

THEory into ACTion

A Bulletin of New Developments in Community Psychology Practice

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Reconciliation of Guilt and Grief – The Contributions of Ezer Kang in Uncovering Unspoken Animosity in Rwanda

The principles and values of Community Psychology – in particular, collaboration – can serve as powerful driving forces behind improving the lives of members of diverse communities around the world, even those with brutal pasts. The ideological violence that swept the nation of Rwanda in 1994 resulted in extreme acts of brutality and great loss of life; however, the origins of the division between the Hutus and Tutsis had existed for decades prior to the outbreak of extreme violence. Reconciliation between the two groups is of dire importance, as failing to mitigate the division and discord between these two groups could result in negative attitudes being passed across generations and persistently threaten the stability of Rwanda. As may be expected, reconciliation between perpetrators and victims is an extremely difficult task, and one that is made even more difficult because there strict laws that forbid any expressions that are deemed “genocide ideology,” thus potentially constraining open and honest dialogue. Despite the difficulty task and its challenges, reconciliation is critical in moving the country forward.

One group that has focused on reconciliation efforts is *Christian Action for Reconciliation and Social Assistance* (CARSA). CARSA is a faith-based social justice organization based in Kigali, Rwanda, and has developed innovative programs for survivors of the 1994 genocide events. This group specializes on the youth of Rwanda, fighting against the ideologies of segregation and divisionism. The focal point of their work is assisting perpetrators of the genocide events in reintegrate into their communities following their release from prison.

Part of this effort includes community reconciliation workshops, where perpetrators and victims who live in the same districts of Kigali are brought together to attempt reconciliation. However, generating honest dialogue between both parties may conflict with the strict laws about expressing “genocide ideology.”

Dr. Ezer Kang of Wheaton College was a visiting student intern in Kigali in August of 2012 when he met Christophe Mbonyingabo, executive director of CARSA. He observed the community reconciliation workshops firsthand, and was overwhelmed by the challenges faced in processing guilt for perpetrators and grief for victims. Discussion between Dr. Kang and Mr. Mbonyingabo also revealed concern about the potential for victims to continue to harbor animosity and prejudice toward their perpetrators that, due to the legal repercussions, could not be publicly acknowledged.

In response to these concerns, Dr. Kang and Mr. Mbonyingabo engaged in a collaborative research effort to uncover the relationship between types of exposure to the genocide events in 1994 and implicit prejudice and negative stereotypes of perpetrators, and, if a significant relationship is found, if there is a difference based on gender or based on whether individuals participated in the community reconciliation workshops. Through a 1-year cross-sectional study of approximately 400 genocide survivors living in Rwanda, and with the help of funds from SCRA through the Community Mini-Grant program, this research partnership hopes to answer these questions that are important to the reconciliation process.

One of the principles of Community Psychology that is apparent in this effort is the use of community research and action as an active collaboration among researchers, practitioners, and community members. Such research is undertaken to serve the community members directly concerned, and therefore should be guided by these community members and include their active

participation. A critical part of this task is the active collaboration that exists between Dr. Kang and the researchers, practitioners, and community members in Rwanda. The research questions that this study seeks to answer originate directly from the lived experiences of Kigali community members, and the experience of listening to victims and perpetrators at the table together and the discussions with Mr. Mbonyingabo were vital to the development and implementation of the study itself. CARSA is the lead organization in this project, and the role of Dr. Kang has been to provide his expertise in the methodological aspects and the data analysis. The results of this approach have been powerful. Thus far, the active collaboration with community partners has been, according to Dr. Kang, “an extraordinarily productive and personally meaningful collaboration.”

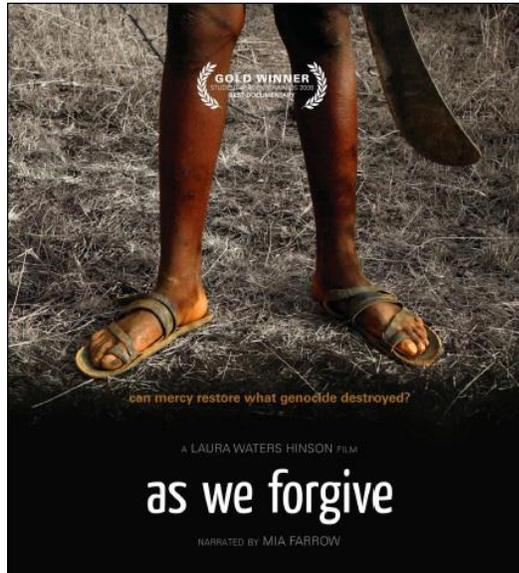
The mission and objectives of the CARSA organization further exemplify the power of the Community Psychology principle of collaboration. CARSA’s overall objective is national reconstruction by promoting citizens’ attitudes and cooperative behavior as a part of holistic development. Other organizations in Rwanda share a similar mission of fighting against ideologies of segregation and divisionism, yet focus on different aspects of the task or different segments of the population. CARSA views these other organizations and considers collaboration to be “indispensable since it is difficult to work for holistic development in isolation.”

Engagement with CARSA has been deeply meaningful to Dr. Kang. He has been able to witness academic principles be applied with great success in a community with exceedingly unique and difficult challenges. Such work can serve as an example of the power of Community Psychology to create change in diverse and challenging contexts. It is hoped that this work will contribute to efforts to ensure that the horrors of the past are not repeated.

If you're interested to learn more, the work of CARSA has been highlighted in the film,

“As We Forgive” here:

<http://www.asweforgivemovie.com/>



This is part of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Bill Berkowitz at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu.