Finding Common (Moral) Ground in Critical Service Learning: Promoting Balance and Civil Discourse Through Moral Foundations Theory

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ABSTRACT

Critical approaches to service learning courses may not innately maximize student engagement, civil discourse, and the confrontation of stereotypes. The purpose of this article is to propose the utilization of Moral Foundations Theory as a complimentary framework for service learning courses seeking to critically analyze systems and policies. Recommendations for practice and future research are included.

Keywords: community engagement, civic engagement

In all intellectual debates, both sides tend to be correct in what they affirm, and wrong in what they deny.
-John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

Service learning represents a high-impact educational practice (Kuh, 2008) that can support myriad learning goals while reciprocally engaging students and communities (Bushouse, 2005; Jacoby, 1996, 2015). Critical service learning represents a specific approach that adopts a social change framework and emphasizes the critical analyses of systems and policies with the aim of confronting inequalities (Mitchell, 2008). While lauded for an emphasis on authentic relationships, systemic injustices, and sustainable change, critical service learning can also present substantial limitations if embodying "a liberal agenda under a universalistic garb" (Butin, 2010, p. 35). Similar points were also expressed by Jacoby (2015) and Lewing (2018).

Critical service learning has the potential to challenge discriminatory systems and engage students with communities in authentic partnerships. However, if discussions and lectures are politically polarizing, critical service learning may encourage student self-censorship. Self-censorship can be defined as "the withholding of one's true opinion from an audience perceived to disagree with that opinion" (Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005, p. 299) and represents a potential issue for students in critical service learning courses, especially considering the fairly consistent liberal lean of faculty members (Gross, 2013; Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Klein & Stern, 2009; Phillips, 2016). In these situations, the singular perspective of the instructor may become an established supra-normative value system for a course (Butin, 2010) and may not innately provide a framework that best promotes critical thinking and student engagement across the ideological spectrum. Experiences that promote student self-censorship may seriously weaken the ability of critical service learning courses to facilitate the confrontation of stereotypes and reconsideration of misperceptions through engagement, analysis, and discussion.

Central to the thesis of this manuscript is the idea that critical service learning, contrary to existing critique, is not explicitly liberal. Rather, critical service learning, specifically the internal dynamics of the course (i.e., design, assigned readings, reflection prompts), simply goes in the direction steered. Similar to Haidt's (2001) elephant-rider metaphor used to describe the relationship between rationality and emotion, critical service learning likely has

the tendency to gravitate towards predominant belief systems, often those of the instructor.

In response to the potential limitations of politicized service learning, Butin (2010) advocated for a more balanced approach that avoided orthodoxy and dogmatism which can hinder critical approaches. A balanced approach to critical service learning aligns with an understanding that perspectives toward social issues are driven by moral frameworks (Bobocel, Son Hing, Davey, Stanley, & Zanna, 1998; Day, Fiske, Downing, & Trail, 2014; Emler, 2002; Haidt, 2001, 2012; Skitka, 2002; Skitka & Bauman, 2008) that are derived from specific life narratives (McAdams, Albaugh, Farber, Daniels, Logan, & Olson, 2008) and influenced by neurobiological factors (Kanai, Feilden, Firth, & Rees, 2011; Schreiber et al. 2013). In alignment with Astin's (1970, 1991) Input-Environment-Outcomes Model in which student outcomes are influenced by individual inputs and personal experiences, students will enter critical service learning courses with differing perspectives towards the morality of policies and social issues due to both biological chance and cultural learning. Their ability to critically analyze social systems and identify systemic injustices is dependent upon course structuring that adequately accounts for these differences as well as the provision of a common moral vocabulary.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this conceptual article is to suggest Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt, 2012; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004) as a complimentary internal framework for critical service learning courses. It should be noted that the premise of this article is not to propose sweeping changes to critical service learning pedagogies, but rather to build upon the recommendations of Mitchell (2008). The provision of an inward-centered approach to structuring reflection and discourse further promotes the tenets of critical service learning such as encouraging students to identify systemic inequalities, critically examine their own ideas, respectfully acknowledge challenges from others, and evaluate divergent perspectives (Mitchell, 2008).

MORAL FOUNDATIONS THEORY AND POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Moral Foundations Theory (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt, 2012; Haidt & Graham, 2007) deviates from much of moral psychology by suggesting scholarship in the discipline tends to show bias toward a somewhat narrow liberal and individualistic perspective common to those from Western, educated, industrial, rich, and democratic backgrounds. In an attempt to account for the prevalence of existing moral frameworks that also place value on autonomy, group cohesion (Fiske, 1991), and conceptualizations of divinity (Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997) common in non-liberal (e.g., libertarian, conservative, many non-Western) backgrounds, Moral Foundations Theory posits that moral reasoning stems from innate moral modules: (a) care/harm, the protection and care for others and avoiding the infliction of harm, (b) fairness/cheating, the promotion of equality, proportionality, and justice, (c) loyalty/betrayal, the honoring of obligations to an in-group, (d) authority/subversion, the maintenance of communal order through a respect for authority-ranking, (e) sanctity/degradation, the avoidance of physical and spiritual degradation, and (f) liberty/oppression, the opposition of domination by one individual or entity over another. Care and fairness are generally associated concerns for individuals and are referred to as "individualizing" foundations while loyalty, authority, and sanctity, in contrast, represent "binding" foundations as they emphasize larger groups and institutions that are predicated on moral systems.

When applied to political psychology, a consistent set of foundations is associated with political preferences (Franks &

Scherr, 2015; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007). Individualizing foundations are the most predominant foundations in liberals, and the binding foundations tend to resonate the most with conservatives (Graham, Nosek, Haidt, Iyer, Koleva, & Ditto, 2011). Liberty is unique as it is valued by all groups, especially Libertarians (Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012); however, the concept manifests differently based on individual ideology. Liberals tend to emphasize liberty as government protection for vulnerable groups while conservatives and libertarians tend to value liberty as an individual's "right to be left alone" (Haidt, 2012, p. 182) from government interference and also tend to oppose large-scale intervention programs. Furthermore, due to the emphasis of individual foundations, the theory is also valid for understanding groups outside of the binary liberal-conservative approach and along multiple levels of ideological personality, such as the religious-left (Haidt, Graham, & Joseph, 2009).

Perspectives on social and political issues are, at least in part, grounded in moral concerns (Bobocel et al., 1998; Day et al., 2014; Emler, 2002; Haidt, 2001, 2012; Nilsson & Erlandsson, 2015; Skitka, 2002; Skitka & Bauman, 2008). It is from this vantage point that Moral Foundations Theory can frame critical service learning as it provides a conduit for mutual understanding and civil discourse related to community engagement, political action, and social change. Leskes (2013) described civil discourse as learning about issues, obtaining valid data, constructing a logical argument that is convincing but nondogmatic to those with opposing opinions and perspectives. Civil discourse represents respectful, honest, and deliberate dialogue and represents the central pillars of a balanced approach to service learning. Respectful and open-minded dialogue may be more likely when empathy and grace are offered, moral foundations are acknowledged, and arguments are allowed space to undergo critical analysis.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

As previously stated, this approach is meant to complement the existing tenets of critical service learning (i.e., identifying systemic inequalities). In addition to general best practices for critical service learning as outlined by Mitchell (2008) and Jacoby (2015), several strategies can help maximize the engagement and effectiveness of service learning courses in promoting civil discourse through a Moral Foundations Theory framework: (a) ensure student understanding of Moral Foundations Theory and its relation to political opinion, (b) facilitate students' self-reflection of their own political perspectives and the associated moral framework, (c) encourage the acknowledgement of emotions during reflection associated with their experiences, and (d) facilitate civil discourse and promote mutual understanding of conflicting moral foundations and opinions.

Ensure Student Understanding of Moral Foundations Theory and Its Relation to Political Opinion

Viewing political ideologies as extensions of moral foundations derived from one's life narratives and influenced by neurobiological factors is not necessarily innate for students or faculty members. Therefore, introducing students to Moral Foundations Theory and the association of intuitive emotions and reasoning can support a more self-aware and open-minded course. Considerations for required readings include Haidt and Joseph (2004), Haidt and Graham (2007) and Graham et al. (2009, 2011, 2013), and would be ideally completed within the first quarter of a course in order to ensure students' grasp of the theoretical contextualization.

Facilitate Students' Self-reflection of Their Own Political Perspectives and the Associated Moral Framework

Once a basic understanding of Moral Foundations Theory has been established,

self-reflection allows students to become more aware of their personal ideological leanings and the lenses through which they may view others. Whether facilitated through the completion of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2011) or through general self-identification, self-reflection encourages students to further view substantiated ideologies as differing moral foundations rather than an automatic good/evil or tolerant/intolerant paradigm. The questionnaire provides foundation-specific scores that move further beyond a simplistic conservative-liberal binary perspective. Self-reflection also helps students begin to see areas of limited understanding that their own morality may create.

Encourage the Acknowledgement of Emotions During Reflection

Morality and reasoning are emotionally driven processes (Haidt, 2001), and students will likely encounter a diverse range of emotions during their community engagement experiences that can promote deeper reflections (Felten, Gilchrist, & Darby, 2006). In alignment, Moral Foundations Theory posits that each foundation is associated with characteristic virtues and emotions (care: kindness, compassion; fairness: anger, gratitude; loyalty: group pride, loyalty, self-sacrifice; authority: respect; sanctity: disgust, chastity, piety; liberty: reactance, oppression). Facilitating a self-awareness of emotional reactions can further promote student's understanding of their experiences and also the association between the experiences and emotions of their peers in relation to the corresponding frameworks of others, which is critical to civil discourse.

Facilitate Civil Discourse Through Understanding the Framework of Others

Former vice president of the American Association Colleges and Universities Andrea Leskes (2013) advocated for the promotion of civil discourse in higher education as thoughtful and respectful exchanges of opinions that evaluate the validity of arguments rather than the value of individuals, and that seek to identify both disagreements and points of common purpose of those engaged. Leskes further stated,

> Participants in civil discourse need to learn about the issue at hand, critically weigh the information's veracity and validity, build a logical argument, and present it in a convincing but nondoctrinaire manner to individuals who might not share the same views. They need to be respectfully attentive to alternative interpretations—weighing them, too, analytically—and be willing to alter positions based on convincing argument and evidence.

Individuals are prone to stereotyping the perspectives of those with different moral frameworks and tend to exaggerate the extremity of dissimilar ideologies (Graham, Nosek, Haidt, 2012). Therefore, a framework that can facilitate open-mindedness and a willingness to critically evaluate divergent opinions is of tantamount importance to balanced service learning. According to Gilovich (1991) and Haidt (2012), individuals view arguments that align with their moral frameworks through the context of "can I believe this?" while viewing arguments that conflict with their frameworks through the context of "must I believe this?" Moral Foundations Theory provides an accessible conduit for understanding the opinions of one's self and those of others. Encouraging students to understand, not accept, the underlying moral foundations and the corresponding arguments of those individuals with whom they disagree is imperative as it promotes the identification of commonalities in terms of potential long-term solutions to social issues.

Depending on the organizational or geographical context of the institution, the instructor, or the discipline, there may not be sufficient variance of opinion to support rich discussion on either side of the liberal-conservative spectrum. Therefore, faculty members may benefit from collaborating

with another instructor who represents an informed divergent opinion. Whether through a team-teaching approach or simply by providing balance of perspective to a class discussion, seeking collegial support can move a class toward a more balanced approach while also providing a model for professional disagreement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

While there is a body of research supporting the validity of Moral Foundations Theory, its utilization as a teaching strategy is limited. Future scholarship can provide investigations into the utilization of the framework as a means of supporting community engagement, the confrontation of student-held stereotypes, civil discourse, and broad-based student awareness of social issues. Specifically, research that explores how service learning and Moral Foundations Theory can support student acknowledgement of tendencies to exaggerate divergent opinions can strengthen the role of service learning and community engagement within the broader scope of higher education.

CONCLUSION

The limitations of service learning are not found in its political examinations; rather the practice becomes limited when it fails to deeply engage students across the political spectrum in a way that sufficiently emboldens them to critique their own arguments while identifying the merits of opposing views. Service learning is weakened when forced into an apolitical corner that disallows critical thinking and civil discourse. Moral Foundations Theory can coincide with best practices of service learning instruction and provide a framework that encourages students to become active citizens in a democratic society.

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