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Catalyzing a Commitment to Community Service in Emerging Adults

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In this study, the author conducted in-depth interviews with college students from affluent suburban communities who perform 10 to 20 hours of community service each week. Three fourths of these students attribute their commitment to community service in large part to a single academic experience that influenced their respective worldviews and conceptions of service. Examples of such experiences include Bible studies, secondary and university-level courses, a freshman week orientation program, and independent study. For the majority of the students in this study, these experiences occurred during the freshman year of college. In this article, the author offers a model that documents the role of these experiences in catalyzing an emerging adult's commitment to community service.

Keywords: *activism; civic engagement; community service; emerging adulthood; social action; social justice; worldview*

In "The Moral Equivalent of War," James (1920) instructed his elite and affluent students at Harvard College to go off into the world as an army of volunteers "to coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, to dishwashing, to clotheswashing and window-washing, to road-building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stoke-holes and to the frames of skyscrapers" (p. 2). Such work, James believed, would heighten his students' awareness of "the lot of the less fortunate classes" and lead them to "come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas" (p. 2). In these words, James (1920) argued that emerging adults from elite backgrounds are often brought up "blind" to the misfortunes occurring in the world around them and that performing community service can instill in these emerging adults a deeper sympathy and understanding of such misfortune.

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Although James offered no empirical support for these claims, the work of researchers today suggests that James was on the right track on both counts. With regard to the “blindness” of affluent emerging adults to the problems of the world, Perry (1997) reported that an individual’s “commitment to public interest or civic duty . . . declines with increasing wealth” (p. 191). Hauser (2006) described an “inverse correlation between levels of donation and wealth” (p. 288). Lasch (1995) observed that America’s affluent citizens are more and more likely to live in gated communities; enroll their children to private schools; hire their own security force, landscapers, and garbage collectors; and, in so doing, limit “their acknowledgement of civic obligations . . . [to] their own immediate neighborhood” (p. 47). Likewise, Putnam (2000) argued that suburban life reinforces a culture “of atomized isolation, self-restraint and moral minimalism” (p. 210). He goes on to cite Jackson’s description of the suburbs as “privatizing” Americans’ social lives and leading “to a reduced feeling of concern and responsibility among families for their neighbors and . . . for residents of the inner city” (Jackson as cited in Putnam, 2000, p. 211).

Other researchers support James’s (1920) claim about the benefits of service and volunteer work. In a longitudinal study of 12,000 college students, Sax and Astin (1997) found that, even after controlling for students’ freshman-year predisposition to engage in community service, participation in community service during the college years is positively associated with a lifelong commitment to volunteerism, community activism, promotion of racial understanding, and helping of others in difficulty. Likewise, longitudinal studies of college student activists reveal that, as adults, these individuals remain engaged in various forms of political activity and disproportionately enter “helping professions” such as teaching and social work (Fendrich & Lovoy, 1988). It seems, then, that, as James (1920) suggested, encouraging students to participate in community service during the college years produces outcomes desirable for both these students and society.

It was with these outcomes in mind that I conducted in-depth interviews with 20 college students who are, in some sense, living out James’s prescription. Specifically, all of the college students in this study were raised in middle- and upper-middle-class suburban communities, yet all are now performing 10 to 20 hours of weekly community service in local homeless shelters, hospitals, community centers, and inner-city schools. To provide some context for this level of commitment, consider the fact that only 14% of Americans and 5% of college students report volunteering 6 or more hours per week (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Hodgkinson, 1995). The college student–volunteers in this study perform two to four times that amount.

My goal, then, in conducting this study was to investigate the factors, characteristics, and pathways that have led these emerging adults from affluent, suburban backgrounds to develop such a deep commitment to community service. In embarking upon this investigation, I sought to add to the scholarship contributed by researchers such as McAdam (1988), Oliner and Oliner (1988), and Colby and Damon (1992) who investigated the altruistic impulses of populations ranging from Holocaust rescuers to civil rights activists.

Through this study, I discovered that three fourths of the students in this sample attribute their commitment to community service, in large part, to single academic experiences that they believe influenced their respective worldviews and conceptions of community service. Examples of such experiences include Bible studies, secondary and university-level courses, discussion groups, and independent study. For the majority of the students in this sample, these experiences occurred during the freshman year of college. To investigate these experiences, I draw primarily on Erikson's (1965, 1968) work on identity development as well as more recent work on emerging adult theory (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Tanner, 2006). Supported by these frameworks, I offer a model that incorporates these academic experiences as a critical factor influencing the commitment to community service of emerging adults.

Research Context

Factors That Influence a Commitment to Community Service

The most robust evidence within this body of literature concerns the impact of one's parents and role models. Hodgkinson (1995) reported that among adults whose parents volunteered when they were young, three out of four currently perform community service themselves. Several other researchers have found the service orientation of an individual's parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors to play a key role in that individual's development of a commitment to community service as well (Fitch, 1987; Keniston, 1968; Rosenhan, 1970; Tierney & Branch, 1992).

Religion can also influence one's commitment to community service (Colby & Damon, 1992; Wuthnow, 1991). Teenagers who consistently attend religious services are three times more likely to participate in community service than teenagers who do not attend religious services (Hodgkinson, 1995).

Another factor influencing commitment to service and activism is participation in community organizations such as Boys and Girls' Clubs (Fitch,

1987; Serow, 1991). Schools that offer service opportunities have also been found to play a key role in the development of a commitment to volunteerism (Hodgkinson, 1995). Several studies cite participation in community service in high school as the single best predictor for involvement in community service in college (Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998; Sax & Astin, 1997). Other studies demonstrate the importance of one's peer group on the development of a commitment to community service (Clary & Miller, 1986; Colby & Damon, 1992; McAdam, 1989).

Several researchers have identified early experiences of hardship as playing a role in the development of a commitment to community service and activism (Colby & Damon, 1992; Fischman, Schute, Solomon, & Lam, 2001). Also found to influence an individual's commitment to community service are transforming experiences or triggering events. Haste (1983) described these events as "sudden, unexpected occurrences that create powerful emotional responses and 'trigger' a reexamination of one's life choices" (p. 102). Examples of such events can be found in studies by Fischman (1999) as well as Hart, Yates, Fegley, and Wilson (1995). However, little scholarship exists on the corollary to these emotional triggering events; namely, an experience that results in a deepened commitment to community service by affecting an individual's intellectual or philosophical understanding of the world (see McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001, for a description of turning points and Seider, 2006, 2007, for a description of frame-changing experiences). Such experiences are the focus of this study. To explore this topic more fully, I draw on the theoretical frameworks of identity development and emerging adult theory.

Identity Development and Emerging Adulthood

According to Erikson (1968), it is in late adolescence that "youth seek to identify with values and ideologies that transcend the immediate concerns of family and self and have historical continuity" (p. 32). Erikson (1968) defined ideology as "a system of ideas that provides a convincing world image," and he suggested that adolescents require exposure to such ideological structures to organize their experiences and growing understanding of the world (p. 31). Sources of such ideologies include "religion and politics, the arts and sciences, the stage and fiction" (Erikson, 1965, p. 24).

Erikson (1965) acknowledged that individuals moving through the period of adolescence are likely to adopt and grasp onto "simplistically over-defined ideologies" but argued that the adoption of such ideologies comes about as a result of an "inescapable inner need" (p. 114). In a developmental period in

which individuals begin to separate from their parents and simultaneously become aware of their existence within a social-historical context, these adolescents and emerging adults require an ideology that can counteract their “newly won individual identity with some communal solidarity” (Erikson, 1965, p. 24).

Erikson (1968) conceived of the “identity crisis” as occurring during adolescence; however, he also recognized that some people in industrialized societies may experience a “prolonged adolescence” during which this process of crisis and exploration continues. Emerging adult theory posits that several factors have made such a prolonged adolescence the norm for many individuals in a number of contemporary, industrialized societies including the United States. Specifically, Arnett (2000, 2004) made the case for “emerging adulthood” as a distinct developmental period by noting that societal factors such as the increase in age of those entering marriage and parenthood as well as the “prolonged pursuit” of higher education have shifted the period of primary identity exploration from adolescence to the period during which an individual is approximately 18 to 25 years old. Arnett (2000) referred to this period as “emerging adulthood.”

What, precisely, marks the period of emerging adulthood? Arnett (2004) characterized emerging adulthood as the developmental period of peak identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibility. Shanahan (2000) and Tanner (2006) conceived of emerging adulthood as the period of “re-centering”—the period during which self-regulation replaces a childlike dependence on parents and teachers. Finally, Schwartz, Cote, and Arnett (2005) asserted that emerging adulthood “represents an extension of Erikson’s psychosocial moratorium, the period during which youth are free to explore potential identity alternatives without having to assume permanent adult commitments” (p. 204). In short, then, the college student–volunteers in this study fall squarely within the period of emerging adulthood that each of these researchers believes to be a pregnant period for the strengthening, revising, rejecting, and embracing of what Erikson (1968) referred to as ideology and what is more commonly referred to today as one’s “worldview” (Koltko-Rivera, 2004).

Research Design and Method

This study uses in-depth interviews to investigate the development of a commitment to community service in a sample of 20 college students currently attending a large private university in a northeastern city.

Selection Criteria

The participants in this study are college students currently performing 10 to 20 hours of weekly community service. All 20 students grew up in middle- or upper-middle-class suburban communities. Identification of these students' class status and childhood community were based on the students' own descriptions of their class status, parents' occupations, and the community in which they were raised. I chose to focus this study on a particular demographic of college student-volunteer in terms of class and childhood community because of the evidence in the identity development literature that differences in these factors can lead to significantly disparate developmental pathways. For example, Kroger (1993) observed that there are likely significant differences in the "meaning of occupational and ideological commitments" for working-class compared with middle-class teenagers (p. 12). Noam (1999) observed that, in terms of identity development, emerging adults who enter the workforce or the army after college have very different experiences than those who attend college. Likewise, in making the argument that the college years should be regarded as a unique developmental period, Parks (2000) conceded that "if a new stage of life [during the college years] is emerging, it is confined primarily to the middle class" (p. 9). For all of these reasons then, I have chosen to focus this study on college student-volunteers who come from middle- and upper-middle-class suburban backgrounds. In future research, I plan to broaden my focus to include emerging adults from a broad range of socioeconomic levels and home communities.

Although I limited my study's population in terms of socioeconomic status and childhood community, I did seek to construct a sample that was diverse in terms of gender, age, religion, race/ethnicity, and geography. To construct such a sample, I worked with what Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to as "experienced and knowledgeable experts": namely, the professional staff members of the university's community service organizations. With these professionals' assistance, I strove to achieve maximum variation along the aforementioned lines of gender, age, religion, race/ethnicity, and geography (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

The sample, then, consisted of 10 male college students and 10 female college students. Nine of the students in the sample were college seniors, 6 were college juniors, and 5 were sophomores. Nine of the students in the sample identified themselves as Christian, 1 as Catholic, 1 as Jewish, 1 as Hindu, 1 as Buddhist, and 1 as an atheist. The remaining 6 students in this sample were raised in families that practiced one of these aforementioned faiths, but these students now classified themselves as nonpracticing. In terms

of racial and ethnic diversity, 8 of the students in the sample described themselves as European American or White, 2 as African American or Black, 4 as Asian American, 1 as Cuban American, 2 as Indian or Southeast Asian American, 1 as Middle Eastern American, 1 as Filipina, and 1 as half-White/half-Asian. The students in this sample came from 12 different states in the United States as well as one Canadian province. All students are referred to in this article by pseudonyms.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study included 20 in-depth interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 1½ hours, and the protocol for these interviews questioned students about the service projects in which they are currently engaged as well as their motivations for becoming involved and remaining committed to these projects (see appendix). The interview protocol was sufficiently structured to ensure that questions posed to students 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 interviews conducted for this study were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. All of the interviews were coded using etic and emic codes drawn from the literature on volunteerism, identity development, and emerging adult theory, as well as the participants' interview transcripts. These codes were then grouped into categories to allow patterns, themes, and analytic questions to arise (Maxwell, 1996). In addition, profiles and narrative summaries were constructed for each of the college student-volunteers within the sample (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Upon completing my coding and categorizing of the transcribed interviews, I constructed matrices that juxtaposed the themes and patterns emerging from the data to the prior research on identity development, emerging adult theory, and commitment to volunteer work described earlier in this article (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As I used these data to draw initial conclusions about my research questions, I also sought out discrepant data that did not correspond to these conclusions (Maxwell, 1996). These discrepant data are addressed in this article's Discussion.

Results

Earlier in this article, I noted that factors found to contribute to the development of a commitment to community service in adolescents and emerging

adults included service-oriented parents and role models, a strong religious faith, early exposure to service opportunities, experiences of early hardship, and triggering events. Across my interviews with college students who currently perform 10 to 20 hours of weekly community service, each of these factors emerged as relevant to the developmental pathway of one or more of these students.

The study's most important finding, however, concerns an experience common to 15 of the 20 students in this sample that seems to be relatively unexplored in the literature on commitment to community service. Specifically, in describing their development of a commitment to community service, three fourths of the students in this sample emphasize the impact of a particular *academic experience* that they believe to have altered what Erikson (1968) referred to as their "ideology" and contemporary identity scholars refer to as "worldviews" (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). These academic experiences include university courses on topics ranging from religion to health policy, Bible studies, independent reading, and participation in a freshman-week orientation program. All of these experiences occurred between the senior year of high school and the junior year of college, with the majority occurring during the freshman year of college.

Although 15 students in this sample attributed their commitment to community service, in large part, to an academic experience that influenced their worldview, these students differed in their descriptions of *how* their respective academic experiences influenced their worldviews. Specifically, in coding the interviews conducted with these 15 college student-volunteers, their descriptions of the impact of these academic experiences fell into three distinct categories. I have labeled these categories *Replacement of Worldview*, *Modification of Worldview*, and *Specification of Worldview*. In this section, I draw on the experiences of the college student-volunteers in this study to define and provide examples of these three different types of experiences. Later, in this article's Discussion, I draw on identity theory and emerging adult theory to propose a model that incorporates these different types of experiences into the development of a commitment to community service in emerging adults.

Replacement of Worldview

Students who experience a "replacement" of their worldview describe academic experiences that lead to the adoption of a new worldview prioritizing community service. Seven students in this sample—Eric, Ann, Bill, Louis, Ty, Bonnie, and Esther—describe academic experiences that resulted in such a replacement.

Allow me to use Esther as an example. Esther is a Middle Eastern American college senior who volunteers 10 hours each week at a local homeless shelter. In her interview, Esther explains that she was somewhat involved in community service in high school through her high school's Key Club organization:

In high school I did Key Club and some of those direct service activities. I did them and enjoyed them, but I didn't really form relationships with the people I was working with. I did a few things with Special Olympics, which I really enjoyed, but I never went back to the same thing enough times to actually understand my impact. And I didn't really care or think about that.

Here, Esther characterizes herself as going through the motions of service without forming relationships with the people she was serving or reflecting on the work she was doing. However, during her orientation week as a college freshman, Esther chose to participate in her university's Freshman Week Service Program. According to the university's Web site, the Freshman Week Service Program is a voluntary, 4-day program that allows incoming freshman to spend several days working on projects for local nonprofit organizations. The students then gather together in the evenings to participate in discussion groups based on speakers and readings. For Esther, these nightly discussion groups proved to be transformative. As she explains,

There are readings about gender oppression; there are things about racism, about prisons, about homelessness. . . . And during the week there are discussion groups every couple of nights where you get together with a couple of leaders and a few other freshmen just to talk about your thoughts. It was amazing because I hadn't even thought about some of this stuff. I hadn't thought about how oppression permeates our lives in ways that we don't think about. And the program made me really, really angry. I left saying, "Oh my gosh. I really have to do something."

Two comments in this passage seem particularly important. First, Esther notes that she had never previously considered some of the ideas in the program's reading packet. Later in the interview, she adds,

I hadn't thought about what it was like to be a homeless person and to be looked down upon in a system that was against you; a system that it was really hard for you to get out of anyway.

In these comments, one can see how the Freshman Week Service Program's readings and discussions altered Esther's worldview. Moreover, in concluding

this passage by noting, “I left saying . . . I really have to do something,” Esther reveals that the program’s readings and discussions affected not only her worldview but also her conception of the role that she as an individual can play within the world.

The extent to which Esther experiences a replacement of her worldview is evident in her reflections about her worldview as a high school student in comparison to the one she holds now:

I feel like I was really, really selfish in high school . . . I really didn’t think about other people that much in all honesty. I knew that some things were wrong with society, but my first priority was my work and my family. And I think the Freshman Week Service Program challenged you to think, if you don’t do anything, who will? And so FWSP forced you to confront why you were so complacent, and I had no answer. I was so angry when I read stories about prisons and how people were treated, and how in many ways the system is so wrong and no one is doing anything about it.

In these words, Esther reveals the extent to which she credits the Freshman Week Service Program with offering her a new conception of the world and her role in it—a worldview that she translates into action through her long-term, weekly volunteer work at a local homeless shelter.

A second student who credits an academic experience with replacing her existing worldview is Bonnie, an Asian American college senior who volunteers 10 hours a week at the same homeless shelter as Esther. In her interview, Bonnie says of her childhood: “Growing up in suburbia, I didn’t really have that much exposure to issues of social justice.” She notes that “in high school, we didn’t have classes about social issues” and that, as a result, “I didn’t realize how hard it is to break out of a cycle of poverty, and I don’t think I ever actually tried to put myself in others’ shoes.” Bonnie did participate in several community service opportunities during high school but offers the following reflection on her motivation for volunteering:

We did like service days, and like they were good, but . . . I think I did them—not necessarily just to put on my transcript or resume or whatever you call it, getting into college, but because it was kind of the thing everyone did. But I don’t think I really understood the reasons why. It wasn’t like a personal motivation.

Similar to Esther, Bonnie characterizes herself during these early volunteer experiences as uncommitted and unreflective. For Bonnie, however, the academic experience that led to the replacement of her existing worldview

came about through a Bible study she participated in during her freshman year of college. As Bonnie explains,

I was a Christian all through high school, but I think in the church we didn't talk very much about issues of social justice, and I think, like being at [college] . . . we talk a lot more about those issues, and like looking at our heart for the poor and the oppressed, and just like doing Bible studies on that. Like that wasn't something that I had heard before. So I feel like it's almost like a central part of Christianity that I don't think was emphasized to me before. . . . [Now] I feel like that's kind of what Jesus' ministry was about when he came here and like you can't understand who God is without understanding his heart for the poor.

Here, Bonnie explains that although she has been a practicing Christian for many years, it was the Bible study she joined in college that led her to adopt a worldview in which one's Christian duty involves caring for the "poor and oppressed." Certainly participation in a Bible study could be described as an emotional, spiritual, or transformative experience rather than an academic one. Yet, Bonnie's description of the Bible study's impact focuses primarily on what one might call the "academic content" to which the Bible study alerted her. As she explains, the Bible study helped her to see "what the Bible has to say about social justice issues" as well as "the interaction between faith and service." Bonnie, then, serves as another example of a student who was exposed to community service in high school but whose motivation for performing such work was altered and strengthened by an academic experience (in this case, a freshman-year Bible study) that led to her adoption of a social justice-oriented worldview.

Modification of Worldview

Students who experience "modifications" of their worldviews describe academic experiences that do *not* alter their motivation for performing community service but rather their conception of the best means for carrying out this work. Four students in this sample—Martin, Esohe, Nancy, and Dara—describe academic experiences that led to such a modification.

Take Esohe, for example. Esohe is an African American college junior who volunteers 15 hours each week for an AIDS education program at a local hospital. In reflecting on her childhood, Esohe explains that her parents—who immigrated to the United States from Nigeria—instilled in her some deep beliefs about service and community. As Esohe explains,

Growing up there was always a very intense sense of service in my home. My parents didn't do so much around civic work here, because they're immigrants, so they were not really so built into the community. But in terms of Nigeria, their idea is always—you have money, you give back. It's the idea of giving back and the idea of being part of something greater than yourself.

Here, Esohe describes the way in which her parents' commitment to supporting relatives and friends in Nigeria contributed to a worldview in which she prioritizes "giving back" to those who have less.

Esohe's deep religious faith also contributed to this worldview. She explains that her childhood church "hammered in that you're not special. God blessed you. But you're not better than anybody else in any way." As a result of this worldview, Esohe explains that her church taught her to regard service as "not something you do out of the kindness of your heart but your responsibility to make things better for other people as well."

Perhaps as a result of this worldview, Esohe explains that growing up, "I always wanted to be a doctor." Looking back now on this childhood ambition, she explains, "It was the idea of having an honorable career, where you could help people, that was also like sustainable. You would have money to be able to give back to people." However, during her freshman year of college, Esohe took an academic class, "Understanding HIV and AIDS," that led to a modification of her worldview and, specifically, to her childhood ambition of becoming a doctor. In describing the content of the class, Esohe explains,

The class was very much about pushing the issues. It talked about AIDS in prisons, it talked about the connection between gender and HIV and AIDS. It talked about domestic and foreign as well. It was just kind of the idea of all the linkages. . . . And how what we've done here has affected the way it's spreading over there. And making those connections, and kind of tying that in to what I believed about connections made a lot of sense. So that was a great academic influence for me.

Here, Esohe describes her deep engagement in the content of the class. Later in the interview, she describes the impact of the class on her conception of the most effective way for her to "make things better for other people." As Esohe explains,

The class made me not want to be a doctor anymore. That class really got me like fired up about social justice issues. I wanted to go into public health. And I was kind of like, "I don't want to be a doctor sitting in an office."

In these words, one can see that, in contrast to Esther and Bonnie, Esohe's participation in "Understanding HIV and AIDS" by no means replaced the

worldview she holds in which giving back is the responsibility of those who are blessed. However, the experience did modify Esohe's conception of the best means for carrying out this giving back. Specifically, her aspiration of entering medical school and becoming a small-town doctor shifted to a graduate degree in public health and focusing her professional efforts on combating AIDS in Africa. It is for this reason that I classify Esohe as having undergone not a replacement but a modification of her worldview.

A second student, Dara, also describes an academic experience that leads to a modification of her worldview. Dara is a White college sophomore who volunteers 15 hours per week teaching English as a Second Language to immigrant youth. Dara comes from a family deeply enmeshed in politics. Her parents are both former state legislators. Her father is now a professor of political science, and her mother serves as the legal counsel to the state's governor. Dara describes her parents' involvement in politics as motivated by a sense of responsibility "to their communities and their state to make a difference." She explains, "Growing up, it was always like, 'Well, you should read the newspaper because you have to be informed, you have to be able to write your congressman if you find something's wrong.'" Dara also notes that her parents' involvement in politics has allowed her to personally meet national politicians such as Bob Dole, Al Gore, and Howard Dean and that family gatherings are "almost kind of overwhelming how you mention President Bush and everyone starts yelling." In short, from quite literally the cradle, Dara has been taught to respect and value the power of politics to effect change.

Interestingly, however, Dara explains that "I guess I've just kind of taken that message and not really applied it to politics . . . and applied it more to social work." As to how her interest in social work developed, Dara points to a class she took during her senior year in high school, "Choices for the 21st Century." According to Dara,

Everything [in the class] seemed so tied to what was going on in the world today and integrated history . . . and ways that I could actually make a change in the world. And there was a lot of emphasis on stating your opinion and critically analyzing the different things we were studying, so we would have to write editorials on something that happened in the UN, or like the Cuban Missile Crisis. Like what we would have done differently.

Here, Dara explains the way in which her senior-year Social Studies class served to spark her thinking about the different ways that she "could actually make a change in the world." She explains that she came away from

“Choices for the 21st Century” with the belief that “there are so many things that need to be improved in our world that if everyone of us doesn’t start pitching in, then nothing will ever improve.”

It seems, then, that Dara’s experience is similar in trajectory to that of Esohe. Her academic experience during her senior year of high school in “Choices for the 21st Century” did *not* replace the worldview modeled by her parents that prioritizes taking personal responsibility for making a difference. The class did modify her worldview, however, in the sense that she came away from “Choices for the 21st Century” with an interest in pursuing direct service (or “social work”) as opposed to the political work favored by her parents. Like Esohe, it was not Dara’s motivation for performing community service that was altered but rather her perspective on the best means for carrying out such service.

Specification of Worldview

Students in this study who experienced a “specification” of their worldview describe academic experiences that deepened their commitment to community service by clarifying or focusing a particular aspect of their existing worldview. Three students in this sample—Lester, Jeff, and Deborah—describe academic experiences that led to such a specification.

Allow me to use Lester as an example. Lester is a White college junior who volunteers 12 hours per week at a local high school. In describing his childhood, Lester cites his father and high school headmaster as having deeply influenced his worldview. Regarding his father, Lester explains,

We would have these chats at night, like the lights off, just talking about life. And we’d just talk about everything. And like, he influenced me so much. Like I never felt like he was telling me what to do, but just worldview and just how lucky we are, and how Americans in some ways are given too much and how little we do with it.

Here, Lester describes the way in which his father imparted to him the message that people should “do whatever you can with whatever you have to leave a place better than you found it.”

Lester describes himself as gaining a similar perspective from his high school headmaster. According to Lester, his headmaster would offer weekly sermons or “halls” about topics similar to those he discussed with his father:

And like they’re pretty much the same old spiel. They would be either to whom much is given much is expected; you’re going to die soon, make the

most of your life; honesty. That was a huge thing that he always talked about. Just integrity and honesty and character. And he would just talk about those things. And he was just a really, he's an amazing speaker. I think he has a book of his speeches, because he's that good. . . . To me, it just hit home.

Despite these influences, Lester admits that he did "pretty much zero meaningful service" in high school. He also admits that despite the conversations with his father and sermons from his headmaster, "I didn't realize how lucky I was. I didn't realize how wonderful and nurturing my parents were; how much money we had; and how much luxuries we had."

During his freshman year of college, however, Lester enrolled in a religion course titled "Personal Choice and Global Transformation." The course consisted of weekly lectures by speakers who were playing some role in changing the world. Over the course of the semester, Lester read and learned from a host of speakers that included Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, and Elaine Scarry. The course's final speaker was Jonathan Kozol. Lester explains,

He just spoke, and just blew me like out of my seat. Just like everything about him. I can't even like begin. . . . He just kind of just wham bam in a three-punch just knocked down, to me, just two things: He just showed how ridiculous the idea of a level playing field is in this country for educational access. So he does that on one hand. And then two, just with this absolute love of kids, just shows what lives are at stake, these unbelievably wonderful lives.

Here, Lester describes the impact of Jonathan Kozol's lecture on his conception of educational equity. In preparation for Kozol's visit, Lester had been assigned to read Kozol's (1992) *Savage Inequalities*, and he explains later in the interview that "one of the reasons I got so into teaching was reading books like Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* . . . and realizing how bright, wonderful, amazing kids don't get that opportunity [to succeed]." Following his participation in "Personal Choice and Global Transformation," Lester began volunteering with a program that teaches local high school students about international issues. He also enrolled in his university's teacher education program to receive the credentials necessary to teach full-time upon graduating.

I classify Lester's academic experience as an example of specification rather than replacement or modification. Recall that replacement involves the substitution of a new worldview for a preexisting worldview, whereas modification involves a shift in an individual's conception about the best means for carrying out a particular worldview. Neither of these descriptions

seems to precisely fit Lester's experience. Lester describes himself as being taught by his father and headmaster to embrace a worldview in which "to whom much is given, much is expected." His freshman-year religion course, and particularly the writing and teaching of Jonathan Kozol, seemed less to replace or modify Lester's worldview so much as to focus his attention on the particular issue of educational inequity. It is for this reason that I describe the impact of Lester's academic experience as an example of specification.

A second example of a college student who describes a specification of her worldview is Deborah. Deborah is an Asian American college sophomore who tutors local middle school students approximately 10 hours each week. In describing her worldview, Deborah explains that she grew up in an affluent, predominantly White suburb, the daughter of parents who immigrated to the United States from Taiwan. In describing important events that shaped her worldview, she recalls being made aware at an early age that she was different from the other children in her town. As Deborah explains,

Some kids said things to me in like fourth or fifth grade like—Oh, you're Chinese. You do this and that. . . . Stereotypes. And, so, I mean I was like, wait, that's not really nice. They've been my friends for so long, and they're starting to impose these standards on me, these stereotypes on me.

In addition to such interactions with her White peers, Deborah describes as influential the experience of getting to know the blue-collar, migrant workers employed by her parents' business—men and women who Deborah describes as "facing discrimination on a daily basis." She believes that the combination of growing up in an affluent suburb while simultaneously experiencing and recognizing prejudice has led her to adopt a worldview in which she has "two different channels to think about things." As she explains, "It's kind of like I've been able to see things on two different sides. I've been able to see things from like the mainstream perspective but also from the perspective of people who may be overlooked in mainstream society."

Despite this worldview, Deborah describes her community service participation in high school as composed of "just small events like every so often." She noted that both her middle school and high school had community service requirements that she met "because that's what I was supposed to do." Similar to several other students in this study, Deborah chose to participate in the Freshman Week Service Program upon arriving at college. Although critical of several aspects of the program, Deborah describes a single article in the program's reading packet as influencing her worldview:

The first essay that they had us read was about being aware of like the community outside of [the university]. . . . I don't remember a lot of it. But it definitely does talk about how some members of the community would refuse to go through the campus and things like that. I realized I was part of this institution now. I saw myself as part of like the dominant culture that was imposing themselves on the ones that were being overlooked. . . . [The article] really opened me up to seeing . . . the fact that I am here for 4 years does affect other people besides college students. I guess knowing that I don't study just in a vacuum and have the ability to make an impact, it's just logical that I should be out there [doing service] and not just devoting my time doing academics.

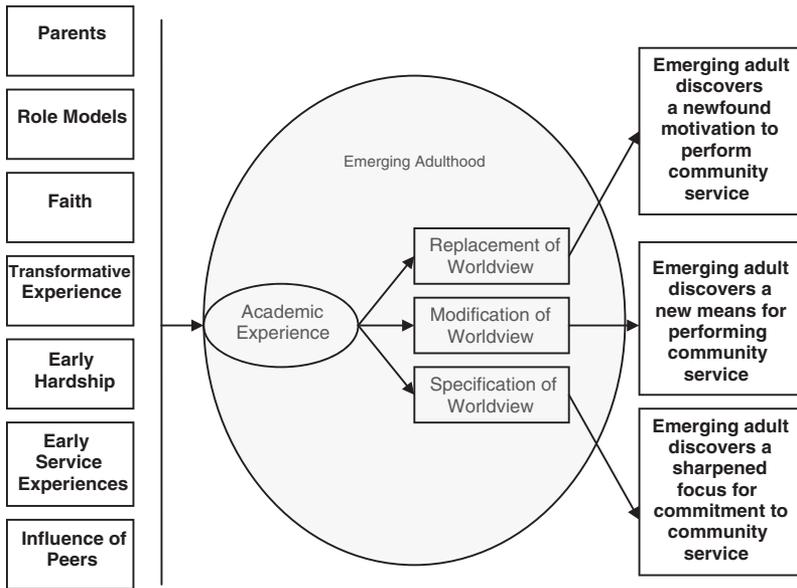
Here, Deborah explains how a single article about town/gown relations clued her in to the context that she was entering. She explains that the dual-perspective worldview she had developed as a child and adolescent allowed her to “really connect with the community around the university that is overlooked at times by university students”—a connection she actualized by committing to tutor local middle school students on a weekly basis.

As was the case with Lester, I classify Deborah's pathway toward service as an example of specification rather than replacement or modification. I say this because the motivation underlying Deborah's commitment to community service—her recognition of the existence of both dominant and oppressive cultures—was neither replaced nor modified by her participation in the Freshman Week Service Program. Rather, the program—or, specifically, a single article in the program's reading packet—allowed Deborah to recognize the way in which her existing worldview applied to her new context as a university student. It was out of this recognition that Deborah began tutoring local middle school students, and it is for this reason that I describe the impact of the Freshman Week Service Program on Deborah as an example of specification.

The Proposed Model

In noting that 15 of the study's 20 participants describe an academic experience as critical to their development of a commitment to community service, I do not mean to suggest that such an experience in and of itself explains the developmental pathway of these emerging adults. Rather, I propose here that such experiences can play a key role in this process by catalyzing an emerging adult's existing *ethic of care* into a full commitment to community service (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2002). A diagram of this proposed model can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Impact of Academic Experiences That Lead to Replacement, Modification, and Specification of Worldview



As can be seen in Figure 1, the various factors that researchers have found to play a role in the development of a commitment to community service remain integral to the model. Factors such as one's parents and role models, religious faith, and early service experiences all play the role of instilling in children and adolescents what Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (2002) referred to as an "ethic of care" and, thus, a *predisposition* for the development of a commitment to community service. Gilligan (1982) described an ethic of care as a conception of morality centered on one's responsibility and relationships with others. Such an orientation is an important precondition for allowing a deepened commitment to community service to emerge. However, the model theorizes that for many emerging adults, an academic experience is necessary to catalyze this existing ethic of care into a full commitment to community service. For some emerging

adults, this academic experience results in a full replacement of their worldview, whereas others experience a modification or specification of an existing worldview.

The seven students in this study whose academic experiences led to the *replacement* of an existing worldview describe the discovery of a new motivation for performing community service. Esther credits the readings and discussions she encountered through her university's freshman week service program with introducing her to a number of social issues she "hadn't even thought about" and leaving her feeling as if she really had "to do something." Likewise, Bonnie describes the Bible study she participated in during her freshman year of college as opening her eyes to "what the Bible has to say about social justice issues." Having adopted this new worldview and its emphasis on social justice, Bonnie asserts that "I don't think I can *not* think about it for the rest of my life."

The four students in this study whose academic experiences led to the *modification* of an existing worldview describe their reconceptualization of the best means for carrying out community service. Esohe describes her freshman-year seminar on HIV and AIDS as making her no longer "want to be a doctor sitting in an office" but instead a public health advocate combating AIDS in Africa. Likewise, Dara explains that her participation as a high school senior in a course on "Choices for the 21st Century" played a key role in shifting her focus from politics to social work as the best means for her to effect change.

Finally, the three students in this study whose academic experience led to the *specification* of an existing worldview describe their development of a sharper focus on the issue or constituency they would like their community service to address. Lester, for example, entered college with a worldview that prioritized "leaving a place better than you found it" but chose to apply this worldview (and his community service) to the issue of educational inequity after a religion course that included a lecture and readings by activist Jonathan Kozol. Likewise, Deborah describes herself as growing up with a worldview that allows her to understand both mainstream and marginalized perspectives. Her decision during her freshman year of college to participate in a local tutoring program, however, came about after an article on town-gown relations clued her in to the way in which her new role as a university student implicitly involved her in such a dynamic with the community surrounding her campus.

In short, then, although 15 students in this study can point to single academic experiences as having played an important role in their development

of a commitment to community service, their descriptions of *how* these academic experiences achieved this impact differ considerably. In other words, a common experience such as a Bible study might lead one student to experience a replacement of her worldview, whereas another participant in the same Bible study describes the experience as leading to a specification of his worldview. That said, I chose to embed all three types of experiences—replacement, modification, and specification—into a single model rather than offering three distinct models because I believe that the workings of all three experiences can be understood within the context of identity development theory and emerging adult theory. Consider, then, through the lens of the identity development and emerging adult frameworks, the various academic experiences cited by 15 students in this study as integral to their development of a commitment to community service.

Three of the students in this sample—Bonnie, Bill, and Eric—describe experiences in freshman-year Bible studies as central to their current commitment to community service. Five other students—Esohe, Martin, Ashwin, Dara, and Lester—describe academic experiences that occurred in secondary and university-level courses about public health, religion, and modern world issues. Six students—Esther, Louis, Ann, Nancy, Deborah, and Jeff—describe their participation in the Freshman Week Service Program as an experience critical to their development of a commitment to community service. Finally, one student, Ty, describes his own independent study of philosophy as integral to his current commitment to community service. As described in this study's Findings, different students describe themselves as affected by these academic experiences in different ways. Some students describe these experiences as leading to the replacement of prior worldviews, whereas other students describe these experiences as resulting in modifications or specifications to existing worldviews.

In each of these students' experiences, however, one can see the identity development process play out as described by Erikson (1968). As these individuals move toward adulthood, they are breaking away from a strict adherence to their parents' ideologies and values while simultaneously seeking out alternative ideological systems that can organize their understanding of the world and their role in it. Such a process is likely going on every day of the year on high school and college campuses across the United States. For the 15 students in this study, however, the various ideological systems they sought out and adopted (either wholly or in part) share the common characteristic of framing community service as a worthy and necessary endeavor.

In considering the academic experiences described by 15 students in the study, one of the strongest patterns that emerges is the timing of these experiences. Recall that this study's sample is made up of a mix of college sophomores, juniors, and seniors. However, of the 15 students who describe such academic experiences, 11 describe this experience as occurring during their freshman year of college. The remaining four students—Dara, Ashwin, Martin, and Ty—describe experiences that occurred during either the senior year of high school or later years of college. This finding—that all 15 students cite experiences that occurred during college or in the run-up to college—can perhaps be best understood in the context of emerging adult theory.

Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, and Vollebergh's (1999) review of the identity development literature cites findings by several researchers that an individual's identity is "mainly formed between the ages of 18 and 22" (p. 424). Likewise, both Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) cited more than a dozen studies suggesting that individuals move toward identity resolution and achievement during the college years. Arnett (2004) reported that identity achievement is rarely achieved by the end of high school, and Waterman and Waterman (1999) noted that 75% of college freshmen change identity status in their ideological commitments over the course of their freshman year.

As to why the period of emerging adulthood and the college years in particular are such a pregnant moment in the identity development process, Arnett (2004) observed that this period is one in which individuals are "neither beholden to their parents nor committed to a web of adult roles" (p. 8). Such independence allows for a period of identity exploration unequalled by any other developmental period. Moreover, Tanner (2006) suggested that an individual's matriculation to college lengthens the period of emerging adulthood for two reasons. First, individuals attending college are likely to delay the transition to marriage and parenthood—life markers that hasten the transition from emerging adulthood to young adulthood. Second, college exposes students to "people, ideas and experiences that challenge their expectations and worldviews" (Tanner, 2006, p. 48). This point is reinforced by Chickering and Reisser's (1993) finding that attending college exposes students to a "diversity of individuals that developmentally challenge students' conception of themselves and requires adaptation and commitment to certain attitudes, values, beliefs and actions" (p. 180). In short, then, emerging adulthood in general, and college specifically, offers individuals a greater independence from their parents and childhood

community, exposure to a diverse environment, new points of view offered by classmates and professors, and the opportunity and distance to think critically about the value systems in which they have been raised. It is this combination of factors that led Arnett (2004) to describe emerging adulthood as representing an unparalleled opportunity for identity exploration and transformation. These factors also seem to offer a sound explanation for the high number of college students in this sample who describe “life marker” or “frame-changing” academic experiences as occurring during this developmental period (Grob, Krings, & Bangerter, 2001; Seider, 2007).

Limitations

I have focused the majority of this article on the 15 students in the sample who describe academic experiences during the period of emerging adulthood as playing a key role in their development of a commitment to community service. Let me acknowledge, however, that 5 students in this sample—Rishi, Sara, Craig, Kelly, and Maria—describe no such experience as integral to their developmental pathway. Sara, Craig, and Rishi all describe extensive community service experiences in middle and high school as critical to their development of a commitment to community service, whereas Maria describes a combination of her religious faith and several service-oriented role models as critical to her development. Finally, Kelly, a college sophomore, describes the experience of attending a high school whose students came from a wide range of class backgrounds as integral to her development of a commitment to community service.

Clearly, then, one cannot reasonably argue—nor do I attempt in this article to suggest—that the development of a commitment to community service *requires* an academic experience during the period of emerging adulthood to catalyze an existing ethic of care. Rather, I propose in this article one pathway toward such a commitment that seems to be relatively unexplored in the development literature. The fact that the experiences of 15 of the 20 students in this sample seem to fit this proposed pathway makes it, to my mind, worthy of further study.

A second limitation of this study concerns the homogeneity of the sample. Recall that all 20 students in this sample were drawn from a single private university. Moreover, all 20 students were raised in middle- and upper-middle-class suburban communities. The rationale for focusing this study on a specific demographic of college students was explained earlier

in this article's Research Design and Method. However, the usefulness of this proposed model in understanding a wider cross section of college student-volunteers will require further study.

Finally, it seems important to acknowledge that this article's classification of students' academic experiences into the categories of Replacement, Modification, and Specification represents an initial attempt at understanding the role that academic experiences can play within the identity development process. It is likely that future research by both me and other researchers will result in the refinement of these categories, and I welcome such refinements.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to demonstrate the impact that academic experiences can have on the development of a commitment to community service in emerging adults. Working to understand the role of such experiences seems particularly relevant to secondary and university-level educators interested in the ethical development of their students. Educators have little control over many of the factors and characteristics that researchers have found to influence a commitment to community service—factors such as students' parents, religious faith, early service experiences, and so forth. However, educators *can* play a role in shaping the academic experiences that their students encounter in late adolescence and emerging adulthood. If such experiences are as important to catalyzing a commitment to community service as this preliminary study would suggest, then both secondary schools and universities would do well to begin studying the curricula and pedagogy of programs such as the Freshman Week Service Program, courses such as "Understanding HIV and AIDS," and Bible studies that focus on the intersection between Christianity and human rights.

Marian Wright Edelman, activist and founder of the Children's Defense Fund, once said, "You just need to be a flea against injustice. Enough committed fleas biting strategically can make even the biggest dog uncomfortable and transform even the biggest nation" (Millard-Hoie, 2005). By supporting students in becoming committed to service, educators increase the number of "fleas against injustice," both through the community service these emerging adults engage in as students and the career paths along which these students' service experiences may lead them to travel.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

Questions about how service fits into current lifestyle

1. What types of community service are you currently participating in?
2. About how many hours a week do you spend doing this community service?
3. How does the amount of time you spend doing this community service affect other aspects of your life? Academic? Social life? Social identity in college?
4. How do you feel about this impact?
5. How has your desire to participate in community service been influenced by your time at college?
6. How would you say that volunteering has affected your (a) outlook on the world and (b) values?
7. How would you say that volunteering has affected your political orientation?
8. How would you say that volunteering has affected your occupational aspirations?
9. What would you say you have learned through your community service?
10. What would you say you have enjoyed about your community service?
11. What percentage of undergraduates would you guess participate in community service to the extent that you do?
12. Why do you think some students choose not to participate in community service?

Questions about values connected to commitment to community service

1. What first motivated you to begin volunteering?
2. What particular values would you say motivated you to start volunteering?
3. This is a hard question, but where do you think these values came from?
4. Are there particular experiences that have occurred in your life that you believe may have played a role in your development of these values? What are they?

Questions about origins of commitment to community service

1. Tell me about the community where you grew up. What was it like there?
2. Did you feel safe in your community?
3. What was the composition of your community in terms of race, class, ethnicity?
4. How do you think this community influenced your commitment to community service?
5. How does the community you grew up in compare to the community in which you now do community service?
6. How would you say that your family has played a role in your development of a commitment to community service?
7. Do members of your family participate in community service? What kinds?
8. Did your family introduce you to community service as a child? How?

9. How does your family feel about all of the community service that you do?
10. Can you think of mentors or role models outside of your parents who have played a role in your development of a commitment to community service?
11. Do you practice a religion? Consider yourself to be religious?
12. How does your faith play a role in your commitment to service work?
13. How would you describe your elementary, middle, and high schools?
14. What opportunities were there at these schools for participating in community service?
15. Did you participate in these opportunities? Why or why not?
16. What motivated you to participate in service in high school?
17. How would you compare your motivation then to your motivation now?
18. How large a role (if any) did "getting into college" play in your motivation to do community service in high school? How about for your peers?
19. How would you say that your peers have played a role in your development of a commitment to community service?
20. Are there organizations you have belonged to that have played a role in your development of a commitment to community service?
21. How would you say that things you have read, heard, or watched have played a role in your development of a commitment to community service?

Follow-up questions for any response by subject that point to possible framework experiences

1. Could you tell me a little bit more about how you feel this experience affected you?
2. How did this experience provide opportunities for reflection?
3. Was this experience one in which you were part of a group? [If yes] How do you feel like being part of a group affected your experience?
4. Why do you believe this experience was an important one?

Final Questions

1. Is there anything else you feel I should know about your volunteer work?
 2. Is there anything that you would like to ask me about the study?
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