"I Understand What They're Going through": How Socioeconomic Background Shapes the Student Service-learning Experience

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Abstract

Traditional service-learning pedagogy assumes that learning occurs when contact between relatively advantaged students and a relatively disadvantaged service population reduces prejudice. However, little is known about how students whose backgrounds are similar to the populations they serve process this learning experience. This study explores the connections between socioeconomic status and learning trajectories within service-learning. Students provided written reflections on a service-learning experience focused on food insecurity as part of course requirements. Analysis reveals that students with low socioeconomic status (SES) demonstrate different learning processes than medium- and high-SES students. Namely, low-SES students were less likely than high-SES students to hold prejudiced attitudes prior to service, and low-SES students emphasized a systemic understanding of food insecurity and poverty, while medium- and high-SES students were much more likely to emphasize an individualist understanding. We discuss the implications of these findings for future research to improve service-learning pedagogy for students of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

Keywords

service-learning, socioeconomic status, intergroup contact theory, student diversity

In its 2011 report, the Department of Education's National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement called colleges and universities "the nation's most valuable laboratories for civic learning and democratic engagement" to spur "collective action to address public problems" (p. 6). The report called on higher education institutions to integrate community service into the classroom and address issues of socioeconomic inequity that results in wealthier students having disproportionate access to the educational benefits of community service.

This curricular expansion requires instructors to engage more critically with issues of diversity and equity within service-learning pedagogy. The foundations of this pedagogy are rooted in Dewey's ([1938] 1997) philosophy of experiential learning and Allport's (1954) contact theory of prejudice reduction. Traditional service-learning pedagogy

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aims to promote greater understanding of social inequality dynamics and increased empathy toward disadvantaged populations through extended contact with these populations. Critics of this traditional approach argue that socioeconomically advantaged students have disproportionate access to service-learning experiences and that service-learning offerings may perpetuate inequality by increasing prejudice in some contexts by failing to equitably integrate the voices of the population being served.

The current study builds on this body of critique by examining the assumption that service-learning outcomes occur primarily through contact between a relatively advantaged student group and a relatively disadvantaged service-recipient population. We evaluated student learning outcomes in a service-learning experience focused on food insecurity. We ask three central questions:

Research Question 1: Are students with low socioeconomic status (SES) less likely than medium- or high-SES students to indicate prejudiced attitudes toward the service population?
Research Question 2: Are low-SES students less likely than medium- or high-SES students to indicate that prejudice reduction?
Research Question 3: Are low-SES students more likely than medium- or high-SES students to emphasize systemic/institutional solutions to addressing the problem of food insecurity?

In exploring these questions, we hope to contribute to greater understanding of the impact of effective and equitable service-learning offerings in higher education.

SERVICE-LEARNING, CIVIC ENGAEGMENT, AND EQUITY

Service-learning is experiential learning that seeks to provide benefit to others without material or monetary reward but with consciously held educational objectives (Furco 1996; Waterman 2013). Service-learning involves reciprocity, with both the provider and beneficiary learning from the experience (Sigmon 1979).

Rooted in Dewey's ([1938] 1997) philosophy of experiential learning, service-learning gained traction in higher education during the shift toward student-centered and experiential pedagogy in the 1980s and 1990s (Furco 1996; Giles 1991; Giles and Eyler 1994; Jacoby 1996; Kolb 1984; Stanton 1990). Service-learning has increasingly come into vogue as colleges and universities shift curricular focus toward civic engagement. Campus centers for community engagement and service-learning curricular requirements are becoming commonplace (Bringle and Hatcher 2000; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 2016; New 2016; Swearer Center 2018). Meg Wilkes Karraker (2018) has recently argued for the advancement of a "service sociology," arguing that sociology programs have the potential to be at the forefront of service-learning pedagogy because sociological concepts help deepen student learning outcomes in understanding the role of structural inequalities in social problems. Hochschild, Farley, and Chee (2013) have likewise argued that sociologists have an important role to play in training instructors from a variety of disciplines who are interested in community-engaged teaching to incorporate sociological principles into their service-learning pedagogy.

The benefits of service-learning on student outcomes have been well established. They range from short-term academic gains to long-term civic engagement, from individual skills development to community improvements (Celio, Durlak, and Dymnicki 2011; Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarella 2015). It is one of the nine main types of high-impact educational practices (HIPs) shown to have the highest level of educational gains for students in the areas of deep learning, self-reported personal and practical gains, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and a supportive campus environment (Kuh and O'Donnell 2013). The expansion of service-learning offerings has primarily been framed within the broader liberal arts educational values of civic engagement, multiculturalism, and democracy (Bringle and Hatcher 1996; Saltmarsh 2005). Studies have found evidence that it contributes to outcomes of increased social responsibility and civic-mindedness (Kezar and Rhoads 2001), increased awareness of stereotypes (Jones and Hill 2001), increased tolerance for diversity and reduction in negative stereotypes and social problems (Eyler and Giles 1999; Steck et al. 2011), and increased commitment to continued civic engagement and development of multicultural skills such as empathy, patience, reciprocity, and respect (Einfeld and Collins 2008). These outcomes are well aligned with the central goal of most sociology programs: fostering a sociological imagination (Garoutte 2017; Wickersham et al. 2015).

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN SERVICE-LEARNING PRACTICE

While service-learning holds great promise for improving student outcomes in the areas of civic engagement and multicultural competency, there are important critiques of conventional models. One focuses on barriers to access. Because service-learning may require greater flexibility in student scheduling, transportation, and other resources, it is commonly assumed that "a disproportionate number of students who participate in service learning are white, middle class, and female" (Jacoby 2015:226). However, recent data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) indicate this assumption may be inaccurate. Overall, first-generation and nonwhite students are less likely than their more traditionally advantaged peers to engage in HIPs (Finley and McNair 2013). However, when these HIPs are broken down by category, we find that African American and Latino students were disproportionately *more* likely than their white peers to engage in service-learning (Kinzie 2012). In addition, first-generation college students were more likely than non–first generation students to report engaging in service-learning in both their first and senior years, even as they lag behind their non–first generation peers in other HIP participation (NSSE 2017). There is a clear gender disparity in service-learning participation: Among graduating seniors who engaged in any HIPs during their college career, 66 percent of women, 57 percent of men, and 50 percent of gender-variant students reported participating in service-learning (NSSE 2017). Service-learning participants appear to be less white, less middle class, and more female than participants in other HIPs; this further emphasizes the need to better understand how students from diverse backgrounds experience the service-learning process.

Indeed, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2017) confirms that American college students are an increasingly diverse population. The proportion of undergraduate students who were nonwhite more than doubled between 1990 and 2016 (from 22.5 percent to 46.2 percent). In 1990, fewer than half of high school students from low-income households enrolled in college, compared with nearly two-thirds of students from medium-income households. In 2016, nearly two-thirds of students from both low-income and medium-income households enrolled in college. Lieberman (2015:1) argues that rather than students and recipient populations standing on opposite ends of a demographic divide, "economically stressed and racially and ethnically diverse" communities that are often the recipients of community service increasingly mirror "the emerging 'new majority' of US college students."

While there is limited information about how beliefs regarding economic inequality among college students varies by SES, there is some evidence to indicate that students from marginalized backgrounds may be less likely have to have prejudiced attitudes toward the poor and more attuned to systemic, rather than individual, explanations for poverty. In a survey of college students in which 88 percent of the sample identified as middle, upper middle, or upper class, Abowitz (2005:721) found a "consistent image of student belief in social mobility based on individual achievement." Furthermore, intergroup contact theory (ICT) posits that having friendly, equal-status, personal relationships with those in poverty increases the likelihood that a person will hold sympathetic attitudes toward the poor (Lee and Farrell 2003; Lee, Jones, and Lewis 1990; Wilson 1996). Merolla, Hunt, and Serpe (2011) found that persons residing in communities with high concentrations of poverty were more likely than persons residing in wealthier communities to hold both individual- and systemic-level beliefs about the causes of poverty; what the authors refer to as a "dual consciousness" pattern.

Taken together, these findings suggest that students from low-SES backgrounds, by virtue of having greater exposure to people in poverty through their own communities and social networks, are likely to hold different attitudes toward people in poverty specifically as well as beliefs about the dynamics of poverty generally than students from middle- and high-SES backgrounds. However, traditional service-learning pedagogy primarily focuses on facilitating interpersonal exposure that will reduce prejudice and increase understanding of systemic inequality; in other words, this pedagogy is organized around the learning goals of traditionally advantaged students.

A second body of critique focuses on the prejudice reduction assumptions of service-learning pedagogy, rooted in ICT assumptions that interactions between relatively advantaged and relatively stigmatized groups (within a particular set of optimal conditions) contributes to prejudice reduction among the advantaged group through increased personal and social understanding (Allport 1954; Kolb 1975, 1984). Implementing service-learning in a way that effectively reduces prejudice among

the advantaged group is challenging, however. Erickson and O'Connor (2012) warn that if any one of the minimum conditions of ICT—pursuit of common goals, equal-status contact, contact that contradicts stereotypes, long-term contact, and social norms favoring contact—are not met, then it is likely that students will actually experience an *increase* in prejudice.

A third body of critique, drawing from Freire's (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, focuses on issues of equity and diversity of multicultural learning within service-learning experiences. It critiques traditional service-learning models for failing to fully develop reciprocity between students and the marginalized populations they serve (Bucher 2012; Thomas 1999; Verjee 2010). This shortcoming is a result of a "missionary ideology…that does not directly acknowledge what those others, particularly communities of color, might have to offer" (Weah, Simmons, and Hall 2000). The critical service-learning approach has focused extensively on the need for reciprocal learning between students and the marginalized populations they serve; however, there has been less focus in this literature on the impact of reciprocal learning between students. Rondini (2015) explores the importance of student discussion as an integral part of developing critical consciousness within a service-learning focused course. Drawing from hooks's (2010) concept of "engaged pedagogy," Rondini integrated stereotype awareness, structural analysis, and conversation-based learning to enhance students' development of critical consciousness. Although limited in scope due to small sample size, Rondini's findings indicate that student interaction serves as an integral part of the critical consciousness process by creating opportunities for reflexivity and contextualization of the service experience. Unexplored in this research and the broader body of critical service-learning research in general is the impact of reciprocal learning between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged students.

While we know that service-learning results in beneficial outcomes for students in general, we know very little about how the learning process within service-learning differs between traditionally advantaged and disadvantaged students. Ludwig's (2016) qualitative study found that ethno-racial minority and immigrant students who engaged in service-learning with a West African refugee community experienced different learning trajectories than their white counterparts. While white and nonimmigrant students primarily demonstrated prejudice reduction outcomes, those students who were "cultural insiders" with the population they served were able to form deeper and more reciprocal relationships with the population they served. In some cases, these cultural insider students described their service as being toward the white students in the class by easing their anxiety about entering an unfamiliar cultural space. This finding indicates that the prejudice reduction and multicultural competency outcomes most often associated with service-learning may be more applicable to traditionally advantaged students than students from less advantaged backgrounds.

The current study seeks to bridge these areas of critique by exploring how socioeconomic status influences students' service-learning outcomes. In both its pedagogical foundations and subsequent critiques, the primary focus of service-learning research has been on the mechanisms through which the service-learning experience leads to prejudice reduction and multicultural competency among students with high SES relative to the population they are serving. How might the learning trajectories and outcomes differ among students whose SES backgrounds are more similar to the population they are serving?

PROJECT DESIGN AND METHODS

Study Background

This project was designed to explore the impact of service-learning on students' perceptions of poverty and determine if student learning, as evidenced by their reflective coursework, differed based on SES. The study was conducted at a small, private liberal arts college in rural Appalachia. The institution focuses heavily on student engagement and experiential learning. The student population is comprised predominantly of full-time, traditional age (18–22 years), undergraduate students. The student population is 56 percent female and 78 percent white/non-Hispanic. More than half the students are in-state residents; 35 percent of full-time undergraduate students received a federal PELL grant in the year this study was conducted. The community that houses the college is 92 percent white, 5 percent African American, and 2 percent Hispanic. The poverty rate is almost 27 percent, and the median household income is $33,000, well below national and state averages (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). The surrounding community is primarily rural, and its main employers are mining,

oil/gas extraction companies, and educational service providers.

Food insecurity is a widespread problem in the county that houses the college. A Community Action Program provides free meals to school-age students during summer months because so many qualify for free or reduced lunches. The rate of food insecurity for all residents is nearly 15 percent but increases to 22 percent for children. About 32 percent of these children do not qualify for income-eligible federal nutrition assistance (Gundersen et al. 2017). The community is served by two local food banks, one of which was the service site for students in this project. The Mountain House[1] is an organization that primarily serves local food-insecure individuals and has a long history as a service site for students at the college.

Study Design

Two professors coordinated common learning experiences for students in two courses (Introduction to Social Justice and Social Problems) in the same semester. This collaboration was done to increase the sample size of the study as much as possible; class sizes at the college are typically 20 to 25 students. Although the two classes had different overall course requirements, the professors collaborated to ensure the course material relevant to the service-learning component was consistent. The common course material across these two classes included three lectures on food insecurity, welfare policy, and the role of nonprofits in addressing poverty as well as two common reading assignments (chapter one in Berry and Aron 2003; Pointak and Shulman 2014). The service-learning component involved two site visits, first a tour with the site manager and meet and greet with neighbors,[2] followed by a visit in which students planned, prepared, served, and dined with neighbors. The meal service was designed in coordination with the site manager to meet a specific need at the Mountain House: an evening meal service during the weekend. The site manager advised us that most meal services were implemented by local churches who consistently provided weekday lunch meals. This meant that families with school-aged children often missed out on the opportunity for a hot meal and community fellowship. At the advice and request of the site manager, we divided students into small groups of five or six for each meal service; overall, students from these two courses provided eight meal services on Saturday evenings over the course of two months. The students not only prepared and served the meal but also shared in the meal with the neighbors.

Assessments in both courses required students to complete written reflections about the experience. The first set of writing prompts were assigned prior to the service experience and required students to answer these questions: (1) What are your expectations about the people you think you might encounter? (2) Do you think there is a need in our community for a food bank service? (3) What are your expectations for the activities during your service time at the [Mountain House]? (4) What are your feelings about doing this service prior to taking any action? What experiences/knowledge inform your expectations about what this service will be like?

A second set of prompts was assigned after completion of the service experience and required students to respond to the following prompts: (1) Explain your observations/experiences in the context of relevant social justice theories/concepts. What seems to be the root cause of the issue your service seeks to address? (2) What institutional and cultural barriers does the population you served (food-insecure individuals) encounter in meeting their needs in our community? (3) How has this experience affected your worldview? Review your assumptions in your first reflection assignment and assess whether and to what extent your perspective has changed. (4) What next steps need to be taken to address the social injustice of food insecurity?

Forty-seven students completed the demographic survey and the service-learning activity. Four cases were dropped because these students failed to address some of the key areas of reflection, resulting in a sample of 43 student reflections. Each student signed informed consent allowing their coursework to be analyzed. The research was approved through the College's Institutional Research Review Board.

Variables

In the first week of the course, students completed a demographic survey that requested gender, race, and information on their socioeconomic background. To minimize bias, the instructors did not review these surveys until after the course was completed. All respondents reported being male or female. The survey included seven possible race categories; however, due to the small number of students of color in the classes, race was condensed to white and non-white. We measured students' SES using an index of two measures: a resource-based measure (parents'

Table 1. Code Descriptions.

Prejudiced attitudes indicator	
Negative	Describes problems of poverty/food insecurity using negative stereotypes about the poor, blaming individual behaviors.
Discomfort	Expresses discomfort, anxiety, fear, and so on about interactions or anticipated interactions with service population.
Prejudice reduction indicator	
Open eyes	Describes an eye-opening experience or change in worldview as a result of service experience.
Feel good	Describes personal satisfaction and/or positive feelings toward service population as a result of service experience.
Unaware	Expresses surprise at services offered by the organization and/or types of issues/ obstacles faced by service population as a result of service experience.
Systemic understanding indicator	
Systemic-alone	Emphasizes systemic and/or institutional responses to the problems of poverty and food insecurity (e.g., increasing the minimum wage, employment access, welfare access, etc.) over individual responses (e.g., work ethic, food donations, increased awareness).
Systemic-combined	Equally emphasizes systemic and/or institutional responses to the problems of poverty and food insecurity (e.g., increasing the minimum wage, employment access, welfare access, etc.) alongside individual responses (e.g., work ethic, food donations, increased awareness).

education) and a subjective identity measure (self-identified social class). Students were asked to identify the education level of their most highly educated parent or primary guardian in the household in which they were raised and the social class standing in which they spent the majority of their childhood. For parents' education, 23 percent responded their parents' highest level of education was high school or less, 28 percent some college or associate's degree, 26 percent college degree, and 23 percent professional degree. For social class standing of the household, 2 percent responded poor, 40 percent working class, 43 percent middle class, and 15 percent responded upper middle class or wealthy. We weighted the two index variables differently, with parents' education comprising two-thirds of the index score and self-described social class comprising one-third. We used this weighting procedure because research comparing resource- and subjective-based measures demonstrate that respondents tend to overestimate their middle-class membership relative to their resources (Bird and Newport 2017). Respondents whose weighted SES scores were within one standard deviation of the mean were categorized as medium SES (23 percent), below one standard deviation of the mean as low SES (34 percent), and above one standard deviation of the mean as high SES (43 percent) (see Table 2 later in the article).

Coding

The qualitative coding was conducted using the Coding Analysis Toolkit available through the University of Pittsburgh's Qualitative Data Analysis Program. One researcher conducted four rounds of coding to ensure coding consistency. Student essays, matched with their demographic survey responses, were analyzed and coded for key terms. Codes fell into three main categories. We classified a response as having the *prejudice attitude indicator* if it was coded as containing either the "negative" or "discomfort" codes; as having the *prejudice reduction indicator* if it was coded as containing the "open eyes," "feel good," or "unaware" codes' and as having the *systemic understanding* indicator if it contained either the "systemic-alone" or "systemic-combined" codes. In addition to these, we also provide summary data for the systemic-alone code separate from the systemic understanding indicator in which it is included. We pulled out this code to further explore the dual consciousness pattern noted by Merolla et al. (2011); in other words, to explore which groups of students were more likely to emphasize systemic over individual explanations of poverty and which were likely to hold both of these understandings simultaneously.

Table 1 provides an overview of the code descriptions used in the analysis. Our analysis was

Table 2. Demographic Summary of Sample.

	Total	Low Socioeconomic Status	Medium Socioeconomic Status	High Socioeconomic Status
Total				
Percentage	100.0	34.0	23.4	42.6
N	43	15	10	18
Sex				
Male				
Percentage	37.2	14.0	9.3	14.0
N	16	6	4	6
Female				
Percentage	62.8	34.9	23.3	41.9
N	27	15	10	18
Race and ethnicity				
White				
Percentage	72.1	20.9	16.3	34.9
N	31	9	7	15
Nonwhite				
Percentage	27.9	14.0	7.	7.0
N	12	6	3	3

concerned with comparing overall differences during the service experience between students from different SES backgrounds, not with measuring the magnitude of those differences. We therefore coded each student response only once for the presence or absence of each of the seven codes; for example, if a response described feeling discomfort, anxiety, or fear before or during the service experience, that response would be marked as containing the discomfort code regardless of the number of times the student mentioned feeling uncomfortable in his or her response.

The coding results were compared between low-, medium-, and high-SES students as well as between white and nonwhite students and male and female students. We analyzed the results using single-tail independent sample *t* tests for statistical significance between SES groups. We considered single-tail *t* tests more appropriate than two-tailed *t* tests in the context of this study due to its small sample size and because of the abundance of evidence available in the existing literature that indicates the direction of the hypothesized relationship (i.e., that populations with greater direct exposure to poverty hold less prejudiced views and are more likely to view poverty as a structural rather than individual situation). Two-tailed *t* tests were used to test the difference between white and nonwhite students and male and female students because there is insufficient evidence in the literature to

indicate the direction the hypothesized relationship between these groups independent of their SES.

FINDINGS

Quantitative Analysis

Demographic characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 2. The student demographics in this sample reflected recent NSSE (2017) data on service-learning participants. All students in this study were traditional college age (18–22 years). Compared with the broader student population, this sample of students were more female (63 percent compared with 56 percent campuswide) and less white (72 percent compared with 77 percent campuswide). Although the campus does not collect data on student SES, we know that 35 percent of full-time undergraduates on campus receive a federal PELL grant; this corresponds closely with the 34 percent of students in our sample who were classified as low SES based on their parents' education and self-identified social class. Forty-three percent of students in the sample were classified as high SES and 23 percent as middle SES; this pattern likely reflects the relatively high tuition cost of a small, private institution, which is less affordable for middle-class families who don't otherwise qualify for federal tuition assistance.

Table 3. Percentage of Students Who Reported Relevant Codes by Demographic Characteristics.

		Prejudice Attitude Indicator	Prejudice Reduction Indicator	Systemic Understanding Indicator	Systemic-alone Code
Total N	43	6	21	15	11
Percentage socioeconomic status					
Low	15	16.7	19.0	66.7	90.9
Medium	10	0.0	42.9	6.7	9.1
High	18	83.3	6.7	22.2	0.0
Percentage sex					
Male	16	50.0	42.9	33.3	36.4
Female	27	50.0	57.1	66.7	63.6
Percentage race					
White	31	100.0	71.4	80.0	72.7
Nonwhite	12	0.0	28.6	20.0	27.3

Table 3 displays the percentage of students whose responses contained the three main indicator variables and the systemic-alone code within the demographic categories of SES, sex, and race. Several interesting patterns emerge. Although only six students indicated prejudiced attitudes toward the service population prior to service, most of these (83.3 percent) were high SES, and all were white. Far more students indicated a reduction in prejudice after service (n = 21), suggesting that many students did not admit to prejudiced attitudes prior to service but upon reflection after service, indicated that they had previously held negative stereotypes that were challenged as a result of service. Among those who demonstrated a reduction in prejudice after service, most were white (71.4 percent). Eleven students emphasized only systemic explanations for food insecurity; among these, nearly all (90.9 percent) were low SES, and a majority were female (63.6 percent) and white (72.7 percent). The statistical significance of these patterns was tested using *t* tests; the results are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4 displays the results of the *t* tests that compared the mean differences in the proportion of students whose responses contained the relevant coding indicators between low-, medium-, and high-SES students as well as between white and nonwhite students and male and female students. In response to our first question, we found that low-SES students were significantly less likely than high-SES students to indicate prejudiced attitudes toward the service population. There was no significant difference between low- and medium-SES students in indicating prejudiced attitudes. In

response to our second question, we found that low-SES students were also significantly less likely than both medium- and high-SES students to indicate a reduction in prejudice toward the service population. Exploration of student responses in the next section indicate that this is driven by the fact that low-SES students were less likely to hold prejudiced attitudes in the first place. Finally, in response to our third question, we found that low-SES students were significantly more likely than both medium- and high-SES students to emphasize systemic/institutional solutions to addressing the problem of food insecurity. Interestingly, there were four students who equally emphasized individual and systemic understandings: All were high SES and white, and three out of the four were female. Additionally, we found that whites were significantly more likely than nonwhite students to hold prejudiced attitudes toward the service population; however, there were no other significant differences on any of our other measures between white and nonwhite students or male and female students.

Overall, these results indicate that low-SES students experience the learning processes of service-learning in a different way than medium- and high-SES students. The small sample size of this study limits the generalizability of these findings; however, important themes emerged from student reflections indicating that traditional service-learning pedagogy better serves middle- and high-SES students than low-SES students. In the next section, we put these results in the context of student responses and discuss the implications of these findings for service-learning pedagogy.

Table 4. Mean Differences in Presence of Relevant Codes between Demographic Groups.

	Prejudiced Attitudes	Prejudice Reduction	Systemic Understanding	Systemic-alone
Low socioeconomic status (SES) versus all other students	−.11*	−.34*	.49*	.63**
Low SES versus medium SES	.07	−.63*	.57**	.57**
Low SES versus high SES	−.21**	−.18	.44	.67**
White versus nonwhite	.18**	−.02	.14	.01
Male versus female	.08	.12	−.06	−.01

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Qualitative Analysis

The traditional service-learning pedagogical model, rooted in intergroup contact theory, focuses on decreasing prejudice and increasing understanding of the systemic dynamics of inequality. Among the students in this study, low-SES students were less likely than high-SES students to hold prejudiced attitudes. In fact, the majority of those who held prejudiced attitudes prior to service were high SES. For example, one high-SES male student wrote in his preservice essay:

> I think I will encounter people that try to make ends meet and strive hard to put food on the table for their family but just can't do it on their own for multiple reasons. Those people I truly feel sorry for. But also I think I might encounter people that are lazy and don't try their best to support there selves [*sic*] or their families and are just looking for easy free assistance instead of trying to work for it.

Another high-SES male student wrote in his post-service reflection that the main factors that explained why people in this community experienced food insecurity was because they "do not have the educational background to have a steady income" and because of "people not having the right mental state to be able to hold a job and support their selves." Although this student did comment that he observed many people with physical disabilities that could prevent them from working and that "these [assumptions] don't apply to everyone," he went on to argue that "I think [these assumptions] apply a lot" and that the main social change that needed to happen to address issues of economic inequality would be "people realizing early on in like high school that you need to work

hard… to keep good grades so you can hopefully have a chance of getting into college and getting a good education to be able to support yourself." The focus on the presumed educational deficits of the service population was shared by a high-SES female student, who also demonstrated the assumption that those in poverty are a burden on society, arguing that most food insecurity can be explained by "people who didn't finish educational wise…. They don't meet the needs in our community such as paying for taxes or helping out in the community by having stable jobs."

Because low-SES students were less likely to hold prejudiced attitudes, they were also less likely than middle- and high-SES students to demonstrate a decrease in prejudice and increase in empathy in connection with the service-learning experience. In contrast, we clearly observed these outcomes in many of the high-SES student responses. One high-SES white female response was typical of many of the prejudice reduction responses:

> It has opened my eyes that people who are on welfare or have food stamps because they are food insecure doesn't mean they are lazy people who don't want to work. They are people who have grown up in hard families and have wanted to get out but haven't had the support and ability to. They are nice individuals who care a lot.

Another high-SES white female student's response typified responses that indicated an increase in empathy: "[After watching people leave after the meal service] I thought to myself and wondered where each of these people went. Did they have a home? Were they on the street? It really changed my perspective seeing each of these people." Middle-SES students were no more likely than

low-SES students to hold prejudiced attitudes, but they were more likely to demonstrate the prejudice reduction indicator. This is primarily because middle-SES students were more likely than both low- and high-SES students to demonstrate both the feel good and unaware codes that are included in the prejudice reduction indicator. Although middle-SES students accounted for only 23 percent of the sample, they accounted for 55 percent of the essays that included the feel good code; low-SES students accounted for only 9 percent, and high-SES students accounted for 36 percent of instances of the feel good code. Similarly, of those who demonstrated the unaware code, two-thirds were middle SES, and one-third were high SES. There were no low-SES students who wrote about being unaware of the services offered by the Mountain House or the types of issues and obstacles that were faced by the service population.

Middle- and high-SES students overwhelmingly described positive emotions about their service experiences and tended to focus more on how the service experience affected them rather than the effect their service had on others. In her preservice essay, one high-SES nonwhite female wrote, "I believe I will probably enjoy this assignment . . . I will actually feel that I did something good as a human being." In a postservice essay, a middle-SES white female wrote, "The way they reacted made my heart light up. . . . It felt great to know we just helped at least some people." Another high-SES nonwhite female wrote, "I love it! I love to show care and love for people and I thought this was a great experience. The people were super nice and thanked us for everything. They even said my potatoes was super good!" In contrast, one low-SES white female wrote:

> My family often lives paycheck to paycheck, and my parents have struggled in the past with providing quality meals and other items to my brothers and me. As such, I understand what these people are going through and want to be able to be there for those who are not as fortunate and are struggling temporarily.

While middle- and high-SES students tended to approach the service-learning experience from feelings of personal satisfaction, low-SES students tended to describe their motivations in terms of personal experiences with poverty and the impact of their actions on others.

While a clear majority of low-SES students emphasized a systemic understanding of the dynamics of food insecurity and poverty, medium- and high-SES students were much more likely to emphasize an individualist understanding. The prejudice reduction focus of traditional service-learning pedagogy may contribute to this individualist focus. In response to a writing prompt that asked students to discuss what steps should be taken to address the issues they observed at the Mountain House, one high-SES white female student who discussed being humbled by conversing with those who were "less fortunate" went on to emphasize that stereotype reduction among those with greater privilege was a central factor to reducing poverty, arguing that "we need to decrease our own assumptions and prejudices against this group of people. Lifting away these stereotypes will allow individuals the opportunity to help people living in poverty. . . . We need people to change their assumptions and thoughts about people less fortunate than them in order to help them." Overall, the majority of medium- and high-SES students emphasized approaches to addressing economic inequality that were rooted in changing individual attitudes and behaviors. Many middle- and high-SES students proposed poverty reduction solutions identical or very similar to that suggested by one high-SES white female: "I think people in the community should get together and have a donation drive or food drive to collect food for the ones that are food insecure and need help."

In contrast, the majority of low-SES students emphasized systemic solutions. One low-SES nonwhite male focused on societal allocation of resources as being central to the problem of food insecurity: "According the $4.1 trillion proposed budget chart discussed in class, there is approximately 3% dedicated to food and agriculture. It's not that we don't have the resources to fix this problem. However, at the end of the day, how big of an emphasis do we put on hunger?" In another example, one low-SES white female focused on the institutional and infrastructural obstacles faced by those who face housing insecurity:

> The criminalization of vagrancy has caused a disruption as officers rip down handmade shelters and leave the homeless with no place to go. The belief that these individuals could make their way to [nearby cities] is invalid, since there are no methods of public transportation to go from our city to the shelters available elsewhere.

Several low-SES students focused more broadly on social organization. One low-SES nonwhite female

stated that "food insecurity comes from larger social problems such as low paying jobs with no benefits," while another very succinctly stated: "The problem [with food insecurity] isn't the quantity of it, but rather the distribution." A low-SES nonwhite male student argued: "Whether that be more access to public assistance or other alternatives, [solutions] should be less focused on feeding the hungry and more focused on creating a society where less people or no people are hungry." While most of the middle- and high-SES students focused on very similar individualized solutions centered on fundraising, awareness raising, and food collections, low-SES students tended to propose much more specific, diverse, and systemic-oriented solutions.

The results of this study suggested that white students were significantly more likely than nonwhite students to hold prejudiced attitudes but found no differences in the prejudice reduction or systemic understanding indicators by race. There were no significant differences in any of these indicators by sex. However, the small sample size of this study means that we could not undertake any meaningful analysis of how race, class, and sex intersect to produce different learning trajectories within service-learning. Of the 12 nonwhite students included in this study, 6 were low SES, 3 medium SES, and 3 high SES. A few patterns did emerge that provided some indication of how future research might approach intersectionality in service-learning pedagogy. Two high-SES females who were both from the same major urban center, one white and one nonwhite, compared their observations of urban and rural poverty:

> [High-SES nonwhite female] I'm not sure whether or not a food bank service is necessary [in this rural community]. Being from [large metropolitan area] I feel as though the situation there is much worse than what it is here....I really don't see homeless people like I would typically see at every corner in [home city].

> [High-SES white female] Helping out in inner-city...communities is much different. A lot of people who use the [Mountain House] were employed at a lower wage or unemployed because of disability. Most of them had homes and families. The people who use [soup kitchen in home city] had no family, were struggling with finding

employment, often homeless and struggling with addiction.

In contrast, students from rural areas of all SES backgrounds tended to be more attuned to the differences between urban and rural poverty and frequently made note of the ways in which lack of public transportation and lack of public housing infrastructure made rural poverty/homelessness look very different from urban poverty/homelessness.

In addition to urban/rural background, cultural background may impact how students experience service-learning. There was only one student in the sample who identified as nonwhite Hispanic. She was middle SES and grew up in the southwestern United States. She noted feeling very sad after having a conversation with an elderly woman who came to the meal service early in order to socialize. The student commented that she found loneliness among the elderly to be shocking, whereas her classmates were less surprised; she described this difference as "just a Mexican thing. Whereas in the United States older people are more likely to be sent to nursing homes rather than family taking care of them. This is something I never understood about the American culture." The student emphasized that the central thing she learned from this experience was the important role that the organizations like the Mountain House played in building community solidarity.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the analyses provided here suggest that service-learning experiences focused on a traditional pedagogical approach of prejudice reduction may be failing to capture the unique learning trajectories of low-SES students. These students appear to be more focused than their higher SES peers on the impact their service has on others rather than on themselves, more attuned to reciprocal learning, and more attuned to systemic explanations for inequality.

Although the traditional prejudice reduction approach to service-learning appears to disproportionately benefit higher SES students, this doesn't mean this approach must be abandoned. Prejudice reduction is an important outcome of service-learning and an important first step in empathy building for many middle- and high-SES students who are likely to have limited contact with people who have experienced poverty. However, the results of this study indicated that even though middle- and

high-SES students demonstrated prejudice reduction at a higher rate than low-SES students (who had lower prejudice to begin with), it was still fewer than half of these students who demonstrated prejudice reduction and even fewer who demonstrated a systemic understanding of economic inequality. Even among high-SES students who did demonstrate prejudice reduction, this prejudice reduction often led them to individualist approaches to addressing the problems of economic inequality, such as food drives and changing attitudes. Low-SES students were more attuned to the systemic dynamics of inequality, indicating that they are better equipped to integrate their service-learning experiences with course material to achieve the main objectives of service-learning.

One unexpected finding was that the four students who equally emphasized both individual and systemic solutions were high SES. Merolla et al. (2011) found that persons residing in communities with high concentrations of poverty were more likely than persons residing in wealthier communities to hold *both* individual- and systemic-level beliefs about the causes of poverty; what Merolla et al. refer to as a dual consciousness pattern. Based on this, we should expect to see more low- and medium-SES students who grew up in high-poverty communities in Appalachia to demonstrate this dual consciousness pattern. Although the small sample size of our study limits our ability to speculate about possible explanations, we can raise some questions for future research. The Merolla et al. study focused on people who lived in high-poverty urban neighborhoods; the dual consciousness pattern may not apply in the same way to high-poverty rural areas. Another possible explanation is that these high-SES students may be more likely to be high academic achievers due to cultural capital; in other words, they may have been more attuned to what the professor expected to hear. It's possible that even though they held individualist beliefs about poverty, they knew how to articulate the systemic beliefs that they knew the professor expected. Differences in cultural capital and urban/rural context should be included in future analyses of service-learning outcomes along with more nuanced intersectional analyses of race, class, and gender.

CONCLUSION

As service-learning becomes more integrated into higher education curricula and more students from low-SES backgrounds enter college, it is important that instructors are attuned to the ways in which socioeconomic diversity impacts student learning outcomes within service-learning. Although the current study is limited by its small sample size, small range of ethno-racial diversity, and limited information on students' cultural and geographic backgrounds, the findings of this study highlight several important patterns that can be used to improve service-learning outcomes for students of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

Toward that end, we encourage others to continue this initiative. We recommend four main areas of empirical and theoretical focus to propel this inquiry forward. First, we recommend that instructors construct essay prompts that propel students to more critically engage with their assumptions about the service population. Although we asked students to make note of their assumptions prior to starting their service, our analysis would have benefited from more detailed information about the sources and motivations of these assumptions. Second, we encourage instructors to explore creative ways to implement more opportunities for engagement between students and the service population; this may mean critically engaging with the structure of higher education itself. We are aware that the limited contact between our students and the service population posed barriers to opportunities for deep learning and may run the risk of increasing prejudice in some instances if the optimal conditions for intergroup contact are not met. Unfortunately, the structure of most college courses (e.g., 150 minutes of classroom time split between two or three class meetings per week) presents a barrier to providing sufficient opportunities for the kind of sustained interaction and deep learning that leads most effectively leads to prejudice reduction. As we build more empirical evidence regarding this dynamics and processes, it is important that service-learning educators work with their institutions' administrative policymakers to find ways to address the structural barriers to implementing high quality service-learning specifically as well as high impact practices more broadly. Third, recognizing that prejudice reduction isn't the most important learning outcome for all students, assessment should be based on a variety of outcomes. Instructors should provide more opportunities for interactive reflection between students—more data are needed to understand how students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds affect each other's learning trajectories.

Finally, we recommend that instructors engage more critically with issues of insider-outsider dynamics and the intersections between service site context and social identities in their design of service-learning course components. Our focus on food insecurity prompted us to think critically about the impact of students' SES on their service experience. A service-learning component focused on domestic violence, for example, may need to more closely attend to the impact students' identities and cultural beliefs surrounding gender may have on their learning experience. Additionally, the racial composition of rural and urban areas raises questions about how students in these contexts perceive of "deserving" and "undeserving poor." There are innumerable combinations of social identities and service site contexts that could impact the student learning experience among an increasingly diverse student body; we believe that service-learning pedagogy is in need of more developed theoretical frameworks focused on intersectionality in service-learning.

This exploratory study sought to identify themes and patterns that may serve as focus points in future research. Despite the small sample size, the findings of this study provide a strong foundation on which to build more robust, nuanced, and critically focused research on service-learning outcomes in the future. Understanding the impacts of these initiatives will facilitate more effective and equitable service-learning offerings in higher education. It is not enough to simply promote greater access to service-learning experiences among diverse student populations; we must also ensure that students of all backgrounds have equitable access to the educational benefits of those experiences while recognizing that those educational benefits may not look the same for all students.

EDITOR'S NOTE

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NOTES

1. Name changed.
2. *Neighbors* refers to the service-recipient population; this is the preferred term used by the Mountain House to refer to the clients of its food pantry and services.

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