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Culturally Engaging Service-Learning With Diverse Communities

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Chapter 3
Don't Touch My Hair:
Culturally Responsive Engagement in Service-Learning

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ABSTRACT

Myriad studies on service-learning agree on the benefits of service-learning for students. Because projects are designed with the needs of students and institutions in mind, the experiences of the Black communities served are seldom highlighted nor are the intricacies of the multiple relationships addressed. Voices of marginalized groups especially the Black communities—the community that is the focus of this chapter—needs to be incorporated in authentic and intentional ways to advance transformational service-learning for all involved. This chapter begins to examine issues and opportunities for best case scenarios for service-learning projects in Black communities.

THE FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Although students and service-learning educators highlight the values of service-learning in general and see these efforts as opportunities to advance communities, questions abound regarding the process and the impact on those communities (O'Grady, 2000). Black communities are concerned about projects that render them "invisible" partners in problem-solving efforts (Calderón, 2003; Einfeld & Collins, 2008). Further, they are concerned about practices that do not utilize the insider knowledge their voices bring to the table. This chapter explores the intersection between service-learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, and Black communities. In this chapter, the students engaged in service-learning are characterized as the Servers and the community is identified as the Served (Henry & Breyfogle, 2006). Freire's theory of critical consciousness informs the chapter.

BACKGROUND

Freire's scholarship has had a significant impact on service-learning, particularly service-learning for societal transformation. In his pivotal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire* (2014), asserts that students are not merely vessels to be filled with knowledge and that education should engender critical consciousness. Only then he argues can we break down institutional and individual vestiges of oppression. Freire coined the term "banking" to describe a pedagogical method in which students operate as agents of their own subjugation. He argues against the "banking" concept, asserting that students have something to contribute to the creation and sharing of knowledge, thereby making education more of a dialogue and the eventual vehicle for liberation rather than oppression. An interpretation of Freire's work in service-learning is that the Servers are partners with the "Served." This means the Served are not to be viewed from a "banking" approach to problem-solving in which they are merely vessels to be filled with "superior" solutions by those who have the privilege and access to resources, but that they, too, have something to contribute from their insider knowledge about their communities and to become co-creators of knowledge (Cohen, 2012; Freire, 2014). Critical consciousness in service-learning facilitates societal transformation through group dialogue, participatory action, and empowerment between the Servers and the Served.

"The" Black Community and Diversity

Black communities are not monolithic—they are varied. Understanding the diversity within the Black community is essential to service-learning design and approaches. Aspects of diversity in the Black community come from dimensions of a difficult social, political, and cultural history (Broman, Neighbors, & Jackson, 1988). Black diversity also comes in the form of culture, language, and national origin. Although viewing the Black community from the perspective of skin color may suggest to some a singular group, even in this instance there is diversity based on whether one identifies as belonging to two or more races.

Black community diversity also entails variations based on regional, urban, and rural differences, and in some communities, age and socioeconomic status (Broman, Neighbors, & Jackson, 1988; Du Bois, 1903). Some may prefer to be referred to as African American, and others prefer to be characterized as Black. The individual needs to be asked. Yet others do not wish to be identified by a single racial label and may prefer bicultural, mixed, or biracial. These contexts are critical for the efficacy of service-learning projects in Black communities. This chapter utilizes Black in referring to communities of people of African descent.

ISSUES, CONTROVERSIES, PROBLEMS

There is much miscellany of opinion about how Black people characterize their ethnic background. The individual needs to be given the opportunity to express their preference. Few studies have examined the impact of service-learning programs on communities (Donahue, Boyer, & Rosenberg, 2003; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009) and the role that communities play in determining the goals of service-learning programs. There is a consensus on the value of service-learning and the potential to bridge communities. However, for service learning to attain the goals of refining student learning, cultivating civic-minded citizenry, and addressing Black community needs, the insider knowledge and voices of Black communities must

be a centerpiece (Conner, 2010). Most of the service-learning research presents the Black community as a unidimensional entity that holds similar values, attitudes, experiences, and has a shared perception of itself as a social entity. Further, in general, service-learning design presumes that the Black community is a homogeneous unit devoid of intra-racial conflict (Broman, Neighbors, & Jackson, 1988). This perspective of Blacks that aggregates their experiences and backgrounds assures that the diversity within the Black community is minimized and overlooked (Novek, 2000). Following are examples of ways to become engaged in critical consciousness while performing service-learning in Black communities.

We Don't All Look Alike

In 2014, a news anchor interviewing actor Samuel L. Jackson confused him for Laurence Fishburne, with Jackson responding, "I am not Laurence Fishburne. We don't all look alike" (Jackson, 2014) . Many Black people have shared experiences of being mistaken by their White peers to be somebody else. When confronted, a common response is, "They all look alike to me." Cognitive bias, also known as the "other-race effect" is one of the frameworks that explains this dynamic. In cognitive bias situations, people find it easier to distinguish the faces of those that share their race. Studies on cognitive bias explain that face recognition biases may occur not because of the Server's lack of ability, but because faces perceived as belonging to a social "out-group" are processed at a definite level, whereas "in-group" faces are individualized and personalized (Bernstein, et al., 2007). Other scholars posit that in-group identities influence the lens through which we view situations, our preferences, thoughts, behavior, and determinations of what is "normal" and basic social concepts (Banks, 2009; O'Grady, 2000; Mitchell, 2008). For example, that people are better at recognizing members of their own race or ethnicity than at recognizing members of other races is explicitly explained through the own-race bias (ORB) phenomenon (Malpass & Kravitz, 1969; Sporer, 2001). The relevance to service-learning is that self-selection involving ORB exacerbates power differentials between the Server and the Served. Cognitive bias is one of the many challenges in service-learning in Black communities that causes a cultural discontinuity for the Served and causes them to retreat from meaningful engagement and relationship building with the Servers.

Don't Touch My Hair

Cognitive bias also manifest itself in the subject of hair touching. In communities where the Served are Black, there are reports of the issue of hair touching without permission. There appears to be a great deal of wanting to touch black hair, the author asserts, as opposed to wanting to touch Caucasian or Asian-textured hair. This hair touching ritual is often justified by statements such as, "What do you use to comb it? Do you wash it? Is it yours?" While it could be interpreted that curiosity is a trait that can be beneficial, curiosity is not always experienced the same by everyone. This approach to hair touching without permission and the barrage of questions that follows the touching suggests to Black people that somehow their hair is different or even odd. This becomes magnified when White middle class students are in engaged in the community with partners who are Black children. Hair is very personal to Black people regardless of how they characterize their ethnic identity. Issues raised around hair presents immediate cultural discontinuity for some Black people. The intrusion through hair touching creates an immediate cultural dissonance with the Servers not understanding the implications of personal space and body invasion and the Served struggling to make meaning of the queries and to find the elusive what is "normal." It is compounded by the dominant culture in the U.S.A. that centers blond Caucasian hair

as the ultimate symbol and standard of beauty. Thus, having "different" hair that does not conform to the norms of beauty creates yet another instance of cultural discontinuity and reinforces stereotypes of whose hair is "normal." This situation does not do anything to build effective relationships, an ingredient necessary for transformative and reciprocal service-learning. Instead it leaves a psychological scar on the Served. Emerging studies on race in service-learning pose the question about the relevance of service-learning that does not challenge the root causes of social inequality and on eliminating racial stereotypes and promoting a deeper awareness of racism and.privilege (Dunlap, Scoggin, & Davi, 2007; Caro, et al., 2009; Mitchell, Donahue, & Young-Law, 2012).

Mitchell, et. al. (2012) challenge that service-learning pedagogy should illuminate the cognitive bias that relies on "a pedagogy of whiteness," by designing activities and service-learning courses that meet the needs of White students. This approach, Mitchell, et al. (2012) argue, perpetuate color-blind discourses that do little in the way of providing critical consciousness and understanding of the root causes of the deprivation of the communities in which the Servers perform "service."

Mitchell (2008) articulates Critical Service-Learning as a transformative approach that considers the issues and concerns raised by scholars regarding the impact of service-learning on communities. Critical service-learning differs from traditional service-learning in that social change and power redistribution are central elements. The focus is on engaging the Servers in understanding root causes of inequality and developing an environment where the Served are not viewed as deficient by their own making but rather as partners for social change.

Mitchell (2008) advocates for intentional power distribution as a central element of service-learning practice. The process of power redistribution is facilitated when the Servers are systematically walked through personal reflection on identity and the complexity of social concerns before they embark on service-learning projects.

The Power Imbalance

According to Butin (2006), data on the demographics participating in service-learning is generally not widely available but scholars conclude that "the overarching assumption is that the students doing the service are White sheltered, middle class, single, without children, un-indebted, and between the ages of 18 and 24" (p. 481).

The term "service" already infers an imbalance in the relationship of those engaged (Rosenberger, 2000). Despite enhancements in service-learning models, the predominant versions are still based on the principle of caring. While caring is indeed a noble human quality, within the context of service-learning, this approach perpetuates the philosophy of doing something for the disadvantaged and does not necessarily go the extra step to understand and challenge social and systemic inequities. Further, it also invokes a deficit thinking approach which places the Servers as possessing the resources and intellectual capital that the Served do not possess.

The current process is antithetical to the goals of service-learning in that it places the Server at a higher role than the Served. When we take into consideration that the Server may not be adequately prepared prior to undertaking service-learning the situation is one that further disadvantages the community. In some instances, students are not exposed to the deeper dialogue to understand the larger structural forces underlying social problems and the reasons for the position and social place of the Served. The caring philosophy and approach do not take into consideration critical consciousness. Critical consciousness delves into intentional processing of the placement of self in society and the intersectionality of race,

culture, social class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, on how one views situations of inequality (Banks, 2009; Gay, 2000; Gay, 2010; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Grant & Sleeter, 2011).

Pompa (2002) expresses concern by stating, "Unless facilitated with great care and consciousness, 'service' can unwittingly become an exercise in patronization. In a society replete with hierarchical structures and patriarchal philosophies, service-learning's potential danger is for it to become the very thing it seeks to eschew" (p. 68).

O'Grady (2000) asserts that the dominant model of service-learning is Euro-centric and that scholarship on the subject tends to focus on White students engaged in service-learning. Power dynamics as a critical element of service-learning preparation is not adequately addressed in the scholarship on service-learning. The fact that power is not addressed reveals what is described in the literature as the helping approach to service. Robinson (2000a) agrees with the dissonance in this approach to the essential tenets of the intent of service-learning, stating that service-learning without the social understanding of systemic inequities and activism to address them is a "glorified welfare system" (p. 607). Service-learning models that do not delve into critical consciousness the process by which the Servers, identify the root causes of social problems, and engaging in initiatives to address them is futile. Without embedding critical consciousness, such approaches to service learning only result in eliciting good feelings for the "Servers." Such approaches are in the end detrimental in that they preserve systems of inequality and reinforce systems of privilege (Brown, 2001).

O'Grady (2000) agrees with the above scholars stating, "Responding to individual human needs is important, but if the social policies that create these needs is not also understood and addressed, then the cycle of dependence remains" (p. 13). Cultural humility and sensitive is one of the avenues that can be utilized to mediating power dynamics (Brown, 2001; Ross, 2010).

According to Ross (2010), cultural humility is a multifaceted concept that comprises processes to acknowledge the intersectionality of race, social class, national origin, and power dynamics. The process of cultivating and maintaining cultural humility and power mediation entails an ongoing examination of one's own biases through self--reflection and the willingness to "relinquish the role of expert, work actively to address power imbalance in communication to create respectful and dynamic partnerships with the community, and ultimately become a student of the community" (p. 318).

Service-Learning

The benefits of service-learning for students have been long extolled by scholars and practitioners (Astin, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Seider, Huguley, & Novick, 2013). Scholars postulate that service-learning enhances students' academic, personal development, and sense of civic responsibility. Moreover, these scholars posit that service-learning supports institutional missions of service. However, there is a paucity of research on the experience of the recipients of service—the Served and very limited focus on the Served who are members of the Black community (Blouin & Perry, 2009). The population that engages in service-learning continues to be predominantly White students, often from the middle and upper class, and the Served tend to be marginalized and often communities of color of low socio-economic status (Jones, Robbins, & LePeau, 2011; O'Grady, 2000; Rosenberger, 2000; Sleeter, 2001). Service-learning is often utilized as a pedagogical strategy in teacher preparation programs to support the application of culturally responsive pedagogy and teaching practices. This aspect is more critical than ever given the shifting national demographics. Proponents of culturally responsive pedagogy underscore the importance

of preparing students to mediate and negotiate nuanced cultural reference points within the communities where they are performing service-learning (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Hundreds of studies have examined the impact of service-learning on university students. These studies agree on the benefits for students in general but very few observe the experiences of students of color engaged in service-learning or the direct experiences of the communities served (Holsapple, 2012). Because institutions define service-learning different ways, there are multiple definitions of service-learning. Bringle & Hatcher (2009) define service-learning as an

educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility (p. 38).

Jacoby (2014) states: "Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes" (pp. 1-2). Furco (2000) espoused a conceptual definition of service-learning that emphasizes reciprocity: "Service-learning programs are distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by their intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring" (p. 12).

Regardless of the definition that is espoused, O'Grady (2000) asserts that the common elements of most definitions of service-learning comprise of four themes: (a) institutional collaboration with community, (b) the importance of reflection, (c) active learning, and (d) the development of a sense of caring. The various definitions center around student learning. Perhaps a nuanced definition that incorporates reciprocity would serve better. This chapter advocates for an experiential model of service-learning in which students critically learn about the societal, social, historical, political, and economic factors that perpetuates inequalities and devise active solutions to these problems with the community. The definitions, goals, and intentions of service-learning by the Servers are especially critical given the shifting national demographics. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2044, more than half of all Americans are projected to belong to a minority group (any group other than non-Hispanic White alone); against this backdrop is the school age population which is also projected to be culturally and linguistically diverse. The numbers indicate that by 2025, students of color will comprise 50% of US school age children, and by 2050, students of color will make up half of the U.S.A. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The current status quo will result in half of the nation's population unable to achieve the socio-economic mobility that education supposedly procures. And here is where service-learning pedagogy is critical. But, unless the current model of service-learning is transformed utilizing culturally responsive and critical consciousness raising techniques, these communities will continue to be marginalized and service-learning will continue to be beneficial only to the Servers and not the Served.

Despite proposals for new directions in service-learning, current and traditional models tend to be from a deficit framework rather than from asset-based models. Black communities do present many strengths and insider knowledge about how things work in the respective communities (Ross, 2010). Yet, current approaches of service-learning design and implementation still lack the authentic and

purposeful integration of their voices in determining the types of service-learning efforts (Stoecker & Tyron, 2009). Best-practices research involving the community in service-learning design is recent and scant. What exists tends to frame the issues on the nature of the partnerships between universities and the community. As such the unit of measurement is seldom about the experience of the community in the processes involved (Clarke, 2003; Dorado & Giles, 2004; Worrall, 2007).

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

So, what must practitioners of service-learning do to authentically engage with Black communities?

Calderón (2003) argues that "the connections between the classroom and community based learning are all about translation." Calderón continues by clarifying that at their best, these interactions are about getting students to "understand communities outside of themselves and to become engaged interpreters" (p. 22). Meaningful community building and transformation in the Black community can only occur when the translation process is built upon a foundation of intercultural sensitivity. It is in the moments of self-examination and reflection of the self, identity and the intersectionality of identity and social placements that the Servers will understand that deficits do not reside in Black people and their communities but that they are structural manifestations of inequity. The developmental model of intercultural sensitivity is a useful tool in the process of preparing the Servers for culturally responsive service-learning.

The developmental model of intercultural sensitivity is not simply an exercise in sensitivity. It encompasses a process to recognize the underlying intersectionality of social place and identity (Bacon, 2002; Banks, Cochran-Smith, Moll, Richert, Zeichner, LePage, Darling-Hammond, Duffy, & McDonald, 2005; O'Grady 2000). Social place manifests itself through societal structures of inequality that continues to relegate communities of color in an "ever present social jeopardy" (Cooper, 2014, p. 13). Unpacking and deliberating on social place, intercultural sensibility, and privilege are all imperatives for transformational service-learning.

Best Practices in Service-Learning

Our cultural sensitivities are influenced by expectations, values, beliefs, language, and communication styles from our background. These attributes also influence our interpretations of social events and communities. The author asserts the need for cultural humility guided by the following questions (Bacon, 2002; Banks, Cochran-Smith, Moll, Richert, Zeichner, LePage, Darling-Hammond, Duffy, & McDonald, 2005; O'Grady 2000), which are helpful prompts for reflection. Responses to these questions will enable the Servers to engage in critical consciousness by intentionally reflecting on the values of their own communities and families. Later on these reflections become meaningful foundations to glean the values of the Black communities and to utilize culturally responsive approaches as they engage with Black communities in service-learning. The prompts are:

1. What are my family's expectations about responsibility, dependability, and getting the job right the first time?
2. What are my family's expectations around time and punctuality?

3.   What is my family's language use—tone, loudness, words?
4.   What is my family's non-verbal communication—closeness, eye contact, hands?
5.   What are my family's ways of acting toward or acceptance of others who are different?
6.   What are my family's beliefs and/or expectations based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, levels of ability, age, and/or gender?

Further, advance preparation is key to mitigating miscommunications and deleterious effects on the Black community during service-learning. The preparation should entail learning about the racialized history of Blacks in the U.S and the historical and social underpinnings. Use pedagogy that underscores the importance of the Servers mindfulness and awareness of social and political use of language that address the Black community experience with disempowerment, oppression, disinvestment, and racism that Black communities experience. The author further recommends that prior to engaging in opportunities with Blacks or African Americans, service-learners and their faculty consider the following advice:

- Be real, genuine, and respectful with individuals.
- Understand that family ties are important in Black communities and strong kinship bonds are valued.
- Recognize that Black families take care of their own and value what is considered the "extended family unit."
- There is a strong religious orientation with the church playing a major role in social change; however non-traditional spirituality must also be respected.
- There is strength in the use of informal support networks – church or community.
- There is a sense of distrust of mainstream establishment and distrust of government and social services: "Big Brother doesn't care about us."
- Some don't like to admit the need for help as there is a strong sense of pride. Black women will seek assistance more so than Black men.
- There is a strong work orientation.
- There may be a lack of knowledge about available services and how the system works.
- Poverty impacts education, self-esteem, quality of life, and lifestyle across the lifespan.
- Seniors are highly respected. Aging represents respect, authority, and wisdom. Identify people as Mrs. or Mr. until given the permission to call individuals by their first name.
- They tend to keep things hidden within the family system and may fear being disgraced or having the family be disgraced.

Tips for Communication

- We don't know every Black person and cannot speak for them.
- Prolonged eye contact may be perceived as staring and interpreted as confrontational/aggressive.
- Engage community and/or religious leaders if assistance is needed.
- Show respect always, as a history of racism and sense of powerlessness impacts interactions.
- Don't use "street slang," which may be interpreted as ridicule.
- The decision-maker is usually the eldest adult child.
- We do not like to be asked questions about finances and past relationships, whether married or not.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, as Cruz and Giles (2000) have shown, the research that has examined the impact of service-learning on communities is almost nonexistent. With regards to the Black community, such scholarship is absent. As noted earlier, most of the outcome measures have focused on personal changes in students. As colleges and universities turn to service-learning as a solution to re-engage teaching and learning to advance Black communities, it is critical that these efforts be designed with Black community input at all levels. Viewing the Black community as co-creators of knowledge while challenging for the academy, is an important step towards shifting the discourse on service learning from that which is predominantly the voice of the academy to that which places the Served in the discourse (Amatea, Cholewa, & Mixon, 2012; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEACH

Service-learning can be the bridge between the academy and communities. It can also be fertile research and social action ground for examining a new concept of humanity. Future studies should start out with the community members' sense of empowerment as the focal point of the research. The data collected on service-learning is typically based on reflection journals, which are self-reports of the Servers. Self-reports, while helpful to the students involved, also have the potential to result in self-monitoring, especially in research on service-learning and impact on communities. Future research should review community reactions and authentic voices to service-learning beyond self-report reflection journals. Intentional and deep exposure to and dialogue about cross-racial exposure can assist in mediating cognitive bias. However, studies about and strategies of negotiating cognitive bias in Service-learning is not prevalent. Scholarship on strategies for mitigating cognitive bias in service-learning occurring in Black communities is absent. Studies on the broader manifestations and implications of cognitive bias in service-learning occurring in Black communities needs further exploration.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Black Community: People of African descent.

Critical Consciousness: Refers to an individual's awareness of how they and others are impacted by dimensions of culture, race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as how these dimensions are related to the political, social, and economic systems in the United States.

Cultural Discontinuity: Differences between the culture of a middle-class teacher (usually White) and the school as a White institution and students of the non-dominant race or culture. Often characterized by differences in sociolinguistics, interpersonal or intergroup relations, the absence of certain concepts in certain ethnicities, and conflicts in teaching and learning style.

Cultural Humility: The ability for one to be open to the "other" in relationship to cultural identity aspects that are most important to the person.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: The overarching philosophy for teaching and practice. Generally refers to awareness on the part of the teacher of how culture, race, class, gender, and other societal structures impact teaching and learning.

Ethnocentric: A belief that one's own culture is superior to other cultures.

Power: A relational term. It can only be understood as a relationship between human beings in a specific historical, economic, and social setting.

Privilege: A right, favor, advantage, immunity, specially granted to one individual or group, and withheld from another.

The Served: As used in this chapter it refers to the Black communities where service-learning takes place.

The Servers: As used in this chapter it refers to students and faculty engaged in service-learning.