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Heterophily or Homophily? South African Citizens'
Preferences of Community Development Project Leaders

International development involves several layers and levels of progression for different communities across the globe. Debates about aid and its efficiency begin to uncover some of those complexities, but they are limited in their ability to analyze how social aspects of development contribute both positively and negatively to the general developmental equation. Furthermore, they address neither developmental progression from the perspective of the beneficiaries nor their experiences in that role. Surely there is a more complex spectrum of experiences encompassing trust issues: feeling a sense of autonomy, power dynamics, alteration of social structure and interaction, etc. – all which are integral parts of assessing progression in developmental work.

Inspired by my interest in uncovering social layers and levels of developmental work, I focused on identity and diversity via racial and gender perceptions and preferences in local South African citizens within Woodstock, Cape Town. Given that Woodstock is well populated by community development organizations and projects, it was an ideal location for this uncovering to take place. My hope, initially, was to evaluate those preferences clearly through interviews, and to be able to categorize them into heterophily (if respondents prefer community development leaders who are demographically similar to themselves) and homophily (if they prefer community development leaders who are dissimilar to themselves). Additionally, it was important to

me to know whether this varies depending on the nature of the development project. Were racial and gender preferences going to differ between a sex education project, an educational project, a technological project, a domestic violence program, or another kind of program?

A task as daunting as evaluating a topic so broad, subjective, and hard to measure required both time and thought. I spent eight weeks living in Cape Town to do so. I originally focused on Woodstock, where I visited different households to request interviews, after which I needed to broaden my scope for safety reasons. I became acquainted with a director of Post Graduate studies at the University of the Western Cape, where I met with several individuals (interns) who ended up becoming instrumental to my new recruitment scheme. This resulted in interviewing workers on the campus as well as people within the interns' home communities. I struggled with the new recruitment scheme, which involved more convenience and bias than my original plan to interview individuals from every 10th household in Woodstock. This is, however, the very essence of being out on the field and not at a desk: the structured proposals and plans you make beforehand become disrupted, and this disruption presents an intellectual challenge of its own.

Multiple factors are at play, sometimes even simultaneously, when people are asked to reflect and report on gender and racial structures. Among the factors that I encountered through interviewing, three that I will focus on more as I analyze my findings are: trust issues associated with certain races and ethnicities; social perceptions of gender, race and competence; and the role that economic vulnerability plays in racial and gender politics.

After eight weeks, I interviewed 39 people, most of whom were males without a tertiary education. I found that more educated respondents were less likely to report gender or racial leadership preferences; however, if they were black, they typically spoke of the importance of having blacks like themselves pave the path to success for others through community development.

Unbeknownst to me at the time of planning, immigration into South Africa from other African countries is at a rather high level, and that ultimately contributes another perspective to community development leadership preference. I found that the vulnerability that comes with being "other" as an immigrant might be linked to the low trust levels that some respondents have in demographically similar community development leaders.

An overarching theme throughout this project is the power and dynamism of personal prejudices and biases. I often interviewed people who would initially insist that they had no racial or gender biases at all, until I asked the more specific questions. In many ways this highlights the importance of studying the issue, as many people might be accustomed to not thinking about the fact that they have biases, and therefore they do not understand how these biases shape their experiences as beneficiaries of community development projects.

In conclusion, while the findings of such a project are thrilling and the rewards invaluable, challenges with utilizing the data effectively remain. My definitions and language may have shaped participants' responses; the switch in recruitment methods introduced a bias; and the complexity of the preferences makes it hard to treat heterophily and homophily as mutually exclusive entities. Despite these challenges, there is

something to be said about the fact that this work is a strong foundation for further

research, which could potentially address some of its shortcomings.