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Service-learning and perceptions of homelessness

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Abstract

This article examines how service-learning positively impacts students' perspectives of the homeless. Data were collected through a pre- and post-assessment issued to students in a service-learning course. At the beginning of the course, students characterized the homeless according to common stereotypes. At the end of the course, students' views were more humanized.

Service-learning Improves Perceptions of Outgroups

Service-learning (SL) is a variety of experiential learning that couples two distinct but complementary components — academic learning and community service. This combination creates a social-justice oriented learning experience in which students are introduced to key concepts, which they observe firsthand while performing community service (Furco, 1996). SL affords students a glimpse into critical issues affecting local communities such as homelessness and poverty. By engaging in SL, students may also better understand service recipients who are struggling with these very issues.

Research indicates that SL encourages critical examination of preconceived notions about marginalized groups, helping participants to identify and debunk the stereotypes, biases, and/or prejudices that they may hold (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). SL has also been shown to enhance participants' empathy levels, making participants more empathetic towards the populations that they serve (Stewart, Tomko, & Lassila, 2012). This syncs with research on stereotype mitigation, which shows that sustained contact with outgroups tends to disrupt stereotypes, leading to more positive perceptions (Aberson & Haag, 2007; Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000; Buchanan, Rohr, Kehoe, Glick, & Jain, 2004; Gumpert & Kraybill-Greggo, 2005; Hocking & Lawrence, 2000; Hughes, Welsh, Mayer, Bolay, & Southard, 2009; Knecht & Martinez, 2009).

One population often served by SL courses is the homeless, a social group burdened with pronounced stigma (Harter, Berquist, Titsworth, Novak, & Brokaw, 2005; Phelan, Link, Moore, & Stueve, 1997; Phillips, 2015; Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2010). Largely dehumanized as “[social] outcasts... [eliciting] contempt and disgust,” the homeless are stereotyped as lazy, mentally ill, substance abusers, and worse (Fiske, 2015, p. 46; cf. Forte, 2002; Harris & Fiske, 2011; Leibowitz & Krueger, 2005; Phillips, 2015; Rokach, 2014). Negative perceptions like these are dehumanizing, stripping the homeless of their individuality and “elicit[ing] both active harm and passive neglect.” (Fiske, 2015, p. 46; cf. Shier et al., 2010)

Could participation in a SL class positively influence students' opinions of the homeless? Early research indicates that it could (Buch & Harden, 2011); however, more research is needed to better understand if and how SL impacts students' perceptions of outgroups (Chupp & Joseph, 2010), including the homeless. Here we contribute to scholarship on the impact of SL by investigating how participants in a SL course experienced a shift in their perspectives of the homeless.

Our Service-learning Course (157SL)

San Jose State University (SJSU) is located in Silicon Valley, California, an area renowned for wealth and success, which, paradoxically, also struggles with increasing income inequality, homelessness, and housing insecurity. According to the 2015 homelessness assessment report from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, San Jose has the nation's highest rate of unsheltered homelessness, and ranks among the ten major U.S. cities with the highest rates of total homelessness (Henry, Shivji, de Sousa, & Cohen, 2015).

Community Action and Service (157SL) is one of SJSU's premier SL courses. Running each semester for 15-16 weeks, 157SL engages students in classroom learning coupled with 48 hours of community service at a designated community site. The classroom component involves weekly meetings with course instructors and site leaders. Students prepare for these sessions by reading about topics like service and the common good; power, privilege, and identity; the role of education in redressing social injustice; and homelessness and income inequality. Students view documentaries on food insecurity and income inequality and participate in a poverty simulation — a 3-hour role-play simulating the experience of living in poverty. Members of the homeless community visit class to share their personal stories.

Concurrent with class meetings, students complete 48 hours of service at their assigned site. The 157SL community sites are: an elementary school; a STEM education project; an intergenerational/intercultural community center for immigrants; a faith-based community service center for the poor; and an afterschool educational program. Students document their site activities through weekly journaling, drawing connections between their service and the course materials. At the end of the semester, students write essays examining one social issue in depth, reflecting on the potential for community service to mitigate that issue. They also report on what they learned about themselves and their community.

Procedures

Our data come from a pre- and post-assessment issued to students enrolled in two sections of 157SL taught by the first author in 2013. The pre- and post-assessment were designed to elicit students' feelings and attitudes on multiple social issues, including homelessness. The pre-assessment was issued in week 2, before students began their service. The open-ended question on homelessness was: "When you hear of people described as 'homeless' what images, words, or feelings come to mind?" The post-assessment was issued during the final week of the course, asking students: "Now when you hear of people described as 'homeless,' what images, words, or feelings come to mind?" 50 out of 53 students completed both pre- and post-assessment.

To code the data, we independently compared students' pre- and post- assessments to determine whether or not a shift in perspective occurred. We characterized a shift as a change in any degree — whether positive or negative — in the characterization, definition, and/or explanation of homelessness. For example, in the following case was coded as "no shift" because it showed no qualitative changes:

Pre-assessment: "[The homeless are] people in need of help and the first feeling that comes to mind is wanting to help them."

Post-assessment: "When I hear the word homeless I think of someone who needs help and being able to get back on their feet."

This next case, however, was coded as “positive shift” because the post-assessment response is more reflective and nuanced, moving beyond stereotypical markers of homelessness:

Pre-assessment: “[The homeless are] typically poor people living on the streets, affected by malnourishment, unclean and hungry.”

Post-assessment: “[Now] I think people look pretty similar to the average person you see on the street. Some homeless people even have jobs they are just struggling to survive. I have a greater feeling of compassion than I used to towards homeless people.”

To determine which cases constituted a shift, each author independently coded the data and then all authors discussed the coded data to reach consensus. Agreement was reached on 48 of the 50 cases.

Findings

Chi-square analysis of the results supports our supposition that the SL course positively impacted students’ perceptions and attitudes towards the homeless. The chi-square (with degrees of freedom of 2) value equaled 32.38, with a p value of less than .01. A positive shift was observed in 33 of the 50 cases (69%), no shift was observed in 14 (29%). Descriptions of the positive shifts are provided below.

Negative characterizations of homelessness (pre-assessment)

At the beginning of the course, students’ responses characterized homelessness as the state of having no fixed residence and being hungry, unkempt, and alone. In cases where students articulated possible causes or conditions resulting in homelessness, most subscribed to what Boyle-Baise and Sleeter (2000) call a “deficit view,” attributing homelessness to moral and/or character faults in the affected individual (excerpts below).

No fixed residence

- o “living on the street”
- o “sleep wherever”
- o “in parks”
- o “on the [street] corner”
- o “at stoplights”
- o “in medians”
- o “under the freeways”
- o “in tents”

Hungry

- o “nothing to eat”
- o “starvation”
- o “barely enough food”
- o “malnourished”
- o “hungry”

Unkempt

- o “raggy clothes”
- o “ripped clothes”
- o “dirty”
- o “smelly”
- o “messy”

Alone/outcast

- o “alone”
- o “abandoned”
- o “no family”
- o “outcasts”
- o “hermit”
- o “lost”
- o “unwanted”
- o “forgotten members of society”

Deficient

- o “drug addict”
- o “mentally ill”
- o “disabilities”
- o “horrible credit card debt”
- o “unemployed”
- o “couldn’t keep a job”
- o “didn’t complete school”
- o “scary”
- o “rude”

Students' pre-assessment characterizations aligned closely with common stereotypes and perceptions of homeless individuals as dangerous, irresponsible, and/or immoral (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000; Knecht & Martinez, 2009; Tompsett et al., 2003).

Positive shifts (post-assessment)

In the post-assessment we found that student responses had shifted in three key ways. First, the students expressed a pronounced "we are all alike" view. Second, they offered more nuanced explanations of the causes of homelessness. Third, students conveyed an increased sense of the homeless as unique individuals instead of a homogenous group.

Emphasis on likeness

The first change, i.e. the students' expression of what Boyle-Baise and Langford (2004) call the "we are all alike" view, was most striking. This view, which focuses on commonalities rather than differences, is similar to the first level of Luckmann's scheme of transcendence, described by Yates and Youniss as "see[ing the] other as a person rather than as a stereotype or view[ing] homeless as ordinary persons who could be anyone" (1996, p. 276). In the post-assessment the students pivoted away from the othering language that they had applied in their pre-assessment responses. Instead, they used words such as "like me," "like you," "anybody," "normal," "ordinary," "same," "human," etc. to describe the homeless, as in these examples:

- "everybody and anybody because anybody can be homeless"
- "people just like me who got the short end of the stick"
- "people just like myself, but less fortunate than I am"
- "normal people like you and me, maybe down on their luck"
- "normal people who are down and out"
- "ordinary men and women"
- "human beings"
- "people just like you and me"
- "people with the same emotions and feelings as others"
- "real people [who] have struggles just like you and I"

Reflections on causes of homelessness

The second key shift pertained to students' explanations of the causes of homelessness. Moving sharply away from the deficit view, students reflected on larger socio-economic circumstances contributing to homelessness, particularly causes beyond an individual's control. The main causes cited in post-assessment responses were job loss, economic recession, disadvantages, and lack of opportunity, as in these examples:

Lost job

- "They may have lost their job and not be able to ask for support from others."
- "I see a person that tried and gave it their very best to live and support themselves, but because of their lost job, they could not afford anything they owned so they had to sell everything and then eventually had no house or apartment to go to."
- "I think of people that were laid off from jobs, people not always technically living on the street, and those that want a brighter future but sometime can't find an outlook."
- "People who may have been brought into an unfortunate situation that caused them to lose their job. Not all homeless people could control the situation they were in leading them to being homeless."

Recession

- "I think of ordinary men and women who were unfortunately victimized by the economic recession."
- "I think of unfair privilege, economy troubles, the lack of equal opportunity, and education."

Other factors

- o “In some cases the homeless cannot afford the high cost of living and cannot make their money stretch. The low paying wages can also have an effect on a person causing them to have nowhere to live.”

Viewing the homeless as unique individuals

Finally, students expressed a growing awareness of the homeless as unique individuals, rather than members of a homogenous group. They cited specific people whom they had met and acknowledged that every homeless person had their own story. As one student wrote, “[now] I think of walking through downtown San Jose and seeing many homeless people and I ask myself how they got into that position.” What’s more, students now felt compelled to discover these stories. As another student reported, “[now] I feel like learning their stories — the stories of how people became homeless.”

Conclusion

At the beginning of the course, students described homelessness according to common stereotypes, emphasizing differences and othering homeless individuals. At the conclusion of the course, students expressed a more nuanced view, focusing on shared traits and reflecting on causes and conditions leading to homelessness. In sum, students developed a more humanized perspective of the homelessness, indicating that the SL course did provide what Boyle-Baise and Sleeter (2000) term an “eye-opening” experience, in which students’ perceptions of the homeless were not only challenged but disconfirmed.

Our results are consistent with other studies on the positive impacts of SL on students’ perspectives of outgroups, including the homeless (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004; Buch & Harden, 2011; Hocking & Lawrence, 2000; Knecht & Martinez, 2009). Indeed, this line of research is concordant with the mission of SL to provide students with a transformative experience. SL courses are designed to facilitate “border-crossing” across categories of race, ethnicity, class, (im)migrant status, language, and (dis)ability” (Butin, 2006, p. 482). It is therefore encouraging to confirm that SL courses function as intended. Two major questions follow. First, what precisely makes a SL course effective in challenging perceptions of marginalized groups? We suspect it is not simply the community service, but rather the service combined with the coursework. Second, what are the long-term impacts of SL? That is, do positive shifts in perspective brought about by SL endure, and how do these shifts impact students’ future decisions and actions? More research on SL and its long-term effects will help practitioners better structure and run effective SL experiences.

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