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Brief Report on Service Learning and Diversity Acceptance

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Abstract

Studies have indicated that facilitating student's interactions with people outside of their in-group is an effective way of increasing awareness of identity complexity and encouraging diversity acceptance. This article explores the efficacy of a service-learning course, focusing on community psychology, in increasing students' awareness of identity complexity and diversity acceptance via 110 written responses. These responses were qualitatively analyzed to track students' social identity complexity development and diversity acceptance between the first and final week of a service-learning course. Results indicate that service-learning experiences aid in the development of diversity acceptance such that there was a significant increase in the amount of students who demonstrated diversity acceptance in the final week of the course when compared to the first week. This study further supports the use of service-learning as a way to promote diversity acceptance. Furthermore, results indicate the need for continued research on the mechanisms by which service learning affects the development of students' perception of diversity and identity development.

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Keywords: Service learning, diversity, social identity complexity

I.

Introduction

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Over the last several years, institutions of higher education have moved towards establishing programs and initiatives to increase students' social diversity engagement (Laird, Engberg, & Hurtado, 2005). Growing evidence indicates that incorporating diversity into the curriculum (e.g., through content or interactions among diverse groups of people) increases the complexity of student thinking as well as their willingness to participate in civic engagement. Specifically, Laird, Engberg and Hurtado (2005) found that enrollment in diversity courses positively influence the quality of students' interactions with diverse peers. Furthermore, researchers find that diversity courses positively influence the commitment to civic engagement and heighten students' desire to take action against social injustices. Based on these findings, facilitating students' interactions with people outside of their in-group appears to be an effective way of encouraging diversity acceptance and social responsibility. This is consistent with research suggesting that students involved in a service-learning course see community members and the clients they served as individuals rather than members of specific groups (Jones & Hill,

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2001). Students enrolled in a service-learning course have the opportunity to interact with individuals outside of their in-groups (via service requirement) while simultaneously increasing their cognitive complexity (via critical reflection).

Service Learning

Service learning is a pedagogical strategy that integrates academic learning with community service and critical reflection. Specifically, service learning affords students the opportunity to interact with people with whom they may not have otherwise, while simultaneously encouraging self-reflection. According to Cokley et al. (2010), students are in a developmental period in which they can expand their understanding of their identity and the way in which they view others. Multiple studies have highlighted the impact of service-learning courses on students' identity development and have found that via constant reflection students demonstrate growth in their identity including changes in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes associated with racial identity development (e.g., Jones & Abe, 2004; Simmons et al., 2011). Specifically, Jones and Abe (2004) found that after taking a service-learning course, students endorsed differences regarding their relationship between self and others (i.e., intrapersonal), shifts in their career plans and aspirations (i.e., interpersonal), and increased open-mindedness about new people and experiences (i.e., cognitive). These findings indicated that service learning has a lasting impact on students' identity development (Jones & Abe, 2004). Donahue & Mitchell (2010) argue that identity is a critical component of a service-learning course because one must understand their own race and class in the context of systemic inequalities in order to understand poverty and marginalization. As such, service-learning practitioners appear to create a space for students to explore their identities and how they interact with the systems that create inequalities. Without exploring one's identity, students would not be able to question systems of inequality (Donahue & Mitchell, 2010).

In addition to identity development facilitating an understanding of the context of inequality, a person's need for positive self-identity prompts individuals to prefer and to evaluate people who are in their in-group in a more positive manner. Therefore, if a person were to increase their awareness of identity complexity, they would have a broader view of who is "similar" to them, increasing the amount of people they evaluate positively (Strauss, Connerley, & Ammermann, 2003). If a person was able to recognize multiple social identities within themselves, they would be able to reconcile any conflict (i.e. stereotypes) they have with people outside of their in-group (Lott, 2010), ultimately leading to a positive outlook towards diversity. Data suggest that diversity courses positively influence the commitment to civic engagement and heighten the desire to take action in the students' communities as a way to end social injustices. Based on these findings, facilitating student's interactions with people outside of their in-group appears to be an effective way of encouraging diversity acceptance (Simmons, Wittig, & Grant, 2010).

According to Sanders and Downer (2012), diversity can encompass many different human characteristics including but not limited to language, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, and cognitive or physical abilities. Based on these characteristics, individuals are placed into categories that can greatly affect their experiences in the world and compose a piece of their identity. Given the impact that different characteristics have on an

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individual's experiences, a person's perception of diversity can affect the way in which he or she relate to others. Specifically, awareness and acceptance of diversity can greatly influence the way individuals view themselves and the way in which they evaluate others. In regards to the relationship between service learning and diversity, research provides support for the effectiveness of service learning in encouraging diversity related outcomes. In 2012, Matthew Holsapple completed a critical review of 55 studies on the impact of service-learning and found the following six diversity related outcomes: (a) tolerance of difference, (b) stereotype confrontation, (c) recognition of universality, interactions across difference, (d) knowledge about the served population, and (e) belief in the value of diversity. His review indicated that diversity outcomes are common after participating in a service-learning course and re-emphasized the idea that service learning is an avenue for discussing diversity in a higher education setting (Holsapple, 2012).

Given that research has indicated the effect of service learning on identity development and diversity outcomes, the current study sought to explore the efficacy of a service-learning course, focused on community psychology, in increasing students' awareness of identity complexity and diversity acceptance. It was expected that enrollment in this service-learning course would increase a person's self-identity awareness and their acceptance of diversity.

II.

Method

Sample

The sample included 103 students (78 females; 25 males) enrolled in a service-learning course offered at a university in the northeastern area of the United States. Due to the nature of the data, no other demographic information was available. University demographic information indicates that 53.9% of enrolled student identify as non-Hispanic White, 13% as African American, 13% as international students, and 6.7% as Hispanic, with the remainder of students identifying as American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, and "unknown". Notably, demographic information regarding the main campus and surrounding areas indicated that 92% of community surrounding the university identify as White. Female students account for approximately 55.4% of enrolled students. While specific demographic information is not available, one would expect that a majority of the students enrolled in this service-learning course identified as White and as female.

Context

The service-learning course (designed by 2nd author) used in this study focused on Community Psychology, a relatively new field that seeks to acknowledge, value, and work with underserved communities. The aim of the course was to provide students with an understanding of the theoretical and practical issues that disadvantaged/underserved communities confront on a regular basis. The goals and student requirements for this course included: (a) to learn theory, research, and practice of community psychology; (b) engage in weekly community service; (c) write reflective papers integrating readings and service-learning; and (d) complete an advocacy

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action plan based on service experience and research. These goals were achieved via course requirements, which included:

- volunteering at service sites for at least five hours per week or a total of 60 hours per semester;
- posting weekly reflections regarding how class readings, lectures, and discussions tied into their experiences in respective service sites;
- leading a weekly discussion on the topic of the day, in groups of 2-3, at least once during the semester;
- writing two reflection papers regarding issues raised in assigned readings and their relation to their understanding of community psychology;
- writing a paper on either a feasible or ongoing community service project at the University or community site where they volunteered;
- completing an assessment of an ongoing community-campus project or conducting an assessment of what community members view as their most pressing needs/obstacles towards achieving their mission. Specifically, each student was required to complete a minimum of three interviews with community leaders and/or members at multiple levels of the organization. Further, they were required as groups to present their final assessment to the community as feedback for program improvement.

These requirements were to be completed by the end of the semester and emphasized critical reflection (a major component of service-learning curriculum) and discussion. Class lectures and discussion focused on discussing privilege, social justice, and empowerment.

Service Sites.

Students were given the option to choose from three sites. Each of the sites' mission statements indicated a focus on empowering and "giving a voice" to marginalized groups within the community. As such, throughout the semester, students were interacting with and exposed to issues surrounding poverty, homelessness, and immigration. Given the amount of time they were expected to volunteer as well as course requirements (i.e., critical reflection, needs/program assessment) students were afforded the opportunity to be involved in long-term projects within the service sites.

Procedure

To examine the impact of service-learning participation on identity development and diversity acceptance, we qualitatively analyzed archival data. The data was collected during the academic years between 2008 and 2010 via Blackboard, a virtual learning environment, and course management system utilized by the university. Each semester, students posted weekly responses to questions posed by the professor. These questions prompted critical reflection on students' experiences within the classroom and in their community service sites. On average, students posted nine times throughout the semester. However, students in the 2008 academic year posted more frequently than students in the following academic years (Table 1). Only students who posted during the first and final week of each semester were included in the analysis, leaving 55 students (45 females; 10 males) and 110 responses.

Table 1.
Number of Posts per Class and Individual.

Year/Semester	Number of posts	Number of Students	Avg. Posts per Student
Fall 2008	131	10	13.1
Spring 2008	135	12	11.3
Fall 2009	78	11	6.1
Spring 2009	81	12	6.8
Fall 2010	75	10	7.5
Total	500	55	9.1

Data Analysis

We created a coding manual to analyze students' identity complexity awareness while enrolled in the service-learning course. The coding manual included three categories based off the structural models described by Roccas and Brewer (2002) and a "no mention" category, the term used for posts that did not merit a specific social identity code. The following is a review of the structural models described by Roccas & Brewer (2002) that served as a frame for this research. According to Roccas and Brewer (2002), there are four distinct social identity models: intersection, dominance, compartmentalization, and merger. The intersection model states that individuals can belong to multiple social groups but still having a single in-group representation. More precisely, someone using the intersection model would assume that those who do not share the same in-group identities are part of the individual's out-group. The dominance model states that individuals cope with multiple group identities by adopting a primary identity. According to the dominance model, the primary identity has more significance over other group identities; any person who shares the same primary group identity is part of the individual's in-group. The compartmentalization representation model allows individuals to acknowledge that they can identify with more than one group and that the most salient characteristic in any given moment depends on their environment. The final model described by Roccas and Brewer (2002) is the merger model which asserts that all group memberships are concurrently recognized and embraced, allowing for anyone who shares any of the individual's group memberships to be perceived as part of the individual's in-group.

For the purpose of this study, a response coded as low social identity complexity exhibited an intersection or dominance structural model of multiple in-group representations. For example, if the response expressed awareness of only one in-group characteristic, or the student described his or her identity as fixed on one trait, we coded the response as having low social identity complexity. If the student acknowledged that more than one characteristic formed their identity, but stated that the environment affects which characteristic is most salient, we coded the response as moderate social identity complexity in conjunction with the compartmentalization

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model of multiple group representations. A response with high social identity complexity conveyed the merger structural model of multiple group memberships. Responses coded as having high social identity complexity acknowledged that identity encompasses many different social groups and that those groups exhibit within-group differences. Finally, a response coded as "no mention" did not reference any aspect of identity.

In addition to the social identity-coding manual, we created a separate coding manual to explore students' acceptance of diversity. We defined diversity acceptance as having respect towards individual differences. We coded student responses as "endorsing" diversity acceptance if their responses expressed a sense of inclusion and indicated acceptance and respect of others regardless of group memberships. We coded responses as "not endorsing" diversity acceptance if the responses did not express inclusion or a sense of respect towards others who are part of their out-group. We obtained inter-rater reliability for both coding manuals, from 0.85 to 1.0, with all inconsistencies discussed until we reached consensus.

III.

Results

Diversity Acceptance

Diversity acceptance analysis revealed that 20% of participants endorsed diversity acceptance in the beginning the course compared to 40% in the end of the semester. To determine whether there was a significant increase of diversity acceptance over the course of the semester, we conducted McNemar's test. Findings indicated significant difference in the proportion of participants that endorsed diversity acceptance at the end of the semester (40%) when compared to participants who endorsed diversity acceptance in the beginning of the semester (20%).

Table 2.
Diversity Acceptance.

Category	Definition	Example
Diversity Acceptance Endorsement	Expressing a sense of inclusion and/or indicating acceptance and respect for others regardless of group membership	"Problems such as oppression, racism, homelessness, the idea of helping, the strategies behind group helping were things I had to rethink and evaluate. This class stretched me and gave me new perspectives… taught me a ton about respecting people different than you."

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Diversity Acceptance Not Endorsed	Did not express inclusion or sense of respect towards others who are part of their out-group	"I have realized that helping by donating money or one-time changes are not beneficial. I have also learned that one person can make a difference…This class has also taught me a lot about the homeless and what can be done to help them. I think the projects that are done every semester in this class are very beneficial for students to learn how to make differences, even if they are small."

Social Identity Complexity

Qualitative analysis revealed inconclusive results in the area of social identity. Specifically, 44 and 96 % of the responses in the first and final week, respectively, were coded as "no mention" due to the lack of information available in the respective posts (examples of responses are available in Table 2). Due to the high amount of posts coded as "no mention", no further analysis was conducted and the overall effect of service learning on students' social identity complexity awareness could not be determined.

Table 3.
Social Identity.

Category	Coding Definition	Example
Low Social Identity Complexity	Awareness of only one ingroup characteristic or the students' identity is fixed on one trait.	"Potential groups I would be interested in working with include: minority groups and homeless people. Working with Minority groups would be within my realm of interest as I am a minority myself and could help communicate any pressing needs they may have…"
Moderate Social Identity Complexity	Acknowledge more than one identity, but stated that the environment affects which is most salient	"Communities exist as a result of sexual preference, geographic location, and even racial identity. We have communities that exist in our work environments and in our school environments…"

High Social Identity Complexity	Acknowledge that identity encompasses many different social groups and that those groups exhibit within-group differences	"Community is a group of people living or existing together, who may share the same ideas, values, beliefs, etc. Communities work together in organized societies. Many diverse people belong to communities and communities themselves are very diverse."
No Mention	No reference to any type of identity	As I have mentioned in our discussions in the past, I was unaware how deeply rooted some institutions are that allow racism, sexism, classism and other 'isms' to exist…One point I have been thinking about which was raised in the film, is that for many white people they are unable to identify who or what they are and what that means for society.

IV.
Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the efficacy of a community psychology service-learning course in increasing students' diversity acceptance and self-identity awareness. Findings indicate that service-learning experiences aid in the development of diversity acceptance. Specifically, we found a significant increase in students' diversity acceptance in the final week of a service-learning course when compared to the first week. Similar to findings in Holsapple's study (2012), students' responses highlighted that they were able to confront stereotypes, to increase their knowledge about the served population, to recognize universality, and to increase their belief in value of diversity. These results indicate an initial positive impact of this service-learning course on diversity acceptance; however, it is unclear if these results are generalizable to other service-learning courses or maintained throughout time. More precisely, it is unclear which aspects of the course are important in developing diversity acceptance among its students. As such, it is important to note some critical components of the current service-learning course that should be explored as a possible mechanism of the diversity outcomes.

To begin, the amount of hours required for the service-learning course exceeds the national average. Specifically, the current course required enrolled students to complete 5 hours of service-hours per week while the national average was approximately 3.6 hours of service per week (Campus Compact, 2013). Past research is inconsistent in regards to the impact that amount of service hours has on service-learning outcomes. For example, a study by McGuire and

Gamble (2006) found that psychological engagement and not number of hours spent, accounted for the change in community belonging and social responsibility among rural adolescents. On the other hand, other studies have indicated an association between number of hours and future social responsibility and/or civic engagement (e.g., Astin, Sax, Avalos, 1992; Garcia et al., 2011). In addition to the amount of required service hours, this course explicitly covered topics such as privilege, empowerment, and social justice. Lewis (2004) argues that service learning based on charity (i.e., courses that solely provide students with an opportunity to serve less privileged individuals and reflect on their experiences) accomplishes the goal of student learning but differs from a course focused on social justice. According to Lewis (2004), courses that focus on social justice engage students in academic experiences that attempt to empower communities. As such, it may be that an emphasis on social justice is a mechanism by which diversity outcomes and identity development are obtained. In this course, the idea of social justice was further facilitated by a needs assessment that required students to interview community members about their views of organizational needs. These assignments facilitated students' ability to view the organization through multiple points of view.

Although results indicated a relationship between service learning and diversity acceptance, our analysis yielded inconclusive results on the relationship between service learning and social identity complexity. We attribute our results to the reflection questions that guided students' responses, as they changed each semester, and did not specifically ask students about their identity. Since this study utilized archival data, we were unable to frame the question in a way that extracted students' perception of their identity. Further, given the nature of the data, we were unable to uncover student demographic information. This information would have been important to obtain as it would have provided background information about the students in the courses. Information such as the race/ethnic status of the student, the amount of previous community service hours, students' year in school, and their age could have identified specific student characteristics that may moderate the effect of service-learning on students' attitudes towards diversity. It is important to note that although all service-learning courses share the same core components, they vary in presentation of material, the amount of community service hours required, and the community service sites the students attend. As such, it is of particular importance to explore the mechanisms by which service-learning courses impact identity development and diversity acceptance.

Based on past and recent findings, it is evident that service-learning courses have an overall positive effect on students' development (e.g. higher grades, increased moral reasoning, and heightened awareness of civic responsibility). Findings of this and previous studies highlight the need for a service-learning course development within college and university settings as a way to promote overall student development including diversity acceptance. In particular, more studies examining the mechanisms by which service-learning courses facilitate diversity outcomes and identity development are needed.

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