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“Bad Things Could Happen”

How Fear Impedes Social Responsibility in Privileged Adolescents

Scott Seider

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In this study, I compared the shifts in attitude of affluent high school seniors participating in a course on social justice issues to a control group of similar adolescents. In this course, participating adolescents learned about social justice issues such as homelessness, poverty, world hunger, and illegal immigration. An analysis of presurvey and postsurvey data revealed that the adolescents participating in the social justice course experienced a decline over the course of the semester in their support for educational equity between wealthy and poor communities. Interviews with these adolescents and analyses of their student work revealed that their shifts in attitude were influenced by fears about the possibility of one day becoming poor or homeless themselves.

Keywords: *social responsibility; emerging adulthood; privilege; social justice; equity; activism; civic engagement*

History may ultimately remember Microsoft founder Bill Gates as much for his role in combating worldwide poverty and disease as for the advent of the personal computer. And, yet, in his remarks at the 2007 Harvard Commencement, Gates characterized his adolescence and emerging adulthood as sheltered from the challenges facing the world's poor. Gates (2007) explained that growing up in an affluent family, attending preparatory school and then Harvard resulted in him reaching adulthood “with no real awareness of the awful inequities in the world—the appalling

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disparities of health, and wealth, and opportunity that condemn millions of people to lives of despair” (p. 1).

Although Bill Gates has gone on to enjoy one of the most extraordinary careers in American history, the insulation he described as a privileged teenager is not unique. Numerous researchers have reported on characteristics of affluent families that can inhibit their teens’ exposure to issues of social justice. Giroux (1992) noted that factors such as race and class create borders that separate and distance groups of people from one another. Stuber (2006) added that individuals typically reflect upon their own class status by comparing their lives to those “standing above them in the status hierarchy” rather than to those “standing below” (p. 311). Finally, Perry (1997) and Hauser (2006) have found income level to be inversely correlated with a commitment to public interest, civic duty, and charitable donation.

In short, numerous obstacles inhibit affluent teenagers from developing a sense of social responsibility for the challenges faced by many individuals in neighboring towns, states, and countries across the world. By social responsibility, I refer to a feeling of obligation to improve the circumstances of those who are struggling or in need of support. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that, “No society can long sustain itself unless its members have learned the sensitivities, motivations and skills involved in assisting and caring for other human beings” (p. 53). He believed that schools must explicitly teach children how to care for others and to see such care as an obligation.

In this study, I investigated the response of affluent high school seniors to learning about issues of social justice. In so doing, I sought to offer insights to parents, educators, policymakers, and researchers about the process by which privileged adolescents develop (or fail to develop) a sense of social responsibility. Due to the relatively short time frame within which this study was conducted, I focused on the ability of students’ learning to impact their attitudes towards issues of social justice. Further, longitudinal research is necessary to consider how these shifts in attitude translate into behavior and action.

Research Context

This study considered the influence of a social justice course upon the attitudes and values of affluent high school seniors. Such courses have long been a part of the American educational experience. In his history of moral education in America, McClellan (1999) explained that early proponents of public education such as Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, and Noah Webster “placed special emphasis on the teaching of ‘virtue,’ which they defined roughly as the willingness to set aside purely selfish motives and

work for the good of the larger society” (p. 13). The support for various forms of civic, moral, character, and social justice curricula ebbed and flowed throughout the 20th century, but has experienced a surge of support over the last decade from both conservatives and liberals. Most recently, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement issued a report that called for more coursework on social issues at the secondary and postsecondary level (Kiesa et al., 2007). However, the scholarship on the effectiveness of such coursework is mixed.

On the positive side, Torney-Purta’s (2002) study of adolescents across 28 countries found that exposing students to a civics curriculum was a significant predictor of future voting. This finding supported earlier research by Almond and Verba (1963) across five countries that found adults with the highest levels of political efficacy to be those exposed to discussions and debates of political issues during their schooling. Likewise, Galston (2001) reported that civic knowledge is a consistent predictor of civic participation, and Niemi and Junn’s (1998) evaluation of National Assessment of Educational Progress survey data revealed civics courses to positively impact the civic knowledge of high school seniors. Finally, Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont and Stephens (2003) argued that

Colleges and universities can also transform students’ interpretive frames, for better or worse, through traditional academic coursework . . . A powerful course can open students’ eyes to global economic interdependence or the influence of opportunity structures on individual achievement. (p. 109)

Another group of scholars, however, have reported few lasting effects from such courses. Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, and Atkins (2007) reported from their evaluation of National Educational Longitudinal Survey data that the relationship between civic knowledge and civic engagement is relatively weak, as is the relationship between civic knowledge and the amount of social science coursework taken in high school. These scholars concluded that civic courses are not a cost-effective strategy for promoting civic engagement. They argued, instead, that experiential activities such as high school community service are a better mechanism for encouraging civic engagement. Specifically, Hart et al. reported that performing community service in high school—even when such service is mandatory—is a statistically significant predictor of local and national voting 8 years after high school. Moreover, those who participated in community service in high school were significantly more likely to perform community service as adults

(Hart et al., 2007). These findings supported earlier scholarship that documented the ability of community service to deepen students' sense of social responsibility (Everett, 1998; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Metz, McLellan, & Youniss, 2003; Youniss, McClellan, & Yates, 1999; Youniss & Yates, 1997).

Particularly relevant to this current study was Youniss and Yates' (1997) report on African-American teenagers from an urban parochial school who participated in a course on social justice issues along with regular volunteer work at a local soup kitchen. These scholars found that "Service within the context of the social justice course triggered political awareness and steered the identity process in a useful direction toward political involvement" (Youniss & Yates, p. 82). The study described in this article complements the work of Youniss and Yates by considering the impact of a social justice course (without accompanying volunteer work) upon a sample of predominantly white adolescents from an affluent suburban community.

Research Design and Methodology

This section provides detailed descriptions of the site and participants involved in this study as well as the data collection and data analytic methods employed.

Site

Glennview, Massachusetts,¹ is an upper-middle class suburban community located 15 miles southwest of Boston with a population of just under 14,000 people. The median family income in Glennview is \$98,600; the median home value is \$670,800; and the public school system spends more than \$9,000 per student per year. In terms of racial demographics, Glennview is 96% White, 3% Asian, and .5% Black. In 2005, a national magazine ranked Glennview 13th on a list of the "100 Best Places to Live in America."²

Glennview High School enrolls 750 students. More than 90% of these students go on to enroll in 4 year colleges. Seniors at Glennview High School fulfill their English/Language Arts requirement by choosing two semester-long courses from among the English department's five course offerings: Creative Writing, Humanities, Youth in Contemporary Literature, African-American Literature, and Literature and Justice. Students are randomly assigned to take one of their selected courses during the fall semester and the other during the spring semester. Each of these courses contains 20 to 30 students and is taught by a member of the Glennview High School English department.

Literature and Justice

The Glennview High School course catalog offers the following description of the Literature and Justice course:

In this course students will examine the question, "How do we determine what is just and unjust in the world in which we live?" Topics will include prison policy, juvenile justice, issues of poverty such as homelessness and hunger, and illegal immigration. Students will explore issues of ethics, justice, and obligation to others through various fiction and nonfiction works. Books read and discussed may include *Nickel and Dimed*, *Living at the Edge of the World*, *New Jack*, *There Are No Children Here*, and *Coyotes*.

As is evident in the short course description above, Literature and Justice sought to expose students to social issues such as poverty, homelessness, world hunger, and illegal immigration as well as to various political and philosophical perspectives on addressing these issues. The Literature and Justice instructor, Nancy Allington,³ explained that, in addition to her academic goals for her students, she aspired to motivate her students "to take action in their lives, whether it's some service or donating time or donating money or standing up for injustice, whether it's personal injustice or a collective injustice." A syllabus for Literature and Justice is available online as Appendix A (<http://scottseider.googlepages.com/badthings.doc>).

Educational Equity in Literature and Justice

There was no explicit unit on educational equity within the Literature and Justice curriculum; however, the topic arose in the course's units on poverty and immigration. Specifically, during the unit on poverty in America, students read *There Are No Children Here* by Alex Kotlowitz (1992), a journalistic account of two boys growing up in the Henry Horner housing project in Chicago. Literature and Justice participants also spent several weeks listening to a National Public Radio radio diary entitled *Ghetto Life 101* in which two teenage boys from Chicago's Ida B. Wells housing project offered an intimate look at urban America (Jones, Newman & Isay, 1993). Finally, in their study of immigration, students watched a documentary entitled *Fear and Learning at Hoover Elementary* in which they got a firsthand look at the challenges facing an urban elementary school in one of Los Angeles's poorest neighborhoods (Simon, 1996). Through these readings, radio diaries, and documentaries, Glennview seniors in Literature and Justice were offered a stark contrast between their own educational experiences in Glennview and those of America's poorest children.

Participants

This study's sample consisted of 83 Glennview High School seniors. The 40 students in the treatment group were the Glennview seniors enrolled in Literature and Justice for the fall semester of the 2006–2007 school year. The 43 students in the control group were the Glennview seniors who had elected to participate in Literature and Justice but were randomly assigned to take the course during the spring semester of the 2006–07 school year. During the fall semester, the 43 members of the control group were enrolled in three other senior English courses: Humanities, African-American Literature, and Creative Writing.

The students in the treatment and control groups were highly similar in terms of gender, race, religion, class status, and academic performance. Specifically, the treatment group was composed of 21 males and 19 females while the control group was composed of 23 males and 20 females. All 40 members of the treatment group identified as white while the control group included one student who identified as African-American and two students who identified as Lebanese-American. In both the treatment and control groups, there were two students who identified as “upper class” while the rest identified as either “middle class” or “upper middle class.” Finally, 25 members of the treatment group and 26 members of the control group identified as Catholic, with the rest of the students in each group identifying as Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and unaffiliated in similar proportions.

All 83 students in the study filled out initial and follow-up surveys. Additionally, I selected a purposeful subset of 21 students—10 from the treatment group and 11 from the control group—to participate in interviews at the beginning and conclusion of the fall semester (Maxwell, 1996). In selecting these 21 students, I strove to construct an interview pool in which the two groups were highly similar to one another as well as representative of the larger sample in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, and class status (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Data Collection

I surveyed all 83 Glennview High School seniors participating in this study at the start of the fall semester in mid-September and again at the conclusion of the fall semester in late January. The survey tool is available online at <http://scottseider.googlepages.com/badthings.doc> as Appendix B.

I also selected a diverse group of 21 students from the treatment and control groups to participate in in-depth interviews. I interviewed each student twice in order to allow for “prolonged engagement” with each participant (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The first interview took place at the

start of the fall semester in mid-September, and the second interview took place at the conclusion of the fall semester in late January. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. In the first interview, students reflected upon the framework through which they currently view themselves and their community as well as the actions they take that do or do not reflect this worldview. In the second interview, students reflected upon how the framework through which they view themselves and their community had or had not changed over the course of the fall semester. For both interviews, the protocol was sufficiently structured to ensure that questions posed to the students in the sample were open-ended, clear, and not overly complex (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). However, the protocol also allowed the flexibility to pose what Patton (1990) referred to as probes or follow-up questions. The protocol for both interviews is available online as Appendix C at <http://scottseider.googlepages.com/badthings.doc>.

I also collected copies of all written assignments completed by students participating in the fall semester Literature and Justice course and conducted observations of three of the four senior English courses offered at Glennview High School during the fall semester. I conducted 5 observations of the Creative Writing class, 7 observations of the Humanities class, and 13 observations of the Literature and Justice class. I was unable to conduct observations of the African-American Literature course because the course's instructor declined my request to observe the class in session.

Measures

The survey completed by participants at the beginning and end of the fall semester consisted of demographic questions as well as questions intended to ascertain students' attitudes on the various social issues covered in the Literature and Justice curriculum. These social issues included criminal justice, homelessness, domestic poverty, humanitarian aid, and immigration, each of which constitutes one section of the survey. The survey also included sections on environmental and educational issues in order to consider the ability of Literature and Justice to influence students' beliefs about issues that were not explicit course units. Finally, the survey tool included an eighth section in which students responded to more general prompts about their personal values. Each of the survey items utilized Likert scales ranging from 1 (*strong disagreement with the given statement*) to 7 (*strong agreement with the given statement*). The survey items themselves were adapted from items on more than 15 existing surveys including the American Values Survey (Center for American Values, 2006); World Values

Survey Questionnaire (Institute for Social Research, 2000); Americans on Foreign Aid and Hunger (Program on International and Policy Attitudes, 2001); and International IEA Civic Education Study (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 1999).

This article focuses on students' shifts in attitude towards issues of educational equity (see Seider, in press, 2008, for analyses of Glennview seniors' shifts in attitude towards issues of humanitarian aid and homelessness, the other two social issues for which significant findings emerged). The educational equity section of the survey tool consisted of items adapted from several existing surveys on Americans' beliefs and attitudes. To consider the core underlying construct tapped by these items, I conducted a principal components analysis on this study's pretreatment survey items regarding educational equity. The principal components analysis indicated that one key construct appeared to be measured by these items, the first component accounting for 60% of the standardized units of variance (eigenvalue = 2.40). The composite showed good internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$).

Quantitative Data Analysis

I began my quantitative analysis by fitting a taxonomy of multiple regression models to consider the impact of the treatment (LITANDJUS) upon Glennview seniors' beliefs about educational equity. I first specified a baseline covariate model to control for any confounding effects of students' gender (GENDER), religiosity (RELIGIOUS), class status (CLASS), academic achievement (GRADES), participation in community service as a high school student (HICOMSER), and parents' participation in community service (PARCOMSER). Given the statistically null findings for my control variables on the outcome, I removed them for parsimony in subsequent models. I then specified a residual change model by adding pretreatment scores (PREATTITUDE) as a predictor, along with the treatment variable (LITANDJUS). It is a model of change in that the treatment variable (LITANDJUS) is predicting only outcome variance not accounted for by the pretest (PREATTITUDE).

Table 1 reports on the model fitted for the educational equity composite. The tables found online at <http://scottseider.googlepages.com/badthings.doc.as> Appendix D report on the models fitted for the survey items that make up the composite. As one can see from the tables, the predictor variables that remain integral to each model are students' pretreatment attitudes (PREATTITUDE) and participation in Literature and Justice (LITANDJUS). For each of these models, I determined the effect size of participation in Literature and Justice using Cohen's *d*.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The transcripts from all 21 interviews with Glennview seniors were coded using etic and emic codes drawn from the scholarship on adolescent development, emerging adulthood, civic engagement, and social justice education. Etic codes refer to terminology with meaning to the social science community while emic codes refer to terminology meaningful to the particular community under consideration. I checked the reliability of my codebook and coding process by enlisting a colleague from the Harvard Graduate School of Education trained in qualitative methods to code 20% of the student interviews. In comparing our interrater reliability, we achieved a Cohen's Kappa (unweighted) of .85, which is considered to be a very good strength of agreement (Fleiss, 1981).

Upon completing the coding and categorizing of the transcribed interviews, I constructed matrices that juxtaposed the themes and patterns emerging from the data with the relevant scholarship (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I also developed narrative profiles for all 21 students who participated in qualitative interviews, in which I sought to consider the experiences of each student in the context of the study's quantitative findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Specifically, I utilized these narrative profiles to consider whether each interviewed student demonstrated shifts in attitude over the course of the semester that aligned with the study's quantitative findings.

Similar to the analysis of student interviews, relevant pieces of student work and field notes from classroom observations were coded using etic and emic codes and then grouped into categories in order to allow patterns, themes, and analytic questions to emerge (Maxwell, 1996). I then constructed matrices that juxtaposed the themes and patterns emerging from the student work and field notes to prior research on identity development, social justice education, and mind change.

Results

The Glennview seniors enrolled in Literature and Justice experienced statistically significant declines over the course of the semester in their support for educational equity. Both the composite of beliefs about educational equity and the individual survey items that made up the composite revealed statistically significant (negative) relationships ($p < .05$) between the treatment (Literature and Justice) and students' postsemester attitudes towards educational equity. The taxonomy of fitted models for the composite can be found in Table 1. The taxonomies of fitted models for the educational

equity survey items that make up the composite are available online at <http://scottseider.googlepages.com/badthings.doc> as Appendix D. Here, I consider these items in turn. Then I draw upon this study's qualitative data—student interviews, classroom observations, and student work—to interpret these quantitative findings.

Finding 1: The Educational Equity Composite

The shifts in attitude demonstrated by Glennview seniors on the educational equity composite revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between the treatment (LITANDJUS) and students' postsemester attitudes about educational equity (POSTATTITUDE). Recall that the educational equity composite is measured along a 7-point Likert scale in which a 1 = *strong disagreement* with steps to heighten educational equity and a 7 = *strong agreement* with such measures. The Glennview seniors in this study's control group began the semester with a mean attitude of 3.86 units ($SD = 1.47$) on the educational equity composite and concluded the semester with a mean attitude of 3.93 units ($SD = 1.20$). This represented a negligible increase in support for educational equity of .07 units.

The Glennview seniors enrolled in Literature and Justice, in contrast, began the semester with a mean attitude of 4.22 units ($SD = 1.20$) on the educational equity composite and concluded the semester with a mean attitude of 3.51 units ($SD = 1.27$). This represented a decrease in support for educational equity of .71 units.

Conducting Ordinary Least Squares regression on the outcome variable (POSTATTITUDE) against participation in Literature and Justice (and controlling for PREATTITUDE) revealed there to be a statistically significant difference between the Literature and Justice students and control group students on the educational equity composite ($\beta_{\text{litandjustice}} = -.65, p = .0004$) and evidence of a large effect size (Cohen's $d = .79$). In other words, Literature and Justice students described a significant decline in their support for educational equity over the course of the semester in comparison to their peers in the control group.

Finding 2: The Survey Items on Educational Equity

The survey items that made up the educational equity composite also demonstrated significant negative relationships between participation in Literature and Justice and students' attitudes towards educational equity. For example, one educational equity survey item offered students the

Table 1
Taxonomy of Regression Models for Educational
Equity Composite. (*n* students = 83)

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Intercept	4.91***	1.52*	1.25	1.14***	1.47***
GENDER	-.78**	-.067	.41		
CLASS	-1.03~	-.40	-.45		
RELIGIOUS	.21				
GRADES	.10				
HICOMSER	-.39				
PARCOMSER	-.26				
LITANDJUS				-.65***	-1.55**
PREATTITUDE		.64***	.71~	.71***	.63***
LITANDJUSxPREATTITUDE					.22
GENDERxPREATTITUDE			-.11		
CLASSxPREATTITUDE			.01		

~ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

following prompt: "Some people say it is not right for students in a poorer school system to receive a worse education than students in a wealthier school system." The control group began the semester with a mean attitude on this survey item of 5.3 units ($SD = 1.86$) and concluded the semester with a mean attitude of 5.02 units ($SD = 1.64$). Both responses demonstrated an attitude that falls in between *somewhat agree* and *agree* with the given statement. In other words, the Glennview seniors in the control group demonstrated little change over the course of the semester (.28 units) in their concern about disparities in educational opportunity between students in wealthy and poor communities.

The Glennview seniors in Literature and Justice, in contrast, began the semester with a mean attitude on this survey item of 5.7 units ($SD = 1.24$) and concluded the semester with a mean attitude of 4.5 units ($SD = 1.81$). In other words, over the course of the semester, Literature and Justice participants shifted from a mean attitude that fell between *somewhat agree* and *agree* to a mean attitude between *neutral* and *somewhat agree*. Conducting ordinary least squares regression on the outcome variable (POSTATTITUDE) against participation in Literature and Justice (and controlling for PREATTITUDE) revealed a statistically significant difference between the treatment and control groups on this survey item ($\beta_{\text{litandjustice}} = -.76$, $p = .02$) and evidence of a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = .56$). In short, then,

participation by Glennview seniors in Literature and Justice was associated with a decreased concern for educational disparities in the United States based on socioeconomic status.

The other survey items about educational equity that made up the composite revealed a similar pattern. Specifically, the Glennview seniors enrolled in Literature and Justice demonstrated over the course of the semester an increase in their belief that wealthy towns have a right to outspend poorer towns to ensure a quality education for their citizens ($\beta_{\text{litandjustice}} = .52$, $p = .03$, Cohen's $d = .57$); a decrease in their belief that funding across a state's school districts should be equal ($\beta_{\text{litandjustice}} = -.67$, $p = .02$, Cohen's $d = .45$); and a decrease in their belief that tax revenues should be redistributed from wealthy towns to poorer towns to create more equitable educational opportunities ($\beta_{\text{litandjustice}} = -.54$, $p = .03$, Cohen's $d = .55$). To consider these unexpected findings, I turn now to my qualitative data.

Finding 3: Raising Awareness but Instilling Fear

Qualitative interviews with 21 Glennview seniors revealed that Literature and Justice raised students' concerns about the possibility of one day experiencing financial hardship. Five Literature and Justice students who participated in in-depth interviews expressed concerns in their follow-up interviews about one day becoming poor or homeless themselves. For example, in describing the impact of the course upon his worldview, Jonny explained: "I don't want to be one of those people who we learned about growing up without money cuz it is just so stressful and so hard." This sentiment about not wanting to become "one of those people" is echoed by several other students as well. Frank noted that the focus on poverty and homelessness in Literature and Justice led him to think that, "Hey, I really have to work hard or bad things could happen." Andrew explained that, before Literature and Justice, "I used to think like when I walked into Lit and Justice, I'll get a job—it's that easy like blah, blah, blah." In contrast, Andrew now admits that, if he finds himself in financial trouble, "It's a lot harder to climb out of that hole than I originally thought it was." Likewise, Annie added that her biggest take-away from studying homelessness was "that it could happen to anyone. Like after I go to college or whatever, what if I can't find a job, and then what if my parents can't help me? And then I could be homeless."

Finally, another student in the course, Michelle, described Literature and Justice as having left her worried about her father one day not existing as a safety net. She explained:

It just really opened my eyes to like the poverty we have in our own city. I live in Boston, but I never realized like there really are a lot of homeless people in there. One of the guys could be like your dad. Like he worked somewhere and then just gets laid off and just never like bounces back. It is scary.

In those final words, “It is scary,” Michelle summarized what seemed to be an unintended consequence of *Literature and Justice*; namely, that, in learning and reflecting about issues of poverty and homelessness, Glennview seniors experienced trepidation about their own future well-being.

It should be noted that there was no specific prompt in this study’s interview protocol about the possibility of one day becoming poor or homeless. Rather, the 5 Glennview students described here offered these comments in response to questions about what they had taken away from *Literature and Justice* or would remember about the course in the future. It should also be noted that, in interviews with 11 Glennview seniors from the control group, none expressed fears about their future financial security or the possibility of one day becoming homeless.

Finding 4: Recognition of Privilege

Literature and Justice also heightened Glennview seniors’ awareness of the extent to which disparities exist between poor and affluent communities. Specifically, four *Literature and Justice* students who participated in qualitative interviews explicitly described their newfound recognition of the educational advantages that come with growing up in a community such as Glennview. For example, Brendan explained that “A lot of times we would compare Glennview to what’s happening in a city, to what’s happening in a poor town. . . . You just see huge differences.” Likewise, Dan observed, “We take education as a priority here. And we’re given all these special opportunities that a lot of other towns do not have.” Interestingly, Dan added that “Maybe the other seniors, they don’t realize what’s going on in these other countries and in America.” In these words, Dan expressed his belief that the Glennview seniors enrolled in *Literature and Justice* were aware in a way that other Glennview seniors were not of the advantages bestowed upon them by virtue of growing up in Glennview.

Another *Literature and Justice* participant, Frank, echoed these comments. Specifically, Frank expressed his belief in his follow-up interview that, “Poor people [are poor] because of education. They can’t get that good education and, therefore, can’t move up in the way everyone else does.” Specifically comparing the public school system in inner-city Chicago to Glennview, Frank noted:

I mean it's not even like a school [in Chicago]. I mean the learning environment there is so, so different than here—I mean it's not a learning environment; it's just a social environment. They don't go there to learn; they just go there because they have to. [It's different for] people who live in places with good school systems.

Here, Frank expressed his newfound recognition that growing up in Glennview conferred upon him an educational head start that children from less affluent communities did not receive.

Discussion

In the Results section of this article, I reported that affluent high school seniors enrolled in a social justice course demonstrated a decline over the course of the semester in their support for educational equity. Such a finding initially seemed counterintuitive. Interviews with Literature and Justice participants, however, shed light on the way in which the course heightened students' fears about their own futures and rendered them protective of their own educational advantages. In this way, Literature and Justice seemed to function—for many of its participants—less as a tool for highlighting injustice and more as a scared straight program. In other words, while the goal of the course and its instructor was to push students to take action in their lives and stand up for injustice, interviews with Literature and Justice participants suggested that such goals may have been overshadowed by students' heightened fears about winding up poor or homeless themselves. Such a reaction to Literature and Justice can be better understood within the context of the developmental period of emerging adulthood as well as the traits characteristic of the millennial generation of which the Glennview seniors in this study are a part.

Emerging Adults in the New Millennium

As 17- and 18-year-old high school seniors, the Glennview students in this study are on the cusp between adolescence and emerging adulthood. Arnett (2004) characterized emerging adulthood as the period of peak identity exploration, instability, self-focus, transition, and possibility. Emerging adults do not know exactly how their lives are going to turn out, but they tend to be optimistic about the possibilities. A national study of 18 to 24

year olds found that 95% agreed with the statement “I am very sure that someday I will get to where I want to be in life” (Arnett, 2004). It is likely, then, that the majority of Glennview seniors who stepped into Literature and Justice on the first day of school did so feeling highly confident about their potential for future success. And this confidence was only emphasized by the generation of which the seniors at Glennview High School are a part.

Erikson (1965, 1968) observed that the historical era in which an emerging adult comes of age can impact that individual’s developmental pathway. The Glennview seniors in this study are members of what has come to be called the millennial generation, the generation of young Americans born between 1980 and 2000 (Howe & Strauss, 2000). In characterizing this millennial generation, Brooks (2001) observed that millennials perceive the world they live in to be one in which those who play by the rules are “rewarded with a wonderful ascent in the social hierarchy” (p. 50). Likewise, Levine and Cureton (1998) reported from their national study of college students that, “No generation has wanted to believe in the American Dream more than current undergraduates” (p. 135). The scholarship on the millennial generation, then, underscores the perspective offered by emerging adult scholars that the Glennview seniors who stepped into Literature and Justice in early September did so feeling highly optimistic about the adult-hoods stretching out before them.

However, as Literature and Justice began, the participating Glennview seniors embarked upon a study of several of the less optimistic aspects of American culture. They learned that almost 40 million Americans live below the poverty line, and they learned what such poverty looks like from sources such as *There Are No Children Here*, *Ghetto Life 101* and *Fear and Learning at Hoover Elementary*. Perhaps not surprisingly, Literature and Justice participants reacted to this learning with fear that such difficulties might one day befall them. In response, these emerging adults increased their protectiveness of the educational advantages they suddenly recognized themselves to possess. As a result of the sobering content of the Literature and Justice curriculum, they feared they might need these advantages to ward off financial calamity. In contrast, the Glennview seniors in the control group, who were not exposed to the Literature and Justice curriculum, experienced no such assault upon their optimistic outlook for the future. Without this added anxiety influencing their attitudes, the Glennview students in the control group displayed no significant shifts in attitude on the issues of educational equity. Concerns about future financial challenges were simply not on their radar screens.

Belief in an Earned Advantage

Social psychology research also provides insight into the decreased commitment to educational equity demonstrated by Literature and Justice participants. The term “fundamental attribution error” refers to the tendency of individuals to attribute an individual’s success or misfortune entirely to personal qualities rather than to external factors such as racism, nepotism, privilege, or even luck (Carr, 1994; Carr & McLachlan, 1998; Gans, 1972). It is due in large part to fundamental attribution error that 70% to 80% of Americans characterize welfare recipients as “lazy and dishonest” and affluent Americans as possessing “superior individual talent and effort” (Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

Fundamental attribution error can explain why Glennview seniors may have entered Literature and Justice on the first day of school believing that their educational privileges had been earned through the effort and ingenuity of their parents. However, explaining why these students actually became less committed to educational equity over the course of the semester involves an additional finding from social psychology referred to as “just world theory.” As Lerner (1980) explained, “For their own security, if for no other reason, people want to believe they live in a just world where people get what they deserve. Any evidence of undeserved suffering threatens this belief” (p. 208). Lerner found evidence for just world theory in a series of laboratory experiments, but other scholars have theorized that just world theory can account for individuals’ reactions to larger, societal injustices as well. Montada and Schneider (1991) have argued that because individual citizens feel powerless to address the circumstances of the very poor, many citizens react by blaming the poor for their misfortune. In convincing themselves that the poor deserve their poverty and the affluent have earned their wealth, individuals are able to preserve their belief in a just world.

Consider, then, the way in which these two psychological tendencies—fundamental attribution error and just world theory—interacted as Glennview seniors in Literature and Justice learned about social issues such as poverty and homelessness. The Literature and Justice curriculum introduced Glennview seniors to a picture of America that many had never previously considered: an America in which millions of individuals not so different from themselves struggle with poverty and homelessness. A number of students in Literature and Justice described these revelations as scary, but, according to the social psychology research, they also likely reassured themselves that individuals are able to control whether or not such circumstances befall them. Thus, the principles of psychological control and fundamental attribution

error increased the likelihood of Literature and Justice participants reacting to their learning by blaming the poor and homeless for their circumstances and crediting more affluent individuals such as their parents with having earned theirs. Such blaming and crediting allowed Glennview students to maintain their belief in a just world—a world in which people get what they deserve. In this way, then, the Literature and Justice curriculum paradoxically served to strengthen its participants' reliance on individualistic explanations for poverty and affluence. In so doing, Literature and Justice also decreased students' concerns about educational equity between affluent and poor communities. Since Glennview students believed that individuals in wealthier communities had earned better educations for their children, they saw little cause for concern in the disparate educational opportunities afforded children from wealthy and poor communities.

Conclusion

This study found that the majority of Literature and Justice participants reacted to learning about poverty with fear, anxiety, and a protectiveness of their own educational privilege. It is, of course, important to acknowledge that this study's quantitative data reported on mean attitudes towards educational equity and that the qualitative data reported on recurring (but not ubiquitous) themes from interviews with students. Unquestionably, there were a handful of Literature and Justice participants who experienced the course differently than their peers. For example, one Literature and Justice participant, Richie, explained in his follow-up interview that he concluded his reading of *There Are No Children Here* shocked by "the complete audacity of the situation there in Chicago." In his final exam for Literature and Justice, Richie diverged from many of his classmates in arguing that, "The injustices brought on by urban decay against those least fortunate must be corrected." Clearly, Richie did not react to the Literature and Justice content with the same fear and anxiety exhibited by many of his classmates. In earlier work, I have examined the attitudes and experiences of students such as Richie in order to understand the types of experiences and influences that led him to experience Literature and Justice so differently than the majority of his peers (Seider, 2007a, 2007b). Such exemplars are unquestionably worthy of further study.

Also worthy of further consideration are the shifts in attitude demonstrated by the adolescents in this study compared to those described by Youniss and Yates (1997) in *Community Service and Social Responsibility in Youth*. As

described in this article's literature review, the teens in a study by Youniss and Yates came away from a similar course on social justice issues with a deepened commitment to social responsibility. There are a number of demographic differences between the participants in these two studies—race, age, and class, for example—that make comparisons challenging. However, it may be notable that the adolescents in the study by Youniss and Yates supplemented their academic learning with a year-long service project at a local homeless shelter. Also, because the teens were students at a private Catholic school, their social justice course was framed by a single (Jesuit) ideology about social justice and social responsibility. In contrast, the Literature and Justice course—taught at a public, nondenominational high school—explicitly sought to offer students' multiple perspectives on the issues covered in the course. Future research that effectively considers the role of these variables may be invaluable in deepening our understanding of the pathways along which adolescents deepen their sense of social responsibility and commitment to social justice. Robert Kennedy observed that

Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends a tiny ripple of hope . . . and those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance. (Lewis, 2001, p. 13)

With this study, I have sought to provide educators, policy makers and researchers with additional insight into the processes by which young people are (and are not) inspired to send out such ripples of hope.

Notes

1. A pseudonym. All data presented here on the city in Massachusetts are from <http://www.city-data.com>. Retrieved June 9, 2007.
2. Name of publication withheld to protect identity of Glennview.
3. All teachers and students cited in this article are referred to by pseudonyms.

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