

Building Capacity through Group Research: An Investigation of Interdisciplinary, Cross-Cultural, Participatory Research

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During the summer of 2008, an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural research team came together to investigate the impacts of Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) on rural communities in Botswana and Namibia. This research addressed socioeconomic, ecological and other aspects of livelihoods, environmental change, uncertainty, and human impacts within this Southern African region. This unique research team was comprised of young African professionals from various countries, students and faculty from the University of Florida in the United States, and advisors. During the summer, several different research projects were conducted, many of which not only included multiple members of the research team, but also incorporated local people into the research design. While individual researchers conducted their own studies, members consistently came together to collaborate and share research methods, insights, ideas, and perspectives with fellow researchers.

This study examines the impact of the team research experience on the learning that occurred within this unique social context. Semi-structured interviews, observation, social network analysis, and document review were used to investigate the impacts of participation in this research group on the information flows and learning among team members.

This study provides strong evidence that despite some significant challenges, the facilitation of interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, participatory research is an effective way to enhance learning about the research process and environmental management for both researchers and communities. The approach presented provides a means for conducting more effective, relevant research while building the capacity of both local community members and researchers to contribute positively to research areas.

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