

## Challenging Privileged College Students' Othering Language in Community Service Learning

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### Abstract

In a previous article for the “Engagement on Campus” column in the *Journal of College and Character*, the authors described the weaker sense of community experienced by students of color and students from low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds in a university-based community service learning program, as well as how students from these identity groups described and understood their experiences within the program (Novick, Seider, & Huguley, 2011). In this article, the authors turn to qualitative interviews with participating students from this same community service learning program who identified as White and/or affluent. The descriptions by these students of conversations within the program about race and class offer further insight into the dynamics that contribute to a discrepant sense of community in courses or programs involving community service learning.

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The undergraduate student bodies of American universities are growing increasingly diverse in terms of matriculating students' race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, and age (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002; Vernez, Abrahamse, & Quigley, 1996). Yet service-learning scholar Dan Butin (2006) has noted that the community service learning programs offered at many of these universities remain guided by the “overarching assumption that the students doing the service-learning are White, sheltered, middle-class, single, without children, un-debted, and between ages 18 and 24” (p. 481). In a previous article for JCC's *Engagement on Campus* column, the lead author and several colleagues sought to address this disjunction by highlighting our findings from a recent study of Beacon University's Social Action Program (Novick, Seider, & Huguley, 2011).<sup>2</sup> The Social Action Program (SAP) is an intensive community service learning program sponsored by the Beacon University philosophy department that involves three lectures, ten hours of service, and one discussion section *each week* for the entire academic year. In our study of the Social Action Program, we found that students of color participating in SAP reported a weaker sense of community in the program than did their White classmates, and many described feelings of alienation in the classroom component of the program (Novick, Seider, & Huguley, 2011). These same findings were true for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds participating in the Social Action Program.

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<sup>2</sup> Beacon University, the Social Action Program, and all students referenced in this article are referred to by pseudonyms.

In order to consider more closely this discrepant sense of community, my colleagues and I initially turned to our qualitative interviews with participating students of color in order to learn more about their experiences within the program. As we reported, a number of these students characterized themselves as deliberately *not* participating in the program's weekly discussion section when issues of race or racism arose. Several different explanations were offered for this decision. Three students of color described their reluctance for their individual perspectives to be perceived by White classmates as representative of *all* people of color. Two other students of color expressed a desire to avoid appearing overly sensitive about racial issues. Finally, two students explained their non-participation in race discussions as stemming from the difficulty (and frustration) of conveying their perspectives on race and racism to White classmates.

While there is relatively little research on the experiences of students of color engaged in community service learning (for an exception, see Evans, Taylor, Dunlap, & Miller, 2009), the concerns expressed by students of color in the Social Action Program resonated with the existing research on the experiences of students of color in predominantly White institutions more broadly (Nettles, 1988; Oliver, Rodriguez, & Mickelson, 1985; Uba, 1994). We concluded our article by noting the lost opportunities for learning when any constituency within a course or program feels silenced and offered several resources for faculty and administrators committed to fostering inclusive classroom environments (e.g., Pollock, 2008).

However, it also felt as if we had only told half the story. In order to understand fully the weaker sense of community and silencing experienced by students of color (and students from low-SES backgrounds), we also needed to consider the ways in which Beacon University students who identified as members of privileged groups talked about *their* participation in the Social Action Program. In the research literature, "privileged groups" typically refers to individuals who characterize themselves as belonging to one or more of the following identity categories: White, male, affluent, heterosexual, and able-bodied. In this article, we focus specifically on the students in the Social Action Program who identified as affluent and/or White, and our subsequent use of the term "privilege" is intended to refer to SAP participants belonging to one or both of those identity categories. The descriptions by these students of conversations within the program about race and class offer insight as well into the dynamics that can contribute to a discrepant sense of community in courses or programs involving community service learning.

### **"Othering" Language**

One of the key patterns that emerged in our interviews with privileged SAP students was their use of "othering" language in the weekly discussion section to describe interactions at the service placements. In other words, many of these students described the individuals they encountered at their service placements in language that emphasized the extent to which they perceived these individuals to be different from themselves. To focus on one example, a Beacon University student named Corey—who identified as both White and affluent—offered the following description of what he considered valuable about the SAP discussion section:

I come from a decent background myself, you know there's not a lot of direct interaction with that class of society, so I think the discussion group has kind of like shown me the different aspects of it, like the educational problems, the structural problems of finding housing and whatnot.

Similar to a number of the privileged SAP participants we interviewed, Corey seemed to express simultaneously two different themes in this explanation.

On one hand, Corey credited the Social Action Program—and specifically the opportunities for discussion and reflection within the Social Action Program—with opening his eyes to the structural and systemic challenges facing individuals contending with poverty. Such an introduction to structural inequity is an explicit goal of the Social Action Program. On the other hand, Corey offered this explanation in language that also made clear the extent to which he perceives the individuals he has encountered through his service placement at a drug rehabilitation center to be fundamentally different from himself. His phrase “that class of society” seems to draw a bright line between the clients at the drug rehabilitation center and the people in his everyday orbit—for example, family, friends, and classmates. Moreover, Corey’s explanation that “I come from a decent background myself” would seem to imply that the individuals he encountered at his service placement do not.

The conflicting themes in Corey’s response highlight the genuine challenge in supporting college students from privileged groups in making adaptations to the beliefs and assumptions with which they have entered university. Additionally, Corey’s language also offers a window into the weaker sense of community, which Corey’s classmates of color and classmates from low-SES backgrounds experienced in the Social Action Program and about which we have previously written (Novick et al., 2011). Turner (1994) has used the phrase “guests in someone else’s house” to summarize the feelings of alienation and discomfort described by many students of color at predominantly White institutions. Other scholars have similarly found that many students from non-dominant identity groups report feeling alienated (Oliver et al., 1985), out of place (Nettles, 1988), and like “interlopers” (Uba, 1994) in affluent and predominantly White institutions of higher learning. The “othering” language used by Corey and other SAP participants to describe the individuals and groups at their service placements may well have served as a reminder (however inadvertent) of the extent to which members of non-dominant identity groups are still regarded as outsiders in the university setting.

### Paternalistic Language

Other privileged students participating in the Social Action Program described conversations from their discussion sections that revealed their use of language that was not simply “othering” but paternalistic. As an example, we focus on a description by Sam—a White Beacon University business major from an affluent family—of an animated conversation that took place in his SAP discussion section. One of Sam’s classmates began the conversation by describing an impoverished teenage mother whom she had recently met at her service placement. The ensuing conversation quickly turned to the “right” of this young woman to have a child she could not support financially. According to Sam:

It was a conversation in discussion [section] in which we spent a great deal of time blaming both this girl and primarily her parents for allowing her to be put in this situation and essentially saying that she shouldn’t . . . some of us got down to saying she almost shouldn’t have the right to give birth to this child given her situation. . . . My professor essentially said, “Who are you to say that they don’t have the right to bring a child into this world?” So I was torn. You get on a slippery slope when you start to talk about someone not having the right to bear a child, but at the same time how do you address the problem of stopping the cycle of suffering and poverty?

Sam and the other students in this discussion section moved beyond “othering” language to explicitly paternalistic language. Specifically, they debated whether the right to bear a child should be taken away from a woman in challenging economic circumstances.

Once again, this explanation highlights the challenge for university faculty and administrators of engaging privileged college students in community service learning that has a powerful effect upon their worldview. On one hand, the students in this discussion section express a new-found awareness of a “cycle of poverty” and a commitment to combating this cycle. On the other hand, Sam’s description of the debate and proposed solution within his discussion section places the blame for individuals struggling with poverty squarely on the shoulders of those individuals themselves.

Sam’s description of the debate in his discussion section also offers a potential explanation for our previously reported finding that many students of color and students from low-SES backgrounds reported a weaker sense of community in their SAP discussion sections than their White and/or affluent classmates (Novick et al., 2011). Namely, the SAP participants from low-SES backgrounds, or those who belong to *other* non-dominant identity groups, may experience class discussions such as the one described by Sam as a stark reminder of the extent to which students enrolled at Beacon University and participating in the Social Action Program are assumed to be “White, sheltered, middle-class, single, without children, un-debted, and between ages 18 and 24” (Butin, 2006, p. 481). If such an implicit message can be seen as embedded within the language of both of these examples, then it is not surprising that Beacon University students who did not fit into one or more of these dominant identity categories described a weakened sense of community within the Social Action Program.

Finally, it is important to note that the definition of privilege we offered at the outset of this article allows for the possibility of an individual belonging to a dominant identity group in one domain while simultaneously belonging to a non-dominant group in another domain. Although the examples offered in the preceding sections were of students who identified as both White *and* affluent, we saw similar patterns of language in the students we interviewed who belonged to only one of these identity groups. One such student was Abigail—a Cambodian-American marketing major from an affluent family background. Abigail was one of the students referenced earlier in this article who described the challenges associated with being one of the few students of color in her SAP section; however, she simultaneously used “othering” language similar to Corey’s to describe the students from low-income backgrounds she encountered at her service placement. In short, Abigail serves as an example of a student who feels silenced in some SAP discussions by virtue of her identity status as a person of color while simultaneously using language in other SAP discussions that likely has the same effect upon classmates from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

### Challenging Assumptions and Language

**I**n the preceding sections, we have sought to demonstrate ways in which the White and/or affluent students participating in the Social Action Program invoked language during the program’s class discussions that revealed their assumptions and judgments about the individuals they encountered at their service placements and about whom they read in the program’s assigned readings. We contend that this language—or, more accurately, the assumptions revealed by this language—contributed to the weaker sense of community experienced by students of color and students from low-SES backgrounds participating in the Social Action Program. As a result of this weakened sense of community, many of these students from non-dominant groups made a conscious decision *not* to participate in discussions or reflections that touched upon issues of race or class.

Angela Gutman, an African American student majoring in English, was one such student. As Angela explained of her SAP discussion section, “When race or anything about the inner-city came up, people would assume that I was going to speak, and [so instead] I kind of sit back and listen.” However, Angela also described breaking her “vow of silence” to challenge a classmate’s

implicit criticism of a nine-year-old girl for whom she served as a tutor at a low-income urban public school. Speaking first of her classmate, Angela explained:

She said that when she asked the little girl what she wants to be when she grows up, she said she wanted to be a mother. The Beacon student said she was shocked that she wanted to be a mother, and not upset but disappointed. . . . She said that the little girl's mother was a mother when she was very young, and she didn't want to see her doing the same. To me, I do not think it is anybody else's right to judge. And I kind of interrupted her to say, "Why does this surprise you that she wants to be a mother? I think being a mother is a great thing. I think that shows maturity for her." I am not saying she should be a mother right now, but I think that is something she is being responsible about. And she said, "Well, I don't want to see her ruin her life." I am like, "Who is to say that is going to ruin her life? I think that being a mother is a great role in life." And I think people in the class were kind of surprised that I said that.

What is notable about this conversation is that Angela stepped forward to challenge both the "othering" and the paternalism that she perceived to be implicit in her classmate's language. Namely, Angela's classmate seems to have heard a nine-year-old's aspiration of becoming a mother as an aspiration of becoming a *poor, young single mother* and that doing so would "ruin her life." Would this classmate have made these same assumptions or used this same language to describe a nine-year-old girl from an affluent suburban community expressing similar aspirations? What if the nine-year-old had been White instead of Latina? While our research team was not present in the SAP discussion section to observe this conversation taking place, Angela's final observation about the incident ("I think people in the class were kind of surprised I said that") suggests that her decision to challenge her classmate's language may have been a powerful learning moment for all of her classmates. In this community service learning program focused on issues of inequity and social justice, Angela's comment pushed her classmates to consider the assumptions and judgments that are even embedded within the language with which they discuss these issues.

Angela's decision to challenge her classmate's use of language may have represented a powerful learning moment in her SAP discussion section, but do not forget that this is precisely the role that Angela and a number of other SAP participants of color expressed a desire to *not* have to play in their classes at Beacon University. As noted above, Angela described her reluctance to speak up in her SAP discussion section about issues involving race or class precisely because she felt as if the entire class were waiting for her to do so. Likewise, Namwali—a student in the Social Action Program who had been born in Africa but raised in a low-income urban community in the United States—explained:

In classes [at Beacon University] you are usually one or only one of two other Black people. When you talk about issues like race, you don't want to be the Black voice. I don't want to raise my hand [and say], "Oh, well, this is how Black people feel."

What these students are resisting is what scholar Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009) has characterized as students of color "*becoming* the curriculum of diversity for their White peers" (p. 167) and what scholar Dorinda Carter (2008) refers to as the "spotlighting" of students of color within predominantly White classrooms.

In short, then, it seems we have in Angela's description above an example of a powerful learning moment for students in that particular SAP discussion section, but one that community service learning programs and faculty should not be relying upon their students from non-dominant groups to deliver. That said, we believe Angela drew upon a powerful strategy when she focused specifically on her classmate's use of the phrase "ruin her life" to describe a nine-year-old's desire to one day be a parent, and then asked, "Who is to say that is going to ruin her life?" In so doing, Angela

pushed her classmates to consider not only the particular issue about which they were speaking, but also the *language* in which they were discussing it. This meta-cognitive focus (a conversation about the conversation) can be a powerful lever for pushing students engaged in community service learning to question the lens through which they view the interactions at their service placements, and one which we believe university *faculty* engaged in community service learning programs would do well to employ.

### Conclusion

Recently, this article's lead author was observing a class at a public middle school where the students were learning how to carry out effective academic discussions. In order to teach this lesson, the teacher divided his class into two concentric circles. The students in the inner circle were given a topic to discuss, and the students in the outer circle were each assigned one aspect of the discussion to analyze: how many girls spoke versus how many boys spoke, who disagreed with someone in a respectful way, who referenced someone else's comments, and so on. After the initial discussion was carried out, the students in the outer circle shared their perspectives on the discussion itself. Their analyses of the ways in which the conversation unfolded provided as valuable a learning experience for the entire class as the actual discussion carried out by the students in the inner-circle.

At the university level as well, faculty and administrators leading community service learning can deepen the learning opportunities for their students by *explicitly* drawing attention to the language their students use to describe their service experiences, and the *implicit* assumptions and judgments embedded within this language. By actively taking on this role, faculty can add a new dimension of learning to class discussions and simultaneously reduce the expectations for students from non-dominant identity groups to raise these challenges themselves. In so doing, faculty can increase the opportunities for learning and the sense of community for *all* of their students engaged in the important work of community service learning.

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