

Brief Reports



Anne Mwiti
Daystar University, Nairobi, Kenya
&
Joyce Ngugi
United States International University, Africa



From Kenya into the International Psychology Arena

This past August, we had the privilege of attending and presenting at the American Psychological Association (APA) convention in San Francisco. As two Kenyan doctoral candidates, Anne Mwiti and Joyce Ngugi, we were proud to represent our local African universities, Daystar University and United States International University-Africa, respectively. This was our first time to visit the United States, and naturally, our first time attending the APA conference, therefore, we pleasantly reflect on our impressions as first-time attendees at the convention. The journey was a feat in itself, in addition to its accomplishments. Similar to the fable character Alice in Wonderland, we jumped in with two feet, oblivious of what the journey was going to be. We were on an adventure, with scary and challenging moments, as well as interesting and fascinating ones. We were focused on increasing awareness of the Deaf community in Kenya, and to learning more about mental health practices in different regions of the world.

When we initially learned about the conference, we

decided to submit an abstract, which was accepted under APA's Division 45 - *Culture, Ethnicity and Racial Minorities*, and understandably, we were very pleased when we learned that it was accepted for presentation. We began to prepare immediately, starting with travel logistics and financial arrangements. Thankfully, during this time, we received overwhelming support from family members and friends, all of which served as a motivating factor, even though some discouraged us by sharing information on how visas can be difficult to obtain for such activities. Finally, everything came together and we landed on the United States' (US) soil after experiencing moments of exasperation owing to delayed and missed flights, as well as extremely long lay-over periods in cold airports. All this could have affected our attitudes, but it only fueled our resolve to be successful.

While we were prepared for culture shock, we were grateful to find that US-Americans are very friendly, but also observed that there was an impersonal culture as evidenced by do-it-yourself gadgets. Coming from a less dominant

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culture, we experienced US conversations as using the active voice too much, with clear directional conversations including Yes or No answers, and an over-emphasis on independent minded assertion of opinions, over interdependence. Business and social meetings' appointment-setting was a strict affair with an unspoken rule of a very brief waiting time, with seemingly high impatience in the new cultural space. We were pleased to see that road users generally seemed to respect the traffic rules, and there was a robust and clean transport system. We greatly enjoyed a generally courteous and an extremely efficient and professional service industry in business transactions, with high levels of trust. For instance, at train stations and buses, we were trusted to enter money into a slot machine to pay for our destinations prior to boarding. A funny incident was when several people motioned at me with a "hello" sign, which was an open hand with all fingers cusped forward pointing downwards. We interpreted it as the Kenyan sign for "come." The US impressed us with all forms of art and culture, food, music, theatre, museums, and infrastructure.

We were particularly fascinated with the supermarkets, which were very well stocked with a high variety of foods and everything else! We were aghast at the stark reality of the excess sugar obsession juxtaposed with an equally strong weight-watching obsession in America, replete with calorie and diet information all over menus and billboards. We were jarred by the many overweight people we saw, and dismayed at the apparent exploitation of the human biology by the food industry, seemingly quick to make profits. Our wonderful hosts allowed us to rest fully from the heavy jetlag, and proved to be wonderful tour guides with whom we had a lot of fun. It was interesting to exchange information about our cultures from US and Kenyan perspectives, and to realize that as human beings, we all inadvertently suffer a fundamental human weakness of not realizing that we are more similar than different. While differences will always be there in the rich tapestry of diversity, we can harness these differences for the common good of humanity.

As first-time attendees to the APA convention, we found it to be a wonderful learning experience. At the opening session, the key-note speaker, Dr. Bryant Stevenson, delivered an inspiring speech, stressing that Psychologists need to be active citizens by getting proximate to those

suffering, changing narratives from the politics of fear and anger, and staying hopeful while working with clients so as to ultimately impact the human race. The APA Convention Exhibition exceeded our expectations in that we were treated to a host of valuable information, as well as great freebies with all kinds of giveaways including a massage, and most surprisingly, a dog therapy demonstration with an actual dog!

When it was time for our poster presentation, time flew fast as we created informal conversations about our research, exchanged contacts, and took pictures with our guests. It was wonderful to remember that just like the African "Ubuntu" philosophy of brotherhood; we were quite at ease with talking in turns, in true African style. In our predominantly collectivist culture in Kenya, the "We" is often more important than the "I", therefore team effort is lauded over and above individualistic cultures who cherish personal achievements. We presented our research as two Hearing researchers investigating the Deaf culture; we acknowledged the importance of adapting to different cultural contexts and of total respect and belief in the Deaf community culture. We were greatly honored to market our esteemed universities and to bring value to our universities in Africa, but also to our beloved country Kenya. A surprise outcome of the presentation is that most of our guests wanted to know more about our Kenyan culture, and we often found ourselves challenged by such facts as the meaning of the word "Africa", which motivated us to return to our roots and know our heritage again. One very rewarding part of our presentation was when we learned that our poster was being given an award for the "2nd best in Africa Region" from the Division 52 International Psychology, Student First-Author Poster Contest.

Overall, this was the most wonderful experience of our careers, which also served as a great esteem-builder of our scholarly potential as Psychology professionals. It was magical to meet renowned scholars such as Dr. Irvin Yalom and Dr. Aaron Beck, among others. Most notably, it was comforting to learn of other countries' thunders and rainbows, in other words, challenges and opportunities in the Psychology space. For example, in a presentation on Current Trends in Clinical Supervision, we learnt that the majority of the countries in the world still struggle with inadequate systems to translate and enforce ethical codes of the

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profession into actual behavior. Our advice to future potential student attendees is to engage early in the process of publication and especially co-authorship. It is also advisable to create future partnerships from the collegial friendships forged and contacts shared at the APA Convention. Finally, we observed that in the future, it could be useful if the APA Convention could consider live captioning with sub-titles to boost international attendance of members from different time zones and who speak other languages, including signed languages, so as to curb the issues of global inequalities in representation in terms of attendance and participation of developing countries at the annual event.

Note:

** We would like to sincerely acknowledge USIU-Africa, with special mention to Joyce's professors and advisors, Dr. Dana Basnight-Brown and Dr. Josephine Arasa who assisted with poster preparation and edits. We appreciate the Daystar University fraternity, specifically Dr. Alice Munene. Of notable mention are our supporters and well-wishers, especially Dr. Carol Watson and Dr. Dashanaba King and their families, as well as both our families who fully supported us. Haki na afya kwa wote! (Justice and health to all!)

