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In The Final Analysis: Students' Reflections on Their Community Psychology Service-Learning Experiences

David S. Glenwick
Fordham University

As part of the advanced undergraduate community psychology course that I teach at Fordham University, students participate in a community-based, service-learning experience of at least 3 hours weekly. After a brief overview of these experiences and their integration into the classroom context, the present paper focuses on students' final papers as a means of fostering introspection on their field placements.

Overview of the Service-Learning Experience

At the start of the course, in consultation with the instructor, students select a human service setting in which to fulfill the service-learning component. These choices are generated by the students' individual interests and involve programs in which they currently are or potentially desire to be involved. The sites span a wide range, including after-school tutoring programs, elementary school classrooms, urban community centers, university emergency medical services (EMS), shelters for homeless families, church youth groups, housing and neighborhood redevelopment organizations, campus tour services, university counseling centers, and hospital psychiatric units, among others. To facilitate their entry into and involvement in the organization, the students usually assume direct service delivery roles (e.g., teacher's aide, group co-leader, lifeguard, clerical worker, EMS technician). However, for purposes of classroom discussion and their final papers, the emphasis is not on these individual activities but on analyzing the organization from a community psychology perspective.

Dalton, Elias, and Wandersman's (2001) text, *Community Psychology: Linking Individuals and Communities*, provides the organizing lens for this analysis. As topics are covered throughout the semester, classroom discussion relates the central themes (e.g., core values, models of ecological context coping and social support, empowerment, prevention and wellness promotion) to the students' placements. Such application performance provides each student with numerous opportunities to contribute to discussions and aids them in shifting from the individual to the systemic level in thinking about their activities. These discussions both provide an intellectual, conceptual framework for their experience and help operationalize abstract constructs, making them more comprehensible and meaningful. An important aspect of this is consideration of how context—specific characteristics of the settings—affects the manifestation of these concepts. Salient among these dimensions are settings inhabitants' age, gender, sexual

orientation, socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity and race, religion, and geographical location.

In addition to promoting classroom interaction on their service-learning experiences, Dalton et al.'s framework also is utilized to facilitate students' reflections on their placements in their final papers (worth one-third of their course grade). It is to these reflections that we now turn.

Students' Reflections in Their Final Paper

At the beginning of the course, students are given guidelines for the 10- to 15-page final paper. Handing out these guidelines at that early point enables the students to begin thinking like community psychologists (i.e., at multiple levels of analysis) from the start and to keep in mind the conceptual road map that we will be navigating during the semester and that they will be expected to connect to their experiences on both semiweekly (i.e., in class) and cumulative bases.

The final paper's purpose is succinctly stated in the guidelines' opening sentence: "The final paper is intended to help you reflect upon your field placement within the context of the course, applying the main ideas and concepts of community psychology to your organization/agency (o/a)." Eleven areas then follow, with students told to devote one to one-and-a-half pages to each. These areas, along with illustrative student responses, are the following:

1. "Describe your o/a. What is it? Where is it located? Who are its staff? Who are its clientele/members? What is its mission (i.e., goal)? By what means (services, activities) does it attempt to accomplish this?" This fairly straightforward introduction gives the instructor a sense of the context of the student's experiences and sets the stage for the paper's ensuing, more subjective sections.

2. "Which of the seven core values of community psychology does the o/a seem to emphasize? What is the basis for your statement? To what extent do stated values agree or disagree with what you've observed?" The seven values are individual wellness, sense of community, social justice, citizen participation, collaboration and community strengths, respect for human diversity, and empirical grounding. A church youth group promotes wellness in the form of spiritual well-being and citizen participation in having its members choose the lesson for the day. An urban community center promotes respect for human diversity by having training sessions for employees to enhance diversity awareness and cultural competence. A housing and neighborhood redevelopment program promotes social justice by allocating resources to encourage affordable housing.

3. "Pick one quantitative and one qualitative method for doing community psychology research and design a study of some aspect of your o/a from each of the methods. What would you be investigating? How would you go about it? What would be the strengths and limitations of each approach for understanding you o/a?" Qualitative interviewing of elementary school pupils following their school's Cultural Awareness Day could assess what they learned from one another. A quantitative longitudinal experiment could compare the effects of English versus bilingual flyers on a community center's membership participation and renewal rates. Prospective college students and their families on campus tours could be surveyed as to their reactions. An

epidemiological approach could be taken with EMS call data to see if particular physical and psychological problems were prevalent.

4. “Pick two of the conceptual models of ecological context and analyze your o/a from each perspective. After doing so, consider: What unique information does each model give you about your o/a?” The five models are Barker’s ecological psychology and behavior settings, Kelly’s four ecological principles, Moos’ social climate dimensions, Seidman’s social regularities, and environmental psychology. Seidman’s model can elucidate role-relationships between preschoolers and teachers, preschoolers and volunteers, and volunteers and teachers in a homeless shelter classroom. Barker’s program circuits and deviation-countering circuits can explain the behavior of members of an urban condominium board. Kelly’s principles are useful in understanding the cycling of resources between a university counseling center and dormitory resident advisers.

5. “(a) Which of the nine key dimensions of human diversity is most salient for your (o/a) (it can be more than one dimension)? What is the basis for your statement? How is the o/a sensitive to this (these) dimension(s) in its functioning? (b) Describe ways in which your o/a is culturally sensitive (think of both surface structure and deep structure) and suggest ways in which it can become more culturally sensitive.” Campus tour guides reflect differences in race, ethnicity, age, SES, gender, and sexual orientation, with a recent especial openness to gay and lesbian students. An afterschool tutoring program is particularly sensitive to the Chinese background of many of its tutees and their parents. A homeless shelter’s preschool program promotes cultural diversity in its flags, books, and dolls.

6. “Apply the McMillan-Chavis model of sense of community to your o/a. Describe your o/a with respect to each of its four elements.” The four elements are membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. A church youth group facilitates membership—a sense of belonging and identification with others—through its binder with the church logo and its members’ acceptance of Jesus Christ; it promotes a shared emotional connection through friendships and spiritual bonds. Group therapy in a psychiatric ward allows the group as a whole, as well as individuals within the group, to have influence and also fosters a shared emotional connection.

7. “Coping and social support: What stressors does your o/a attempt to address? What resources (e.g., social support, psychosocial competencies) does it attempt to provide and/or develop in order to help its members cope with stress? How does it do this? What coping responses seem to be favored by members of this o/a?” A condominium board employs a problem-focused plan to deal with the stressor of drug-dealing tenants. A housing and neighborhood redevelopment organization offers workshops to ease the transition of buying and moving into one’s first house. Group therapy in a psychiatric ward provides social and emotional support. Workshops in a university counseling center attempt to improve such student competencies as stress management and interpersonal relationship skills.

8./9. 8. “Design a prevention or wellness promotion program for you o/a. What risk factors would your program attempt to reduce and what protective factors would it attempt to increase?” 9. “What might be some barriers to the effective implementation of the program you designed in question 8? How might you increase the chances of

effective implementation?” An elementary school could attempt an obesity prevention program by serving healthy food and using older students as models to promote healthy choices. A university EMS could develop primary prevention groups to prevent excessive alcohol use and thereby reduce EMS emergencies; one barrier to implementation would be the current social acceptability of undergraduates becoming intoxicated.

10. “How does your o/a foster participation in decision making and empowerment among its members? How might it do this better?” In a homeless shelter preschool program, youngsters assist peers in need. At an urban community center, employees’ input is sought regarding the creation of new programs; members’ input could be solicited as well. In a university EMS, experienced members mentor newer ones. In an afterschool tutoring program, tutors encourage the children to first try to solve homework problems on their own, with assistance gradually increasing as necessary.

11. “Describe how you would evaluate your o/a’s effectiveness, with respect to both (a) process and (b) outcomes and impacts.” A church youth group could keep track of how many youths commit their lives to Jesus Christ in public declarations (short-term outcome). In ensuing years do the youths stay in church and become involved in adult groups (long-term impact)? A university counseling center could videotape sessions to see if staff members are implementing services at a high level of fidelity and quality (process evaluation). A housing and neighborhood redevelopment organization could conduct interviews with new home-owners to assess their perceptions of whether the organization is accomplishing its goals.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Although students in the course have not evaluated the service-learning component separately, they have been asked “to what extent [their] interest in the subject matter has increased as a consequence of this class.” The mean response of the most recent class ($N = 10$) was 7.9 on a 9-point scale (where 7 = *agree* and 9 = *strongly agree*). Their mean overall rating of the course was 7.7 on this same scale. Written comments by, as well as conversations with, students indicate that they have valued the close linkage between lecture/class discussion/text, on the one hand, and field placement, on the other. The latter helps make the content and constructs of community psychology more “real,” while the former stimulates them to view their service-learning activities from a more systemically oriented vantage point.

The framework of Dalton et al. utilized in guiding my students’ analyses appears to serve them, and the course, well. However, the particular lens adopted is less important than that it be one that (a) encompasses the major themes of the field and (b) is heuristically applicable to a broad array of service-learning settings—in other words, that it presents community psychology to our students as a discipline that has both intellectual substance and relevance to the actual communities in which we live and learn.

References

Dalton, J. H., Elias, M. J., & Wandersman, A. (2001). *Community psychology: Linking individuals and communities*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.