

Changes in social justice orientation for HDFS majors through service learning

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Abstract

Service learning, in many programs, is envisioned to increase awareness of and intention to enact social justice. For this study, 21 female HDFS majors completed a questionnaire in class measuring their orientation to social justice at the beginning and at the end of the semester in which they completed 30 hours of service learning. There were no statistically significant changes on social justice attitudes, perceived behavioral control, subjective norms, or behavioral intentions. None of the scales also predicted final grades. HDFS majors may already be social justice oriented, which supports the need for deeper service learning opportunities.

Introduction

Service learning has been found to be beneficial for students' learning (See Toews & Cerny, 2005). Lee (2012, p. 2) noted that "service-learning experiences are extremely helpful for students to identify the actual felt needs of the community and the target audience." Although service learning may be useful for students intending to move into helping professions, there is less understanding if service learning brings about heightened understanding of and increased intentions to engage in activities for social justice.

Social justice may be understood as "the goal to decrease human suffering and to promote human values of equality and justice" (Vasquez, 2012). Fouad, Gerstein, and Toporek (2006) further asserted that working towards social justice requires that individuals and groups work towards ensuring equity.

In Human Development and Family Studies classes, instructors may use service learning as a means to expose students to others who are different from themselves and to "foster the development of tolerance, empathy, and a sense of civic responsibility" (Berke, Boyd-Soisson, Voorhees, & Reininga, 2010). In an analysis of undergraduate Family and Consumer Sciences majors' reflection papers on service learning, Toews and Cerny (2006) found that the students cited increased tolerance of diversity, greater social awareness, the importance of community service, and commitment to future service. Although these findings may be related to aspects of social justice, they do not have the broader purpose of bringing about social justice and the action oriented commitment to seek social justice in the community. More

Procedure and participants

Twenty-one undergraduate Human Development and Family Studies majors (Female = 21, Male = 0) from a suburban, public university completed a measure of social justice orientation at the beginning of the semester and at the conclusion of the semester in a class for which they had completed 30 hours of service learning activities in the community. Participants completed the measure as part of their in-class activities. The ethnic composition of the sample was 10% African American, 38% White, 40% Latino, and 10% Asian American.

Measures

Social Justice. Participants rated the item of the 24-item Social Justice Scale (Torres-Harding, Siers, & Olson, 2012) using the scale 1 = Disagree strongly to 7 = Agree strongly. The measure is comprised of four subscales: social justice attitudes (SJA; 11 items, $\alpha = .88$), social justice perceived behavioral control (SJPBC; five items, $\alpha = .86$), social justice subjective norms (SJSN; four items, $\alpha = .88$), and social justice behavioral intentions (SJBI; four items, $\alpha = .66$). Examples of items include: "I believe it is important to act for social justice," "I am confident that I can have a positive impact on others' lives," "Other people around me are engaged in activities that address social injustices," and "In the future, I will do my best to ensure that all individuals and groups have a chance to speak and be heard," respectively.

Table 1
Correlations of Social Justice subscales pre and post

	SJA	SJBI	SJPBC	SJSN	SJA _{post}	SJBI _{post}	SJPBCpost	SJSN _{post}
SJA		.90***	.65**	.69**	.63**	.53*	.49†	.35
SJBI			.67**	.65**	.67**	.67**	.60*	.36
SJPBC				.33	.83***	.79***	.73**	.49†
SJSN					.49†	.39	.47†	.45†
SJA _{post}						.91***	.92***	.76***
$SJBI_{post}$.88***	.70**
SJPBCpos	st							.79****
SJSN _{post}								

Note: SJA = social justice attitudes, SJBI = social justice behavioral intentions, SJPBC = social justice perceived behavioral control, and SJSN = social justice subjective norms. $\dagger p < .10$, * p < .05, ** p < .01, and *** p < .001.

Table 2 Paired t-tests for Social Justice subscales

	Pre	Post	t(df)	p
	M(SD)	M(SD)		
SJA	71.20 (5.49)	72.00 (6.85)	63(14)	ns
SJBI	24.33 (2.64)	25.13 (3.04)	-1.47(14)	ns
SJBC	30.40 (3.89)	31.67 (4.08)	-1.66(14)	ns
SJSN	22.07 (3.77)	21.67 (3.77)	.43(14)	ns

Note: SJA = social justice attitudes, SJBI = social justice behavioral intentions, SJPBC = social justice perceived behavioral control, and SJSN = social justice subjective norms.

Results

First, we explored to see if there were any ethnic differences by dichotomizing the ethnicity variable as White and people of color, given the small sample size. There were no differences on the subscales by dichotomized ethnicity variable. Second, we investigated the relationship between the subscales in pre-test and in post-test. Pre and post-test measures of social justice attitudes, social justice behavioral control, and social justice behavioral were significantly correlated (r = .63, p < .01; r = .67, p < .01; r = .73, p < .01, respectively). Social justice subjective norms pre and post scores did not reach statistical significance, r = .45, p < .10.

Next, to determine if there were any changes in scores on the subscales, we conducted paired t-tests. There were no statistically significant differences on any of the subscales. In addition, we conducted paired t-tests of the items pre and post. Again, there were no statistically significant differences. We also conducted a regression analysis to see if any of the social justice scales predicted final grades. There were no statistically significant predictors.

Conclusion

Given that focus of service learning is often to increase a sense of social justice and intention to pursue social justice, the lack of significant findings among students is somewhat surprising. Jacobson, Oravecz, Falk, and Osteen (2011) also found that there were no significant changes on the empowerment and civic responsibility among Family Studies undergraduates. Thus, it could be that the intention to increase students' awareness of and intention to enact social justice by engaging in service learning may not be occurring. There are a variety of reasons that no significant changes were found:

- 1. HDFS students may already be social justice oriented when they enter the major. Indeed, Garcia-Reid et al. (2016) found that HDFS undergraduates participating in an internship "saw themselves both as HDFS professionals-intraining and as advocates for social justice" (p. 61).
- 2. The participants had previously completed a fieldwork course that also required volunteer hours in an HDFS setting. It could be that, for the students, there may not have been sufficient distinction between fieldwork and service learning. Therefore, any changes in social justice orientation may have already occurred prior to entering the service learning course.
- 3. Students selected their own service learning sites from an established community partner database. The service learning sites included the campus child care center, Kindergartens, a nutrition education program for fifth graders, a social service agency for adults with disabilities, and a group home for foster youth among others. It could be that the service learning sites were not sufficiently oriented towards deliberate social justice issues, and so the students' experiences did not make issues of inequity apparent to them or motivate them to make systemic changes.
- 4. The curriculum and instruction may have failed to provide enough opportunities for learning and reflection on social justice issues of the service learning experiences.