

Service Learning: Reframing Perspective on Social Injustice

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Service learning forces you to confront a simple fact: much of our blessings or burdens are not earned, but instead are the result of structural factors in society. Consequently, the privileged – whether it is financially, socially, or academically – must accept something that might make them uncomfortable: their success is, to some extent, the product of chance. Many of the privileged are born into circumstances (for instance, a socioeconomic status or race) that are systematically favored in our society. Should we try to uphold a sense of fairness or justice in a world that, by nature, is riddled with this chance? Should the privileged work with the disenfranchised to lift their burdens, burdens that belong to our society as a whole? To me, this is what it means to live *for* the insights you’ve gained through service learning. Or, after having an experience with service learning and understanding the truth about how privilege is allocated, the systematically advantaged can choose to ignore the disadvantaged and live *with* their own burden: the belief that they unfairly reap unearned advantages. Hence, service learning reframes the way we view social problems and our role in alleviating them in a way that compels us to uphold a sense of justice, to leverage our privileges in hopes of benefiting the less fortunate. I will share with you how my experiences abroad precipitated crucial questions about how we attribute success or failure in the United States, how my service learning experiences played a role in forming my own beliefs on the matter, and why my new convictions urge me to act to mitigate social injustice.

My travel, academic, and service learning experiences have catalyzed such reflection during my undergraduate career at the University of Pennsylvania, where I am currently a senior. I can describe my experiences most simply in four parts: 1) I am the Co-Director for Penn Reading Initiative (PRI), a group of approximately 60 tutors that focuses on improving literacy rates at two elementary schools in West Philadelphia. 2) I have worked in College Access and Career Readiness (CACR), helping juniors and seniors with elements of the financial aid and college application process. 3) I studied abroad in Denmark for the Fall 2013 semester of my junior year, where I witnessed an entirely different cultural and social policy approach towards disadvantaged groups. 4) I served as a Teaching Assistant (TA) for *Social Policy and Citizenship* at Penn, an academically based community service (ABCS) course that compared the differing approaches to social policy and citizenship across the U.S. and various European Countries, such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and Denmark.

For *Social Policy and Citizenship*, I led a 2½-hour class about Denmark’s unique social policy and ideas towards citizenship. One of the readings I assigned was a composition of quotes from interviews with Danes; what better way to understand if a political system is working than to ask the people who pay for it, operate it, and benefit from it? One quote reminded me of my experience in Denmark while studying abroad: “...there is relatively little stigma attached to unemployment and little sense that unemployment is the result of individual pathology: it is a problem which anyone can experience” (Pringle and Harder 1999, 128).

Before sharing my anecdote, I will describe Denmark’s social policy and how it contrasts with that of the United States in order to provide formal context. Gøsta Esping-Andersen, a renowned Danish sociologist, categorized welfare state regimes into three distinct groups: social democratic, liberal, and corporatist-statist. Social democratic policy “promote[s] an equality of

the highest standards, not an equality of minimal needs,” whereas liberal social policy’s “entitlement rules are... strict and often associated with stigma... [and] benefits are typically modest” (Esping-Andersen 1990, 26–27). Denmark’s social policy is classified as social democratic, while the United States’ social policy is the archetype of the liberal approach. Denmark’s social policy is more extensive and universal than that of the United States, where welfare tends to be means-tested (i.e. qualified by income) and highly stigmatized. These contrasting policy approaches reflect differing cultures and attitudes. Demographics plausibly contribute to this difference as well. Denmark has a highly homogeneous population; 5.03 million of the 5.63 million residents (89.3%) are ethnically Danish, with the other 10.7% composed of immigrants and their descendants (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark). This uniformity of the population likely increases a Dane’s propensity to empathize and care for other struggling Danes. On the other hand, the United States is composed of an immensely heterogeneous population, which may be responsible – in part – for its more austere approach towards welfare.

Several of my Danish friends demonstrated the tendency to believe that all citizens deserve equal status and that individuals’ situations are often reflective of events that occur outside of their control. This belief percolates through Danish society even in small, seemingly insignificant daily activities. One night my Danish friend Alexander and I were walking home from dinner and a woman who appeared homeless asked Alexander to borrow his cellphone so she could call a friend. Alexander said yes, and the woman talked with her friend for five or ten minutes while Alexander and I waited. As we walked away I had several questions for Alexander: Why did you trust her with your cellphone? Is it common for homeless people in Denmark to have a social life like that? Do most Danes interact with homeless people in that way? Alexander was quite casual about the whole interaction, saying sometimes people just are not suited for the jobs that are currently available, may have a psychological issue, or may simply not be able to hold down a full-time job. He said they are still nice people, no different than him or me. And yes, homeless people can have friends, too.

Instead of further questioning Alexander’s generosity or Denmark’s culture, I instead began to question why we treat homeless people the way we do in the United States and particularly here in Philadelphia. Most Americans ignore the homeless, distrust them, fear them, or blame the homeless for their problems. This treatment of the homeless can be linked to the fundamental attribution error, a concept I learned in a psychology course last semester. The fundamental attribution error is our tendency to think what happens to others is a result of their personality or internal disposition, underestimating the influence of external factors.

A Penn student and a homeless person are not as different as we think; maybe external factors – such as family support, structural changes in the economy, or socioeconomic background – are responsible for much of their situation. We often attribute the success of Penn students primarily to their internal disposition, when much of it is in fact decided by the flip of a coin: Which families were the students born into? What color is their skin? Who are their parents?

These questions often come to mind as I work in nearby West Philadelphia schools. How did I end up on this side of the interaction? Why is that I am the one who leaves my Ivy League school on Fridays to help students become interested in and prepared to go to college? Why are those students in need of my help? It is tempting for people to say it is solely their character (namely intelligence or ambition) that has made them successful; it is tempting to believe

wholeheartedly in the American Dream. But if they believe this, the natural extension is to say that others' lack of success must be the result of their character flaws (for example, laziness).

I am tempted to believe in the American Dream. In fact, my college application essays invoked it, and, on the surface, I represent many of its ideals. I came to college from a single-mother household of low socioeconomic status, witnessing my mother's resilience in the face of medical, financial, and marital problems. My academic diligence and passion for knowledge fueled my success in high school, admission to an Ivy League school, and receipt of generous financial aid. However, my service learning work has made me question this alluring story, *my alluring story*.

While I helped students with their college essays, many of them shared their stories: vulnerabilities, family backgrounds, adversities, and dreams for the future. Most had minimal parental support when it came to education and attended an underfunded urban school, where the culture did not emphasize academic achievement, for the entirety of their childhood. Despite this, some of the students showed great promise and ambition. However, gaining admittance to a university and the financial aid needed to attend is difficult when you have low standardized test scores, no extracurricular activities on your resume (opportunities for such activities are almost nonexistent at severely underfunded schools), and no counselor or parent for encouragement and mentorship.

I am humbled each time I go into the schools and am forced to accept that some of my privileges were given to me, not earned. Though I faced significant adversities, I was not marginalized in the same way these students are being marginalized. After a service learning experience like this, the person going into the school to help — in other words the relatively privileged one in the interaction — will inevitably feel a sense of gratefulness, and this is commonly understood. But what is often overlooked, is the deep sense of injustice one understands in the process. For me, this is what made service learning life changing.

When a relatively privileged person has this realization, he or she can respond in one of two ways. The first approach is composed of two options: actively ameliorating the societal symptoms of the injustice or seeking reform to eliminate the injustice all together. The former is commonly done through volunteering or donating, while the latter is more difficult and requires catalyzing political change. I think of this as living *for* what service learning has taught me. The second approach is to simply ignore the injustice and focus on your own life; it surely sounds like the easier option. But this choice has a burden of its own: moral culpability for contributing to the injustice. I think of this, on the other hand, as living *with* what service learning has taught me.

Service learning has fundamentally changed the way I view social issues and my role in reducing them. After an experience with service learning, inaction may produce a moral burden that weighs on the conscience of the non-actor. Had I never worked as a literacy tutor or a college counselor in West Philadelphia, I would still believe that I had earned all of the privileges I currently have. Inaction, on my behalf, might seem fair in this world. But this is not the world I live in anymore; I now feel compelled to act, to use my unfair privileges to help those who inherited disadvantages. Had I never studied in Denmark, I may not have asked the critical questions about culture and social policy in the United States that led me to see disenfranchisement as the byproduct of societal issues, to see individuals' struggles and failures in a larger context. Every Wednesday and Friday morning as I bike home from the local elementary school, where I work as a literacy tutor, I feel a genuine sense of hope. I feel hopeful, not just for my student, but for my community, for my society. I think that in some small way, I

am working toward relieving injustices that are not just borne by the disadvantaged, but by our society as a whole.

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