This case study describes how nine American librarians who participated in a short-term library development program run by the World Library Partnership carried their senses of professional identity and knowledge into new temporary work roles and library settings in South Africa. In-depth interviews with these volunteers revealed several important dynamics in which professional identity and knowledge came into play. These included (1) the interaction among expectations concerning library-related work, the volunteer librarian role, and the reality of these factors in South Africa; and (2) the role of prior experiences—both professional and non-professional—in adapting to unknown and unfamiliar situations. Additionally, this study considered the accomplishments volunteers perceived in their experiences and the various ways their senses of personal and professional identity have been affected by the program.

Headings:

      International library programs

      Librarianship – International aspects

      Librarianship as a profession

      State and regional library development – Africa

      Volunteers – Africa

      World Library Partnership

BRINGING PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND IDENTITY INTO A
GRASSROOTS LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT: A CASE STUDY
OF WORLD LIBRARY PARTNERSHIP VOLUNTEERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

by
Kimberly Duckett

A Master's paper submitted to the faculty
of the School of Information and Library Science
of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Science in
Library Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

July, 2001

Approved by:

_____

Advisor

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2000 seventeen American volunteers participated in short-term library development projects in communities throughout South Africa. While in their host communities, these volunteers participate in a wide range of library-related tasks including starting a library, organizing collections, and providing practical hands-on training for community librarians and educators. They shared information about the importance of libraries and reading with host community colleagues and community members.

The Inform the World (ITW) program in which these volunteers participated was started in 1999 by the World Library Partnership (WLP), a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing access to information in developing countries through sustainable, community- and school-centered libraries. After training in grassroots library development and orientation to the project, the ITW 2000 volunteers spent approximately two weeks in communities throughout South Africa working in host libraries, sharing their knowledge and skills while learning about their host culture and society.

The ITW program is intended to provide technical assistance to libraries in developing countries as well as a cultural exchange opportunity for both volunteers and host community members. In technical assistance programs such as the ITW program, knowledgeable professionals work closely with host country counterparts in order to transfer skills and knowledge. As a result, a major goal of the ITW program is for trained

librarians to share ideas and knowledge by working in libraries and schools with host community members, many of whom have had little or no previous experience in library work and possibly not even personal experience using libraries. Additionally, ITW volunteers often work without their host librarians on setting up and organizing the library. Particular emphasis is placed on using materials that are readily available to the library and helping the host librarians develop strategies for maintaining and sustaining the library after the volunteers have gone.

As a cultural exchange opportunity, the ITW program also provides volunteers with the opportunity to live with host families and participate in community life. The volunteers are able to learn about their host culture as well as share information about their own countries. Through this exchange, they learn about the cultural and social contexts surrounding libraries, information, and learning in these communities as well as simply experience another view of the world.

The technical assistance and cultural exchange aspects of the ITW program make it a multifaceted and rich focus for study. This research project only scratches the surface. It is a case study of nine ITW 2000 librarian volunteers and the role their sense of identity as professional librarians played in their experience. These librarian volunteers have developed a sense of professional identity through working in libraries in the United States, in situations very different from South Africa. Regardless of their motivation for participating in the ITW program, as volunteers with professional knowledge and expertise they carried this American professional identity into their project. In-depth interviews with these ITW volunteers provided an intimate examination of this topic. This research explores how this identity influenced expectations about the volunteers'

work roles, their adaptation to culturally different library contexts, and how they have changed as people and professionals from their ITW experience. It also examines tensions inherent in their work as librarians in a cross-cultural context.

Although the broader cultural experiences of living with a host family and participating in community life cannot be divorced from the ITW volunteers' library-related experiences in South Africa, emphasis has been given to the latter. The reason for this focus is that the ITW experience is simply too complex for a small-scale research project. At the same time, events taking place outside the host library merge with and color the work that goes on in the library, and this real life interaction of community and professional contexts is evident throughout this research project.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The underlying issue that this case study explores is how professional identity and knowledge is carried into and shaped by an experience such as the ITW program. Professional identity and knowledge are conceptualized here as a sense of oneself as a librarian with a fundamental understanding of libraries and librarianship gained through prior experience working in libraries. It is not equated with a professional master's degree, although professional training in library school may be an integral aspect of this sense of oneself as a librarian, and we can assume that it contributes to professional knowledge.

How important are professional identity and knowledge in the ITW volunteer role? How did this identity help the volunteers face unknown situations concerning the work they would do? What prior experiences, both professional and nonprofessional, did they use in order to help them make sense of a new library context and role? Was their professional sense of purpose or identity changed by the dynamics of working in a new cultural context and/or exposure to the ideas and practices of host country colleagues? These are questions that drove this research, shaping interview questions and data analysis.

The answers to these questions are valuable because they shed light on how professionals such as the ITW volunteers rely on their sense of work-role identity and work-related knowledge to help them face new or modified work-roles in a new cultural context. It examines the flexibility and/or adaptability it takes to bring knowledge and

skills—expertise—into a work situation that may be fundamentally similar to that in

which the volunteer works in the United States, but also radically different because of

cultural, economic, and environmental factors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The ITW program was started in 1999. At this writing, in 2001, no systematic evaluation has been conducted. Additionally, because the library science profession currently has few cross-cultural programs, especially in grassroots library development, there is little published information on the experiences of individuals such as the ITW volunteers. Some short anecdotal accounts are available but these are intended to promote international librarianship rather than provide a detailed exploration of cross-cultural experiences.

There is a rather large body of literature on the development of libraries in Africa including work at the grassroots level. Some of this literature is important for understanding the cultural context and current library situations the ITW volunteers faced in South Africa and will be reviewed here. Yet there is very little information on the transfer of library-related knowledge and skills between individuals from developed countries and community members in developing areas of the world. In general, this literature focuses on the role of library consultants from the United States and Europe in adapting practices to academic libraries; little emphasis is given to the personal experiences of these library consultants.

As a result of the paucity of library-related research on the topic of this case study, it was necessary to look beyond the library literature to other disciplines for information and theory to inform the research undertaken in this project. This literature review touches on a range of issues—the use of reflection in professional practice,

cross-cultural adaptation, cross-cultural effectiveness, and the current state of libraries in South Africa. These fields of study all touch on aspects of the ITW volunteers' experiences as professional librarians working in a cross-cultural context. This literature review, however, is selective and focuses on research in these different and extensive fields that proved most useful to the researcher.

Reflective Practice

This research project was originally conceptualized as an examination of how professional librarians use their library-related knowledge and skills to help them deal with the unknowns they might face while adapting to and working in new cultural contexts in South Africa. A key theory that proved highly valuable to this inquiry was Donald Schön's concept of reflective practice. This theory, derived from in-depth observations of practitioners in architecture, psychotherapy, urban and city planning, and management, is an "epistemology of practice." It gives credibility to the dynamic processes of using experience, trial and error, intuition, and "muddling through" when solving problems rather than relying solely on logical, scientific principles.[1]

According to Schön, practitioners use "reflection-in-action" to work through the unique challenges they face in their daily work. In other words, they approach different situations as unique cases that must be reframed in terms of their prior experience and worked through by means of experimentation as well as the knowledge and intuition developed through prior professional experience. As Schön explains, reflection-in-action is the process which is essential to "the 'art' by which practitioners sometimes deal well

---

[1] Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict" in their daily work.[2]

One of Schön's key questions pertaining to this kind of professional thinking had direct bearing on this research project. He asks:

> When the practitioner takes seriously the uniqueness of the present situation, how does he make use of the experience he has accumulated in his earlier practice? When he cannot apply familiar categories of theory or technique, how does he bring prior knowledge to bear on the invention of new frames, theories, and strategies of action?[3]

Schön does not deal with the unknowns presented by the transfer of professional knowledge and identity into a new cross-cultural context. He focuses primarily on the challenges that arise within the practitioner's sphere of daily activities. In the library context these challenges could arise from innumerable factors—reference questions, implementation of a new cataloging system, or budget crises, for example. By participating in a library development project and taking on different work roles than those they typically held in the United States, the ITW volunteers would face a range of library-related unknowns within a new library in a different cultural context. What role, if any, did reflective practice place in adapting to these new situations?

Cross-Cultural Adaptation

While the concept of reflective practice may have some bearing on how the ITW volunteers carried their prior professional experiences and sense of identity as librarians into their program, it is also necessary to look at the literature on cross-cultural adaptation to gain an appreciation of the wealth of dynamics involved in adjusting to new cultural

---

[2] Ibid., 50.
[3] Ibid., 132.

contexts. This rich literature spans a range of disciplines including psychology, sociology, communication studies, and anthropology.

Individuals travel to other countries for different purposes and varying lengths of time. These people can be categorized according to these differences using a variety of terms—tourists, sojourners, international businesspeople, migrants, immigrants, and refugees to name a few. Of these groups, the ITW volunteers most closely parallel the sojourners—people who live temporarily in another country, usually for at least six months. Peace Corps volunteers, international business workers, technical assistants, international students, and military personnel are the most common sojourner groups studied. The ITW volunteer experience is much shorter than the length of most sojourners' stays abroad, but for this literature review the study of sojourners has proven the most insightful for examining the ITW volunteers and cross-cultural adaptation.

An examination of the cross-cultural adaptation literature suggests that there is a paucity of studies on short-term travelers to other countries who are not visiting in a tourist capacity. Additionally, although the ITW volunteers do bring their professional knowledge and skills into play during their project, their intercultural experience is somewhat different than that of a short-term businessperson working overseas. Instead, their roles are most closely related to technical assistants or technical advisors who are generally studied as a sojourner group. Regardless of how the ITW volunteer experience is categorized, the cross-cultural adaptation literature suggests that there are often stresses and challenges for an individual to deal with when he or she enters a new culture for either a short or long period.

The theories relating to the cross-cultural adaptation of sojourners is extensive and it is difficult to summarize this literature. According to Linda Anderson,[4] there are four main "families of models" dealing with the process of adapting to another culture. The first of these focuses on how individuals "recuperate" from culture shock to accommodation to life in a new country. A key theory in this family of models is the "U-curve," which describes how a sojourner experiences an initial high when they enter a new culture, followed by a difficult period of cultural confrontation, and then an upward climb toward cultural acceptance and adaptation. Other variations of this theory have centered on the concept of culture shock, experienced during the low period. Furnham and Bochner,[5] for example, examine the psychological affects of exposure to the unfamiliar in a new culture and how individuals deal with the stress associated with such experiences. They suggest that travelers on short-term stays (tourists, international businesspeople) experience these stresses as well as sojourners on a longer stay, although they claim that the reasons for these stresses and the process of their adaptation may be "quantitatively and qualitatively different" than that of sojourners due to their shorter stay.[6]

A second family of models looks at cross-cultural adaptation as a learning process in which, rather than following a U-shaped curve, an individual's adaptation is conceptualized as a learning curve where the sojourner continuously learns the culture and thereby adapts. The third is a combination of the recuperation and learning models and a fourth family of models views cross-cultural adaptation as a process of tension

---

[4] Linda E. Anderson, "A New Look at an Old Construct: Cross-Cultural Adaptation," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 18, no. 3 (1994): 293-328.
[5] Adrian Furnham and Stephen Bochner, *Culture Shock: Psychological Reactions to Unfamiliar Environments* (London: Methuen, 1986).
[6] Ibid., 158.

reduction. The sojourner reduces an internal balance—variously called a tension, drive, need, or uncertainty—that surfaces in confrontation with the new culture and can then adapt into a normal pattern of life and work in the foreign environment.

Anderson presents a useful review of the literature on all these families of models related to cross-cultural adaptation. She then encapsulates these families in the broader perspective of sociopsychological adjustment that makes the process of cross-cultural adaptation a less elusive and unwieldy concept. According to Anderson, cross-cultural adaptation is simply a form of the commonplace process of learning to live with change and difference. People are constantly in the process of learning to adapt to unknown and unfamiliar situations regardless of whether they are at home or abroad. They experience transitions, deal with disruptive events, and confront personal crises such as moving into midlife, the death of a loved one, beginning a new job, or learning to live in a new culture.

Anderson's model of cross-cultural adaptation holds that all adjustment is a process of overcoming obstacles and solving problems as they arise in the sojourner's present environment. The individual chooses how to respond to any given obstacle and thereby creates his or her own adjustment. This process is cyclical and interactive as sojourners deal with or do not deal with present obstacles. They can change themselves, change the environment, or turn away from the obstacle. A variety of cognitive, behavioral, and affective factors may play into the individual's will and ability to adapt in response to the situation and may be constantly changing as "situation parameters" affect his or her thinking and emotions. According to Anderson:

> The pattern and strength of our motivations, our current emotional state, commitments, beliefs and expectations, the degree of our interaction with

host country inhabitants, and the relative power of our personal resources for instance, all have an influence on the coping responses that are chosen.[7]

As a result, cultural adaptation is a continuum and sojourners may adapt to differing degrees and at different levels. Out of this interaction with obstacles and the sub-adjustments that take place the sojourner can also experience significant transformation.[8]

Anderson's model is particularly useful to this research because it exposes the variety of dynamics that can affect cross-cultural adaptation and how individual response can led to so many different levels and ways in which the ITW volunteers made sense of and adapted to the unfamiliar and unknown. Additionally, the process of confronting obstacles, reacting, overcoming or re-confronting, and moving on to the next obstacle applies equally to a person who stays and works for only a relatively short time in another culture, such as the ITW volunteers, as well as the more commonly studied sojourner.[9]

Although cross-cultural adaptation can be compared to other life challenges, there is at least one aspect of cross-cultural adaptation that significantly distinguishes it from life adjustments in a familiar environment. This is the dynamics of the stranger-host relationship. As Anderson describes, "as 'guests' in the 'host' culture, [sojourners] must modify their frame of reference to adapt to the culture of the group."[10] According to Gudykunst,[11] there are different kinds of strangers (guest, new arrival, sojourner, immigrant, marginal person, etc.) depending on the stranger's reason for being in the community (visit, intention to live) and the host community's reaction toward individuals of that type (friendly, indifferent, negative).

---

[7] Ibid., 314.
[8] Ibid., 318-320.
[9] Ibid., 319.
[10] Ibid., 306.
[11] William B. Gudykunst, "Toward a Typology of Stranger-Host Relationships," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 7 (1983): 401-413.

Using this typology, the ITW volunteers' interviews suggest that in most cases they were viewed as guests in their host communities. The homestay living situation of most volunteers certainly shaped this relationship. At one site, however, the volunteers received a somewhat indifferent response from the community, possibly due to misunderstandings concerning the role of the ITW volunteers and the program in general. At least one key member of the host school believed the volunteers were being paid and the hosts chose to pay for the volunteers to stay in a guesthouse rather than with a local family. The misunderstandings at the root of this situation seem to have created a stranger-host relationship that was less friendly than that at the other volunteer sites. This tension inevitably affected the adaptation of the volunteers there in relation to their work roles and the new work context.

Cross-Cultural Effectiveness

In addition to studying the process of cross-cultural adaptation, much of the literature on sojourners and international travelers has focused on the factors that help one succeed in cross-cultural contexts. These studies have been primarily concerned with developing criteria for selecting individuals for overseas assignment and predicting their success. In a review and synthesis of the literature on successful intercultural adaptation, Kealey and Ruben[12] found that despite different concepts of what constitutes cross-cultural success in different overseas experiences, researchers studying Peace Corps volunteers, overseas business personnel, technical assistants, and military personnel have

---

[12] Daniel J. Kealey and Brent D. Ruben, "Cross-Cultural Personnel Selection: Criteria, Issues, and Methods," in *Handbook of Intercultural Training*, vol. 1., ed. Dan Landis and Richard W. Brislin. (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon, 1983), 155-175.

been fairly consistent in the non-technical criteria required for successful adaptation and work in another country. These factors are related to personality and behavior and include empathy, respect, interest in the local culture, flexibility, and tolerance. Additionally, four other criteria—initiative, open-mindedness, sociability, and positive self-image—were commonly associated with successful adaptation to life and work overseas.

Hawes and Kealey[13] uses the term "overseas effectiveness" to describe an individual's ability to work and live effectively in a cross-cultural overseas context. In their study of Canadian technical advisors working abroad, they confirmed that the personality traits suggested above were important in overseas adjustment and effectiveness. They also found that while most of the 250 people in their study were well adjusted and satisfied with their life in their host country, only a small percentage were considered effective at transferring skills and knowledge according to their host country counterparts. Hawes and Kealey suggest that these technical advisors were most likely ineffective because of their inability to engage in intercultural interactions.

There are three factors that comprise overseas effectiveness: professional expertise, adaptation, and intercultural interaction.[14] The first of these factors has traditionally been the main consideration during selection for overseas assignment. It includes technical skills and prior work experiences but also an ability to assess the overseas job situation and adapt technology and training to the host site's needs and realities. Adaptation to a new environment is also essential for overseas effectiveness.

---

[13] Frank Hawes and Daniel J. Kealey, "An Empirical Study of Canadian Technical Assistance: Adaptation and Effectiveness on Overseas Assignment," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 5 (1981): 239-258.

[14] Summarized by Daniel J. Kealey, *Cross-Cultural Effectiveness: A Study of Canadian Technical Advisors Overseas* (Hull, Quebec: Canadian International Development Agency, 1990), 5-7. Based on research by Frank Hawes and Daniel J. Kealey, *Canadians in Development* (Hull, Quebec: Canadian International Development Agency, 1980).

Kealey discusses this adaptation in terms of a new living environment (e.g. housing, personal security, availability of goods and services) rather than a work environment.[15] This factor, however, has important implications not only for the technical advisor's professional work but also his or her level of satisfaction on the assignment. Last, intercultural interaction is a key factor in overseas effectiveness. A capacity for interaction with host country nationals and an interest in the local culture have a direct impact on building trust with the advisor's host country counterparts. This trust is a prerequisite for effective transfer of skills and knowledge.

These studies on overseas effectiveness are important to this research because they suggest the crucial role personality traits play in adjusting to a cross-cultural situation. Additionally, this work shows that professional expertise is only one of the important factors influenced by these personality traits. Adaptation to the general living environment and the ability to interaction well with host community members are essential for the technical assistant to share knowledge and skills with his or her counterparts. This research project focuses on the realm of professional expertise and identity and as a result does not examine all of these factors in depth. This larger framework, however, suggests that professional experience and identity cannot be viewed in isolation from adaptation to the general living environment and effective intercultural communication when assessing overseas effectiveness. Rather than look at this concept, this research intends to explore the realm of professional expertise and its influence on the cross-cultural experience of ITW volunteers in greater depth than found in the cross-cultural adaptation and overseas effectiveness literature.

---

[15] Ibid., 5-7.

African Libraries and the "Librarianship of Poverty"

Another area of research and scholarship pertinent to the topic of this research project is the state of libraries in South Africa, challenges to their development, and the training needs of individuals responsible for running them. Because most of the ITW volunteers worked in school libraries, it is particularly important to examine the challenges facing these libraries. Such information provides the framework for understanding the library environments and the surrounding contexts in which the ITW volunteers worked. It also reveals the gap between the professional status and perspective of the American ITW volunteers and their colleagues in South Africa.

In general, African librarianship has focused on implementing concepts and educational strategies developed outside Africa in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. Furthermore, particular emphasis has been given to academic libraries and their problems of collection development and bibliographic control. The two editions of Sturges and Neill's book on librarianship in Africa, *The Quiet Struggle: Information and Libraries for Africa,* provide an insightful overview of this history and problems created by dependence on foreign imported concepts of librarianship.[16]

In the past twenty years critics of African librarianship such as Mchombu have urged African librarians and library educators to develop a new model of the profession based on the specific needs of African communities. This new model focuses more on the specific economic and cultural problems faced by African libraries and the

---

[16] Paul Sturges and Richard Neill, *The Quiet Struggle: Information and Libraries for Africa* (London: Mansell, 1990); Paul Sturges and Richard Neill, *The Quiet Struggle: Information and Libraries for the People of Africa*. 2nd ed., (London: Mansell, 1998).

information needs of the rural poor, who constitute the majority of the population in many countries. Mchombu calls for a concept of "development librarianship," intent on improving the lives of poor Africans through the provision of information.[17]

Elsewhere Mchombu speaks more broadly of "the librarianship of poverty," a model he finds essential for understanding the information needs and the role of libraries in developing countries.[18] Several ideas he outlines in this paper have important implications for understanding the ITW volunteers' work in South African communities. First of all, he claims that poverty is the most important factor to consider in the development of information services in the Third World and that this factor makes such services markedly different than work in developed countries. He also points out that the librarianship of poverty must be built of theories developed from practice, rather than theories borrowed from abroad and applied to radically different social and economic contexts. Additionally, Mchombu argues that because of the scarcity of resources in developing countries, greater emphasis must be placed on technicians rather than librarians trained in library schools. The roles of such technicians will necessarily be more involved than that of their counterparts in developed countries. These ideas are important to this research because they expose the discrepancies between the library environment and concept of librarianship in which the ITW volunteers have been trained and the unique character of the library setting and context in developing communities in South Africa. In considering the adaptation of ITW volunteers to these new library settings, it is necessary to remain mindful of the special challenges of the librarianship of poverty.

---

[17]Kingo J. Mchombu, "Which Way African Librarianship?" *IFLA Journal* 17, no. 1 (1991): 26-38
[18]Ibid., "On the Librarianship of Poverty," *Libri* 32 (1982): 241-250.

Many of the participants in this case study worked in libraries in impoverished schools throughout South Africa and became familiar with the librarianship of poverty. Since the process of dismantling apartheid began during the early 1990s, educational reform has been among the most pressing challenges facing the government and people of South Africa. Forty years of systematic segregation and discrimination undermined the educational infrastructure throughout much of the country and left many schools for non-white children in dire conditions. Although attempts are being made to establish a non-racial educational system and balance some of these inequalities, the poor state of many schools in historically disadvantaged communities, particularly black townships and rural areas, is evidence of the deep fissures that remain in South African society. The lack of school libraries/media centers in historically non-white communities in the country provides a conspicuous gap.

In 1996 the South African Department of Education undertook a herculean task—to survey the physical facilities, services, equipment, and resources of the 32,000 educational institutions identified in the country at that time. The results of the *School Register of Needs Survey*[19] provide a bleak picture of the South African educational system. The Survey found that only one-third of the schools in the country have libraries or media centers. These information centers compete for attention and funding against other major problems such as crumbling buildings, the lack of textbooks and materials, overcrowded classes, and a shortage of teachers. Where they do exist, school libraries/media centers also face other challenges such as a lack of adequate space, quality library materials, and proper supervision. Teachers frequently do not have

---

[19] See the *School Register of Needs Survey*: http://www.hsrc.ac.za/tutor/srn.html.

experience integrating library resources into their teaching and principals may view the library/media center as inessential for teaching and learning. These circumstances provide the broader educational context for these host school libraries and the basis of the librarianship of poverty in which the South Africans responsible for these libraries as well as the ITW volunteers worked.[20]

Mchombu's writings, although based in extensive research on the information needs of African people in Tanzania and other countries, do not provide illustrations from or evaluations of grassroots efforts to improve libraries in these communities. This gap is filled to a certain extent by the second edition of Sturges and Neill's study of African libraries.[21] These researchers provide a thorough review of the literature on a variety of issues pertaining to their subject, including an in-depth discussion of grassroots librarianship efforts and the development of new information services for the African public, particularly the rural poor. Like Mchombu, they promote the use of paraprofessionals and nonprofessionals at the community level, although they believe professionally trained librarians should be involved in higher levels of administration and training. They also argue that the concept of the "barefoot librarian" developed in Asia has a place in rural library provision.[22] This category of nonprofessional is recruited from the community and trained at a very elementary level in the necessary tasks required to maintain a village library.

---

[20] For background on school libraries/media centers in South Africa see: Sandra Olën, "Utilisation of School Libraries," *Mousaion* 15, no. 2 (1997): 10-38; George H. Frederiks, "Educational Developments, the Role of the School Library, and the Teacher-Librarian in the Education of Blacks in South Africa with Special Reference to a Sample of Schools in the Cape Peninsula," *Education Libraries* 18, no. 2 (1994): 19-27; Thuli Radebe, "Experiences of Teacher-Librarians in the Workplace After Completion of the School Librarianship Programme," *South African Journal of Library and Information Science* 64 (1997): 218-226.
[21] Sturges and Neill, *The Quiet Struggle: Information and Libraries for the People of Africa* (London: Mansell, 1998).
[22] D.E.K. Wijasuriya, Lim Huck-Tee, and Radha Nadarajah, *The Barefoot Librarian: Library Development in Southeast Asia with Special Reference to Malaysia* (Hamden, CT: Linnet Books, 1975).

Sturges and Neill provide examples of training programs for paraprofessional community members in use in Tanzania and Zimbabwe, but no direct cross-cultural development programs such as the ITW program are described. The ITW volunteer program is a relatively unique project in grassroots librarianship for developing countries. One purpose of this research project is to examine the possible strengths and problems in educating librarians for work in rural developing communities through cross-cultural interaction between American librarians with professional training and their host country colleagues with limited library education and experience.

Summary

This literature review is by no means exhaustive but is intended as an overview of the studies and concepts that informed this research project. The case study does not intend to prove any of the many theories of cross-cultural adaptation or overseas effectiveness. These theories, along with Mchombu's concept of the librarianship of poverty and information on the state of library development in Africa, are presented as a framework for understanding the complexity of the ITW volunteer experience. As suggested by this rich literature, innumerable factors and aspects of the ITW volunteer experience could be explored other than those that will be examined here.

Nonetheless, this research fills a gap in the existing literature on cross-cultural experiences. It explores in more detail and with more intimacy how professional identity is carried into such an experience and the role it plays in adapting to new work environments and roles. As a result, it focuses on a narrower part of the sojourner or other international traveler's cross-cultural adaptation than most studies of similar overseas experiences. In a sense, this focus allows a microcosmic examination of how individuals

adapt to the unknown and the factors that play into their adjustment. By focusing

primarily on the library work context and environment, some of the dynamics at play in

cross-cultural adaptation to new work roles and contexts may be exposed. Additionally,

the in-depth interview methodology also allows a rich and varied look at the internal and

external resources ITW volunteers relied on in dealing with obstacles and solving

problems in a work-related cross-cultural context. Other studies may touch on this aspect

of professional expertise and experience but in a much more subordinate way, often

encapsulated as "technical knowledge and skills" and flexibility. This case study intends

to examine what this means in action, what it looks like in practice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The case study methodology was chosen for this research project in order to examine how the ITW volunteer librarians' sense of professional identity was affected by the new cultural contexts of their host libraries in South Africa. This research strategy allows an in-depth exploration of the personal experiences of these librarians in a cross-cultural working environment. Because it was impossible for this researcher to observe the program participants in the field, in-depth phone interviews of the American volunteer librarians were used instead to examine the experiences of the volunteers (See Appendix). The strength of the interview-based case study design is that in-depth conversations with study participants provided a rich overview of personal experiences and social processes. The interview format also allowed study participants the opportunity for self-reflection on their ITW experience and its effects on their lives.[23] Field observation would, of course, be a natural complement to these interviews and it is hoped that this research may provide the groundwork for later case studies pairing interviews and field observation.

Fifteen volunteer librarians and two non-librarian spouses participated in the ITW 2000 program. The program's leader and a volunteer journalist/photographer also traveled with the group. To recruit volunteers for this research project, an email was sent to each of the ITW 2000 librarians explaining the purpose of this study. Only librarians were targeted in order to focus on the role of professional identity in the program.

---

[23] Grant McCracken, *The Long Interview* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988), 9.

Altogether, ten participants were interviewed, all of who had worked or were currently working as professional librarians. One of these interviews, conducted early in the data collection process, was adversely affected by technological problems and was not able to be recorded. As a result, during data analysis the researcher relied on notes taken during the interview rather than a transcription of the conversation. Another interview was discarded from the data analysis because the researcher considered the interviewee too sick during the interview for the comments to be considered an accurate reflection of the interviewee's experiences in South Africa.

Of the nine interviewees, all but one holds a master's degree in library science. The non-M.L.S. volunteer, however, has worked as a professional librarian for a number of years. The interviewees' ages range from the mid-twenties to the early seventies, with the majority between forty and sixty years old. Nine of the interviewees are female and one is male, the only librarian of the three male ITW volunteers. Two of the participants are African American and the rest are white.

At the time of their South African trip, two of the volunteers in the study group were retired, one had just graduated from library school, and the rest were working in a variety of professional roles. The following chart outlines the primary library work experiences of the interviewees, including the previous work experiences of the two retired librarians and the one library school student, before the ITW 2000 trip:

Primary Work Settings of Volunteers	Volunteers Experienced in This Setting
School library	4
State or governmental library	1
Special academic library	1
Special or non-profit library	3
Public library	*One librarian had extensive public reference experience in addition to other experience*

Most of the volunteers, because they worked in either school or special libraries, had worked in situations in which they were responsible for a variety of library-related tasks such as reference, collection development, collection organization, and general management. A number of volunteers also had at least some professional cataloging experience because of their jobs and one volunteer is a cataloger by profession. As a group, these volunteers brought a great deal of expertise and experience to their ITW volunteer positions.

The interviewees spoke openly about their experiences in South Africa, not only about their work, interaction with others, and accomplishments but also their insecurities and disappointments. Many of these volunteers spoke passionately about their experiences, the things they had learned, and the hopes for the ITW program's future. From these conversations it was clear that many of the volunteers had spent a great deal of time processing their ITW experiences since returning to the United States and were eager to share their stories. One woman also commented that the interview was a great

opportunity to talk about her experience on a deeper level than immediately following the South Africa work because she had been processing her experience for months.

Interviews ranged from forty minutes to two hours with an average length of one hour. Although all interviewees were questioned concerning the same relevant themes, the researcher remained open to emergent issues and evidence of key events or kinds of interaction throughout the data collection process. As a result, initial interview questions were sometimes re-worded and more emphasis was shifted to certain research topics to explore emerging trends. Thus, the data analysis involved both an exploration of data as they were collected and semantic content analysis following data collection.

The typed transcriptions of the interviews comprise more than ninety pages of text. Additionally, one trip diary and several essays written by volunteers since returning to the United States were included among the data. The ITW volunteers also provided consent for the researcher to examine post-program evaluations that they completed in South Africa following the ITW program. In order to focus the direction of this research, these post-program evaluations were not examined. It is hoped that they may be included in future research.

During data analysis interview transcriptions and other documents were examined for relevant themes related to the volunteers' sense of purpose and their adaptation to the new contexts of their host libraries and their roles as ITW volunteer librarians in this program. The constant comparative method of data analysis, as described by Glaser and Strauss, provided a useful model during this stage of the research project.[24]

---

[24] Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967), 105-116.

From this data exploration several dynamics emerged as important factors that shed light on the role of professional identity in the ITW program. These dynamics include:

- The interaction between expectations concerning library-related work and the volunteer librarian role and the reality of these factors in South Africa. Important to this theme is evidence of how volunteers adapted the former in response to the latter.

- The role of prior experiences—both professional and non-professional—in adapting to unknowns.

- Personal and situational tensions that affected sense of purpose, adaptation, and feelings of accomplishments.

- The kinds of accomplishments ITW volunteers perceived in their experiences and ways their sense of identity as librarians has been affected by the program.

These dynamics are important for understanding the range of ITW volunteer experiences and their responses to unknown situations. The remaining sections of this paper focus on these dynamics. An overview of the ITW program and a description of the library contexts and volunteer work roles are first presented in order to provide a picture of what the interviewees experienced in South Africa. This background will provide the framework for understanding the library environments they worked in and the work roles they assumed. Following this description, detailed examinations of how the ITW volunteers' carried their sense of themselves as librarians into their projects are presented.

Three primary dynamics are explored: (1) the interaction between expectations concerning library-related work and the volunteer librarian role and the reality of these factors in South Africa, (2) the role of prior experiences—both professional and non-professional—in adapting to unknowns, and (3) the kinds of accomplishments ITW

volunteers perceived in their experiences and ways their sense of identity as librarians has

been affected by the program. Evidence of tensions between the individual and their

environment and work roles are presented throughout these sections.

OVERVIEW OF THE ITW 2000 EXPERIENCE

Until two months before departure, the World Library Partnership had planned for the ITW 2000 group of volunteers to work in rural libraries in Zimbabwe. Political tensions, however, prohibited the group from safely visiting that country and only weeks before their scheduled departure, the World Library Partnership had to shift the program to South Africa. The American non-profit worked with READ Educational Trust, a South African non-governmental literacy organization, as well as the Center for Educational Technology and Distance Education of the South African Department of Education to organize the program. This last minute change meant that there was less preparation time for both the ITW volunteers and host communities and their libraries. Although the ITW group leader was able to visit most of the host libraries before the ITW volunteers arrived in South Africa, these libraries had only a few weeks to prepare for their volunteer guests. All of these factors added to the number of unknown and unfamiliar situations the ITW volunteers as well as their South African hosts faced during the program.

The World Library Partnership, however, provided its volunteers with cross-cultural training in both the United States and South Africa to help prepare them for their work and cultural exchange. Prior to leaving the United States, the volunteers attended two and a half days of training in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. During this orientation the volunteers were able to meet each other and the WLP administrators for the first time, one of who served as the program leader to South Africa. The researcher was able to attend this orientation and meet many of the ITW 2000 volunteers.

The training consisted of an overview of the ITW program and its work in Zimbabwe the previous year. The volunteers were also educated about the state of libraries in South Africa and the developing world and the kinds of library-related activities they could expect to work on in their host library. These activities encompassed the full range of library work including building shelves and cleaning books, organizing and cataloging a collection, educating teachers and librarians, mending and preserving books, making simple paper books, and fundraising to support the library. Additionally, they were giving cross-cultural training concerning life, culture, and social norms in South Africa. In this training, the World Library Partnership drew extensively upon the Peace Corps experiences of both the organization's director and a former volunteer from 1999, as well as the experiences of the ITW group leader, who had traveled several times both to Zimbabwe and South Africa in order to organize the ITW projects. The experiences of 1999 volunteers were also used to provide the ITW 2000 volunteers with a clearer vision of their upcoming experience.

Following orientation in Chapel Hill, the volunteers traveled to South Africa where they participated in a in-country orientation led by the ITW program trip leader and members of WLP's two South African partners for the 2000 project. During this in-country orientation, most of the volunteers were able to meet at least one member of their host community library or school. The orientation focused on introducing the volunteers to South African culture, discussing library-related procedures from a South African perspective (for example, ways South Africans process books), and allowing the volunteers to get to know their hosts.

Following the host country orientation, the volunteers traveled to their host community sites where they spent approximately sixteen days. Due to travel distances, some volunteers actually had fewer than sixteen days at their site. In most cases, the workweek was Monday through Friday for both weeks, leaving the volunteers approximately ten to twelve working days in their host libraries.

After the host community portion of the program, the volunteers returned to Pretoria with at least one member of their host school or library. Debriefing in Pretoria included site reports and sharing information, book buying for the host libraries with funds raised by WLP, and a program debriefing session for the volunteers in which they discussed the operation of the ITW program and ways to improve it.

WORK SITES AND WORK ROLES

Upon the ITW volunteers' arrival, the state of their host libraries as well as the hosts' preparations for the volunteers varied by site. The different libraries, for example, included a new, freestanding library building, small library rooms in a school, a library cart that remained in the teacher-librarian's classroom, shelves of books in the back of a classroom, and a former closet. The library collections ranged in size from approximately 25 to over 1,500 books. In two cases the libraries already had computers. Several more have received computers since the project. At the time of the ITW 2000 project, however, none of the libraries were using automated cataloging systems. Many of them lacked book pockets and other supplies (glue, adequate amounts of paper), but others had these materials.

During orientation in North Carolina, the ITW 2000 volunteers were given information about their sites. These short descriptions provided contact information, information about the lodging for the volunteers (homestay, guesthouse, etc.), a host community profile, a school or community library description, and a list of the site goals for the project. These descriptions had been written by the host community members and varied in detail. Despite differences in wording or conceptualization, the goals of the host libraries were similar in scope. They requested help in:

1. Preparing and organizing the collection and library space for use

2. Training the individual(s) responsible for the library in librarianship and/or educators in ways to use the library

3. Promoting the library and reading in general

4. Fostering library ownership among school/community members

Although the volunteers were aided by these stated goals, the preparation of their library hosts -- principals, teacher-librarians, and sometimes district media advisors -- and the ability of these hosts to articulate their goals for the project seems to have varied. In several cases, the volunteers were able to work closely with insightful principals and teacher-librarians who had clear ideas about what should be done in order to get the library running. As one volunteer explained when asked how she and her partner knew what to do to help the library, "We had a principal there who wanted us to learn as much as we could and he did a lot of talking. So yes, we listened. But he told us things that we might not have been asking about or thinking about yet and that really helped." The libraries were usually fairly well established at these sites where the library hosts were able to guide and clearly articulate their goals for the project.

At other sites where libraries were less established, however, some volunteers felt that their hosts were somewhat uncertain about what should be done. There may have been educators or community members with a strong appreciation of libraries, but with no prior or only limited experience with libraries in their settings, they had difficulty articulating their goals or guiding the volunteers. When asked about what she and her partner understood their role to be after first arriving at their host library, one volunteer remarked that:

> We pretty much worked out on our own the kinds of things we wanted to do because it seemed as though the host libraries didn't know what we were supposed to be doing there and so they weren't able to communicate that to us.

The volunteers at this site were not alone in these feelings. At least one other pair of volunteers felt that their hosts were unsure of what the goals should be for the project.

Depending on the current state of the host libraries, the volunteers either chose to spend the majority of their time on certain activities out of necessity or were asked to work specifically on certain tasks related to the major categories of activities requested by their hosts: preparing and organizing the collection, training colleagues and library users, promoting the library and reading in general, and fostering library ownership.

All of the volunteers worked on preparing and organizing the collection for use at least part of the time at their host site. This preparation and organization may have included any or all of the following: taking books out of boxes, cleaning and mending books, weeding inappropriate materials, preparing books with book pockets and circulation cards, organizing books by language, cataloging and classifying materials using a simplified Dewey system, and shelving the books in a logical way for the size and purpose of the library. A component of organizing and preparing the library collection for use was to prepare the library space so that it might be a comfortable learning environment. This aspect of organization varied from site to site but included building shelves, cleaning the library, repairing a book cart, and decorating the library.

The amount of time spent on preparation and organization of the collection varied significantly. One pair of volunteers worked on these tasks for only about twenty hours because their hosts chose for them to spend the majority of their time promoting librarianship in workshops for educators in the area. Another pair of volunteers spent the

majority of their time preparing and organizing a portion of a collection of approximately 2,000 books just sitting in boxes before they arrived at the host site.

In all libraries except for two there was at least one individual who was designated as responsible for taking care of the library. At the school sites, these individuals were teacher-librarians, responsible for a regular load of classes in addition to maintaining the library. Most of the volunteers had at least some time to work with the teacher-librarian and share ideas and knowledge about running the host library, but many felt the amount of time was inadequate because the teacher-librarian had to teach for most of the day. There were exceptions to this situation. Several volunteers were able to spend a considerable amount of time with their host library counterparts and felt satisfied by the level of interaction and knowledge they were able to share. In general these volunteers were working in libraries that were more established regardless of the size of the collection.

In addition to working with the teacher-librarian or other individuals responsible for the library, many volunteers were asked to educate teachers concerning ways to use the library. At many sites this consisted of workshops for educators that focused on the importance of libraries in education, creative ways to use library materials to support classroom learning, and general concepts of librarianship. At one site, the pair of volunteers was asked to give a series of workshops on "information skills" and "book production" for educators throughout the area. The first of these workshops was an overview of librarianship including organization, collection development, reference, and making the library a comfortable, enjoyable space for children. In the "book production" workshops the volunteers taught educators a simple paper bookmaking process that they

could use to create reading materials for their classrooms or that they could teach their students to get them involved in sharing stories.

In their interviews, many of the ITW librarians emphasized that promoting libraries and reading was perhaps the most essential part of their work in South Africa. This promotion involved the educational work described above but also a more general emphasis on the importance of libraries and reading in society just surrounding the project and their presence. As one volunteer remarked, one of the most rewarding aspects of the project

> was the enthusiasm that was generated around books and learning just by us being there. And I think that the fact that we came as professionals and that we were proud of our profession helped a little bit in promoting libraries and librarianship. Because they don't have the status and they don't have any clout and they really aren't given any funds or that kind of thing. They have not developed, yet, a culture of reading.

Many other volunteers also remarked on the enthusiasm and hunger for books and learning they encountered in South Africa. At the same time, however, in many of the host communities the library was a relatively new concept and several volunteers realized that when promoting libraries it was necessary to remember that despite their enthusiasm, their hosts were often unfamiliar with libraries and unfamiliar with how to use the power they can contain. One volunteer remarked that in her host community, libraries had been a "thing to have, not to use." Similarly, another interviewee thought that the attitude at her school was that "the library was like a bookstore…you may go there to find something interesting but when it comes to actually being useful for school, I don't think many of our students actually felt that."

At many sites an integral part of promoting libraries was to foster a sense of ownership among library users and the community. Fundraising was an important aspect of this ownership and by teaching their South African colleagues strategies for fundraising, the volunteers were also able to work toward the sustainability of the library. Additionally, many volunteers emphasized that they let the South Africans decide was best for their library, which gave them a sense of ownership.

All of these activities that the ITW volunteers were involved in during their host community stay are important aspects of librarianship regardless of the cultural, economic, and environmental situation of a library. The state of the host library and the preparation of the community hosts in the library and/or school had a significant role in shaping the work roles the volunteers needed to assume and the kinds of unknown and unfamiliar library contexts they faced. As explored in the following sections of this paper, the volunteers brought their knowledge of libraries and librarianship to their host libraries in a variety of ways.

EXPECTATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

In any cross-cultural situation there are many unknown factors that the participants must face. Unknowns confronting the ITW 2000 volunteers included uncertainties about cultural norms and host community expectations, and often before arriving at their host site, even a clear idea of what their roles would be and what the South African libraries would be like. Pre-departure and host country orientation helped the volunteers deal with some of these uncertainties, but often their expectations were only realized when they confronted the reality of the different cultural situation.

All the volunteers knew that part of their role in the ITW project was to help develop their host library and work toward its sustainability. Several interviewees felt that their expectations concerning this goal were similar to what they actually did in their host libraries. These volunteers envisioned themselves helping in their host library however necessary. They had few expectations about what their work would be like or the kinds of accomplishments they could expect. Other volunteers remarked that they were uncertain about what they were going to be doing, sometimes even until they arrived at their host library. As a result, it was difficult for them to build expectations. As one volunteer expressed, " I really wasn't sure what and if I could do whatever I'd be asked but I thought 'well, how bad could it be?'" Although often not articulated, this idea seems to have been a part of many of the volunteers' sense of their role in the ITW project.

Although other volunteers were also open to what their experience turned out to be, they had preconceived notions concerning the level of professional work they would be engaged in, the mentoring or educational role they would have in the host library, and their impact on their host libraries. Using their own experiences, hopes, dreams, and information, these volunteers developed expectations to guide them before and then while they were engaged in the cross-cultural experience. Although a variety of personal factors may have led to these expectations, they are at least partially tied to the interviewees' sense of purpose as librarians bringing their skills and knowledge into a volunteer role.

One of these expectations concerns the kinds of professional skills and knowledge that volunteers would need to rely upon in their host libraries. When asked about her expectations concerning the work she would do in her host library, Volunteer A remarked:

> Actually, I thought the work would be a whole lot more on the professional level…I didn't realize that once we got there the real work that was involved was around taking the books out of boxes, separating them, and organizing them on the shelf. It was a really practical experience and I didn't expect that. It wasn't bad. I wasn't disappointed but it really opened my eyes to what the real issues are because I was really thinking it would be on a more professional level. In other words, the libraries were set up but that they just needed some enhancements that we would be contributing.

This interviewee used the term "professional" many times while talking about her expectations. The kinds of professional work she envisioned included "more hands-on training at an administrative level for the teacher-librarians and teaching them to be trainers and sort of setting the library up on a more administrative level." This expectation was in contrast to the more basic organizational tasks needed in her host library. At least one other volunteer also expected to be working at a more professional level. Like Volunteer A, she did not expect to be building shelves, unloading books from

boxes, and cleaning. She thought she would be teaching basic cataloging and librarianship skills. In both cases the volunteers' expectations for more administrative development contrasted with the reality that their host libraries needed greater infrastructural development before more detailed administrative assistance could take place.

Despite her expectations that her work would entail helping her host librarian with more management-related issues, Volunteer A says she easily adapted to the reality of her host library and the work she was asked to do. As she explains, you can read about the history of libraries and education in South Africa but "then when you get there, not just to the library but the community where we lived, the reality hits home. So as far as doing good work and wanting to make a difference, we were absolutely committed to doing that. We could really see the work ahead." This work included cataloging materials and organizing and setting up the library. Additionally, Volunteer A felt that she and her partner were able to spend an adequate amount of time with their host teacher-librarian, even if they were working on more organizational issues than management issues.

Volunteer A's expectations about the level of professional knowledge she would be sharing relates to the technical assistance aspect of the ITW program. In the technical assistance paradigm, a knowledgeable professional works closely with a host country counterpart in order to transfer skills and knowledge. Although she felt that she was able to work closely with her host teacher-librarian, Volunteer A had higher expectations about the level of knowledge she would help transfer than her host library and teacher-librarian were ready for. When she realized that her library needed more basic

development than she originally envisioned, she had to adapt the kinds and level of

professional knowledge and skills she needed to bring to the situation.

A related expectation that was commonly mentioned by interviewees was the

belief and hope that they would be able to work closely with the host librarian and share

their knowledge about maintaining and developing a library. In many of the schools in

which they worked, however, the person responsible for the library was also a teacher

working in an overcrowded classroom for most of the day. She or he had very little time

to dedicate to the library. More than half of the interviewees expected to have more time

to spend with their host country counterpart(s) and when this was not realized, they were

surprised and then often disappointed or frustrated. As Volunteer B remarked:

> We fully expected that we would be working with [the teacher-librarian] all day
> five days a week. And I guess that it didn't really occur to her to tell us that she
> teaches until our first day at school. And then she says 'oh, I'm going to class!'
> And we sort of looked around and thought, 'well isn't this interesting?' So that
> sort of threw things off because we had a lovely little itinerary of things we
> planned to do with her and that was completely skewed. But we wanted to make
> things available to the kids immediately so we decided to go ahead and just shelve
> the books…

As this volunteer explained, she and her partner were both greatly surprised by the fact

that their teacher-librarian would not be working with them in the library. She does not

remember if she was told in orientation that the teacher-librarians would be teaching for

most of the day and this reality did not fit the "whole American model" she and her

partner knew from the United States. It was a disappointment to her and a challenge

because she knew that for the sustainability of the host library the teacher-librarian

needed more training. Several other volunteers remarked that they felt that they were

unable to spend an adequate amount of time with their host librarians and as a result were

uncertain whether their South African colleagues were understanding all that they were trying to show them.

Being able to share knowledge and skills with her host teacher-librarian was an integral part of Volunteer B's sense of purpose as an ITW volunteer. When asked if she felt as though she accomplished what she hoped to accomplish, she said she felt like she only did to an extent because she and her partner "just had no time with the [teacher-librarian]." While she and her partner made significant progress on the organization of the library collection and preparing it for circulation, Volunteer B saw this lack of time with her host country counterpart as an obstacle to accomplishing her goals.

These expectations about the level of professional work and the amount of interaction with their teacher-librarians concern beliefs and hopes about the kinds of knowledge and skills the volunteers could offer their host libraries during their stay. As volunteers coming as librarians to help libraries, the interviewees wanted to feel that they had left an important mark on their host community—an enthusiasm for libraries and knowledge embodied in individuals who could sustain the library after they were gone.

The level of change they expected to bring and how they envisioned their role in this work varied. Two partners, Melanie and April,[25] illustrate the opposite ends of the spectrum. When asked what her pre-departure expectations were concerning the work she would do in South Africa, Melanie says:

> I *really* believed that we were going to bring libraries as we know them in this country to South Africa...Here's what I wrote in my journal after the first week of work: "My premise was all wrong. I believed that everyone loved libraries and books and reading but when you are so hungry and poor enough that all you can think about is how to get the next meal, you don't have a lot of time for pleasure reading."

---

[25] All names of volunteers have been changed.

Melanie expected to be processing and cataloging books, working with teachers and students with library materials, and teaching them to make their own simple books from paper. Most of all, she wanted to read to children and make books and reading come alive for them. Overall, she thought the work would be similar to what she would have done in a library in the United States ten years ago.

While some of the volunteers did do these things in their host libraries, Melanie and her partner spent most of their time organizing a small library collection and mending and cleaning books. Although they were able to work with teachers and students to a limited extent, Melanie did not feel she was able to really make a difference in the library or foster a sense of the power of books and reading that she feels so deeply. Like several other volunteers, she was shocked at the lack of familiarity with books and reading in her host community and overwhelmed by the impoverished state of the libraries there. It was difficult for her to reconcile her high expectations for change and the impoverishment of her host libraries as well as the limited range of library-related activities she and her partner were able to engage in. She felt depressed and claims that "the hardest thing is feeling like I didn't accomplish anything or much at all."

In contrast to Melanie's high expectations for change, her partner April held few expectations concerning the work she would be doing and the kinds of things she could accomplish during her visit. She had traveled to developing countries in Africa before and claims that having already seen the harsh reality of poverty in South Africa helped her not to have the expectation that she could make substantial changes. As she describes:

> One expectation I had was that I just thought it would be a cultural exchange. I didn't think I would be able to do anything incredible with the library. I knew that my presence there, or I hoped that my presence there would generate interest in the library if nothing else and generate interest in reading.

As a result, she saw the cultural exchange aspect of the ITW program as more important that the technical assistance component. Although she knew that her work in the host libraries would be helpful to the schools, she framed her role primarily in terms of sharing information about libraries as well as her own life experiences. An important part of this cultural exchange, however, was centered in being a representative for libraries.

Unlike April, Melanie had only limited international travel experience and she considers herself a "very naïve traveler." As a result, her lack of prior experience in South Africa or even a similar first-hand experience meant that the situation she faced was a greater unknown than for her partner. Additionally, Melanie's sense of purpose in South Africa seems to have been strongly tied to her identity as a librarian and the love of libraries and learning she could share with her hosts. For April, conveying a positive message about libraries was important, but she did not have great hopes that her host library could make substantial changes during her short stay.

Melanie talked openly with her partner about feeling that she was not accomplishing all she expected and April helped her keep a balanced perspective. According to Melanie, her partner enabled her to see the experience as primarily an opportunity to get to know the South African people and share ideas and feelings. The benefits to their host libraries came not only as a part of their work with the library collections but also their conversations—both library- and non-library related—with students, teachers, and principals. According to Melanie, the goals of their trip became "living in the moment, accepting the idea of accomplishing with baby steps rather than with changing the world, and having a great cultural experience." Interestingly, April feels that her partner, despite her high expectations and subsequent disappointment,

played a critical part in this process of cultural exchange. Melanie was comfortable in any social situation and this helped April when she may have felt more shy.

In a sense, Melanie used the perspectives of her partner to help her adapt her expectations to meet the reality of their host libraries and work roles in South Africa. While she was overwhelmed by the discrepancies between her expectations and the reality of how impoverished the libraries were in her host community, she worked to change her perspective in order to see how she and her partner could still make a difference during their short stay, even if in smaller steps than she had hoped. With April's help, she reframed her experience to match what they could accomplish. Nonetheless, throughout her trip she struggled with the discrepancy between her expectations and reality. As she describes, "it was just a mix everyday of saying, " 'I'm so lucky to be here!' and 'oh my God, what are we really accomplishing?'"

Inevitably, a variety of factors play into the development of expectations concerning a cross-cultural experience such as those of Melanie and April as well as the other ITW volunteers presented here. These examples suggest, however, that the technical assistance nature of the ITW program led some of the volunteers to build expectations about the kinds of work they could hope to engage in and the impact they could make on their host communities. After all, they went into this program as librarians who would help developing libraries. They developed expectations of what this would mean in the South African context and how they could create change. When faced with the reality of the state of their host libraries and the kinds of work that needed to be done, these librarians adapted their goals and understanding of the project to fit the situation they found. In many cases this meant building a stronger infrastructure for the library or

approaching the development of the library at a more basic level than they regularly work at in their libraries in the United States. They worked at this adaptation in different ways, but it was easier for some volunteers to bridge the gap between their expectations and realities than for others.

USING PRIOR EXPERIENCE TO FACE UNKNOWNS

In addition to adapting expectations to fit the library work and environment they found in South Africa, the ITW volunteers also needed to confront a variety of new and sometimes unfamiliar situations while working in their host libraries. In literature on the cross-cultural adaptation of technical assistants, professional expertise and professional flexibility are recognized among the factors that are important to overseas success.[26] Nonetheless, a detailed examination of how professionals adapt their work to fit unfamiliar contexts in an another culture is lacking. During this research project, volunteers were asked about both the prior professional and non-professional experiences they believed helped them in their work. Their interviews were also examined for evidence of reflection-in-action, a concept that is almost tacit and therefore hard to describe.

Professional Knowledge and Skills

In the host library context, the volunteers relied on a range of library-related experiences to help them adapt to their work roles and new library contexts. From the interviews it was evident that all the volunteers feel a strong sense of professional purpose and groundedness in librarianship. They know the ins and outs of libraries and library organization and as one interviewee who had previously worked in the Peace Corps commented, "all libraries have a certain amount of similarities." These similarities

---

[26] Daniel Kealey, *Cross-Cultural Effectiveness* (Hull, Quebec: Canadian International Development Agency, 1990), 5-7.

are much more numerous than the differences created by a cultural or societal context, economic factors, or user group. Regardless of the different physical environments, conceptual forms (i.e. book cart, classroom library), or user groups they worked with, the volunteers all brought with them extensive familiarity with libraries both professionally and personally. With this experience came an inherent sense of what their host library could and should become within the constraints of its environment.

When questioned about the importance of being a professional librarian in the ITW program the volunteers varied in their responses. While they all believed a non-librarian could have done well in the program if paired with a professional librarian, most of the volunteers believed that it was important for at least one of the partners to have worked as a librarian. Their reasons for this belief were generally based in the fact that they used librarian-specific skills such as cataloging books using a simplified Dewey system. As one volunteer remarked, "How many laymen would know how to catalog, even in an elementary way?" This librarian was cataloging and classifying books from memory. The interviewee admits, however, that if a non-librarian had a written copy of the Dewey classification system, "I guess anybody with intelligence or experience could do it. A lot of things could be done without a library degree, for heavens sake." Like this volunteer, many interviewees seemed to value experience working as a librarian as an important quality for an ITW volunteer but did not see the MLS degree as essential.

A couple of volunteers felt particularly strongly that their identity as a professional, "seasoned" librarian was critical to their work in the ITW program. As one interviewee explained, her professional training and experience gave her an innate understanding of how a library should be organized:

> After you've worked in a number of settings, and I've worked in a number of
> them now, I think it's almost instinctive. If you've gotten that basic training,
> immediately when you walk into a library you know how it should be organized.

This volunteer saw this knowledge as inherent to her identity as a librarian. In fact, she

felt that only a librarian would know library organization and function at an intimate

enough level to do the work needed at her project. She remarked that:

> Unless you are really the type of person who's visited libraries and know them at
> such a level that you know all this stuff… really walking in and knowing how to
> put a reference [collection together] and even knowing what essential reference
> books need to be there ... that's what librarians do. Like I said, unless you're one
> of those patrons who really spends a lot of time there and has gone to that kind of
> level just using a library…only a librarian would know that. And knowing how to
> put a schedule together and a really basic circulation system, I don't believe that a
> patron or someone who's just interested in libraries can do that.

This volunteer speaks of this knowledge as instinctive and as an integral part of her

identity not only as a librarian but as a volunteer sent to help her host library in South

Africa.

According to Donald Schön, this kind of instinctive knowledge is an inherent part

of professional practice. He claims that as professionals:

> It is our capacity to see unfamiliar situations as familiar ones and to do in the
> former as we have done in the latter that enables us to bring our past experiences
> to bear on the unique case. It is our capacity to *see-as* and *do-as* that allows us
> to have a feel for problems that do not fit existing rules.[27]

His description parallels that of the ITW volunteer who talks of the instinctive nature of

librarianship.

There is other evidence that some volunteers implicitly and explicitly used their

intimate knowledge of libraries and library work to help them adjust to their new work

---

[27] Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic
Books, 1983), 140.

roles as Donald Schön suggests. When asked about how she knew what she should do in her host library, one volunteer expressed, "I drew from past experiences and sometimes I flew by the seat of my pants and just made it up as I went along." This librarian had a number of years of professional experience she could draw upon to help her in an unfamiliar yet similar library context to those she had worked at in the United States.

Some volunteers said that there was little relation between what they had done professionally in the United States and the more basic work they undertook in their host libraries. Others commented on a range of library-related activities beyond the technical skills involved in cataloging, organizing collections, and setting up a simple circulation system. These included training volunteers in their school libraries or new librarians, adapting one-on-one and group instruction to fit the background of library users, and teaching workshops for educators. Such experiences build up a repertoire of professional experiences, knowledge, and skills that become second-nature to librarians. They require reflective consideration of what libraries are for and what constitutes the framework of librarianship. Creating a groundedness in such knowledge is the presupposition of library science education and the inevitable result of professional work.

On the other side of the continuum, there were two volunteers who emphasized that the work they did was so basic that it was unnecessary for them to be a librarian. As one of these interviewees remarked:

> We were doing such basic things that I think if I had had an interest in libraries and an interest in reading and in children, I probably would have ended up doing very similar work because I didn't use that many library skills that I had learned in libraries or in library school.

This volunteer admits that she did use some skills from her previous library work and education, but they were not essential to her experience in South Africa. Likewise,

another volunteer felt that it was possible to get by comfortably with just an organizational plan and some guidance from a handbook such as *Libraries for All!*, a manual for starting a community library in a developing area written by Laura Wendell, the director of the World Library Partnership and a former Peace Corps volunteer in Togo.[28] Perhaps professional library work seemed unnecessary for the projects these volunteers participated in but inevitably their prior personal experiences using libraries had some bearing on their work.

One of these volunteers who de-emphasized the importance of being a librarian, however, also felt that her prior professional experiences working in libraries may have given her important knowledge about what libraries can do to change people's lives. She clearly articulates the instinctual nature of this sense of what libraries are for and what librarians should do that Donald Schön suggests comes from professional practice. Having reflected on her ITW experience, she wishes that she had done things differently:

> What I really wish we had done…I wish I had acted on instinct. For heavens sake, after twenty years of working with children here you know that the main purpose is to figure out ways to bring books to kids and teachers! And I wish I had gone out on the playground and tried to interact more with children. I wish that I had taken books out to the playground and gone up to teachers and said 'may I share a book with your class?'

Not having been invited by teachers and principals to do these things at her site, she felt reluctant to initiate this interaction even though she internally felt that it was the most essential work she could have done.

Either using their prior professional or prior personal experiences with libraries in the United States, the ITW volunteers took with them a knowledge and comfort about using libraries that was invaluable to their work.

---

[28] Laura Wendell, *Libraries for All! How to Start and Run a Basic Library* (Paris: UNESCO, 1998).

Non-Professional Knowledge and Skills

When asked what nonprofessional knowledge or personal resources she drew upon to help her with her work in South Africa, one volunteer responded, "experience with a lot of unknowns." This statement holds true for most of the volunteers who both implicitly and explicitly relied on knowledge gained from experience with a wide range of unknown situations. International travel, experience cultivating interpersonal communication skills, and personal experiences requiring a high degree of flexibility and open-mindedness were all frequently cited nonprofessional elements that helped the volunteers do well in their assignments.

The range of prior experiences with challenging unknowns was wide and included raising adopted children, raising a bi-racial child, hosting international exchange students, living in communities with people of a different race, and cultivating friendships with people of various cultures. As one volunteer commented, these kinds of life experiences that require flexibility and open-mindedness were often more important than prior professional experiences:

> I think that some of the things that prepared me the most for this were my personal experiences in my life—far more than my professional—although for sure, I had a lot of confidence around my skills as a librarian because I had worked in it for so long. But I don't think that was the biggest thing, I really think that it was my ease, my comfort in another culture.

Many of the volunteers thought that being flexible was the most essential factor for participation in the ITW program. Several volunteers remarked that it was crucial to be flexible and 'try not to put any boundaries around what kind of work you want to do or what living situation you want.'

This flexibility helped volunteers not only live in a very different environment from their homes in the United States but also adapt to working in a new context and with new people. One volunteer expressed it like this:

> You have to admit that you are an American and you really realize that when you leave these shores … You've got to be more flexible. Things aren't going to operate the way that you're used to here. And I tend to be a little impatient but you learn that the infrastructure is not there. And some days there was an issue with the water and instead of getting upset and thinking 'I don't see how they are going to move forward because this isn't in place.' You've got to sit all that down and put it aside because you can't look at things from that perspective, it's not the case. I just think that really being flexible when doing that kind of work really helps because if you're not flexible and you haven't done any research or read about what's happened in these communities … you'll get really frustrated or lose your passion. It'll end up being a really bad experience.

Many interviewees emphasized the importance of flexibility in their work in South Africa. Often volunteers had inadequate supplies at their sites and had to find creative solutions for dealing with the lack of basic materials like staples, glue, and book pockets. One volunteer also felt that it was important to be flexible in respect to accepting what materials were at hand in the library. She says that some of the books may have been older than American librarians would accept in the United States. In her library, 'older' seems to have meant that a dictionary might have been published a few years ago rather than be the latest edition. She says that

> we're not talking about giving them complete cast-offs but [realizing that] this will work. It's not like you're going to totally short-change the teachers and students but it's not the best source and it's OK. Because you're talking about a lack of resources to begin with, so I think a lot of us had to be flexible around what we had to work with.

Ideally, she wanted more choices for her library and in some cases, more appropriate resources. As she worked with these materials, however, she had to make the best library

possible and then helped her teacher-librarian plan for improvements in the future as more resources became available.

Additionally, many interviewees remarked that the small size of the their host libraries led them to do things differently than common practice in the United States. For example, all the volunteers did more simplified cataloging than would be done in American schools or public libraries. One interviewee who has extensive experience as a school librarian, explained that "You don't need a card catalog in a small library where everything is visible and there are other ways to organize books on the shelf. Just more than anything it was simplifying to fit a simpler situation." Many volunteers agreed. As this volunteer commented, however, she sometimes had to remind herself of the simpler context in which she was working. When beginning to catalog and classify materials in her library she said that her initial inclination was to create a more complicated system by going two or three numbers beyond the decimal point as she would in her American library:

> At first I had to bite my tongue a few times and keep reminding myself that 'this is not necessary' 'this is not necessary' We do what is *necessary* and what will be useful here. Don't worry about the U.S.! I wasn't haunted by that by any means, but yes, I did have to remind myself from time to time.

This volunteer recognized that creating a more complicated system would only confuse the teacher-librarian, who was still learning to determine the major subject of a book.

This internal dialogue resonates with Schön's idea that the reflective practitioner engages in a "reflective conversation with a unique and uncertain situation."[29] As the situation "talks back, the practitioner listens, and as [s]he appreciates what [s]he hears,

---

[29] Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 130.

[s]he reframes the situation once again."[30] This is the basis of trial and error and experimentation on-the-fly, both of which necessitate the kind of flexibility the ITW volunteers relied upon when working in their host libraries. This flexibility may have derived from prior professional experience as well as personal experience adapting to unknowns with an open and reflective mind.

In addition to being flexible in respect to materials and procedure, many volunteers commented on how important flexibility was to their collaboration and interaction with South Africans. Being aware of the more casual sense of time among South Africans was essential.

Many volunteers described how their South African colleagues or host would make plans for one time and show up thirty minutes to an hour later or that the plans might not happen at all. During orientation they had been told that this more casual sense of time would require a great deal of flexibility but at times the more casual approach to time in South Africa was frustrating. As one volunteer remarked, "it seems that not a lot gets accomplished. Things are slower. And the pattern of the day changes all the time. And I wasn't used to that at all. So it was sort of frustrating…It's important to be really flexible." Similarly, another interviewee described that she had to "reconcile her American-workaholic frame of mind to a more relaxed of approach," in order to work with the South Africans. There was a tension, however, between her tenacity and drive to accomplish as much as possible at her host library and the more casual approach to work that she saw among her South African colleagues. She felt that she sometimes pushed the principal and teachers harder than was customary in the host school.

---

[30] Ibid.,132.

Another volunteer remarked that although she was flexible concerning time, it was sometimes hard to adjust to this reality. She also viewed the South African concept of time in a somewhat critical light:

> I didn't find it particularly funny or something unique about the culture. I just felt that it had been allowed to perpetuate and so everyone just kind of agreed upon in and assumed it. And you see it reflected. The flexibility I had embraced but that really bothered me….We were going to meet with some people and sometimes it would happen and sometimes it didn't and you know they would arrive much later or it just didn't happen. It was this just a really open way of handling business. That was hard to deal with.

This volunteer as well as others knew that she needed to bring an open mind and personal flexibility into play when working with her South African colleagues. This flexibility, however, did not necessarily erase the tension and frustration she and other volunteers felt as they worked in a cultural context very different than that in the United States. This flexibility allowed the volunteers to adapt to new work roles, libraries with more limited resources and different environments, and working relations with South Africans. The use of prior personal experiences as well as prior experience working in libraries seem to have both come into play in the exercise of this flexibility. Additionally, such flexibility, in the context of library work, may have operated hand in hand with reflection-in-action and the application of knowledge and skills related to prior professional practice in librarianship.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND EFFECTS

Accomplishments and Concerns for Sustainability

While organizing the host library collection for use was an important part of all

the ITW volunteers work in South Africa, many volunteers felt that promoting libraries

and helping South Africans learn to use books was at times a more critical part of their

work. As stated earlier, several interviewees remarked that they were surprised by how

little the South Africans knew about libraries and using books. Often their hosts knew

they wanted a library but were unsure about what they should do with it. Paired with this

uncertainty about libraries was an enthusiasm to learn about books and an eagerness for

exposure to them.

Several librarians saw their primary role as representatives for libraries with a

guiding, mentoring, or teaching role. When asked if she saw herself as an educator or

mentor in her host library, one interviewee expressed

> I guess maybe an educator, but I saw myself more, in that short span of time, as
> someone who was exchanging ideas and sharing a positive message about
> something they already knew but weren't sold on yet maybe.

Whatever words they used to describe their role—mentor, teacher, representative, or

"someone exchanging ideas"—many of the volunteers indicated that a major part of their

role in South Africa was to share a positive message about libraries and their power.

This enthusiasm came easily to the volunteers not only because of their

professional experiences, but often because of simply growing up in a culture where

libraries are an integral and appreciated part of society. As one volunteer expressed, she

and her partner constantly promoted the importance of reading and libraries but trying to

articulate this importance was new to her. She had never worked in a school or public

library and had never needed to express the importance of libraries. The role came

naturally, however, because of her personal interest in reading and the "sort of ingrained

idea that libraries are a good thing." In a sense, the need for volunteers to articulate this

belief is a reminder of the basic premise of librarianship and something that may at times

be taken for granted in the United States.

Several of the interviewees remarked that working in South Africa also clearly

showed them how much they and other Americans sometimes take for granted the power

of libraries, books, and reading. When asked what she learned from working in her host

library, one volunteer commented that

> I learned how important education was to them. They wanted something that
> everyone could go to from the oldest person to the youngest and be able to learn
> from it and share in it and have joy about books and about reading and learning. I
> guess that that's what surprised me. I took it for granted and they don't.

Other volunteers similarly remarked that they saw an eagerness to handle books and learn

to find and use information that they did not see in the United States. One interviewee

commented that she watched kids in her host library "gobbling up" books because they

were new and different from anything they had ever seen. As a school librarian, she

thought about "how my children would have taken a lot of that for granted because they

had had exposure from such a young age." She says she learned from these children that

newness is powerful. Another volunteer also found that unlike the college students in the

United States she works with, the South African high school students were eager to learn

how to do research for themselves rather than look for a quick-fix to an information need.

These volunteers have brought this awareness back to their work in the United States.

Despite the engagement and enthusiasm for libraries and books that many of the

ITW volunteers saw among the South Africans they worked with, a number of volunteers

expressed that they sometimes felt uncertain about the impact they were actually having

in their host community, both while there and even now. One librarian even questioned

the work she was doing altogether. She felt that

> Mostly we really enjoyed our work, but *I just don't* know if we accomplished
> very much and that was always something that made me worried about all the
> time and effort WLP had put into this and what we were getting back.

Although other volunteers did not express such a strong doubt about their impact

on the host libraries, several interviewees shared a concern that they were not able

transfer all the knowledge and skills they hoped to share. Culture and language

differences played a large part in creating this tension. One volunteer spoke for several

others when she claimed that

> You know there were times when I felt lonely or like I wasn't having any impact
> at all because I couldn't relay certain information. Like the workshop that we
> gave -- that was a big challenge because you see a lot of indifferent faces, people
> maybe not taking away what you hoped they would or being skeptical about your
> presence …. It was hard to stand up in front of a group and at the end you ask if
> there are any questions and there are none …. This is a big challenge.

Like this volunteer, several interviewees mentioned that they were met with 'blank faces'

when they tried to share information about library work and the use of books in learning.

At times they also felt like they were unable to understand their hosts and their needs.

These cross-cultural dynamics left several volunteers concerned that since their

departure, the South Africans have been able to incorporate the knowledge and skills they shared about maintaining the host libraries and using books.

At one site, the ITW volunteers found that the teachers at the host school were not particularly welcoming. They had very little contact with South Africans, possibly because of miscommunication that led the host community to believe that the volunteers were being paid, or school politics of which the volunteers were unaware. Due to this tension, the ITW volunteers were unable to work closely with a host site counterpart who might take over the librarian role. There was no designated teacher-librarian at the school and the principal envisioned that the upper-level students could run the library. At one point during the project several schoolchildren were in the library deciding the library policy. Although an interviewee from this site remarked that these students' desire to make the library a functioning place was mature, this situation suggested how difficult sustainability could be for this library. The volunteer expressed a great deal of uncertainty concerning the present state of the host library:

> It'd be interesting to see what it looks like because you'd like to think that what you did is maintained in some way. It wouldn't take long for it to be in disrepair and have books disappear or whatever. And I wouldn't be surprised at anything. The books might be all gone for all that I know.

Because other volunteers had greater contact with people concerned about the library, they seemed more confident that their host library would be sustained. Language and cultural barriers, however, created filters through which information had to pass and some volunteers felt that important knowledge and concepts may have at times been lost.

Nonetheless, the interviewees seemed generally confident that their work in South Africa has made a difference. They told stories of principals, teachers, students, and community members who were able to increase their knowledge of libraries through

interaction with them. Additionally, several interviewees remarked that they could see

that just their presence in the community drew attention to the library. As one volunteer

commented, handling books with care and cleaning and mending them seemed to

increase their value in the community's eyes. Another volunteer remarked that "I think

that what is most valuable about all this is that if we're excited…if we believe in

something then the message comes across in a powerful way." Volunteers felt this

message got across despite language and cultural barriers, as one interviewee remarked

about a workshop she and her partner gave:

> We had prepared an outline and we talked about different things like using library materials in the classroom, ways of raising money for your library, and I don't know that hardly *any* of that got across. But all those people were gathered in that room because of libraries and I thought that was good if nothing else.

Another volunteer, who worked at the site with little contact with hosts described

above, related how a group of teachers approached their principal and insisted that the

library, which had been used as a classroom, remain a separate room. They came to this

decision on their own with little actual contact with the ITW volunteers. As an

interviewee from this site noted "that showed me that they realized how important it was

having those books there, without us talking about it. We didn't have to convince

anybody." The fact that this event took place while the volunteers were at the site,

however, suggests that their presence increased the value of the library for its

stakeholders.

Several interviewees commented that they have heard from their hosts and that

the host libraries have received attention since the ITW program. Some schools have

been written about in the media. One bookmobile that was organized by ITW volunteers

is now on the road and bringing books to more rural educational sites. At least one principal has won an education award and another library has been promoted as a model for other schools. Some volunteers also know that principals and teachers at their host sites are continuing the work that was started by the ITW program. In the words of one interviewee, "You know we were a much bigger deal than I had imagined."

Effects on the ITW Volunteers

One of the underlying issues in this research project was to consider how the ITW experience affected the participants' understanding of libraries and their roles as professional librarians. Seeing the eagerness for books and learning that some South Africans felt was invigorating for the volunteers. Several of the volunteers remarked that exposure to this enthusiasm as well as the paucity of materials and books at their host sites has made them more mindful of the wealth of information and familiarity with books and libraries here.

Many of the volunteers commented that the ITW experience did not change how they felt about or understood their profession. Their professional and personal experiences with libraries in the United States grounded them in the importance of these cultural institutions. Although library procedures may have been different because of the size and scope of the collections in South Africa, these volunteers felt that the role and function of the library was the same, as was their role as librarians. As one volunteer remarked, "I think the value for me was basically just re-enforcing my whole concept of what a library should be and how it should function."

As one volunteer expressed when asked what she learned about library work from being in South Africa, "I don't think I learned anything. I think that it's pretty much the

same. The size of the collection doesn't really matter." When the researcher commented

that perhaps this was something she learned, she explained that this was something she

had always believed. This idea may have been shared but not expressed by other

volunteers who felt that they did not learn about library work from their ITW experience.

A number of interviewees remarked that they did learn about what South Africans

thought of libraries and how foreign the library concept is to some people in the world.

They also learned about how hungry South Africans were to have books and knowledge.

Additionally, some of the volunteers provided evidence that working in an impoverished

community in South Africa has carried over into their professional work in the United

States. As one volunteer expressed,

> I think that I have come back here a little bit more thoughtful about book
> selection, in terms of how it's actually going to be used rather than 'hey, this is a
> great book!' In South Africa it was very easy to see how a book might be used
> because there was so little to start with…

Similarly, another librarian finds herself at times overwhelmed by the amount of paper,

especially publisher catalogs, she must throw away each day. The teachers and students

at her South African site could use that paper to make collages and simple paper books

for learning material.

Overall, getting to know the South African people was the most powerful aspect

of the ITW experience for many volunteers. As one woman expressed, she learned more

about other human beings than about her profession and that the program was "more

wide-reaching than just libraries." This belief resonates with the cultural exchange aspect

of the ITW program. As one volunteer eloquently expressed,

> It was a culture exchange as much as anything, which was really exciting for me.
> They just were dying to hear our stories. How we lived … what were our libraries
> like … what kinds of schools do we go to … what were our homes like … what

music we listen to … what does our city look like. Because they are just really hungry. Many of them said to us that 'we feel like we've been left behind'… 'we feel like we've been left behind.' I think it's really true.

This sharing of culture and experiences penetrated the work many volunteers' did in South Africa and it is one of the strongest aspects they have taken back to the United States. Many volunteers remarked about the warmth and generosity of their South African hosts and how important it was for them to learn how other people lived, their gratitude for what they have, and their hospitality during their stay.

Furthermore, the interviewees felt that their lives were positively affected by the challenges of working and living in another culture. They learned how other people live and that they could live with people of other races and lifestyles. As one woman expressed, "I found out that I'm good at being a friend and honoring other people's ways of doing things and being fairly flexible." Dealing with a variety of unknowns also taught some volunteers that they can be more flexible than they ever imagined.

Additionally, one volunteer who had a great deal of uncertainty about being able to do a good job in South Africa found that she had a wealth of knowledge and experiences she could share. This volunteer had compensated for her feelings of insecurity by expecting to be able to depend on her partner to help her through her weaknesses. At her site, however, she found that she had to face her insecurities and rely on her own store of life experiences and professional expertise. She was amazed at all that she could do. As she describes:

> I was amazed, I really was, especially as somebody who wasn't too sure of myself and what knowledge I had to impart. I really thought I'd be able to impart what somebody else knew, rather than what I knew. It didn't work out that way. It made me feel like I have more on the ball than I think I have or that I know more than I thought I knew and I got it across.

Many volunteers feel a responsibility to share their knowledge of South Africa and its libraries. They make public presentations for library association meetings and conferences, for civic and church groups, and for educational groups. Some have written about their experiences for newsletters, newspapers, and other publications. Several volunteers mentioned that doing this work reminds them of wonderful people they met who shared their homes, libraries, and culture with them. Many interviewees also mentioned that they would eagerly participate in the ITW program again.

Several interviewees mentioned that despite their efforts to share information about their experience, they feel that they are not making enough of an impact or able to give back enough to the people they met in South Africa. One volunteer also feels disappointed that she has not generated enough interest among librarians she has talked to about her experience. When asked if the ITW program changed the way she looked at her profession, this librarian claimed that "it has just reaffirmed what I've thought for many, many years…about how much other cultures enrich our own experience and our responsibly in informing the world!" She feels that many librarians around her, however, are not as concerned about these issues as she feels necessary:

> To be honest, I haven't had as strong an interest here as I had hoped for…There are individuals but overall my colleagues don't seem all that interested. And that has disappointed me somewhat…because I don't want to push it down anyone's throat. But I think it's an important responsibility…[to learn] about how others are faring in this information age.

Additionally, this interviewee felt that the ITW program re-enforced her belief in the power of diversity to enrich people's lives here in the United States. She expressed disappointment that diversity efforts in American libraries are developing more slowly than she would hope.

Like many interviewees, this volunteer returned to the United States with a wider knowledge of the world, the challenges for libraries in developing countries, and herself. This knowledge has given the volunteers a richer understanding of the possibilities and challenges to libraries and librarians everywhere. The volunteers may have brought this knowledge into their senses of themselves as librarians in different ways. As with this last volunteer, it may have reaffirmed existing beliefs about the responsibilities of librarians or the role of libraries and their power in society. It may have informed their continuing practice in school media centers, university libraries, and special libraries. Further, the knowledge of other peoples and cultures that was so important to the volunteers inevitably enriches them as people and as librarians.

OBSERVATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

General Observations

The feelings, thoughts, and experiences of the ITW volunteers presented here are

intended to illustrate the variety of ways they carried their professional identity and

knowledge as librarians with them into their program. These librarian volunteers have

developed a sense of professional identity and a repertoire of professional knowledge and

skills through working in libraries in the United States as well as their own experiences

using these cultural institutions. They may have worked in libraries very different from

those they were placed at in South Africa but they took with them a store of knowledge

and expertise concerning libraries with them. Although a variety of factors played into

their experience, the volunteers relied on this knowledge and sense of identity to help

them in a number of ways. It surfaced in dynamics such as the interaction between

library-related expectations and the reality of the host library and using prior experiences

in adapting to unknowns. As demonstrated by the range of feelings and ideas expressed

by the volunteers, however, they relied on their professional knowledge and skills in

different ways and to different degrees. This is consistent with the literature on cross-

cultural adaptation, which shows that "there are probably as many degrees, kinds, and

levels of adaptation as there are situations and individuals adapting."[31]

This research project did not set out to confirm that professional identity is the most

important resource ITW volunteers relied upon to adapt to new situations and

---

[31] Linda E. Anderson, "A New Look at an Old Construct: Cross-Cultural Adaptation," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 18, no. 3 (1994), 318.

unknowns. It is only considered one of many aspects that play into the rich and sometimes intense experience of participating in such a project. Examining this aspect of cross-cultural adaptation, however, provides a richer understanding of how professionals bring their expertise into technical assistance programs than provided elsewhere in the cross-cultural adaptation and cross-cultural effectiveness literature. At the same time, the researcher recognizes that it is impossible to equate the kinds of professional adaptation and professional flexibility described here with cross-cultural adaptation and cross-cultural effectiveness in general. They are only examples of a certain kind of adaptability. The dynamics explored here are nonetheless valuable because they create an intimate and detailed look at professional adaptability and flexibility in action in a cross-cultural context.

As mentioned by some interviewees, life experiences with a variety of unknowns are invaluable to the development of the flexibility and adaptability that allow individuals to live and work in new cultural contexts. Personality traits such as flexibility, open-mindedness, empathy, and interest in the host culture are also important aspects of adaptation. All of these factors inevitably come into play in being professionally flexibility in a work context as well. The lines here between prior professional experiences and non-professional experiences and personality traits are blurred as the latter possibly influence the former.

Such experience with unknowns may be as valuable to ITW volunteers as professional work in libraries. As suggested by some volunteers, it may in fact not be important to be a librarian to do well in the ITW program. Most librarians felt that their professional training and experiences were important to them but not crucial for

participation. At the same time, the interviews provided evidence of some volunteers'

reflection-in-action, based in years of professional practice as librarians. This kind of

intuitive thinking and groundedness in librarianship seems to have been a useful quality

for volunteers. One limitation of this research is that it focuses only on the experiences of

the librarian volunteers. The two non-librarians would inevitably provide unique and

interesting perspectives on what kinds of other life knowledge, skills, and experiences

proved valuable to them in this work. Did they feel that they were disadvantaged because

they did not have previous work experience and training in librarianship? Did their sense

of identity as ITW volunteers differ because they did not come as trained librarians?

In addition to examining how professional identity and experience influenced

expectations and adaptation to work in host libraries, this research looked at how

participation in the ITW program affected the volunteers' ideas about libraries,

librarianship, and themselves as librarians and as people. The ideas and feelings

expressed by the interviewees suggest that the program affected them in a variety of

ways. In general, however, most volunteers seemed to leave with a greater appreciation

of how other people look at libraries, information, education, and at the world. Some left

with a greater recognition of how living in a state of constant information flow sometimes

makes us insensitive to all that we have. All of these factors inevitably left the volunteers

more reflective and aware of the possibilities and challenges to libraries in the United

States as well as worldwide. Some volunteers also expressed that their ITW experience

had led them to consider other ways to promote international librarianship and participate

in other service programs.

This research touched on only a limited number of factors and the interviews revealed many more insights outside the scope of this project. Nonetheless, the dynamics discussed here have several implications for the selection of ITW volunteers and program orientation. The state of the host library and the preparation for the hosts at any given site was an important factor in shaping what the volunteers did, how they used their knowledge and skills, how greatly their expectations contrasted with reality, and the kinds of accomplishments they achieved. In any cross-cultural collaborative project such as the ITW program, there will always be these unknowns. As stressed again and again by interviewees, flexibility is therefore an essential quality for participants. This flexibility should be applicable to both living and working environments.

Previous travel experience also seems to be an important consideration because the two interviewees with the least international travel experience seemed to have particular challenges, which they both talked about in some depth. One had high expectations about the work she would do that contrasted greatly with what actually took place at her site. Another had a number of personal insecurities about her ability to do well in the program. Both of these volunteers, however, seem to have done well at their sites and dealt relatively well with their insecurities and expectations. Their ability to be flexible at their sites seemed to be a more important factor than previous travel experience, although the latter was mentioned as important by a number of volunteers.

In terms of preparing volunteers for their experience, one recommendation is that the unknown situation of the host library and the uncertainty about what tasks the volunteers will undertake should be emphasized. As discussed before, the state of the host library and the preparation for the hosts at any given site was an important factor in

shaping the ITW project. Orientation and training should emphasize that libraries may lack some aspects of a basic infrastructure. The volunteers will have to start with "babysteps" and may only work on the most basic aspects of librarianship at their site. Volunteers should be introduced to the range of activities that might take place in order to give them a sense of possibilities but additional emphasis should be given to helping volunteers think creatively about confronting library contexts and limitations. It may be useful to give volunteers scenarios derived from real life cases such as those faced by the ITW 2000 volunteers and ask them to approach the problem in a variety of ways.

Additionally, the fact that many volunteers were unable to spend a great deal of time with their host country counterparts is an important issue to discuss with subsequent volunteers. The limitations on the interaction with the teacher-librarians are a reality created by the impoverished, overcrowded state of South African schools. The World Library Partnership has little control over this factor. It is therefore important for volunteers to be aware of this situation and think about ways they can leave knowledge and skills with individuals at their site even though they may only work with them for a short time.

For Further Research

As stated at the beginning of this paper, the ITW experience is rich and multifaceted. This research project touched on only a few of the many dynamics involved in such a challenging and sometimes intense experience. It is therefore intended only as a beginning to a more in-depth exploration of professional adaptation and the transfer of skills and knowledge in a cross-cultural project such as the ITW program. A variety of research directions could be taken from here. One limitation of this study is that only librarian volunteers were interviewed. As stated before, talking with the non-librarian

volunteers would inevitably provide other interesting and insightful perspectives on the ITW experience. Additionally, the interviewees were not asked about their host living conditions and interactions with South Africans in their host communities outside the library. As demonstrated by research on cross-cultural effectiveness, contact with host community members is of great importance to the transfer of knowledge and skills in a technical assistance project. Many volunteers also mentioned that their relationships with host community members outside the library were a highly significant part of the ITW experience. As part of subsequent research, examining issues of cross-cultural communication and stranger-host dynamics would be valuable. Further, interviews with host country counterparts would provide another critical perspective on the ITW program and how volunteers adapt to the host libraries and their work in South Africa. Lastly, interviews such as those discussed here would ideally be paired with field observation at the host sites. First-hand observation and interviews on-site would provide perhaps the richest examination of how ITW volunteers bring their knowledge of libraries into new cultural contexts as well engage in intercultural interaction both in the library and outside it.

APPENDIX

Interview Questions

Thank you for your willingness to take part in this interview and this research project. I assure you that we will be speaking in complete confidentiality, that your name will remain completely anonymous, and that no records of this interview will be kept with your name on them. Excerpts of this interview may be used in the final research paper but under no circumstances will your name or identifying characteristics be included.

The focus of this interview is your experiences working in the (name of library) library in South Africa, especially how you adjusted to working in this library and the tasks you and other volunteers worked on together there. *Respond to any questions about the project. Ask for permission to use tape recorder.*

Biographical Information:

Subject's name:

Place: African site_____   U.S. home_____

Warm-up Questions:

1. Could you tell me about your career in librarianship? What kinds of libraries have you worked in and what kinds of jobs have you held? How long have you been working in libraries?

2. How did you become interested in the Inform the World Program?

Research Questions:

Expectations:

1. Before leaving the United States for South Africa, what were some of your expectations about the work you would do during your stay?

2. What did you expect the library to be like where you would work?

Adjusting to the New Work Role:

1. When you first arrived at your host community's library, what did you understand your job to be? Was it explained to you or did you decide for yourself what kind of role you would have?

2. What were your major tasks?

3. How did it feel to be in this role?

4. How did it compare to your library job in the U.S.?

Experiences Working on Library Projects:

[In this section discuss various library projects and question for two main themes, **collaboration** and the **importance of prior professional experiences**, in either order depending on the flow of the interview.]

I'd like to hear about some of the projects you worked on in your library.

1. What was one of the most satisfying projects you undertook?

    • What made this project particularly satisfying?

    • Who did you work with on this project? How was the work divided among those involved? (American partner and South African volunteers)

    • How did you (and your partner) decide what to do?

    • Had you ever worked on a similar project before?

    • What was similar to this experience? What was different?

- Did you find yourself comparing working experiences you were having in South Africa to previous experiences in your library back home?

- What other kinds of non-professional knowledge and previous experiences helped you in your South Africa work?

2. You worked with a number of people on the _____ project.

    - What was it like to work with these people? (both South Africans and American partner)

    - What was most satisfying about working together?

    - Did you have frustrating experiences working together? What made working together challenging in these instances?

    - When collaborating did you use any techniques or strategies you had tried in the past? Or did you develop new ways of working in this group?

3. How important do you think it was to have your partner with you while in S.A.?

4. What do you think it would have been like for you to be alone at your site?

Mentorship and Effects of Experience on Concept of Librarianship:

1. Did you see yourself as an educator or a mentor when you worked in the South African library?

2. Did you feel there were aspects of librarianship that were essential for you to demonstrate or discuss with the South African volunteers?

3. Did you find it necessary to adapt certain aspects of library work to fit the South African community/culture? (Examples)

4. What did you learn about library work from the South Africans you worked with?

5. Do you think that it was important for you to be a librarian in order to do well in the ITW program? Why or why not?

6. Do you feel that the ITW experience changed how you understand your profession?

Flexibility:

7. One idea that has come up many times during these interviews is how important it was to be flexible. You've described many instances in which you were flexible both in the library and in the host community.

  - Were you surprised by your flexibility?

  - Were there times when it was difficult for you to be flexible? When it felt uncomfortable or awkward for you?

  - What resources both in yourself and in the situation helped you to be flexible?

WORKS CITED

Anderson, Linda E. "A New Look at an Old Construct: Cross-Cultural Adaptation." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 18, no. 3 (1994) : 293-328.

Department of Education. *The School Register of Needs Survey*. Pretoria: Department of Education; Human Sciences Research Council; Research Institute for Education Planning. University of Free State, 1997. [Online] Available from <http://www.hsrc.ac.za/tutor/srn.html>.

Frederiks, George. H. "Educational Developments, the Role of the School Library, and the Teacher-Librarian in the Education of Blacks in South Africa with Special Reference to a Sample of Schools in the Cape Peninsula." *Education Libraries* 18, no. 2 (1994) : 19-27.

Furnham, Adrian, and Stephen Bochner. *Culture Shock: Psychological Reactions to Unfamiliar Environments*. New York: Methuen, 1986.

Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine, 1967.

Hawes, Frank, and Daniel J. Kealey. *Canadians in Development*. Hull, Quebec: Canadian International Development Agency, 1980.

Hawes, Frank, and Daniel J. Kealey. "An Empirical Study of Canadian Technical Assistance: Adaptation and Effectiveness on Overseas Assignment." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 5 (1981) : 239-258.

Kealey, Daniel J. *Cross-Cultural Effectiveness: A Study of Canadian Technical Advisors Overseas*. Hull, Quebec: Canadian International Development Agency, 1990.

Kealey, Daniel J., and Brent D. Ruben. "Cross-cultural Personnel Selection: Criteria, Issues, and Methods." In *Handbook of Intercultural Training*, vol. 1, ed. Dan Landis and Richard Brislin, 155-175. Elmsford, NY: Pergamon, 1983.

Mchombu, Kingo J. "On the Librarianship of Poverty." *Libri* 32 (1982) : 241-250.

_____. "Which Way African Librarianship?" *IFLA Journal* 17, no. 1 (1991) : 26-38.

McCracken, Grant. *The Long Interview*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988.

Olën, Sandra. "Utilisation of School Libraries." *Mousaion* 15, no. 2 (1997) : 10-38.

Radebe, Thuli. "Experiences of Teacher-Librarians in the Workplace After Completion of the School Librarianship Programme." *South African Journal of Library and Information Science* 64 (1997) : 218-226.

Schön, Donald A. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.

Sturges, Paul, and Richard Neill. *The Quiet Struggle: Information and Libraries for Africa.* London: Mansell, 1990.

_____. *The Quiet Struggle: Information and Libraries for the People of Africa*. London: Mansell, 1998.

Wendell, Laura. *Libraries for All! How to Start and Run a Basic Library*. Paris: UNESCO, 1998.

Wijasuriya, D.E.K., Lim Huck-Tee, and Radha Nadarajah. *The Barefoot Librarian: Library Development in Southeast Asia with Special Reference to Malaysia*. Hamden, CT: Linnet Books, 1975.