Mapping Moral Development:
A Case Study of Service Learning in the Midwest

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between service learning and moral development. During a phenomenographic examination of a service-learning project in the Midwest, researchers identified ways that participants conceived of justice. These conceptions were analyzed with a Neo-Kohlbergian approach to post-conventional moral thinking and mapped using social cartography. Findings indicate that immersion programs can provide participants with nominal opportunities for moral development and that there is a need for additional supports and future research on the longitudinal effects of service learning.

Keywords: community engagement, student development, post-conventional moral thinking, social cartography

In addition to providing students with opportunities for professional advancement, higher education is charged with preparing them for responsible citizenship. One of the more immersive ways that institutions accomplish this task is by offering alternative spring break programs (DuPre, 2010; Rhoads & Neururer, 1998).

These programs, which emphasize service over leisure, provide insight into how students develop competencies for critical consciousness (Freire, 1974). Doerr (2019), for example, studied students' experiences with diversity during a service trip to New Mexico, while Schneider (2018) studied students' conceptions of empathy during a service trip to Uganda.

This study, which explores the relationship between service learning and moral development, describes students' perceptions of justice during their participation in an alternative spring break program in the Midwest, and maps them in the context of a Neo-Kohlbergian approach to post-conventional moral thinking (Rest et al., 1999).

Service Learning and Moral Development

The relationship between service learning and moral development is well established. According to Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens (2003), for example, it is "impossible to divide moral and civic development sharply from intellectual or academic development because much of moral and civic development *is* intellectual" (p. 105). This symbiotic relationship is reflected in higher education's renewed focus on civic responsibility and service learning, a shift that challenges students to develop a moral imagination whereby they assess their longstanding beliefs and behaviors to determine what is or is not problematic in light of their knowledge and experiences, and then to adjust their perspectives based on their new understandings (Hatcher & Erasmus, 2008; You & Rud, 2010).

Furthermore, Strain (2005) suggests that service learning challenges students' moral frameworks by putting them in ambiguous contexts, thus displacing limited or apathetic worldviews, and Bernacki and Jaeger (2008)

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contend that students who participate in service-learning experiences are not only more compassionate than their peers, but also more motivated to make the world a better place.

METHOD

Participants

Eleven college students, seven females and four males, all of whom identified as White, participated in this study. In addition to providing direct service to people who were houseless or struggling with poverty, they also assisted with ongoing support initiatives, such as providing transportation and building sustainable food sources, in a small rural community. Prior to embarking on their immersive experience, participants had to attend three pre-trip meetings that offered an orientation to the Alternative Spring Break Program and its associated goals and learning outcomes, an introduction to the partner agency and the social issues it addresses, as well as an overview of the region to be visited and its historical context. After the event, students, regardless of their willingness to participate in this research study, participated in a post-trip debrief that included a final guided reflection and discussions of options related to furthering participants' engagement in service initiatives.

Data Collection

The data was formally gathered by interviewing the participants during pre- and post-experience focus groups that were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. These interviews were semi-structured, and the participants were encouraged to discuss their conceptions of justice as they related to the alternative spring break service-learning experience. Throughout the duration of the one-week immersive experience, students participated in informal reflective conversations while on site and then had group-based debriefs every evening. These informal spaces for sharing allowed students to reflect on their experience, grapple with the challenges they faced, and explore concepts of justice as it relates to their experience.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using a phenomenographic method (Marton, 1986). This method, which seeks to identify and categorize the ways in which people experience the world, involved an iterative process of reading the transcripts, coding the data, organizing the results into categories of description, and mapping the categories into an outcome space. Moreover, one author, who supervised the experience, provided her reflective journals for analysis, as they recounted the informal data collection processes previously described.

Working within a constant comparative framework, the researchers independently read and coded the transcripts by highlighting statements relating to the participants' conceptions of justice (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They discussed their codes to establish a common language, and revisited the transcripts both independently and cooperatively with a synonymous coding scheme.

FINDINGS

Categories of Description

By comparing and contrasting the similarities and differences in the students' responses, the researchers identified five qualitatively different ways that the participants conceived of justice in the context of service learning. Rather than presenting these categories within a hierarchical framework, they are mapped within a heterotopic outcome space (Paulston & Liebman, 1994).

Justice as Social Responsibility

The participants who viewed justice as social responsibility framed their service-learning experience as an obligation to society. They identified privilege primarily in terms of socioeconomic status, erected false dichotomies between the "haves" and the "have nots," and spoke to issues of civic duty by equating charity to social justice.

"I'm here because it feels right," one participant said during a pre-experience focus group. "I've been lucky enough to grow up

without having to worry about money, and this is one of the ways that I can give back…It is important for people to realize that the playing field is anything but equal, and people with means should try to support those without."

Justice as Means of Empowerment

Rather than describing service as a charitable obligation, the participants who viewed justice as a means of empowerment framed their experience as an exercise in sustainability. They saw themselves as providing lasting, rather than temporary, relief, and believed that they had left the people they served with capacities to continue serving themselves.

Speaking at a post-experience focus group, one participant said, "We really made a difference, you know? We donated more than our time. We donated the resources and expertise needed to make change…Take the sustainable gardens, the food plots, for example. We helped build them, but it's the community that's going to tend them."

Justice as Humanizing Experience

The participants who viewed justice as a humanizing experience described their service-learning experience as "reciprocal" and "mutually beneficial." Rather than entering into binary, "server" and "served" relationships, they conceptualized partner-ships in which they saw themselves working in tandem with the community toward common goals.

According to one participant, who did not have any experience working in rural communities and voiced some reservations during the pre-experience focus group, "[this alternative spring break] helped me understand that we really are in this together…It helped dispel some of my preconceived notions about difference, and I feel like I got just as much from this experience as I put in."

Justice as Restorative Practice

The participants who viewed justice as a restorative practice, defined here as a means to recognize and cooperatively reconcile systemic injustice, situated their work within a historical discourse (O'Brien & Nygreen,

2020). They were interested not only in serving the community, but also in collectively righting the wrongs of the past in ways that transcend geographical borders.

"The real issue is that the [community members] have been historically under-served," one participant wrote in a post-experience reflection. "They have been ignored, or at least brushed aside, not only by local government agencies, but by society in general…I was glad to participate in this experience; however, I feel as if our work is just beginning. It is not okay for anyone to be hungry or houseless [in the current age]."

Justice as Transformative Endeavor

Finally, the participants who viewed justice as a transformative endeavor framed their service-learning experience in terms of personal change. While they acknowledged physical changes to the community, such as the development of sustainable food beds, they represented their work as "perception altering," with capacities to inform all of their future interactions.

"I feel like a different person," one participant said during a post-experience focus group. "Before we arrived in [the community], I had a very narrow understanding of difference…Although I'm ashamed to say it, I used to believe that poverty was a choice. That anyone could change their circumstances, if they really put their mind to it…Now I understand that it is anything but, that there are histories and systems in place that take the element of choice out of it."

Outcome Space

According to Kohlberg's (1981, 1984) theory of moral development, people move through a complex series of stages as they develop capacities for moral reasoning. At one end of the spectrum is Heteronomous Morality, which involves behaving or "conforming" to avoid punishment. At the other end is Universal Ethical Principles Morality, which frames behavior in the context of dignity and justice, and most relevant to the present study (Mathes, 2019).

To further explore the participants' conceptions, the researchers mapped the categories of description into a landscape inspired by Kohlberg's theory (Figure 1). The horizontal axis moves from Pre-Conventional Reasoning on the left to Post-Conventional Reasoning on the right. The vertical axis moves from Apathetic Perspectives on the bottom to Empathetic Perspectives on the top.

A third dimension, which is situated at the intersection of moral development and the participants' conceptions of justice, moves from Low Critical Consciousness in the lower left to High Critical Consciousness in the upper right. The categories of description appear as "clouds" to suggest porous boundaries and the potential for the post-representational exchange of ideas.

Figure 1. *Participants' Conceptions of Justice*
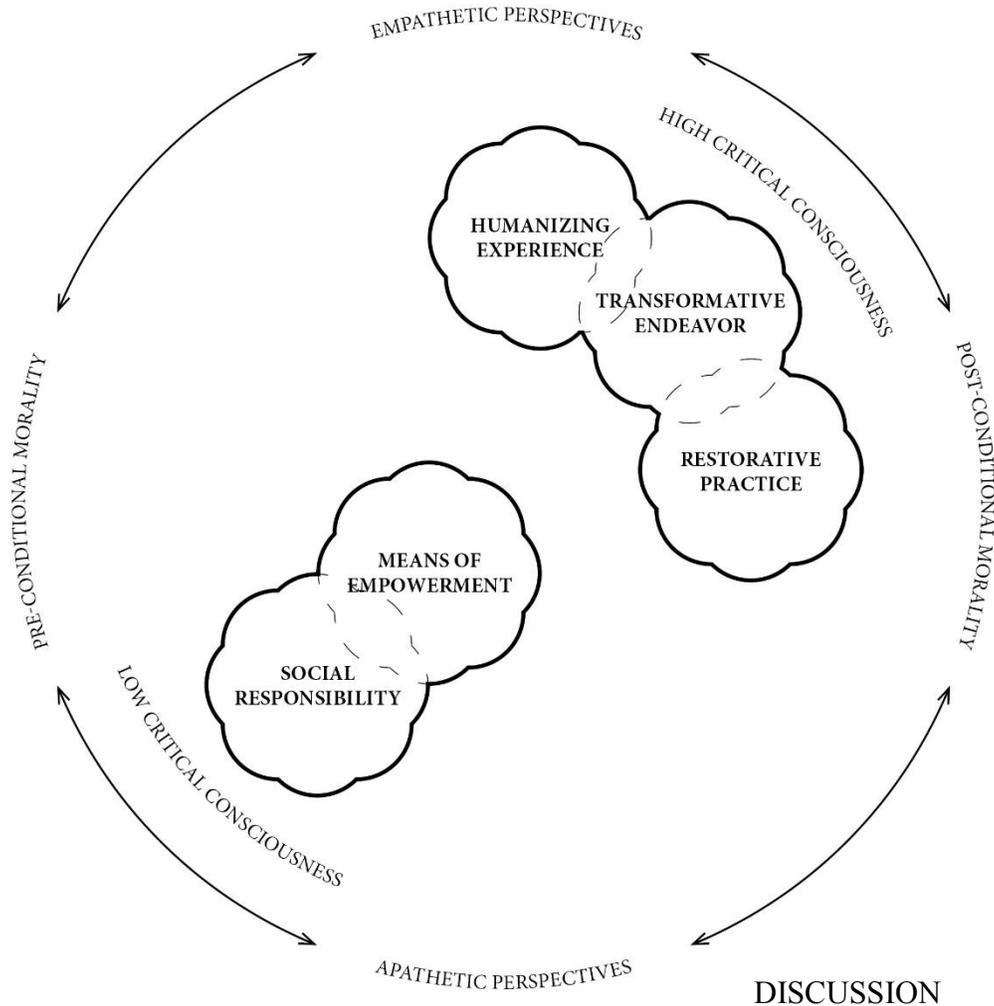
While the map is informed by Kohlberg's theory, it should not be construed as a literal representation. Rather than boxing the participants' conceptions of justice into the specific stages of moral reasoning that he describes, or trying to define development as a linear process, they have been allowed to "float" within the context of the present study.

DISCUSSION

In much the same way that Rest et al. (2000) approach Kohlberg's theory in terms of moral schemas rather than moral stages, this study uses a social map to "fill in [the gaps] where information is scarce or ambiguous … [and to] provide guidance for evaluating infor-mation and for problem-solving" (p. 389).

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While none of the participants' conceptions of justice were couched entirely within the confines of Pre-Conventional Reasoning—the students did not indicate a desire to serve to avoid punishment, for example—there was substantial "blurring" across related perspectives as they approach higher forms of critical consciousness.

This overlap was not unexpected, as students who participated in this study were not compelled to attend the alternative spring break; however, there were particularities not only in terms of their motivations for participating, but also in how they conceived of themselves and their work in relation to the population they served.

Perhaps the most interesting nuances to emerge were between the students who viewed themselves as "working for" or "working with" the community they served. The former conceived of justice as social responsibility or a means of empowerment, while the latter conceived of it as a humanizing experience, restorative practice, or transformational endeavor.

The students who described their service in terms of "us" and "them" would benefit from additional exposure to difference as they continue to develop higher forms of critical consciousness. This particular service-learning experience was one of their first, and they often indicated a willingness to be "less judgmental."

It can be difficult, especially for students from economically privileged populations, to overcome preconceived notions about their less fortunate counterparts; however, alternative spring break programs can help them uncouple apathetic perspectives from their worldviews and replace them with perceptions formed from firsthand experiences.

The students who described their service in terms of a "partnership" could also benefit from increased exposure to difference. Even those students who had participated in multiple service-learning experiences, including previous alternative spring breaks, discussed changes in their perceptions of what it means to serve.

It is impossible for someone to enact meaningful change in a community unless they take responsibility for it. They have to see themselves as belonging to that community, regardless of where they live, take ownership of its issues, however large or seemingly inconsequential, and work in partnership with likeminded stakeholders.

Whether the map and its representation of Kohlberg's theory is accepted as truth or a metaphorical curiosity, it nevertheless provides an opportunity to visualize not only the spatial nature of the participants' service-learning experience, but also the nuances associated with moral development, and can be adapted by researchers searching for similar correlations. In this sense, as higher education faculty and administrators continue to explore the connections between students' moral and civic development and the pursuit of an academic degree (Colby et al., 2003), studies such as this offer a space to reflect on student development and changes in disposition as a result of service-learning experiences.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed five qualitatively different ways that students conceptualize justice in the context of service learning—as social responsibility, means of empowerment, humanizing experience, restorative practice, and transformative endeavor—and offered a glimpse into their perceived levels of critical consciousness and moral development.

This suggests that alternative spring breaks—especially when they are combined with multidimensional reflective exercises such as journaling, both structured in response to a prompt and unstructured in response to students' experiences, and participating in focus groups—can provide participants with opportunities for personal growth. The process, however, is gradual and often problematic, which suggests a need for additional supports and future research on the longitudinal effects of service learning particularly related to participants' moral development.

While some changes to students' perceptions of difference can be observed during service-learning experiences as brief as alternative spring breaks, no significant differences in students' moral development can be attributed in the present study. Nevertheless, Kohlberg's theory provides a useful framework for identifying and structuring conversations around where students are.

While this study in and of itself does not demonstrate an explicit link between moral development and service-learning experiences, it does align with Bernacki and Jaeger's (2008) conclusion that these experiences, such as alternative spring breaks, "may be a cognitive stepping stone to developing the ability to reason at principled levels" (p. 13).

In the short term, it is important for higher education to continue to invest in opportunities for students to develop, not only professionally, but also as responsible citizens. These opportunities become scarce as students graduate, start families, and join the workforce, and alternative spring breaks serve as a powerful means for encouraging personal engagement and change.

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