ETHICS AND ACTION RESEARCH IN EMANCIPATION-BASED ENDEAVOURS: PROJECTS OF HEART OR PROJECTS OF PUBLICATION?

Melanie Bennett-Stonebanks
McGill University

C. Darius Stonebanks
Bishop's University

Thomas Mphande
Transformative Praxis: Malawi (TPM)

ABSTRACT

University standards for attaining tenure-track positions, tenure, advancement of rank, and successful periodic evaluation in universities in the Global North primarily center on attainment of research grants and publications. This article considers the ethical implications of these values when action research projects are carried out with impoverished communities in the Global South. Simultaneously, when impoverished communities in the Global South work with Global North universities, they often do so with the experiences of universities and other foreign organizations (religious charities, non-government-organizations, not-for-profits, etc.) having timeframes and funding allocations set to standards of the usual two to five years, along with the knowledge that the “foreign-researcher” will, more than likely, be transient in their lives. Understandably, this relationship of competing needs and dedication will shift moralities of the impoverished community and “local-researcher” given the growing understanding that the foreign-researcher’s commitment is often tied to institutionally required outputs that give them little benefit. This article uses reflexivity to expose the often-challenging experiences of three Action Researchers in different situations as they work on a liberation, emancipation and social-justice based project focusing on Education, Health and Development in a rural region of central Malawi.

KEYWORDS: Action research; Ethics of action research; Collaborative reflexivity
INTRODUCTION
Fundamentally, this is an article about relationships between academia in the Global North (GN), impoverished communities in the Global South (GS), and the ethical considerations that come from utilizing an action research (AR) methodology. It is an article that questions the priorities typically associated with life in academia (e.g. research grants, publications, etc.) and the needs of community. This is not a “sour grapes” article bemoaning a lack of publications or funding: as co-authors, we all do quite well in our respective positions. Rather, it asks those who are engaged in an AR project located in GS communities to consider where priorities should lie and what constitutes an ethical relationship.

Perhaps no other academic put the relationship between the “researcher” and the “researched”, often the non-indigenous outsider and the indigenous local, more concisely than Linda Tuhaiwa Smith (1999) when she admitted, “many individual non-Indigenous researchers remain highly respected and well liked by the communities with whom they have lived” (p. 3). For co-author, Stonebanks, a visible minority and a non-Christian immigrant to Canada, his extensive time with Indigenous communities in Quebec, Canada (Stonebanks C. D., 2008) has consistently included a local happily telling the old joke of, “What makes up the typical/traditional (fill-in-the-blank of Native group) family?” with the answer being, “A grandparent, a mother, a father, two children and an anthropologist from the South”, followed by laughter. There is a reason this joke is shared with communities who have experienced being “researched”. For Stonebanks, at least, it is not shared out of malice, but rather, to point out the truism that such visitors, either short or long-term, are treated with kindness, hospitality, openness, and are genuinely liked within the Indigenous communities where they carry out research. Yet, the question remains as to what is the ultimate use of the researcher? Smith reinforces this by indicating that the fact that researchers are often well liked does not outweigh the reality that the outcome benefit between the two is often one-sided. “At a common sense level, research was talked about both in terms of its absolute worthlessness to us, the indigenous world, and its absolute usefulness to those who wielded it as an instrument” (p. 3). This joke may seem outdated to some readers because they feel that those using AR have moved beyond such stereotypical relationships (although we note that the joke is still shared with Stonebanks even recently, perhaps because he is also a minority in the broader context and is therefore believed to be “in” on the joke). In Malawi, where this article is situated, the landscape is scattered with half completed or abandoned projects and structures put in place by GN universities, not-for-profits and NGOs. These well-meaning outsiders may once have been considered part of the communities where these projects began, but they simply picked up and left when their five year window of work in the area ended.

Since the 2008-2009 academic year, Transformative Praxis: Malawi (TPM), an emancipatory based knowledge transfer effort utilizing action AR in the Kasungu region of Malawi, has attempted to foster engagement between the GN and GS communities while acknowledging that for the vast majority of GS peoples, research has “…told us things already known, suggested things that would not work, and made careers for people who already had jobs” (p. 3). The three authors of this paper come from significantly different backgrounds (i.e. ethnically, culturally, experientially, academically, geographically, religiously, socio-economically, employment security, etc.). Melanie Bennett-Stonebanks is a part-time course lecturer for two universities
who grew up in the comforts of an upper middle-class white Anglo Saxon family in the suburbs of Montreal, Quebec where she fit in seamlessly and benefited from all the privileges her neighbourhood had to offer. C. Darius Stonebanks, a full tenured professor at a Quebec university mostly grew up in the same suburb. However, coming from an immigrant family of predominantly Iranian heritage, he did not receive the same benefits or supportive acceptance of neighbours or schools, and even experienced violent hate crimes. Thomas Mphade is a substance farmer in the rural community of Kususgu, Malawi. Without the means to further his education past high school, his knowledge comes from experience, curiosity and interest to learn all that he can. He is indeed what one would call an organic intellectual.

When it comes to the subject of “risk” associated with the AR project (that we will soon describe in greater detail), we also vary tremendously in what we ultimately lose and gain from its success and/or failure. After many years of knowing each other, what we do share are the following preoccupations, which are the subjects of this article: What is the point and the tangible outcome of an AR project that claims to be founded in social justice and emancipation? Is it actually a project of the heart that requires long-term struggles in the GS field, or simply a fixed schedule endeavour that leads to the all-consuming concerns of those connected with GN universities; that being publications, research grants and/or career advancement? Or, put more bluntly, “How can our action research project escape the pitfalls of becoming an eventual punch line to a joke about complete worthlessness to community?”.

This article will seek to add more clarity to an AR project in the rural region of central Malawi, founded in liberation, emancipation and social justice theories. This is achieved through the use of reflexivity to expose the often-challenging experiences of three action researchers in different life/career situations as they work to assure that benefits to community outweigh the benefits to self. The focus of the collaborative reflexivity will be an incident when co-author, Mphande, participated in a group reading discussion session in Malawi on Caplan’s The Betrayal of Africa (2008). The discussion session primarily included GN university students. Mphande remarked that after many years of working with TPM, he personally felt that many GN individuals take information, make promises and return to the GN never to be heard from again. Given the nature of the AR project, Mphande’s uncharacteristically candid and critical comment came as a shock to many. For the students in attendance, Mphande’s perspective sat in direct opposition to the intentions of the project in which they were immersed.

**The AR Project: TPM**

As it exists to date, TPM is a knowledge transfer space that is simply referred to as “The Campus” by local residents (although some also refer to it as “Little Canada”, a term we have attempted to discourage). It is a physical space that exists on one square mile of land that was donated by Chief Chilowa, as she recognized her community’s needs to improve their lives. Among the assets that The Campus holds are a multipurpose community center, experimental farming space, a water borehole, a living residence for research visitors, a radio station, model toilets, a women’s cooperative chicken coop, a girl’s netball pitch, a pre-kindergarten program, a primary school, a computer lab, and much more. The entire campus utilizes solar power and is committed to sustainability.
Much of the funds for the structures came from a donation from The Ahmad Jahan Foundation and a wide variety of grass-roots organizations that did tireless fundraising. Although the space is most active when university students and professors come during May and June, a time that corresponds with Malawi’s “dry season” and represents a period where the local villagers are not farming, there is activity that continues year-round. It has become a widely known space in the central region of Malawi, situated deep amongst villages that are rarely visited by NGOs and not-for-profits, and it is not uncommon to hear people say that The Campus has changed the landscape of the area. The space is an impressive achievement; derived from strenuous and collaborative efforts.

TPM resulted from an extensive five-year consultation with the local Malawian community. Like many of these projects, it began with a GN administrator’s vision that came with no funding. In this case, it was to “re-engage with Africa”, with the idea that an educational practice, similar to Canadian Overseas Volunteers or the United States of America’s Peace Corp efforts, of simply sending GN students abroad could somehow “do good”. The idea was to send university students to a foreign location, expose them to a new way of challenging living, let them roll up their sleeves (so to speak) and work shoulder-to-shoulder with local community, and BAM!, the university student gets experiential learning credit on their transcript, the local community gets a new friend (evidenced by a picture on Facebook), and the institution gets a Tweet promoting recruitment. This model is not uncommon to any number of today’s universities, as is evident from the multiple books on the subject like, Heron’s (2014) Desire for Development: Whiteness, Gender, and the Helping Imperative or Tiessen and Huish’s (2014) Globetrotting or Global Citizenship?: Perils and Potential of International Experiential Learning. However, we did not want to repeat these same models (Stonebanks C. D., 2014). So, from the outset of this AR project, the ethics that guided its creation focussed on the local Malawian community deliberating on what a GN university community could potentially do of use?

The first GN university involved in discussions, Canada’s Bishop’s University, established in 1843, is largely considered a small, primarily undergraduate institution that offers a Liberal Arts education. With few professional programs, such as law, health, engineering, etc., the many urgently expressed needs of the community, such as human rights (law), medication (health), and access to clean drinking water (engineering), quickly revealed that the project could not be about a single university flying a flag over an effort while promoting its “excellence” and “leadership” abroad. Over time and through discussing assets and deficits that both GN and GS groups present, the community expressed their general needs in Education, Health and Development, indicating that these areas could be improved in the long-term via the fostering of Critical Thinking, Creativity and Social Entrepreneurship. Our Malawian partners were clear that the current schooling being delivered to their children, which was based on a colonial British model of years long past, was lacking what they viewed to be these vital skills necessary for a better future for all.

Among the discussants at our many meetings was a chief from the village of Makupo, Japhet Chiwanda (Chief Makupo). He brought forward the opinion that whatever the project may be, it needed to escape the vague attributes that mired many of the GN/GS efforts he had witnessed in his lifetime. His assessment was that many projects that
began with good intentions, rarely resulted in substantive and committed change to either himself or the community. This perspective resonated with Illich’s infamous “To Hell With Good Intentions” (1968) speech that he gave to student volunteers from the United States, telling them they were completely useless to the Latin American villagers with whom they were about to reside. Chief Makupo’s vision was to mesh research, teaching, and learning with local needs by means of a physical knowledge transfer space where the research being carried out was tailored to immediate and long-term needs. Thus, the TPM campus was born. However, what was going to actually be done in the space was going to require constant planning and re-planning for years to come.

**RE-PLAN THE AR PROJECT**

Understandably, when engaging with a community that the International Monetary Fund deems “… one of the poorest countries in the world” (2017, p. 4), the United Nations defines as “impoverished” (Gwede, 2015), and local members readily and bluntly refer to themselves as “… very poor” (Stonebanks C. D., 2010, p. 389 & Emory, 2015, p. 10), the stakes associated with immediate needs are genuinely life and death. For example, in regard to food security, it is not uncommon for the community we are working with to suffer through famine in the months of November to February. Therefore, if they are collaborating with GN people who are working at, or going to university, it is understandable that their immediate needs would be food or money to purchase food to stave off the pain and suffering associated with starvation. After all, it stands to reason that they would see either the position of professor, lecturer or student in a Canadian university connected with wealth. However, to what extent GN university members can be of use in this area, beyond the short term solution of charity, is dubious at best.

We apply the Action Research Spiral forwarded by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), and consider the process of plan, act, observe, reflection and then revise plan (repeat plan, act, etc.). When we apply this to the dilemma of starvation, we may plan to raise money in Canada, act by using the money to purchase food for local Malawians, observe that they are immediately better off for eating the food, but by the time we get to reflection, all parties will realize that the revise plan cannot depend on the charity of another group to actually tackle the long term problem. Some readers may assume this is simply an example of the ancient proverb, “if you give a man a fish; you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime”. However, in the case of Malawi, there are no fishable bodies of water in the central region where our project is located, and even if you were close to a body of water, like Lake Malawi, not only are all the fish depleted from overfishing, but oil has been discovered on the Tanzanian side of the lakebed (Masina, 2012) that risks ecological disaster which will likely not only affect drinking water, but do so while these ventures historically give the average citizen little to no economic or social gain (Onishi, 2000). Answers are not so simple when confronted with impoverishment associated with the lingering effects of colonization. This is not a situation where villagers are looking into a body of water and seeing fish, but do not know how to get them. It is more complicated and requires dedication to understand the complexities of the needs being forwarded by our Malawian community partners.

This leads back to the positions of each of the three authors and the ethics of expectations of what we do in TPM. We all bring different attributes, histories and needs
to the AR project, but in regard to the ethics of the work being done, there is a commonality of hope in the commitment of all parties involved, from the undergraduate pre-service teacher of the GN to the elderly Malawian villager who lives a typical rural life. What we put into field work, at the very least, matches personal benefits. However, bringing these lofty words to action is often challenging. For example, between the co-authors of this paper, who stands to benefit or risk the most? Bennett-Stonebanks, as Education coordinator of the Canadian efforts of TPM, benefits from, for example, a subject that fuels her PhD dissertation, admiration from university students for her dedication to a humanitarian effort and an opportunity to demonstrate commitment to the teaching profession beyond her borders. Mphande, as the Field Director of TPM, benefits from a salary, a residence on The Campus and the personal growth that comes from closely participating in a multitude of relevant research endeavours. For Stonebanks, as the Director of TPM, benefits include using this title to build his curriculum vitae and apply to more desirable work positions in Canada, using the subject for publications (such as this one) to boost grant applications, and claiming that he is actually engaged in field research and not simply an "Ivory Tower" academic.

What are the risks? For Bennett-Stonebanks, there is risk associated with the research priorities of GN universities where researching a subject that does not appeal to hiring committees ("who cares about Malawi anyway?") could impact work opportunities as a part-time lecturer. For Stonebanks, it can be jealousy of those in the university workplace who seek to undermine and discredit those who apply research in the field in a very tangible way ("He is doing it just to feel like a bigshot abroad"). For Mphande, it can be the daily pressure of living twelve months of the year within a community that has expectations that the AR project will actually improve their lives ("You are getting a salary, and so are others, but what about the rest of us who are hungry, poor and sick?").

Unquestionably, Mphande risks the most. The risks associated with the possibility that the AR project may come to a halt and fail, which would permanently affect his life, and the lives of those around him in a manner unequal to the challenges that would touch Bennett-Stonebanks and Stonebanks. Establishing guidelines for research involving First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada, the 2014 version of Canada’s Tri Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans advises that “... the research community at large may find the guidance articulated here useful when undertaking research or reviewing a proposal involving Indigenous peoples in other countries ...” (p. 114) and notes that “[j]ustice may be compromised when a serious imbalance of power prevails between the researcher and participants” (p. 113). This one-sided relationship exists even within AR projects, where the word “participants” is rarely used, and all stakeholders involved are “researchers”. This is why commitment, beyond what one can personally gain from a project requires constant confrontation. Re-planning based on the failure to acknowledge who benefits in the long-term must be a part of ethical considerations of the AR project, which is why Mphande’s observation requires reflexivity to guide future planning.

**Caplan’s Betrayal Question and Mphande’s Challenge**

TPM recognizes that expertise in areas of Education, Health and Development certainly exist beyond the university borders, and The Campus welcomes a wide cross section of, what we call, “members” who work collaboratively on our collective AR project. Since
its inception, a yearly regular presence on The Campus are university students (studying in one of the fields of Education, Health or Development) who are expected to engage with local community in their mutual areas of interest, while expanding their understandings of the human condition as it relates to colonialism, decolonization, care, exploitation, social justice, etc. Readings that accompany their time in Malawi include Friere’s (c2005) Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Fanon’s (c2004) The Wretched of the Earth, Scott’s (1987) Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance, and, of course Caplan’s (2008) The Betrayal of Africa. We usually begin with Caplan’s book in our first week in Malawi, as it gives both undergraduate and graduate students an initial foray into the sub-Saharan context. We have encouraged local community members to participate in the readings and group discussions, and Mphande has increasingly become an active contributor in analyzing the texts and comparing what has been written about the human condition of Malawians.

A Campus computer lab, boasting 3G connection fueled by solar energy, and smartphones that have been widely distributed to active TPM members. Not only has this increased access to digital PDF files of some of the readings, but through instant communication via applications like WhatsApp, individual and group chats on the likes of Freire and Fanon have become commonplace between Malawian and International TPM members. Between the three authors of this paper, living on opposite sides of the world and the equator, our communications on the subjects of the readings are only hindered by a six hour time difference, which is usually solved with either one party or the other committing to wakefulness when one should be asleep. With that in mind, during a recently held discussion session in Malawi, the question connected to Caplan’s book, “who are the betrayers of Africa?” was posed. Please note that these conversations typically happen at night, and GN university students (in particular) sort through questions and answers in an unfamiliar space, filled with hope, that they are only just beginning to get to know. While the group worked through the multitude of responses, the answer to the question shared by most was “everyone”. Concerned by this reply, a student asked if they were also betrayers of Africa along with all that have come to The Campus before them. Mphande answered, “No”, but continued by expressing that many have come, made promises and were never seen again. Uncharacteristically critical, given Malawi’s culture of social politesse, he continued to speak of GN university individuals who would interview him, or ask him to seek out information related to a local community need, but that whatever the result of their research was, the benefits gained by the GN participants never came back to The Campus space. The challenge, he put forward, was whether or not the AR project existed to primarily benefit those from the GN or those from the GS.

However, Mphande was also quick to remind us that such a critique cannot be done without consideration that local community are not monolithic and passive subjects. In reality, their understandings and responses towards GN-GS AR projects can vary from deep-seated commitment, action and hope, to the pessimistic understanding through experience that foreign researchers come, take their pictures with the locals as evidence of solidarity for their colleagues and friends, publish papers for their home institutions, and then are never seen or heard from again. For the pessimistic GS participants who base their assessments on the cycle of researchers who speak and write of love and dedication, but whose actions belie such sentiments, the reality is that the unequal
relationship between university researcher and the research context continues to be questioned for over thirty years, as is evidenced by Savage's (1988) stance.

Given the hierarchical positions of universities and schools, relations between university researchers and school teachers are unequal. Knowledge, prestige, and the power of the profession belong to the researcher, not the researched. Further, publishing what is learned from the researched for a disciplinary community is an action that has the possibility of advancing the career of the researcher who uses the research as a marketable commodity. This action has the consequent possibility of separating and alienating the researcher even more from "ordinary" teachers. It is revulsion against what has been called the "rape model of research" (Reinharz, 1985) in which career advancement is built on "alienating and exploitative inquiry methods" rather than sharing and jointly negotiating research findings with those who are researched (Savage, 1988, p. 14). Keeping in mind the context of Savage's research observations are embedded within the GN, where power and privilege are not as extremely separated as is often found between the average Malawian villager and the common university researcher. The "rape model of research" has a profoundly higher level of ethical consequences. Therefore, in many ways, it is understandable that the wary Malawian villager is suspicious of promises and intentions, and that the guarantee of what can be gained today outweighs the probable disappointment of what will likely occur tomorrow.

Acknowledging this lived experience, it must also be stated that such relationships are built upon the colonial history of Malawi. The new types of Kipling's (1899) "White Man's Burden" interactions that occur between the GN "researcher" and the GS "participant" are still entrenched within top-down habits, despite intentions or claims of unity, equality, equity or partnership (Stonebanks C. D., 2014). In Easterly's (2006) The white man's burden: Why the West's efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good, he critiques that most not-for-profit and/or non-governmental-organization (NGO) encounters between GN and GS are still effectively intertwined with the sentiments of Kipling's top-down colonial model. We as well make the argument that the same critical lens must be turned towards those of us connected with GN universities engaging in AR that espouse a decolonized or post-colonial approach based on, for example, a Freirean concept of consciousness raising, humanization or liberation.

Our intent is to lay bare some of the realities we have encountered over the ten years of experience with an AR project in Malawi and acknowledge some ethical hurdles that may require a profound realization of the chasms between the needs of academia and those of a rural village. Simply put, when it comes to research in the GS, objectives set forward by the formal academic investigator(s) to (for example) research granting agencies, research ethics boards and/or to the GS groups themselves in which they engage, typically center on positive outcomes to local communities regarding the subject of the stated problem. Yet, conversely it is no secret to GN academia that intertwined, yet often downplayed, with the stated benefits are publication outputs that mean everything in the university context, but relatively little to an impoverished group of villagers. Here is where the ethical question lies in AR projects based on emancipatory and/or liberation theory between the GN and the GS, and our ongoing focus; when all is said and done, are these really projects of heart or projects of publication?
**COLLABORATIVE REFLEXIVITY**

The use of collaborative reflexivity in this endeavour, invites all relevant members of the research community, be it GN or GS, to share their personal perspectives openly and honestly throughout each and every moment of the project. No one voice or personal experience is more relevant or significant than any other. In this case, the three co-authors who also represent the longest standing members of TPM are represented, with room for others to join in the process in the future. Each of us, in our own way, contributes and learns from how we impact and are impacted by the context and how we have moved through the various outcomes on The Campus, be it successfully or with failure. Active, deep listening to one another, paired with thoughtful consideration and more questioning, push us to pick up from where the last episode occurred and together re-plan for how we collaboratively should proceed. We are aware that the practice of reflexivity recognizes research as a learning process and acknowledges that knowledge is co-constructed (Finlay, 2002). This is lived out when we are together on the TPM Campus for a month each year during the dry season. It is during our daily conversations about, for example, construction, community engagement or issues of local governance that we need to remind ourselves while we are in discussion, to actively and respectfully listen to each other and work to understand the positionality and viewpoint that each brings to the dialogue. We are navigating through varying ways of knowing and doing and as we hit impasses, we must consciously strive to find a middle ground so that each is prepared to relinquish some of our personal imbedded values and norms. This is truly learning that is both collaborative and reflexive to the very core.

Reflexivity is defined by Robson (2002, p. 22) as “an awareness of the ways in which the researcher as an individual with a particular social identity and background has an impact on the research process”. This definition resonates well with the three authors as does that of Hertz (1997) who states “(t)o be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment” (p. viii). Reflexivity is being employed in this project to connect us with our world/environment as opposed to reflection which would have us removed from the environment, looking back at it from the outside. This demonstrates a true insider/outsider perspective. We are active and part of the environment and what is occurring, being shaped by and shaping the landscape. The process is alive and on-going, like a movie that is playing out in real time instead of being still like a photograph of something that has happened in the past at which we are gazing, considering what might have transpired to someone else and why. Bolton (2010), in referring to Fook (2002) states that “(r)eflexivity is a stance of being able to locate oneself in the picture, to appreciate how one’s own self influences [actions]. Reflexivity is potentially more complex than being reflective, in that the potential for understanding the myriad ways in which one’s own presence and perspective influence the knowledge and actions which are created is potentially more problematic than the simple searching for implicit theory” (p. 43).

As partners from the GN, we are constantly questioning whether our presence on The Campus in Malawi is actually beneficial for our GS colleagues. We wonder if we have simply decided to continue to perpetuate the charity model that so many other NGOs employ, or if that would be a better option and present less challenges for our Malawian collaborators. The stress and frustration of engaging in this type of dialogic grassroots in the trenches AR work has left us all at times with despair. There are, without fail, the
perpetual problems of misinterpretation, corruption and competing ways of knowing and doing that present themselves as we collectively navigate this landscape. Indeed, it would be much easier to visit, to observe, to leave and to reflect but this is not what we do. Instead, we are adamant that no matter what the dilemma, the obstacle or the hurdle, we are committed to this project until the very end. Moreover, what that end might be, we have no idea as we are learning together through each WhatsApp chat, Zoom conference and during months of living together on The Campus.

We are cognizant that as collaborators in this AR project, our axiology and what we believe to be our personal values and ethics which underlie our actions must be explored and shared honestly between partners so as to find continual balance and forward movement. This can be more often than not problematic when working across cultures with differing epistemologies. Genuine concerns of who benefits from and who risks because of, are always front and center in our minds and our conversations. As we struggle with how to advance in the often unpredictable and sometimes chaotic environment of this project, we find comfort and support in the application of an AR research model that employs collaborative reflexivity to guide us and keep us aligned with the beliefs and ethics we strive to uphold. Cunliffe (2003) notes that this is not by any means an easy task, and in referring to Kristeva (1984) and Tyler (1986) recognizes that research is “an intertextual space where texts, participants, and linguistic conventions interweave, and where meaning and the relationship between author, text, subjects and reader are open to reflexive scrutiny” (p. 988). Through this often-challenging process, we engage in reflexive dialogic exchanges to problem solve and deepen our understandings. The following narrative encapsulates over a year of discussions, both in person and through WhatsApp, between the three authors. This experience has been a powerful reminder of what needs to be upheld when engaging in AR and has pushed us into an ethical position that continually commit to being upfront about with any future or present member who works with TPM.

**Narrative of a Collaborative Reflexive Dialogic Exchange**

Our AR project has always applied an appreciative inquiry stance of acknowledging what assets the local community possesses, as opposed to focussing on what it does not have. However, deficit is constantly present within an impoverished community, and the focus on the positive can be exasperating to a community where it is not uncommon for a mother to choose between the costs associated for medical treatment for one child, or hunger for the remainder. This area in rural, central Malawi can be overwhelming to a foreign researcher, and adding to the pressure of the experience is witnessing the many endeavours in the area that have failed. Often it appears that Malawi is dotted with abandoned projects; empty, dilapidated buildings with battered and faded signs of some NGO or not-for-profit that came to the area with the best of intentions. How long did they stay and commit to the space? What is the typical length of funding time to hand out mesh mosquito netting to combat malaria, or school supplies to children or photovoice opportunities for young women to find their voice? Three or five years? At what point does one ethically pack their bags and say it is time to leave?

Our project has seen over two hundred members of the GN university, partly students and partly professors, come to The Campus and spend between a month, to a month and a half working with local community. What should our expectations be from all of those
people? Of course, our hope is that they stay connected, or better yet, that they commit to action after spending time with other human beings and recognizing that words like sustainability, social justice, solidarity, and equity, easily roll off the tongue in a GN classroom, but are an entirely different animal in a Malawian village. But so many simply do not stay connected and have their reasons: “The airplane tickets to Malawi are expensive, so I need to find a grant”; “I will be spending time away from my children, so I can’t help these children”; “The pressures of work are already hard enough, so I can’t take on something else”; or “I am not exactly sure what this AR project is all about, so I am no longer interested”. This is all true. The plane tickets are expensive. Time away from family is hard. University life can be daunting. AR can sometimes be messy and finding your space within can be confusing. However, we have come to a place where we would like to simply hear, “this is overwhelming, and I am scared about the commitment needed”. After all, it is what we as academics engaged in AR need to acknowledge ourselves.

It is rare to hear someone in Malawi, like Mphande, being openly critical of anyone, let alone a respected foreigner from a university. After all, Malawi is the warm heart of Africa, where titles also add to the almost instant respect one receives. For Mphande to openly state that a GN member of a university, be they student or professor, did not fulfill their stated promise to community is a risk on many levels. After all, Mphande doesn’t know about personal or power relationships in Canadian universities. Would making this statement of feeling that he himself felt used and his community abandoned by someone come back to harm him? Would all the GN members in attendance rebuke his honesty, perhaps even costing him his position in TPM? With these considerations, perhaps he should have remained silent and simply nodded his head when the subject of commitment came up and said nothing about an impression of betrayal. But that would not have moved the AR project forward. This was an important moment of acknowledging and verbalizing the vast differences that appear between two communities. In GN universities, the emphasis on advancement and recognition focusses on research grants and a “publish or perish” structure. Although funding associated with tangibles, like a school, or a water borehole or a clinic would have high importance to a villager in Malawi, in truth, far too often, they hold little regard in GN universities, unless they are associated with self-promotion.

A visitor from a Canadian university landed at the main airport in the capital of Malawi, about a two-hour drive from The Campus. As specific addresses are not the norm in rural Malawi, she told a driver that she and her colleagues were looking for a Canadian Health and Education effort being carried out in the central region. The driver immediately told her, “Ah, you are looking for ‘Little Canada’”, and drove them all to The Campus. Upon arrival, the Canadian team looked amazed at what had been created, and after a short period of discussion they realized they were in the wrong place. Following a brief tour of The Campus, one of the university professors said as she was getting back in their car, “this is a great place, but it’s too bad it doesn’t exist”. Of course, she is right. In Canada, this project doesn’t exist because perhaps we have not focussed on publications that have mass appeal, or an online, social network presence, or being more politically savvy within the institutions to promote the AR based accomplishments. However, that is not really what the community we are working with care about. Publications are fine (as is evident by this effort), and so is a Facebook page on what is happening on The Campus, along with being a little more tactical about
internal advancement of TPM, but that is not the focus of this AR project. The focus of this AR project is to alleviate human suffering via research in Education, Health and Development. We demonstrate our commitment to this idea through the ongoing construction of a primary school paired with professional development for local teachers and an active preschool for the youngest of Malawian learners. As well, we have a Health Committee dedicated to assist in training local Malawian village members to become first aid responders. And, most recently this is actualized through the development of sustainable businesses such as the Hungry Hippo Tuckshop, our Cooperative Chicken Coop and Experimental Gardens designed in a way so that profits can go both into the pockets of individuals working at TPM, as well as allowing for The Campus to become self-sustainable. Therefore, Mphande is right to question what the point is of his involvement with someone else’s potential publication, if it has no real benefit to his project or community. For Bennett-Stonebanks and Stonebanks, Mphande’s observations challenge them to primarily work on the outcomes that the Malawian members of the AR team view as essential. The next steps require all to continue to dialogue to better understand the needs of both spaces to assure that the AR project exists in an equally tangible way in Malawi, as well as at home in the academic sphere.

**NOT A CONCLUSION, A RE-PLAN**

Our experience with reflexivity in our AR project, connected to Mphande’s challenge, requires that we cannot conclude, we must continuously re-plan. We must plan, act, observe, reflect and re-plan until local community has determined that it is time to conclude. This requires a type of ethical commitment that will often not fit within the structures and norms that are now a part of the GN university culture. This does not mean that the GN and GS members of the AR project are incapable of understanding each other’s realities, however it must be clearly acknowledged that the needs of the local community by far outweigh the needs related to traditional evaluations of success within GN universities. All authors of this paper understand that multiple realities must be discussed and navigated for TPM to move forward. This is not only a conversation amongst us three, but one we need to have more openly with others within TPM and outside the project as well. Whereas, by way of example, a hiring committee for Bennett-Stonebanks will likely place great emphasis on a publication record, the type of ethical commitment we are now exploring requires that the AR community as a whole validate that the collaboration of working with local community to develop, fund and construct a school (both physically and intellectually) should be held with equal esteem. The “Action” in AR must be emphasized.

For a Malawian mother from a rural village who cannot send her daughter to school because of overcrowding and distance, her approval of a tangible school, with an expanding and innovative curriculum, holds much more weight than a published paper about a discussion about a potential school. It is not that the mother would not be happy for Bennett-Stonebanks to publish such a paper, it is just that her hope would be that the article would result in benefits beyond what GN academia values. Between Bennett-Stonebanks and the mother, the conversation could and should be held to discuss the often-competing culture of needs. It is not that hard to understand, that to get this (a school for your children), I need to do that (a publication that puts us in a better position for funding). In effect, this was Mphande’s ethical challenge and connected to
Smith’s observations at the beginning of this article, before Mphande even read Smith’s work. It is not that Mphande does not like the multitude of GN university people who have come to his space in Malawi. It is just that so many of them cannot fix the generator and are not inclined to come back when they realize how difficult it actually is to repair a generator.

So, write your paper, put it on your CV and apply for your funding, but just make sure your funding is about you fixing the generator. TPM has already experienced a great deal of success. The success has also necessitated that at this stage of our planning, we must be clear to those involved, either in the present or future, that our ethics have determined that this is a project of the heart, and not one simply for publication.

REFERENCES


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BIOPGRAPHICAL NOTE:
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Melanie Bennett-Stonebanks is a lecturer in the field of Education at McGill and Bishop’s University, where she has won multiple teaching and service awards at both institutions. She is an experienced classroom teacher and has worked extensively with Quebec’s Ministère de l’Éducation et de l’Enseignement supérieur within the Language Arts and Ethics and Religious Culture portfolios. She is also the coordinator of the Canadian Education branch of Transformative Praxis: Malawi and is primarily responsible for organizing the professional collaborations between Canada and Malawi.

C. Darius Stonebanks is a multiple teaching award winning Professor at Bishop’s and Adjunct at McGill University. Among his publications are Teaching Against Islamophobia and Muslim Voices in Schools, which won the NAME’s Philip C. Chinn book award. He is the co-founder of Transformative Praxis: Malawi, an Action Research project that connects social justice theory to practice and is the Primary Investigator on the SSHRC funded research project examining the secular nature of Canadian public schools.

Thomas Mphande is the Field Director of Transformative Praxis: Malawi (TPM), having come into the leadership position through a history of volunteerism at the early stages of TPM and a well-established history of grass roots activism regarding food sustainability and human rights. His role as Field Director requires a dedicated presence on the TPM campus, where he is in constant consultation with a multitude of Education, Health and Development stakeholders. A voracious reader, Thomas uses his quiet moments to take advantage of the TPM Learning Lab and enjoys the works of the likes of Freire and Fanon.

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