

Service-Learning in Community Action Research: Introduction to the Special Section

Roger N. Reeb

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This special section focuses on service-learning in community action research, with an emphasis on Theory, Research, and Practice. This Introduction is organized into three sections. In the first section, a brief description of service-learning is provided, and the general goals of the special issue are delineated. The second section provides a rationale for the special section, including a brief discussion of (a) the relevance of service-learning to psychology in general, (b) the importance of stimulating additional systematic community-based research in the area of service-learning, and (c) the ways in which the goals and outcomes of service-learning reflect the values and assumptions in community psychology. Finally, the third section sets the stage for readers by providing a brief description of each article in the special section.

Description of Service-Learning and General Goals of the Special Section

The following definition of service-learning provided by Bringle and Hatcher (1995, p. 112) is frequently cited in the literature:

...course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a

way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

According to Altman (1996, p. 374), the purpose of service-learning is to promote the acquisition of *socially responsive knowledge*, and he defines these terms as follows:

[Service-learning requires]...linking the curriculum to community needs and engaging students in direct, academically based problem solving on social issues (p. 74)...The goal of socially responsive knowledge is as follows: first, to educate students in the problems of society; second, have them experience and understand first-hand social issues in their communities; and third, and most important, give students the experience and skills to act on social problems...(p. 374–375).

With regard to the general goals of this special section, the articles presented herein will collectively accomplish the following: (a) describe the historical, philosophical, and theoretical foundations and rationale for community-oriented service-learning as a pedagogical strategy in higher education; (b) review empirical research on service-learning projects, with a focus on both community outcomes and student outcomes (i.e., enhanced learning, benefits to personal development); (c) present original empirical evidence of the beneficial effects of this pedagogical technique for both students and the community; (d) provide models of campus-community collaborative service-learning research projects with beneficial effects for both the community and student development; and (e) provide recommendations and guidelines for future research on community-oriented service-learning.

R. N. Reeb (✉)
Department of Psychology, University of Dayton, Dayton,
OH 45469-1430, USA
e-mail: roger.reeb@notes.udayton.edu

Rationale for Special Section on Service-Learning in *American Journal of Community Psychology*

General Relevance of Service-Learning to Psychology

Ira Harkavy, a national leader in the area of service-learning, maintains that the modern research university evolved from the idea that access to education was essential for America to fulfill its democratic mission (Benson et al. 2007; Harkavy and Donovan 2007). With the wake of the Cold War, however, an emphasis on “pure science” resulted in a transition to what Harkavy has called the *Big Science, Cold War, Entrepreneurial, Commodified American Research University System*, which caused universities to shift away from the original core mission of educating young people to participate fully in the life of their community.

Further, in an American Psychological Association award address, Altman (1996) commented on this same historical pattern (p. 371):

The idea that we have always been agents of society is well documented by scholars of higher education. For example, colonial American colleges educated students to be future leaders of the fledgling nation—as clergy, lawyers, and civic leaders. Students received what we now call a broad liberal education. That is what American society of the era required of its educational system, and that is what was provided. The liberal educational tradition is still with us today, albeit, often in a token set of courses that are subordinate to a crowded disciplinary major or technical curriculum.

Thus, in commenting on curriculum needs in psychology programs, Altman argues that socially responsive knowledge is generally neglected in higher education, and he recommends service-learning as a pedagogical approach to obtaining socially responsive knowledge. Altman (1996, p. 376) writes:

I cannot imagine a field more suited to the idea of socially responsive knowledge than psychology. And is it not our goal to both understand behavior and promote human well being?

In addition, it is worth noting that, in a large survey of community members (e.g., Bringle and Plater 2008), the vast majority of residents supported the notion of incorporating service-learning into college curriculum.

Importance of Systematic Community-Based Research on Service-Learning

Despite the fact that there has been a remarkable growth in service-learning courses in higher education since the late

1980s and early 1990s, the body of research demonstrating benefits of service-learning is a relatively new development (Eyler and Giles 1999; Giles and Eyler 1998). In 1994, Miller (p. 29) noted that, “Most of the literature that does exist is theoretical, philosophical, impressionistic, or anecdotal...” Nevertheless, a body of knowledge has developed in recent years to support the early claim that, “when community service is combined with classroom instruction, the pedagogical advantages of each compensates for the shortcomings of the other” (Markus et al. 1993, p. 417). As noted by Bringle and Hatcher (2000, p. 74), there are a number of good reasons for pursuing high-quality systematic research on service-learning:

Scientific research on service learning provides a significant and necessary component of work that practitioners in service-learning must frequently use (a) to develop theory that explains the process and outcomes of service-learning, (b) to improve the practice of implementing service-learning courses and programs, (c) to facilitate the development of a culture of evidence and assessment on campuses, (d) to offer a justification for increased allocation of campus resources to service and service-learning, and (e) to provide a basis for developing policy associated with the institutionalization of service-learning in higher education.

This special section on service-learning in ACP will review available research on service-learning, introduce original research findings to the literature, and stimulate as well as guide future research in this area.

Service-Learning Reflects Values and Assumptions in Community Psychology

From the discussion above, it should be evident that the developing body of research on service-learning outcomes for both students and the community is pertinent to the field of community psychology. For a number of reasons, it is important for *AJCP* to publish a special section on this topic.

First, the special section coincides with the values and assumptions of community psychology. The most common student outcome of service learning is an improvement in attitudes centering around social responsibility (Astin and Sax 1998; Eyler and Giles 1999; Eyler et al. 2001; Markus et al. 1993; Myers-Lipton 1996a; b; Reeb et al. 1999; Vogelgesang and Astin 2000), such as social awareness or consciousness, empathy, community-oriented moral obligations, social justice, respect for diversity, and reduction in racism. These attitudes appear to be maintained for years after graduation (Fenzel and Peyrot 2005).

In addition to increased social responsibility, another student outcome of service-learning is an enhancement in self-efficacy for community service—i.e., one's perceived confidence in his or her competence to make a clinically significant contribution through service (Reeb 2006a; Reeb et al. 1998). Service-learning is associated with an increase in plans for future community service (e.g., Moely et al. 2002) and a greater likelihood for post-college involvement in service and service-related careers (Fenzel and Peyrot 2005). Other outcomes include enhanced learning of core course content (Reeb et al. 1999), higher academic achievement as measured by multiple indexes (Gray et al. 1996), as well as a capacity to view phenomenon from multiple perspectives and to apply knowledge developed in one setting to other settings (Eyler and Giles 1999; Eyler et al. 2001). Further, service-learning offers students the opportunity to develop a number of competencies or skills, such as team building, leadership, conflict resolution, communication, organization, and time-management (e.g., Olney et al. 2006; Tucker et al. 1998). In general, there is strong evidence that community action research projects employing service-learning students as change agents serve to improve wellness in the community (Reeb 2006b).

Thus, it can be seen that the goals and outcomes of service-learning coincide with values and assumptions in community psychology (Prilleltensky 2001; Prilleltensky and Nelson 1997; Rappaport 1977; Rappaport and Seidman 2000), such as respect for diversity, competence, empowerment, sense of community, social action and change, health and wellbeing, personal growth, caring and compassion, collaboration, citizen participation, ecological perspective, and integration of research with community action. Therefore, this special section will advance research and theory in the area of community service-learning while also reflecting and supporting the core values and assumptions of community psychology.

Second, in a general way, this special section functions to acknowledge the contributions of students to *community action research*. Academicians who conduct community action research frequently obtain the assistance of students in implementing their studies (Reeb 2006b) and, when the experiential work interfaces with a course or the curriculum in ways that augment learning, this is referred to as service-learning. Contributions of college students to community action research are not limited to background aspects of program implementation, such as clerical work, data collection, or data analysis. In fact, the potential benefits of using trained college students as *change agents* was evident in the early development of community psychology (e.g., Rappaport et al. 1971), and this practice is routinely employed with continued success in many ongoing community action research projects (e.g., Sturza and Davidson 2006).

Third, the special section will further stimulate theory and systematic research regarding the effects of service-learning on student and community development. The research reviewed (or presented for the first time) in the special section will serve as models for future research, and specific recommendations intended to guide future research will be incorporated.

Setting the Stage: Brief Description of Articles in the Special Section

In the first article, Harkavy and Hartley discuss the historical and philosophical foundations of service-learning, with an emphasis on debates regarding the pedagogical strategy that have occurred over the years. In addition, the Academically Based Community Service at the University of Pennsylvania, which is about 25 years old, is described in order to provide readers with a model of a successful campus community partnership that integrates curriculum enhancement, teaching, learning, community service, and research on outcomes for students, faculty, and the community.

The second article by Bringle and Steinberg describes core elements of the *civic-minded graduate*, which include academic knowledge and technical skills, knowledge of volunteer opportunities and nonprofit organizations, knowledge of contemporary social issues, listening and communication skills, diversity skills, self-efficacy, and behavioral intentions for civic behavior. Within the context of this conceptual framework, they provides a review of research on student outcomes of service-learning projects. The authors also review research focused on the impact of service learning on community outcomes. Implications for teaching community psychology are considered, and recommendations for future research are provided.

In the third article, Davidson and coauthors describe the Adolescent Diversion Project at Michigan State University, which has provided a highly successful alternative to the justice system for juvenile offenders for over 30 years. The impact of the Adolescent Diversion Project on the community is well-documented in the literature, and this article clearly demonstrates that, over the years, the project has significantly enhanced the learning and development of students who, as *change agents* in the community, assist in implementing the program. While this project is well-known as a successful community prevention program, this paper carefully documents the project as an exemplar in service-learning pedagogy.

In the fourth article, Reeb and colleagues review research and theory on self-efficacy and demonstrate the central role of this construct in service-learning. Reeb et al. review over 10 years of research validating the Community

Service Self-Efficacy Scale (CSSES), which measures *the individual's confidence in his or her own ability to make clinically (meaningfully) significant contributions to the community through service*. Within the context of this review, recent (previously unpublished) validation research is also presented. This article provides a model for the theory-driven development of psychometric instruments to assess constructs central to service-learning. Reeb et al. provide research recommendations for (a) further validation of the CSSES and (b) examination of self-efficacy as an outcome variable, moderating variable, and mediating variable in service-learning.

In the fifth article, Rosing and colleagues present a study that identifies potential obstacles, barriers, limitations, and pitfalls in service-learning from the perspective of students. The study focuses on student evaluations across 3 years of service-learning courses at a large, urban university. In this qualitative study, over 2,200 written responses were coded and examined for interrater reliability in order to identify issues of greatest concern to students. The top three concerns expressed by service-learning students included: (a) concern about their placement in the community; (b) the university's choice of sites (e.g., insufficient variety); and (c) problems with time and scheduling. While much of the service-learning literature focuses on the benefits of this pedagogical strategy for students and communities, this article reminds us that it is important to identify, prevent, and address problems along the way as service-learning initiatives are developed and implemented.

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