

CONSTRUCTING MEANING THROUGH SERVICE: BEYOND BELIEFS AND ACTIONS

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Abstract

Much of the literature on community service has sought to investigate the factors that compel individuals to participate. These studies have tended to investigate service using rational choice models or socialization and human capital perspectives. While this literature is useful it fails to address an important dimension of service, specifically the meaning that service has for individuals and how their service activities correspond to their vision of meaningful social change. This study proposes that there are different domains of service defined by the intersection of the type of work that an individual engages in (actions) and the individual's vision of how meaningful social change occurs (belief). Rational choice or market models would predict that individuals serve exclusively in domains that align belief and action; however, drawing on in-depth interviews with college age volunteers, the data presented here suggests that volunteers often engage in service activities that do not conform to expectations. Despite the tension between action and belief, these individuals still see their service work as meaningful. The ways individuals make meaning of service that is out of step with an ideal alignment of belief and action outcomes are explored.

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Introduction:

Rational choice models assume that social actors seek to maximize their utility while incurring the smallest possible cost to themselves. If humans are self-interested actors then how should we think about service work that, as Smith suggests (In Wilson and Musick: 1997), is labor that has “a market value greater than any remuneration received” (694)? Much of the rational choice literature on the subject of service has focused on addressing the theoretical tensions that emerge when seeking to understand why people act in ways that are seemingly out of step with their self interest (Zech 1982; Banks 1997). Gary Becker (1986), for example, has suggested that almost any action can be defined as a rational choice and therefore egoistic. He has subsumed such things as racism, discrimination and selfless action under the umbrella of rational choice claiming that individuals act in accordance with their personal preferences (Becker 1981, 1993). Others have sought to describe the factors that compel individuals to act in a selfless manner. Landes and Posner (1978) take pains to determine what motivates an individual to push another out of the way of a falling flower pot and determine that the allure of extrinsic reward, not pure altruism, must be the cause. Even Max Weber’s ideal types of rational action discussed in *Economy and Society* take for granted that individuals act selfishly (Weber 1968). Of his four analytic categories of social action, instrumental, value-rational, affectual and traditional, only affectual (defined as action that can be reduced to reflex) can be usefully employed to understand altruism and even then it is only valuable under specific and restrictive conditions. Indeed Weber himself questioned how meaningful affectual social action really is.

The analytical parsimony of rational choice formulations makes them attractive. However, they still suffer from the rigidity of their core assumptions. Rational choice scholars assume an egoistic social actor when theorizing and constructing models (Takahashi 2000, Blau 1960, 1977, Homans 1974). This premise is not proven, but instead provides a starting point for inquiry (Elster 1989, Walster et al. 1978). As Wilson (2000) points out, it is possible that “a volunteer might feel good about doing the right thing, but she does not do it because it makes her feel good; rather it makes her feel good

because she thinks she ought to have done it” (222). The rational choice perspective often fails to take account of the nuance and complexity that characterizes how humans make meaning out of acts of service, altruism or even instrumentality. According to Shumer (2000) studies of those who engage in service should be mindful to the “people and the process,” and should favor an approach that yields a rich account of the individual’s service experience.

Other research into what impels individuals to serve considers social factors. One such study by Coleman (1965) sought to explain an individual’s decision to join the Peace Corps by looking at social psychological variables. More recently these studies have tended towards considering the effects of both socioeconomics and family background in trying to explain voluntary activity (Sandomirsky and Wilson 1990; Paxton 1999; Wilson and Music 1997). One such study made the distinction between service that is oriented toward the self and service that is oriented towards the community (Janoski and Wilson 1995). When these researchers made this distinction they found that Weberian human capital theory that emphasizes socioeconomics explains self-oriented service and Durkheimian socialization theory that emphasizes the role of family and parental examples explains community oriented service. These studies often consider service in the broadest of terms including everything from bowling, or participating in community chest, to taking an active role in a community improvement association (Edwards and Booth 1973 in Janoski and Wilson 1995).

Using qualitative data, this study examines the causes of service, the meaning that individuals assign to their service work and the correspondence between their specific service activities and their belief in how meaningful social outcomes are achieved. Inquiry into how a volunteer’s vision of social change articulates with her choice of service activities has the potential to yield valuable insights not only into why people serve, but also about the field of service itself and the complex process of making sense of and addressing social problems. The argument put forward here is that although we may expect service activities that align action and meaning to most effectively serve the expressive needs of volunteers, what we actually find is that service is deeply meaningful to participants despite the incongruities that often exist between the activities that people choose to engage in and their beliefs about what constitutes effective social action.

The expressive side of service refers to the part of giving that produces a sense of satisfaction or fulfillment for the giver. These benefits can take many forms, but in the simplest terms can be thought of as the warm-glow feelings (Andreoni 1990) that accrue from voluntarily doing something for someone else. Peter Frumkin (2002) considers the expressive side of philanthropy in his discussion of consumption in hypothetical unrestrained philanthropic markets. In analyzing competition in these markets, Frumkin contends that market forces most likely do apply to philanthropists' decisions regarding where to allocate money. The equation is simple: a philanthropist will choose to allocate money to the causes and institutions that best align with her "values, beliefs and personal experiences," because this converts to the greatest sense of fulfillment—the greatest feeling of warm-glow (34). The expressive function of philanthropic giving manifests in where money is distributed. This process may predict action within the well-healed world of philanthropy, but can we presume that the same process occurs in venues in which what is given is not money but time and labor? What about those on the ground trying to address social problems? Do market forces operate in such a way that we can predict the kind of service a person will engage in given its ability to maximize expressive functions? Should we assume that service conducted outside of what market models might predict is irrational action? In considering these questions this study will examine the egoistic assumptions that undergird the rational choice literature, while seeking to add to our understanding of why people choose to serve and what role their beliefs play in their decisions.

The literature on the causes of volunteerism has largely ignored the question of how important it is for an individual to perceive that her service work effectively addresses social problems. We might expect, for example, that individuals who engage in work that is out of step with their ideals will cease to engage in service work. This is what Calvin B.T. Lee (1965) predicted in his article about the Columbia College Citizenship Program. Service projects, he speculated, would fail if they do not speak to the volunteer's interests. A more contemporary study by Jones and Hill (2003) demonstrated that both involvement in personally meaningful service and being intrinsically motivated were key predictors of whether or not students who serve in high school will continue to serve in college. Similar to how Frumkin envisions philanthropic

giving, it is reasonable to assume that service work also has an expressive function that is better served through some endeavors than others—but what can be said of those individuals who continue to serve despite acknowledging the sometimes stark asymmetry between what they choose to do and what they wish to accomplish? To begin to answer this question we must first define an ideal-typical service field that distinguishes between types of service and offers individuals different options through which to extract expressive pay-offs. Once we construct a hypothetical “expressive service market” we can then subject it to data to determine two things: 1) if individuals’ decision to engage in certain service activities is predictable given the activity’s ability to maximize the expressive function of service; and, 2) if service is not predictable based on the expressive market model, what accounts for individual’s decision to serve in ways that do not maximize expressive returns?

Defining an Ideal Typical Field of Service

Despite its oversimplified treatment in many scholarly studies, the field of service is complex and internally differentiated. If an attempt to clarify the differences between service activities some researchers have constructed analytical subdivisions. Robert Coles (1993) portrait of American volunteerism draws reasonable distinctions between activities such as tutoring and taking part in a protest march aimed at overturning Jim Crow segregation. The former he terms “community service” and the latter “social and political struggle.” To these categories he adds “charity,” “personal gestures and encounters” and “religiously sanctioned service” among others. Coles is correct in pointing out that there are substantial differences between service activities—clearly tutoring is different from engaging in an activity that could end with a jail term—but many of the distinctions that he draws are not analytically distinct enough to be useful. Charity is often a religiously sanctioned activity. As Aldon Morris (1984) shows, the civil rights movement was a social and political struggle but was inextricably tied to religious institutions. Anyone who has engaged in what Coles terms community service can attest that these activities more often than not include instances of personal gestures and encounters. Coles’s impulse to recognize that there are differences between service activities is right, but his categories are far too ambiguous to be of use here.

Following Giles and Eyler's (1994a, 1994b) contention that categories of service should be distinguished by their social impact, Keith Morton (1995) divides the field of volunteerism into three categories or paradigms: charity, project and social change. The charity paradigm is characterized by a unilateral giving approach; the project paradigm involves doing hands-on work that addresses social problems; and individuals involved in the social change paradigm seek to confront the social factors that generate social problems. Morton sees these three paradigms as rigidly defined and mutually exclusive. Not only do individuals tend not to serve across paradigms, but certain types of service are implicitly treated as pertaining to one of his three paradigms. An individual involved in tutoring, for example, is engaged in the project paradigm regardless of whether or not she believes herself to be an activist. Morton's theory is normative in that he believes that the types of service that an individual engages in should be appropriately pegged to her world-view. Whereas Coles' distinctions were not analytically exclusive enough, Morton's are too hermetic and as a result cannot account for the constitutive role that individual subjectivity plays in differentiating service activities.

Falling somewhere between Coles's Venn diagram and Morton's mutually exclusive paradigms we find Wilson and Musick (2007) who illustrate the differences and similarities between volunteerism, activism and what they call "care work." The term volunteerism, they argue, often refers to those engaged in activities that target individuals in need where activism is seen as addressing social structures (18). Despite seeing some utility in this distinction, these authors caution that the structure versus individual dichotomy often fails when subjectivity is accounted for. Those engaged in individual-level service frequently think of it as a political act just as those who are involved in addressing political issues may see their work as pertaining to the welfare of individuals, not the amendment of structures (21). Identity can also intervene as the specter of being labeled an activist may be unsavory to certain groups while more desirable to others.¹ Ultimately Wilson and Musick conclude that activism should be subsumed as a "sub-type" of volunteerism (23). Care work, according to the authors, is outside the purview of volunteerism because it is without public benefit and is commonly

¹ For example, Blackstone (2004) found that women engaged in political advocacy through the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation refused the "activist" label due to gender norms that construct femininity as "compassionate yet nonconfrontational" (352).

transacted through networks of obligation (e.g. kin relations) (24-26). Wilson and Musick's analytical categories are useful because they are plastic enough to account for social construction. While the study presented here follows Wilson and Musick in putting meaning at the center, the data² collected for this study suggest that when subjectivity is accounted for, volunteers tend to make consistent distinctions between attributes related to service—these distinctions hinge less on archetypal categories of service and more on an alloy of abstract and concrete criteria.

Drawn from the data, and derivative of elements of Coles, Wilson and Musick and Morton's propositions, I propose that meaningful distinctions between service activities emerge when two characteristics are taken into account: the first is the level of proximity that exists between the volunteer and the recipient of the service; and the second is the volunteer's vision of what constitutes meaningful social change. The former will be called "action" and the latter "belief." It is the interaction between action and belief that usefully divides the service field into four discrete but ideal typical domains.³ These categories will form the framework for the hypothetical "expressive service market" that I will examine in this study.

Action: The first of the two indices differentiates types of service by the nature of the service activity itself—specifically the level of interaction—involved in providing for another. Respondents in the study consistently differentiated between service that involved face to face interactions and service that they perceived as removed from those in need. For example, one respondent characterized the difference between the service she does in a cultural exchange program and what she called charity work in the following way: "The difference that I see is [...]with specifically charity some of it isn't necessarily face to face like you don't see the change that you are making." Another respondent had this to say about her work with patients at a psychiatric facility: "I think that [the patients] love it. The smiles on their faces when you walk in the door...it's just like, 'someone's here for me!'...just us being there physically was appreciated so much."

² For information about data collection see the section titled "methodology."

³ Ideal types, as Max Weber (1949) envisioned them, are analytical tools that permit the isolation, bundling and utilization of social phenomena in such a way that allows analysis to proceed. Although ideal types are distilled from the social world, they are necessary an abstraction of it. My formulation of the ideal typical service field is informed by the data collected for this study but presents a somewhat oversimplified version of what is a contested and complex arena of social action.

A self described activist saw much of his work as occurring away from the locations or populations of interest: “[we] operate very much independently from our constituency [...] so in that sense we set our own agenda and say here’s what’s going on.” One student heavily involved in fund raising described his work as primarily directed towards, “day to day operations such as finance and administration.” Instead of interacting directly with the intended service recipient, he saw his work as being, “[on] the planning side of things” and involving, “a lot of management, coordination and keeping people motivated ...” The difference between interacting directly as opposed to working from afar to assist service recipients will be operationalized as the difference between “detached” and “engaged” service and will form the backbone of the action category.

Belief: The second of the two indices separates service activities not based on the activity itself but instead based on the volunteer’s perception of what constitutes meaningful social change. Far more abstract than the action category, the question of what accounted for meaningful social change tapped into a dimension of service that evoked consternation among respondents. Despite, or perhaps due its contentiousness, they often offered well-formed visions of how meaningful social change occurs. As with the action category, there was consistency in respondents’ beliefs which tended toward either a palliative approach to social problems or a root-cause orientation. This dichotomy maps onto work done by Thomas Sowell (1987) on what he calls constrained and unconstrained visions of social change.⁴

While respondents did not wholly subscribed to either the constrained or unconstrained vision that Sowell outlines, they did elaborate beliefs that were in many ways analogous. For example, some favored an incremental approach to social change that characterized humans’ ability to address social problems as limited to providing direct help to individuals or small populations. Others described a comparatively

⁴ In tracing the history of philosophers and economists’ vision of humans’ state of nature, Sowell (1987) sketches a useful portrait of two broad and conflicting visions of social change that mirror the fundamental character of the beliefs offered by respondents in this study. Starting with the axiomatic assertions of enlightenment philosophers such as Adam Smith and William Godwin, Sowell describes two perspectives. The constrained vision postulates that human potential for other-directed-action is circumscribed by self-interest—benefit accrues to others unintentionally as individuals try to maximize their own utility. The constrained vision also posits that humans are unable to affect thoroughgoing and meaningful social change without making undue and unacceptable compromises to personal freedom (34). The unconstrained vision is sanguine about humans’ capacity for selflessness and their ability to provide equal opportunity to all citizens through the redress of systemic social problems (190-203).

expansive view in which social change can occur on a larger scale by confronting or amending social structures. According to a self-described activist, “the difference is that service is something that you do for people in the community, [it’s] non-controversial, non-political. Tutoring is helping one person...activism tries to make systemic change.” One respondent involved in tutoring, who claimed that she operated from an “if you can’t beat ‘em join ‘em” framework, gives voice to a constrained view when speaking of her work with students in under-resourced schools:

I guess you are making a difference for one or two people. Maybe you are not fixing the problem that the school is very under funded [but I can’t] petition the government [or] give the school more money. This is what I can do. I’m hoping to solve it through my little actions.

In contrast, another respondent who tended to speak in metaphor persistently endorsed addressing the social structures that cause social problems. To illustrate his view, he gave the example of a hypothetical doctor who treats an inordinate number of asthma cases originating from a specific community. In this respondent’s formulation, the doctor could either, “keep on prescribing asthma medicine not knowing that there is an incinerator next door,” or he could “find the root cause and get involved [to] take action to end that sort of thing.” In this respondent’s unconstrained view, making structural change was both desirable and possible. In this study the unconstrained view will be operationalized as “structures” whereas the constrained view is termed “individual outcomes” reflecting an orientation toward a more limited vision of social change.

Using both belief and action it is possible to distinguish between types of service. Given the interaction between these categories four ideal typical domains of service activities emerge (see figure 1). Each domain is described below along with a description of a corresponding organization affiliated with or located in the vicinity of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor campus in which this study was conducted.

Figure 1



<i>Action</i>	Detached	Charitable Fundraiser	Policy Advocate
	Engaged	Hands-on Volunteer	Grassroots Activist

- *Charitable Fundraiser*: This domain of service is marked by both distance from the service recipient and an individual outcome orientation to social change. Numerous fraternities and sororities on campus participate in charity giving. For example, according to their website,⁵ the Alpha Chi Omega sorority held a silent auction in 2006 in which items of jewelry and sports memorabilia were auctioned to guests. The proceeds, which amounted to upwards of \$8,000 were donated to “support victims of domestic violence.”
- *Hands-on Volunteer*: This type of service, which combines both a hands-on or engaged approach with an individual outcome orientation, is common on campus. One of the two volunteer clearinghouse websites for the university boasts connections to 509 local agencies and listings of 634 service opportunities—many if not most of which conform to the hands-on volunteer domain’s criteria.⁶ SAFE house, a shelter for victims of domestic abuse, asks volunteers to both interact with residents and their children, and provide crisis counseling to victims of domestic abuse over the phone.⁷
- *Policy Advocate*: This service domain finds individuals working from afar to address what they see as the root causes of social problems. PIRGIM, is an Ann Arbor based organization with the stated goal of preserving the environment, protecting consumers and promoting democracy.⁸ Work with this organization can include raising awareness through the media, lobbying legislators and coalition building with organizations devoted to similar goals.

⁵ <http://sitemaker.umich.edu/axo/Philanthropy> (accessed June 11th 2008)

⁶ <http://www.volunteer-connection.org/searchHome.php> (accessed June 11th 2008)

⁷ http://www.volunteer-connection.org/volunteer_opps.php?opp=187 (accessed June 11th 2008)

⁸ http://www.volunteer-connection.org/volunteer_opps.php?opp=152 (accessed June 11th 2008)

- *Grassroots Activist:* This service domain involves addressing structures through direct action. Students Organizing for Labor and Economic Equality (SOLE) is a university sanctioned organization that participates in protests and direct-action in support of labor equality. Their website documents how nine SOLE activists were arrested during a 2007 take-over of the office of the university's president. This protest was designed to exert pressure on the university to abrogate contracts with companies that manufacture textiles in sweatshops.

As stated above, the purpose of this study is to investigate the correspondence between action and belief in the field of service. If service operates in the same way that Frumkin envisions the consumption of philanthropy—namely that individuals choose to maximize expressive functions—we would expect people involved in service to affiliate themselves with service opportunities that align their belief in how social change happens with their preferred mode of action. It is reasonable to assume that a person who derives great satisfaction from charity giving because he enjoys the administrative work of organizing fund raisers and believes that money used to assist those in need is money well spent, would not choose to volunteer to demolish buildings or work as a policy advocate engaged in influencing legislators or critiquing the media. Similarly we would expect that a grassroots activist would not tend toward service in one of the other domains because to do so would misalign her commitment to engaged action and her belief in systemic change. In other words, if expressive returns to service are manifest in the alignment of belief and action then we would expect to find that in the service marketplace, individuals seek to maximize the expressive function of service by serving exclusively within one service domain. These ideas can be summarized in a series of assumptions: *Assumption A:* Individuals will have a primary service affiliation; *Assumption B:* This affiliation will vary depending on two indices (action and belief); *Assumption C:* Individuals will choose activities that create perfect correspondence between action and belief; *Assumption D:* Lack of correspondence will diminish the expressive dimension of service and will result in service that is less meaningful for the individual involved. This study will examine assumptions C and D in detail to determine if individuals tend to maximize the expressive function of service by concentrating their effort within one predictable service domain and if not, how they make sense of service conducted in other domains. If maximizing expressive returns is not the primary driver of behind individuals' choice of service activity then we must investigate the process

through which individuals construct explanations and make meaning of actions that are out of step with expected outcomes.

Methodology

Sample: Seventeen participants were interviewed for this study in 19 separate interview sessions. The sample was collected using what Weiss (1994) has called ‘convenience sampling.’ To recruit respondents I relied on email list-serves provided by the Ginsberg Center (the official service headquarters on campus), referrals from graduate students instructors who teach undergraduates and snowball sampling. All participants were initially recruited over email.

The sample included men and women,⁹ students in their first year at the university, students in their fifth year and students in the years between. The sample includes an array of races as well. Whites, African Americans, Indian and Asian students are all represented. Some respondents were heavily involved in service others reported fitting it in when they could find the time. All respondents were currently enrolled undergraduates at the University of Michigan who self reported being engaged in service activities to address social problems.

Interviewees were not paid for their participation. How the lack of monetary incentive affected the sample is unknown. Many of the respondents, however, told me that they viewed the interview as, “just more service,” indicating that for this population (one that is accustomed to doing work without remuneration), the lack of monetary incentive might not have created the same bias that it might have in a different study with a different population. Overall, the respondents’ willingness and enthusiasm to participate bodes well for recruitment in future studies with this population.

*In-Depth Interviews:*¹⁰ All interviews were conducted in the sociology department of the University of Michigan between December 15th 2003 and February 20th 2004. On average, interviews lasted about 90 minutes, with the shortest interview lasting about 45 minutes and the longest interview lasting over 120 minutes. The semi-structured, in-depth interviews typically started with the same series of questions, including: *What*

⁹ My sample consisted of more women than men. This is consistent with 2004 Ginsberg Center’s data on service at the university that indicates that more women are involved in service than men.

¹⁰ Interviews were taped and transcribed in full. The full interviews were then entered into the NVIVO computer program for open coding as described by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995). Minor alterations have been made to the quotations for clarity.

service activities are you involved with now? What was your first service experience?

The answers to those questions typically dictated other questions that then were tailored to the respondent's specific experiences and perceptions. To ensure accuracy, I often repeated back how I was hearing and understanding my respondent's answers; I tried to reformulate their thoughts in my own words so they could confirm or amend my interpretations. This technique is consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommendation that researchers conduct member checks through which interpretations are informally tested for accuracy by respondents—in this case during the interview. This process allowed the respondent, "an immediate opportunity to correct errors of fact and challenge what are perceived to be wrong interpretations" (Lincoln and Guba 1985:314).

In all cases I have tried to stay not only faithful to what the respondents said (their meaning), but how they said it. In most instances habitually repeated words or sounds such as, "like," "um," and "ah," are omitted. Places where redundant or inaudible text was cut are indicated by [...]. Three periods in succession within the text without brackets connotes a pause in the respondent's speech.

Findings

The data show little support for the expressive market model which would predict that individuals avoid participating in service activities that fall outside of a specific domain. As opposed to seeking out only those service domains that align action and belief, individuals often serve in other domains—most often as hands-on volunteers. As I will show, this is not because they believe that these other domains are the most meaningful or transformative way to address social problems, but instead, because serving across domains afforded them the opportunity to enhance, enrich and inform work within their primary service domain. Despite presenting respondents with a mismatch between action and belief, the data presented below suggest that service across domains is not irrational action and that rational choice or market explanations must be augmented through attentiveness to the ways in which individuals make meaning of their service activities. In other words, meaning—a socially constructed and subjective process of assigning value—emerges as the key explanatory variable of why individuals choose to serve across domains. The various ways in which respondents make meaning

of service that does not conform to expectations given the expressive market model are explored below.

Making Connections: Many of the students that I interviewed spent at least some of their time involved in charity giving, which included everything from fundraising for cancer research to organizing blood drives for the Red Cross. Derrick,¹¹ a thoughtful third year Indian American student who is heavily involved in the organization that puts together a popular pledge drive on campus called Dance Marathon. Grinning, he described the Dance Marathon, an event that requires pledged participants to dance—or simply remain standing—for over thirty hours to raise money for pediatric rehabilitation. His involvement brought great satisfaction to Derrick; and, as he reminded me many times through the course of the interview, the event helps a number of children in need. However, charity giving activities such as Dance Marathon were not beyond reproach from the other respondents. John,¹² a grassroots activist, bristled when asked about the Dance Marathon.

I hate to rag on Dance Marathon but I think of it as the pivotal example of how not to do service. They raise \$180,000 and then spend \$60,000 putting their events together, so \$120,000 profit goes to the hospital—one of the most well funded children’s hospitals in the country. You can check a box and think you’re done.

In his critique of Dance Marathon, John not only calls into question the effectiveness of charity giving, but also the intentions of the participants.

John’s critique was familiar to Derrick who during the duration of the interview made reference to how Dance Marathon is seeking to change its image by offering hands-on volunteer opportunities which are intended to engage the dance participants with the children who benefit from the fund raising event. By creating an opportunity for participants to interact closely with recipients, Derrick sought to infuse more meaning into charity giving therefore making it more legitimate.

*Why do the volunteering? Why not just do the fundraising? Why do both?*¹³

I think the benefit is that people get to see the fruits of their efforts and where the money is going. And I think that it builds an understanding of what the cause is. We want people to understand is that pediatric rehabilitation is a real issue and there is real progress being made

¹¹ All names are pseudonyms.

¹² For further discussion of John, including demographic information see the section titled, “To Organize and Educate.”

¹³ The interviewer’s text is presented in *italics* throughout, with the respondents’ responses rendered in plain text.

at the hospital with the programs that we fund. We see giving [participants] volunteering opportunities as a chance to deepen their experience.

For Derrick, the Dance Marathon was still the most effective way to address pediatric medical issues but he utilized hands-on volunteer service to bridge the gap between the dancers and the children. Hands-on volunteer service in this case is employed not for its ability to tackle the problem of pediatric disability, but instead for its capacity to create meaning and connectedness for those involved in the detached task of raising money.

Mary, a white sociology major in her fourth year of school, traces her service experience back to participating in church food drives with her mother when she was ten years old. At the time of the interview she was primarily involved in organizing a large campus wide blood drive but also found time to tutor elementary school girls in Detroit and volunteer in a soup kitchen. When asked about what she hoped to accomplish by tutoring she replied.

Well I think I became very aware very young of how small I was in this huge picture. I have no goals to save the world or no ambition to make everything perfect so I don't think in my service that's really what I'm shooting for. You know I'm not trying to fix the Detroit public schools just by going there once a week and helping these girls.

Eventually she articulated why volunteering at the soup kitchen is meaningful to her: “handing the plate to person [and] actually talking to them is really rewarding and it's a really direct way of seeing what you are doing.”

Like Derrick, Mary views hands-on volunteering as a way to enrich her experiences as a charitable fundraiser. Mary flat out denies that hands-on volunteering has transformative potential but it does engage her with service recipients in a way that is not possible when organizing an event like a blood drive which she described as “disorganized” and “frustrating.” This sentiment was echoed by Sophie, a white business major who was also involved in the administration and implementation of a blood drive, which she characterized as, “one of the hardest jobs that I've done in my entire life, but so rewarding at the same time.” In addition to her primary service she also volunteered with abused children in a day care. When asked about whether her hands-on volunteer work effectively addressed root causes she replied, “I think that you can't go to the source, I kind of feel like 'cause it's not going to do anything almost.” When asked why she volunteered Sophie offered this explanation: “Some people just don't care about

service and maybe giving money is their way of helping...I don't think it's equivalent 'cause I feel like you are blowing off people, if you really cared you'd take the time."

Not one of these three respondents reported that hands-on volunteering is particularly effective when it comes to addressing social problems, with Mary showing the most skepticism in this regard. Regardless, all three of these respondents indicated that hands-on volunteering played an important role in making their chosen service pursuits more meaningful. Instead of concentrating on charity giving exclusively as we might expect, these respondents served across domains to enhance their experience in their primary service pursuits.

Credibility: Lippy, an Indian American in her second year of college is heavily involved in both tutoring in Detroit and running voter registration drives met me on a cold January afternoon in the sociology department. A petite woman who spoke slowly and with conviction, Lippy told me about the policy issues in education that she believes create social problems and her future goals which include signing up with a hands-on volunteer teaching organization called Teach for America. When I asked why she is not currently involved in policy advocacy she replied,

I might work in an NGO that works on influencing policy...but I think that as someone my age, 21 years old, I don't think that I have enough experience to say exactly what's wrong with the system and here's what we have to do about it. I think that I need life experiences so I can say, 'I've been there, I've seen it and this is what I think will be best for this community,' and without those experiences I'm not going to be legitimate in any way.

How does Teach for America fit in then? Will you be addressing policy issues?

No! I would venture to say that through Teach for America I'm not going to be affecting things on a policy level. But I am going to leave that experience having learned so much [that will help] when I do things on a policy level.

Although she indicated that volunteering with Teach for America might have a positive effect on some of the children she will teach, she believes that ultimately the experience will be far more beneficial in terms of her ability to affect greater change in the future when she moves into policy advocacy.

Monica, a white fourth year student who spends much of her week conducting drama workshops in a local state prison, echoed Lippy's assessment of hands-on volunteer service. Although she considers herself to be an activist for prisoners' rights,

Monica does not believe that her hands-on service (conducted through an organization called P-CAP) has the potential to change the prison system.

I guess what's interesting is that I consider myself an activist but I wouldn't say that P-CAP is an activist organization because we wouldn't want to actively say that we are trying to reform the system...in order to have access to the people that we want to work with we have to play by [the prison's] rules.

Volunteering is important to Monica because it gives her direct access to the prisoners—a population that is largely invisible. Although she indicated a strong desire to address the structural inequities that she sees reflected in the prison population, there is a tension between Monica's reform-minded goals and the objectives of the prison. She is willing to forgo her activist goals in order to gain direct experience with the prison population because, as she points out, "it would be difficult to justify fighting for a cause without ever actually being a participant in the community. It's almost activism by gaining a real knowledge." Monica sees her service as part of a larger policy advocacy project. For both Monica and Lippy, hands-on volunteer work provides an avenue with which to connect directly to populations that they would not normally have access to. Being a hands-on volunteer provides a valid and viable way not to change social conditions in the ways that they believe are most effective, but to be exposed to them.

For Lippy and Monica, hands-on volunteering is employed to lend credibility to their voices. Both self-identified as upper middle class and privileged, and believed that by interacting directly with the respective populations that they serve, they will be (or in the case of Monica are) taken more seriously when they try to make broader and more systemic changes. In this instance volunteering is meaningful because it builds experiences that can enrich their mission as policy advocates.

It is important to note how the mechanics of credibility work in the cases mentioned above. Unlike many instances in which being taken seriously requires alignment with, or knowledge of a powerful—or more powerful—person or population (as in acquiring a top level job in the business sector through business contacts or obtaining a tenure track faculty position through choosing a well respected dissertation advisor), in both Lippy and Monica's cases, credibility is derived from connection, interaction and affiliation with less powerful populations. Given Lippy and Monica's privileged backgrounds the construction of a credible voice involves a process of

distancing or downplaying one's own social position. Through volunteering, Lippy moves beyond being the rich girl from Bloomfield Hills¹⁴—indeed she will still be viewed as that—but she is also a person with experience in the Detroit public school system. Monica is no longer simply be the well-to-do daughter of a neurosurgeon, she is also a prison insider, a person who can confidently and legitimately make statements about what prison is like and what must be done to address the issue of prisoners' rights.

Awareness of Privilege: Respondents consistently indicated that hands-on volunteer service entailed confronting either the presence or absence of personal privilege. Jackie, a tall second year student with curly blond hair, arrived early to our interview clad in a bright-green, long-sleeved, National Organization of Woman tee-shirt. “Heavily fueled” with caffeine, Jackie energetically detailed her personal service history which involved a staggering number of activities that took place within the confines of her rural Michigan hometown. A graduate of a class of 62 students, she decided that she should spend her first semester at the University getting acclimated—a decision she soon found that she could not abide. Within the first month of classes she had ventured to Detroit for numerous hands-on volunteer activities and secured a consistent position at a battered woman's shelter in Ann Arbor. Through the interview she questioned the usefulness of hands-on volunteerism, “I think that a lot of the times I'm dealing with limited resources and there is only so much that I can do...” She did however indicate vaguely defined plans to have a bigger impact later on in life.

Jackie reported that despite being ambivalent about the effectiveness of hands-on volunteering, it allowed her to learn about herself. The exchange below follows her admission that work at the shelter is often “frustrating and tiring.”

I never realized the privileges that I had. I didn't realize what other kids were experiencing...when I think about it I just want to scream or break down in tears. People don't acknowledge that they have a part to play and that the simplest change to their lives and awareness of that could make everything a lot easier for everyone.

For Jackie, volunteering outside her hometown provided a rude awakening to both inequality in American life and her own privileged position. Jackie was both distressed and motivated by this revelation. Despite having strong emotional reactions when

¹⁴ Bloomfield Hills is a wealthy suburb of Detroit. It is interesting to note that in many of the interviews the respondents used “Bloomfield Hills” as shorthand for privilege.

confronted with her privilege, she alluded to plans to more thoroughly invest herself in service in the future. In this instance, hands-on volunteering was not a way to directly alter social conditions but allowed Jackie to engage with her own privilege by situating it relative to those she served.

Brooke, who identified as both a minority (African American) and a member of the middle class, also reported that her hands-on volunteer work in a homeless shelter raised her awareness of her social position. For Brooke, volunteering did not provide the same shock, or visceral emotional response that it did for Jackie—a fact Brooke might attribute to the fact that she has “family members who are minorities and have seen a lot of things in their lives”—but it does make her self-reflexive. Volunteering, in her opinion, “makes you realize [...] that people are really comfortable with their position, but they don’t realize how easy it can be taken away.”

Monica, the prison reform advocate who conducts drama workshops at a local state penitentiary, talked passionately about how prisons are a site of confluence for social issues such as racism, gender, class, sexual orientation and educational disparity come together. Often tripping over her words and stopping and starting frequently, she labored to articulate just how significant hands-on volunteering has been and continues to be in helping her come to terms with her privilege.

[Prison] is a space where I have to question my freedom, I have question what it means to be white, I question what it means to be female, to be wealthy, to have access to good education, to be a straight woman working with males...I’m not finding people who’ve had any of the privileges that I’ve had...they are not there!

Monica does not see her experience in the prison as an opportunity to be exposed solely to the prisoners and their problems, but as a chance to explore her identity and privilege. However, she is only afforded limited time behind the prison walls; unlike the prisoners, she leaves once the drama class is through. Nonetheless, her experience in the prison lingers long after she departs and forces her to interrogate how she lives her life while informing the work she plans to do in the future. “I guess it gives me a lot of purpose in knowing where I’m gonna go with this and what I want to do further beyond this...I’ll always have this when I go on later.”

Bernie, a tall, thin, African American male who tended to cock one eyebrow when talking, told me about his hands-on service work in a teen center at a housing project.

Hailing from a depressed neighborhood in the South Side of Chicago, Bernie felt as though he could relate to the kids and the families that he interacted with because, “I don’t have much money either and my family doesn’t have much money...so I feel like it’s easy for me to identify.” Unlike Jackie, Brooke and Monica, Bernie sees his own condition reflected in those that he serves. In this case, Bernie’s service brings his social position to the fore, but in a way that does not expose privilege, but rather reminds him of his own disadvantage. While discussing how volunteerism informs his future plans Bernie indicated that it keeps him on track:

It reminds me of where I’ve come from. When I visit my family and I see people on the street asking for money to get crack I think, ok, this is what I need to focus on...I do want to go back and help...so working at the project makes it easier to stay focused on why I am here and stay more academically inclined. I can’t help people if I don’t do well [at the university]. [Volunteering is] like when people go to church right after going to the club...I feel like it’s something that is necessary to keep it all in perspective.

Bernie sees hands-on volunteering as instrumental in helping him stay focused on getting a degree that he plans to leverage as policy advocate and eventually a neighborhood alderman; roles that he believes will allow him to effectively address systemic neighborhood issues. As he says, when “success is at your fingertips, it’s easy to forget why you are trying to succeed and what you are here to do.” For Bernie volunteering provides him with an opportunity to indulge in college life without becoming disconnected from his ambitions and his community.

Jackie, Brooke, Monica and Bernie all find that their service brings them face to face with their respective social positions. Despite the fact that none of these respondents believed hands-on volunteering to be especially transformative and two of them expressed a desire to work in the detached domain of policy advocacy, they persisted within the hands-on volunteer domain. Although we might expect that Bernie, Monica and Jackie would focus primarily on policy advocacy they were willing to overlook the misalignment of action and belief that came with hands-on volunteering because they viewed it as enhancing their capacities for making change in future endeavors—as a result of constructing their service in this way, they experienced it as deeply meaningful.

Organizing and Educating: John showed up for his interview a few minutes late with two hands full of tissues and a runny nose. A white, fourth year student majoring in African American studies, John considers himself to be a “die-hard activist.” Along with

his involvement in a campus labor organization and with a group dedicated to preserving affirmative action, John listed over nine other service activities that ranged from tutoring and demolition work in Detroit to filming a movie about civic involvement in South America. In John's estimation, social change occurs by confronting and changing structures and root causes. He explained this concept in the following anecdote:

Two guys see a body in the water and so one guy jumps into the water and grabs the body and pulls it out and they see another body in the water and both of them are just grabbing bodies and pulling them out. Finally one guy starts running up stream and the other guy yells to him, 'hey, what the hell are you doing? There are still bodies in the water!' [The guy running] yells back, 'I'm gonna go see who's throwing bodies in the water.'¹⁵

Through the course of the interview John's disdain for service that does not directly engage structures became evident. At one point in the interview he alluded to how hands-on volunteering is not only akin to pulling bodies from the water, but often is the equivalent of throwing more bodies in. In other words, volunteering can be detrimental. Given his beliefs, it seemed irrational and counterintuitive that John would be heavily involved in hands-on volunteer service himself. He explained his involvement in the following excerpt:

If you go into Detroit, knock down a house, high five, have a great time and you leave and never see the people who walk by that house everyday thinking that it's an eye sore...you don't understand what happened to this community. That's why it's so important for someone like myself to be there. Most of the people who are pulling bodies want to be doing the right thing and I think it's my responsibility to take their energy and enthusiasm and their ideals and make sure that they are utilizing them in the most effective way...the way that is going to shape our society best which is to attack the root causes.

So the best outcome is that a person goes into a community and...

You go into a community and have your consciousness raised even if it's one day of service. It's best for the community. You don't end up with the house on the ground and college students who think that they have just saved a community from its own destitute situation...everybody benefits. It just makes so much more sense.

Underpinning much of the service learning literature is the assumption that the exposure that hands-on volunteering affords will expand the social consciousness of participants (Giles and Eyler 1994b). But, as John points out, those who volunteer without leaning about the recipient community may derive an exaggerated sense of their contribution and a negative view of the community. In other words, hands-on volunteer

¹⁵ "Bodies in the water" then became part of the language used in the interview to talk about service that addresses root causes versus what John saw as more superficial service.

service may have perverse effects. John's role as he sees it is to leverage and direct the volunteers' energy toward root causes, something that occurs when he is able to help them "challenge their assumptions" and when he connects them with the people and community that they are serving. As a grassroots activist, John derives returns from hands-on volunteering because this domain allows him to protect against potentially harmful outcomes while providing him with a forum through which to educate and orient others toward what he believes is the most effective way to address social problems.

The idea that hands-on volunteer service can have unintended outcomes was also voiced by Gloria, an African American English major in her second year at the university. As a resident of Detroit she talked about how volunteering can lead participants to have a negative view of people from the city—people like her. When asked if there have been any service projects that she has avoided, she stated that she is not interested in volunteering with the Detroit Project, a student run initiative that brings students into Detroit to undertake physical service projects. Her distaste derived from watching how her privileged friends have made sense of hands-on volunteer service in Detroit. According to Gloria, some volunteers returned to report that: "Detroit is so horrible, I almost touched a syringe! Oh my God, I can't believe that people actually live in that!" As far as Gloria was concerned, this service project created negative impressions: "They come in for a day and leave feeling better about themselves and worse about us..."

Gloria's concerns were confirmed by Kate, a white, fourth year sociology major involved in tutoring and the Detroit Project. While speaking about tutoring in Detroit, Kate indicated that hands-on volunteering has left her with, "a lower opinion of the parents of the kids." Seemingly unaware of the class dimensions of life in post-industrial, segregated Detroit, Kate reported that she had, "heard a lot of stories of the kids going to school without coats." She then added that she, "come[s] from a good...nice community...two parent household kind of stuff. You know, constant ride from school, someone to pick me up. [In Detroit] I just saw lot of that not happening."

Dave, a white, third year student who plans to pursue a degree in urban planning, also acknowledges the potential adverse effects hands-on volunteering can have. A grassroots activist originally from Detroit, Dave, like John, believes that his role in

hands-on service is to raise the consciousness of those who volunteer because, “When people go [to Detroit] and all they get out of it is a sense that these people are all messed up...that’s even worse than not even going.” Unlike John who sees his role as redirecting hands-on volunteers to think about structures, Dave’s goals are more modest, “... I’m not trying to make everyone a career community coordinator...just aware of these issues in a manner that is not contributing to the downside of it.” When asked about how he educates volunteers he related a story about a typical day leading peers into service.

It’s usually a big difference between the car ride there and the car ride back. I try to throw a lot of generic information at ‘em like, ‘this area has the highest abandoned home ratio in Detroit and one of the lowest family household income levels.’ And then they go to the sight and the kids are looking forward to tearing something down and hopefully they see what’s going to happen after they’re done and what result it has on the people, that’s a big part of it, trying to get people from the community in there to work with them ‘cause if they don’t it’s just an in and out kind of thing.

By providing hands-on volunteers with information to help them make sociological sense of what they see and by connecting them with community members, Dave is able to not only defend against the potentially perverse effects volunteering can have, but he also evokes a positive response from the volunteers who leave the city feeling optimistic and committed to returning.

John and Dave are grassroots activists who engage in hands-on volunteerism despite the fact that this work is in contradiction with their beliefs about how effective social change occurs. Without their guidance, however, volunteers who serve in places like Detroit run the risk of leaving having developed or reinforced negative valuations like the ones repeated by Gloria and admitted by Kate. John tries to move hands-on volunteers toward thinking about systemic issues and Dave plays a more preventative role by helping them contextualize the meaning of the work that they choose to do and the community in which they do it. For both, their service is deeply meaningful despite the fact that it occurs outside the domain that we would expect would provide them with the greatest expressive returns.

Tangible Effects: Angie, a white woman from the suburbs of Detroit was my first interviewee. Embroiled in taking her final exams for her next to last semester of college, and busy with various commitments, I felt guilty as she sat on the couch for me to set up the microphone and tape recorder. When the interview finally commenced I asked

Angie, who volunteered as a reading tutor, what she thought caused children in Detroit to struggle academically. Instead of answering the question directly by listing causes, she focused on her service work and how she questions its ability to address the problems that create literacy issues.

I don't know if helping one child improve his literacy skills is going to make the change that I want to occur. All the factors that explain why that child is behind in reading, um, by me helping him read it isn't changing why he's behind in reading. I don't know if I'm actually working towards social change by helping one person at a time instead of working to change the whole social structure...but I don't know how to begin to do that...I feel totally powerless...My work isn't getting anybody anywhere really but I do often feel very, very good about helping one person...seeing my kids become better readers.

Caitlin, a white senior who considered herself a policy activist and was interested in working to direct resources to under-funded nursing homes, volunteered in a nursing home despite “feeling like I’m stuck in the middle trying to make change,” in a situation that is, “so big what can one person really do?” Despite the incongruity between her desire to work as a policy activist and her involvement in hands-on volunteering, hands-on volunteer work was meaningful to Caitlin because, “when I see someone’s face light up ‘cause I just walked in the room...[I know] that’s why I’m doing it...”

Both Angie and Caitlin acknowledge that the factors that cause social problems are complex and vast; consequently, they are left feeling powerless to affect structural change. At the time of the interview both respondents seemed to be at a crossroad between coming to terms with the social structure and figuring out how best to change it—something they indistinctly planned to do in the future. Hands-on volunteering is something they pursue in the mean time, a place holder that they both viewed with skepticism but which still yields expressive returns in the form of warm-glow. Volunteering seems to offer both women a way to stay involved in addressing social problems without becoming completely disheartened. By tutoring or working with the elderly they are able to do *something*. Given their bewilderment over how make systemic change, trying to tackle the whole social structure immediately would most likely prove to be both discouraging and enervating. Hands-on volunteerism therefore allows them to feel as though they are connected to making change—even if it is on the level of individual outcomes—while they go through the process of sizing up the social structure and determining how they will work to change it.

Although quite critical of volunteering, John also reported deriving good feelings from it.

It would be arrogant and unfair of me to say that I don't really enjoy looking at a park we've cleaned up or a building that we've knocked down. I think that's a human reaction. I have made decisions to go to removed conferences and things like that to talk about root causes, but in that I have sacrificed real opportunities to do on the ground, getting your hands dirty. Sometimes you just want to pull a body out of the water.

Being a grassroots activist, John favors a structural approach and engaged actions like protest, boycotts and labor strikes. For John, having to involve himself in the detached activities that sometimes accompany direct action—activities such as attending conferences and organizing over email or the phone—leave him feeling isolated. In this instance, John engages in hands-on volunteerism to compensate for those times in which grassroots activism becomes too analytical and administrative—even if the impact is out of step with his belief in addressing root causes. For John, “pulling bodies from the water,” is largely ineffective, but greatly satisfying. Angie Caitlin and John all believe that hands-on service is an insufficient way to meaningfully change the issues they are committed to addressing. Nonetheless, they continue to involve themselves in this service domain and find it meaningful because it nourishes their desire to do something tangible.

Conclusion

This examination of action, beliefs and meaning strongly suggests that the market model of service needs to be modified. The data presented above shows how risky it is to apply rational choice or market principles to the field of service. When we take meaning into account and are attentive to social construction, we find that people engage in activities that are in conflict and in some cases directly opposed to their visions of a transformed world. However, despite the incongruities unearthed in the data, the respondents were not engaged in irrational social action. Whether hands-on volunteering was utilized to connect those involved in the disengaged domain of charity giving with the recipients of their aid, or if it provided a policy advocate with credibility to be transacted later, service was still deeply meaningful and important to those who engage in it. In defining the ideal typical field of service I postulated that action and belief were the key dimensions of service. Despite finding that these dimensions did not predict the

service a person would choose, it is clear that people orient the meaning they make of their service around these variables. While there was some support for Wilson and Musick's (2007) contention that the difference between types of service is largely semantic (actors view the same action as being directed at different ends) the respondents in this study reported consistent skepticism about the effectiveness of hands-on volunteerism. For example, the charitable fundraisers that were interviewed saw hands-on volunteering (e.g. working directly with children) as something very different from their primary service affiliation. Grassroots activists also tended to draw distinct boundaries between structurally oriented service and potentially hazardous hands-on volunteering. Instead of defining or constructing hands-on volunteerism as a form of activism, charity giving or policy advocacy, respondents within these domains pointed to the multiple ways in which hands-on volunteerism could be repurposed to fit the imperatives of their primary service domain.

At the outset of this study four assumptions were proposed, two of which were examined. Assumption C stated that individuals will choose activities that create perfect correspondence between action and belief; and, Assumption D contended that a lack of correspondence will diminish the expressive dimension of service and will result in service that is less meaningful for the individual involved. As discussed above, these assumptions did not hold. Respondents showed great versatility not only in their willingness to serve across domains but also in their ability to make sense of the apparent contradictions that this presented. The following assumptions are offered as amendments: *Assumption C*: Individuals do not choose activities that create a perfect correspondence between action and belief; and, *Assumption D*: the lack of correspondence does not mean that service is less meaningful for those who serve.

The results of this study, however, must be considered in light of the study's limitations. First, this unrepresentative sample provides only a snapshot of young individuals who are still in the process of formulating their understandings of social problems and the best measures available to address them. As students, many of these respondents may find it difficult to align action with beliefs that are still forming and under revision and review. Despite this limitation, most of these students were able to cogently narrate their beliefs about how social change is most effectively enacted.

Second, all of the respondents who served outside of their domain tended to engage in hands-on volunteerism. This may have been due in part to the relative prevalence of hands-on volunteering options available through the university. There were multiple options available within each domain, but activities that engage volunteers in addressing individual outcome were certainly the most plentiful options available.

Finally, this data and findings presented in this study suggest some important directions for future research. First, given the limitations discussed above, future studies that seek to explore the process through which individuals' choose certain service endeavors should seek older populations in venues where there is a greater diversity of service options available. Second, given respondents' acknowledgement of the distinctions between service domains—and their valuations of these domains relative worth—it may be possible to successfully speak of each service domain as its own field with corresponding forms of cultural capital. Cultural capital, as Pierre Bourdieu (1986) has theorized, often, but not exclusively, manifests in non-material goods (dispositions, cognitive structures, styles) that bestow varying levels of rewards to social actors within a field. Fields are structured to privilege some forms of cultural capital over others. Often employed in sociology to explain class reproduction and educational attainment (MacLeod 1995, DiMaggio and Mohr 1995), recent scholarship (Carter 2005) has considered the possibility that individuals can seek out and accumulate forms of cultural capital to enhance their success within a chosen field. If service domains constitute different fields with their own forms of cultural capital then it may be possible to understand Monica or Lippy's desire to take part in hands-on volunteerism and gain credibility as an attempt to accumulate cultural capital for transaction within the policy advocacy field. This perspective may also yield insight into the compulsion to develop and display a strong sense of one's own privilege or even protect the unknowing from the potential harms of hands-on volunteer work. Utilizing cultural capital and field theory may work to not only further explicate individuals' decisions to serve across domains—or potentially accumulate any number of experiences, dispositions or perspectives that can be derived through or for service—but also further develop our understanding of the different domains available to individuals who wish to make social change and their chances for success within each domains.

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