, expressing their feelings, and planning in more hopeful ways in just four months from the program's inception. One explanation could be the strong identification that the staff had with the trainees. They had experienced trauma themselves and so could identify with the youth who had been drastically traumatized and conscripted into war. Furthermore, the Liberian culture seeped through in the way staff related to trainees. Staff often said that they felt these children were like their own. "It takes a village to raise a child" was not just a reasoned, warm

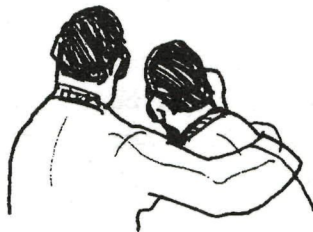
statement at the youth village, but a way of life. This inclusive, social culture that stresses mutual responsibility and connection affected the nature of the treatment and could not be separated from it.

No Need for a Drug Program - There was no formalized drug program for the youth who had been heavily into drugs. These youth had been drugged so that they would perform as uninhibitedly violent and brutal soldiers. As "street children," drugs remained a part of their way of life. I was astounded that there was no supportive and confrontive group and individual counseling nor educational training to stem the use and abuse of drugs. Nevertheless, staff and trainees alike reported that drug use was subsiding dramatically. It appeared that there didn't need to be a "war on drugs" because the needs driving drug use were being met. The youth were gaining acceptance and a sense of belonging and of possibilities for their future and were participating in activities and receiving responses that reinforced their pride and sense of self. Apparently in response, they were giving up drugs spontaneously and without fanfare or attention. Though there were extremely inexpensive drugs available in surrounding villages, drug use was ebbing. When my initial alarm at the lack of a drug program turned into a realization that the youth village didn't need one, I questioned whether our focus in America on our drug problem is just another expensive way to divert us from meeting the human needs of our citizens and to further penalize vulnerable people in our society. Perhaps rather than a war on drugs, we need to work on the alienation, distrust, exclusion, blaming, and lack of sharing that pervades our culture and denies many citizens feelings of importance, value, respect, and acceptance.

Touching Teenagers - During my second day at the youth village, I took a ride



with the material procurement worker and some of the trainees. We were walking from the road to the hut village where a carpenter lived who needed to be paid for the contract work he had done for the facility. The procurement worker so wholeheartedly, assertively, and vigorously held a trainee close to him on his walk that I was curious and later asked him if he knew that teenager particularly well. "No," he responded, "but I don't have to know him well to know that he needs to feel appreciated and that he matters." The trainees were allowed to give and receive physical affection without interpreting every touch as sexual. I began to feel sorry for American teenagers who are often not touched except for sexual purposes. How they must need the physical supportive and affirming touch that the children in the youth village in Liberia received frequently from staff.



These are just some of the awarenesses that broke through and challenged realities in my personal and professional life. My relatively brief stay in Liberia transformed me. The moral courage, strong sense of humanity, and rich community exemplified by the staff and the trainees at the youth village where I worked have taught me inestimable lessons.

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