The Fatigue of Compassionate Service-Learning: A Qualitative Case Study in Community Psychology
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Experiences of compassion, fatigue, responsibility, and identification were both desirable and challenging pedagogical processes of a psychology service-learning course in which students worked with recently-arrived refugees. In this qualitative case study, I conceptualize these experiences as linked to three main themes: the students’ first practical application of psychology-related knowledge; the social construction of their professional identity; and the perceived effectiveness of their fieldwork. These themes operated within social constructions of psychology as a practice of help, which are inevitably linked to dynamics of power and responsibility. Rather than seeing the students’ engagement in their community service as an obstacle to effective service-learning, I argue that experiences of compassion and identification can be constructive tools and occasions for critical reflection, engagement with the field, self-knowledge, and understanding of the limits of power and responsibility in community service.

Keywords: community service-learning, psychology, compassion fatigue, emotions, student identity development, qualitative case studies, refugees.

Prelude: “I feel so involved that I always cry when I think about them... I prefer not to go today.”

Soon after the beginning of the semester, the students in my service-learning course, Psychology and Social Engagement, started working with refugees who had just moved to the USA. As they became more comfortable in their community work and deepened their
knowledge of the individuals with whom they collaborated, I regularly observed that their service became intertwined with their identities and, in general, their lives. While personal engagement and dedication are important dimensions of learning, the extent and intensity with which many students associated their work with their sense of self suggested a worrisome leaning toward burn-out, compassion fatigue, and in light of the specific population of service, the possibility of vicarious traumatization (Harrison & Westwood, 2009). Several students shared comments such as, “I cannot stop thinking about the refugee children,” “I am very worried about what will happen to them when the semester ends,” “I cry when I think about their stories and experiences,” or “I will change my choice for graduate school because I want to continue working with refugees. It is part of me now.” Other times, the comments were less sympathetic, but equally reactive: “I don’t like to work with refugees,” “We are doing too much for them,” or “I feel extremely tired after spending one hour with them.” On occasion, students’ behaviors were less explicit but still telling, like systematic delays, unusual distractibility or nervousness during class discussions of field experiences, lack of motivation or, on the other end, doubling or even tripling the hours of service and neglecting other college courses to focus only on Psychology and Social Engagement.

**Introduction**

As a pedagogical method, service-learning provides unique opportunities for the development of knowledge and critical thinking informed by experiences and performances in ecological settings. By combining course content (e.g., theoretical and research literature) with direct actions and real-world relations, service-learning encourages personalized understandings and effective analyses of information. When knowledge is produced and applied as opposed to being merely received on an abstract level, students tend to develop more nuanced views of phenomena, concepts, and practices. Through ongoing class reflections on field experiences and conceptual understandings, the creation and acquisition of knowledge interweaves with the students’ activism in the community, personal growth and the broadening of learning scopes (Felten, Gilchrist, & Darby, 2006; Miron & Moely, 2006). For instance, the identification of needs among local refugees; the development of awareness about personal skills, interests and cultural identities; and the engagement in social justice are examples of service and learning processes that promote community change and the civic, social, and personal development of students (Geldom, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001; Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2004).

Despite the pedagogical and community relevance of service-learning, this field of knowledge and practice may present unique psychological challenges for students. In my experience of teaching a service-learning course in which psychology seniors worked with recently-arrived refugees, I was surprised to witness numerous instances in which the students developed significant attachments to their service, to members of the served population, and to their new self-image as agents of change.
This manuscript explores the tension between the desirable involvement of students and the development of strong emotional reactions and attachments in service-learning. The qualitative case study presented here raises awareness about the possible implications of service-learning courses in which community work is likely to involve learners’ identities and subjectivities in significant and deep ways. I first present data from the students’ reflections. Then, I suggest some possible interpretations by drawing a parallel to the counselor’s experiences of empathy, identification, and emotional reactions to patients that may occur in mental-health therapy. In my argument, this parallel helps to understand possible links between engaged service-learning and students’ identity and subjectivity. Finally, I emphasize that the focus on reflection that characterizes service-learning situates this mode of instruction in an ideal position to capitalize on students’ psychological dynamics of attachment, identification, and “responsibilization” (Kurasawa, 2007, p.137). This last process concerns the individual’s progressive adoption of responsibility and, with it, the development of a sense of agency.

The Service-Learning Context and the Served Community

Psychology and Social Engagement is a required service-learning course that serves as the capstone for senior undergraduate majors in psychology at Duquesne University, in Pittsburgh, Pa. This study is based on five semesters of teaching, in which classes of approximately 20 students provided service to local communities of refugees, most of who were from Burma/Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal, and Iraq. These refugee populations, although they differed in their own ways from local Americans in terms of cultures, experiences, needs, perspectives and social constructions, shared the experience of having recently moved from a refugee camp to the USA, in most cases for less than two months. They also shared resettlement locations, which were two large apartment complexes in the greater Pittsburgh area.

Students dedicated 2-3 hours per week, for about 13 weeks, to their community service. Most refugees had a very low level of English-language proficiency and their tiring work schedules made it difficult for them to attend formal ESL classes. The service-learning students partially filled this gap by providing English tutoring, teaching basic skills (e.g., reading a utility bill), and helping in everyday tasks, such as planning a bus trip to the doctor or understanding written communications from the children’s schools. With school-age children, the college students focused on homework. In collaboration with two local refugee resettlement agencies (Jewish Children and Family Services and Catholic Charities), students could choose one of the following three service-learning activities:

• During “office-hours,” students were available to answer general questions from refugees, provide appropriate referrals to professionals or experts, and do follow-ups on known concerns and deadlines.

• Students could hold or assist in workshops on practical aspects of living in the United States, like the use of public transportation, the health system, and job searching.
• Students could do in-home visits to refugee families with limited mobility (for instance, due to the presence of kids or elderly people) or in need of special attention.

In order to establish effective and meaningful relationships with refugee individuals, students were encouraged to meet throughout the semester with the same persons and at the same time and location. Lastly, at the end of the semester, the class held successful fundraisers and collection drives on behalf of the refugee families with whom they worked.

Both members of the refugee community and our community partners reported to us that the services offered by the students of Psychology and Social Engagement had a significant impact in the refugee community. For students, realizing the importance of their service for refugees and community partners was both rewarding and taxing. Our community partners were especially keen for our students to be “on the frontline” to spot issues with refugees and serve as bridges between the community members and the resettlement agencies. This informal role as need assessors and mediators contributed to the students’ perceived responsibility about their service-learning.

As I report in the following pages, all of the students experienced this service-learning as being meaningful. Many found in this course a validation of their career choices to become community psychologists, counselors, educators, or social workers. On the other hand, service in the community generated concerns about responsibility, pressure to perform, unexpected emotional demands, and challenges to relational boundaries.

**Methodology**

**Data**

The data used for this case study was compiled during five academic semesters from four main sources: (a) class discussions about field experiences, (b) portfolios in which students collected personal reflections on their service-learning and a final reflection essay on the overall field experience, (c) participatory observations in the classroom and field, and (d) communication with professionals who interacted or collaborated with the students while in the field. During the semesters, I kept field notes about the reflections, reactions and comments that appeared in assignments, conversations, and observations. These notes were useful in planning class meetings. The texts and observations that are here considered “data” were not initially collected for publication or research purposes. When I decided to write about the class experience, the data already existed as personal reflections, students’ portfolios, and field notes. An exemption from the university’s IRB was obtained and no identifying information is made available in this manuscript.
Participants
During the five semesters, 91 students enrolled in the course. All of them were undergraduate psychology majors. Approximately 90% were graduating seniors, while the remainder was juniors. Seventy-five percent of the students were female and 25% male. All but four older students were between 21 and 24 years old. Before this class, most students had only circumstantial contact with non-US born individuals and limited intercultural or international experiences. Most class participants were white; two students self-identified as Latinos and eight as African-American.

Qualitative Case Study
The interests of this case study are both intrinsic and instrumental (Stake, 2005). Dynamics of compassion, attachment, and identity development were intrinsic in the students’ experiences and service-learning. At the same time, this case study raises instrumental questions about the ways in which strong emotional reactions, experiences of vulnerability, and compassion fatigue may be understood for pedagogic and service purposes. The Psychology and Social Engagement course may serve as an example to anticipate relational and psychological dynamics in service learners and to guide pedagogical reflections regarding professional boundaries, personal growth, and constructions of the Other in contexts of service and care. As a research method, the qualitative case study was well-suited to explore the relational aspects of field experiences and, for the specific contexts of this research, to link the phenomenon of compassion fatigue to cultural and discursive dynamics. In addition, the flexibility of this methodology allowed exploring the data along the lines of multifaceted themes such as the location of service-learning along the “helper vs. helped” dichotomy, the tension between power and responsibility in community work, and the progressive development of a sense of identification with the field of professional psychology and the helping practice.

By itself, the decision to treat a college class as a “case” assumes that the course is a bounded system, which can constitute a case (Schostak, 2002). While this approach makes the data manageable within a specific context (in this case, the service-learning course), two main limitations are associated with the methodology. First, qualitative case study may risk simplifying the complexity of personal and social narratives. For instance, it is likely that students’ personal histories, personality characteristics, and socio-cultural backgrounds influenced their relations with the community of service. Yet, idiosyncratic aspects of individual students were not included in this study. Second, the data was limited to the psychological reactions and relational dynamics that could be observed or expressed. The ability to reflect on experiences and identities might or might not be correlated with the students’ actual emotions, which are a focal point of this manuscript. In other words, some class members could have experienced strong emotional reactions but might have not been ready or trusting enough to express them. To an extent, limitations in the processes of data selection, interpretation, and representation are inevitable in any research account. In case-study methodology, it is important to avoid generalizations and homogenizations that may distort the experiences of the subjects under study.
The data was analyzed according to a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure complexity in the data analysis, I first focused on the experiences and dynamics that were openly discussed in class and that were common among all of the participants who presented, wrote or spoke about attachment, compassion fatigue, and identification with community members. This step allowed developing an initial understanding of the processes and phenomena that were taking place. The second stage of the data analysis entailed “grounding” the identified themes in the context of the narratives in which they originally appeared. For instance, a common theme was the excitement of making a difference in people’s lives. Two students further developed this positive experience by reflecting on the ways in which it influenced their career planning and the development of their racial/ethnic identity. The weaving of personality theories, race theory, and personal choices created an original narrative that, although idiosyncratic and unique, provided nuanced and telling information on the extent to which service informed the development of these students’ subjectivity and identity.

Another researcher was asked to independently read the students’ journals and code the data to identify instances of attachment, compassion fatigue, and identity development. We met weekly to discuss our respective selections of the data. Even if it can be argued that this procedure increased the overall research validity, I found it useful to further the study’s complexity by adding another person’s viewpoints and interpretations on the data. Our ongoing discussions prompted me to go back to personal notes and the contexts in which the themes were presented and discussed in journals and class discussions.

Common Psychological Aspects of this Service-Learning Experience

Three main and interrelated dynamics were identified in the data. First, students realized that their knowledge of psychology was useful to interpret their field experiences, to relate to community members, and to understand the contexts in which class content could be applied; for instance, to interpret intergenerational conflicts within a refugee family. Second, as graduating seniors, most students felt some sort of personal and social pressure to develop and embrace a professional identity as facilitators of psychological and social change. Third, service-learning participants realized that their community work was meaningful, effective, and needed. This last theme was desirable indeed, but it also called for an unexpected and yet significant ethical balance between power and responsibility toward the community of service.

The Use of Psychology

For most students, service-learning was an opportunity to demonstrate to others and to themselves the skills and theoretical knowledge they had developed as psychology majors. For some, community work provided the first empirical evidence that they could apply psychology to make a difference in the lives of individuals and groups. This ability to link personal growth, specialized knowledge, and community-based interventions is one of the trademarks of service-learning education (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Jones & Abes, 2004). Significantly, the students’ work with the community helped them to identify as agents of change and to start
seeing themselves as capable helpers. In the following excerpt from a class journal, the author reflects on his ability to use nonverbal communication with a refugee man who has been in the USA for just one week:

From a professional standpoint, a psychologist must be able to talk, sympathize, see, and interpret in order to make a connection with the client. While I wasn’t able to communicate directly with this refugee, I was still able to interpret his body posture, gestures, and the look of hurt in his eyes so I felt like I was able to make a connection with him.

Most class participants embraced this first recognition of their professional identity with enthusiasm and pride, but also with a certain degree of performance-anxiety.

The sense of responsibility that came from working with a population that was perceived as being in need intertwined with the students’ personal constructions of themselves as beginning practitioners. As psychology seniors, they expected themselves to be somewhat able to provide useful service. Yet, such sense of responsibility was not easy to manage: “It felt mildly intimidating to be given so much responsibility so quickly, but I was extremely happy to be helping and was willing to do whatever they needed me to do.” Another female student wrote, “I came to realize how important my in-home visits were. The family really relied and appreciated any help we could provide at all, even if it was something that seemed extraordinarily small to us.” Another student reflected on her performance-anxiety: “I feel like our visits get more challenging each week, and I’m worried I will let them down by leading them astray or not being able to answer their questions.”

In addition, the students’ identification with the professional field was further complicated by the fact that, in the eyes of refugees and community partners, they represented the psychology department and the university. In one of her first reflections, a student wrote: “Here [in the room where office hours took place] I represent the university and the psychology department. . . . As a senior student of psychology, I feel that I should be able to help these refugees.”

The Initial Building of a Practitioner Identity
Frequently, the students’ engagement in the field was fostered by the link between service and anticipation of their professional identity. For instance, in choosing which professional to shadow or on which topic to base their workshops for refugees, many of the students who planned to attend graduate programs in education focused on school-related subjects; those who planned a career in health-related disciplines centered on case management, the health system, and anti-stigma initiatives. Common to all of these practices was the students’ ability to translate knowledge into action within a context of both service and personal career planning. This implementation of knowledge was accompanied by a certain degree of satisfaction and validation of the students’ own career choices.

A student who was applying to graduate programs in cultural studies reflected on the social justice aspects of her service-learning:
The only way to truly recognize the serious problem of discrimination and racism is to help to end it by approaching the oppressor, not telling the oppressed that everything is going to be OK and it is not their fault they are black, gay, Nepali, Jewish, etc.

A female student who was admitted in a doctoral program in school counseling reflected on the birth of her professional identity:

knowing someone really values what you are doing and that you are making a difference in someone’s life. . . . I could have done other things instead of visiting this refugee family, but anything else seems so insignificant in comparison. I feel that not only did I help the family, but I also helped myself by seeing life in a new light.

It was clear that for these students, service-learning meant more than providing service and learning from it. It encouraged them to see themselves as future practitioners, professionals, or social activists. The ways in which these students positioned themselves suggest that their fieldwork impacted their relational identity by developing new interpretations of life values (“everything else seems insignificant”). These new parameters functioned in relation to both the oppressed and themselves, as evident in the renewed sense of agency and social justice of the first quote, and the “new light” that served as referent for the second student.

From a post-structural perspective, identity is neither the essence of the person, as conceived in some humanist traditions, nor does it depend on the external learning or biological determinations emphasized in reductionist interpretations of psychology. Rather, “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990, p. 33). According to Butler, it is through performance and performativity that one’s identity comes to exist within specific contexts of power. It develops as a relational and flexible set of constructions and practices that allow for and are allowed by specific discourses, truths, and power games (Foucault, 1970/1984).

In the context of Psychology and Social Engagement, the development of the students’ identity as community helpers was no exception to Butler’s words. In the process of actively performing their work in the field of psychology, service-learners crafted expressions of self that confirmed and strengthened their views of themselves as practitioners. This process was especially relevant for students because the majority of them were in the process of choosing and applying to professional graduate schools. The knowledge and social positioning that came with the performance of service were linked to the students’ professional plans and, in some cases, life projects. In addition to the students’ personal recognition of their fieldwork, the students reported that service-learning also fostered social recognition from significant others and community members. These recognitions contributed to the important role of service-learning in the students’ identity (Taylor, 1994).

Two main discourses became “true” for the students: first, the identification of refugees as people “in need” and, second, the sharp divide between refugees and helpers. Although these ways of positioning refugees are questionable (Pupavac, 2002), they helped students and
refugees situate each other during their interactions. Through the truths and positions allowed and encouraged by these discourses, students began seeing themselves as active agents of change and the refugees as needing their help. On the one hand, social constructions of the other as “needy” reproduced paternalistic divides between server and served and – as I will discuss later in the section on “compassion fatigue” – boosted the development of savior fantasies among service-leaners. On the other hand, this power dynamic referred to dominant discourses in mental-health psychology in which all of the involved parties (refugees, employees of resettlement agencies, instructor, the students, and peers) expected that, as psychology majors, students in their service would help the refugees.

The important dimension of this latter dynamic of power is that it allowed students to situate their service as part of larger contexts of meanings and social stratification. This expectation informed both processes of “responsibilization” (i.e., taking responsibility) and recognition, and it strengthened the link between service-learning and identity. For many students, their practices became part of their subjectivity. They went from seeing themselves as meeting class requirements to crafting their selves into multiple contexts and fields: as students, community advocates, providers of humanitarian service, and future professionals.

**Recognizing the Effectiveness of Service and its Relevance for One’s Identity**

By becoming personally engaged in their service-learning, students created the very conditions for its success. It did not take long for them to realize the effectiveness of their community interventions and to feel proud of their service and achievements. In turn, this pride further contributed to the above-mentioned dynamics of identity development, encouraging students to view themselves as present and future practitioners. As a student wrote, “no matter how busy my schedule may be, finding time to volunteer is definitely worth it because I can make a difference.”

The course encouraged students to frequently narrate their field experiences. This narrating furthered the interplay of identity and service. While narrating, students participated in two simultaneous processes. First, they created a shared reality between themselves and their audiences (other students, the professor, significant others, family members, etc.). In other words, through narrations, authors recognize themselves and are recognized by others as performers of those narratives (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). For instance, providing service and learning from it played a progressively more central role in the relational life of many students. A student wrote that she became active in social justice groups, but this came at the expense of some of her friendships. Another class participant said that sharing the excitements and challenges of her service-learning with her boyfriend was a source of anxiety for her because she felt changed and was worried that her partner was not going to accept her new self. Another student decided to stop going out with some of his friends when he realized that they were not interested in his experiences with the refugee community. At least five students became so interested in refugee and immigrant rights that they decided to change their graduate school plans and apply for law-school programs with the goal of specializing in immigration law and social justice. Six students applied to AmeriCorps to provide educational
service in disadvantaged areas or populations and, as a consequence of their service in this class, about 15% of the students decided to apply to graduate programs in social work. These examples show the extent to which service-learning experiences and narratives became important in the identity and subjectivity of many students.

The second process involved in narrating is that this act presupposes the narrator’s positioning in the field. In other words, every story is told from a perspective, which is simultaneously chosen by and imposed on the author. We do not simply tell and become who we are, but we are also told who we can be or become (Hall, 1996). In addition, by the very process of developing and asserting our identity, we inevitably limit our possibilities and partake in discourses of exclusion. In the context of Psychology and Social Engagement, the students were both active agents of change and participants in dynamics of power and exclusion. By locating themselves as helpers, service-learners distinguish themselves from those who are instead perceived as being “in need.” This dynamic strengthens institutional divides between those who can do something for others and those who are the recipients of another’s charity (Fine, 2004). Although power-based relations and uses of language are inevitable in service, it is important to realize, make evident to students, and reflect on the implications of tacit suppositions, like the belief that some people would benefit from service and others would be able to contribute to the community’s wellbeing. Class reflections on these social and political dynamics are likely to encourage more collaborative practices between students and community members and, therefore, to challenge the paternalistic risk of reducing the Other two positions of need, inferiority, or ignorance (Gemignani & Peña, 2008).

Despite this pedagogical intent to reflect on power games in the practice of service-learning, some students were unprepared to critically reflect on the dynamics of power and differentiation that occurred in the field, illustrated by the paternalistic constructions of “us” as opposed to “them.” For these students, the relation between responsibility and power was a major source of emotional stress. They saw their service as a performance and they felt intimidated and inadequate to work with refugees, whom they initially expected to be a highly-traumatized population. As a way to protect themselves, the students attempted to deal with their anxiety and fears of incompetency by distancing themselves from their service, for example by reducing their participation in the field. Because some of these students were among the most engaged in service-learning, they were surprised and disappointed to catch themselves adopting oppositional (“us vs. them”) narratives. Many reported feeling attached and compassionate, yet simultaneously distant and indifferent toward the members of the refugee community. These mixed feelings were unexpected and challenging, yet interesting from a psychological perspective. They called for the exploration of relations and processes that are typically used to describe multifaceted relations between psychotherapists and patients – namely empathy, emotional reactions to clients, and compassion fatigue. This exploration proved insightful and meaningful for both the students and myself in understanding the complexity of our engaged service-learning.
Defining the Key Terms

**Empathy**
Empathy can be defined as the listener’s or observer’s ability to understand the thoughts and experience the feelings of another person. As Freud (1921/1960) wrote, the process of becoming empathic implies a certain degree of identification with and imitation of the other. More than just noting someone’s emotions, thoughts, and experiences, feeling empathy means vicariously experiencing the other and, to an extent, becoming the other while keeping a flexible distance and controllable position toward his or her psychological world (Rogers, 1961). Empathy is a tool to guide the clinician’s understanding of patients, to anticipate potential psychological shifts, and to promote the systematic use of intuition.

The above view of empathy extends beyond its romantic interpretation as internalization of aesthetic objects (McLeod, 1999). In addition, the concept of empathy has been criticized by post-structural writers who interpret knowledge (including the empathic knowledge of the other) as resulting from social constructions and power games (Bondi, 2003; McLeod, 1999). Critical views of empathy underscore that this concept presumes: (a) a separation between rational and emotional understanding and consequently between mind and body, (b) the presumptuous ability of the observer to truly understand the other, and (c) a power-based divide between those who adopt paternalistic positions as active agents (e.g., as helper, expert, doctor) and those who are in positions of need, inferiority, or ignorance. As a result of these critical positions, empathy is frequently seen as an important, but necessarily limited effort.

In the context of Psychology and Social Engagement, these critical interpretations of empathy were useful in understanding and conceptualizing the limits of the relational processes that were active in the community service-learning. Nonetheless, as an initial step to promote the students’ understanding and participation, empathy for the refugee condition was encouraged using videos, biographical narratives, and first-person testimonies by refugees, including poetry and visual arts.

**Reflexivity**
One of the defining aspects of qualitative research is the active presence of the researcher in the process of inquiry, from the co-construction of data (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004) to the final writing process (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Rather than a detached observer or data collector, analyst and reporter, the qualitative researcher is actively engaged in the construction of data and the possibilities for their analysis and descriptions (Gemignani, in press). This relational dimension of knowing and being is part of the research as well as pedagogical process. The researcher’s or the teacher’s subjectivity, sensitivity, reactions, wishes, and agendas are inevitably part of the relational processes that guide the social construction of knowledge (Gergen, 2009; Gemignani, 2011). It is therefore important to explore the ways in which I positioned myself toward the service-learning that was performed in Psychology and Social Engagement.
Together with being a researcher and a scholar, I am a migrant. These aspects of my life are not separate. Rather, they inform each other and the ways in which I position myself as an educator. I take pride in promoting a sense of cosmopolitanism and openness to cultural and international diversity in students, as this will foster their intellectual possibilities and professional development. Because any serious education that concerns culture and multiculturalism starts with a critical reflection of one’s cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds and positioning, the students of Psychology and Social Engagement were invited from the beginning of the semester to reflect on their own cultural identities.

I set the development of cultural awareness and sensitivity as a learning goal in the course. Implicit in this pedagogical design was my wish for students to become sympathetic toward the psycho-social challenges experienced by refugees and the attempt to counter possible forms of ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism, which, in the context of international migration, translate into dynamics of cultural assimilation (Berry, 1997) and invisibility (Gemignani & Sheth, 2011).

**Identification**

To an extent, any caring relationship implies a partial identification with the other. In the helping professions, such identification refers to the helper’s psychological incorporation of the experiences of individuals, groups, and communities with whom she is working. As a process of partially becoming the other, identification is closely related to empathy and the two terms are often used interchangeably in the psychological literature. However, identification entails a broadening and deepening of empathy. Whereas empathy’s focus is on the experiences of another, in identification, the other is internalized in the observer’s self.

As I mentioned above, Psychology and Social Engagement contributed to, or at least created the conditions for, an initial development of the students’ identities as practitioners of psychology. Especially for the most engaged students, the field practice became a strong source of learning not just about the other, but also about themselves. Students took up the role of the helper and identified with the professionals with whom they worked. The subtle changes the students could observe in the community members contributed to feelings of commitment and pride in their work. It was not coincidental that many students reported that the service-learning fostered their interest in human-service careers and graduate training programs.

A class discussion provides an interesting example of the significant interplay between identification, personal awareness, community participation, and learning through service. One student reported disliking the refugees and feeling angry at being required to provide service. After thanking the student for her openness, I empathically said that it is common to experience mixed emotions when helpers are deeply involved. Then, I suggested that her anger could be an interesting source of insight and growth, and I invited her to reflect about this in a short paper. A few days later, the student handed me a touching story of her childhood loneliness and parents’ neglect. She wished that humanitarian organizations and,
above all, a group of devoted and enthusiastic students, had been part of her childhood, even if just for a semester. Toward the end of her paper, she stepped back to her role as a service-learner, and concluded that it was “silly” of her to be jealous of the painstaking experience of being a refugee. Yet, the significant link that she was able to establish between her childhood suffering and service-learning helped her fieldwork practice, her understanding of the social isolation of refugee kids, and her ability to relate to them with compassion rather than envy or anger. In this case, the student’s courage and openness to use her personal experience to learn from her service were major sources of knowledge for the whole class.

**Compassion Fatigue**

The empathic identification described above is frequently accompanied by intense emotional responses in the service learner (Rothschild, 2006). In Psychology and Social Engagement, compassion was a common and prevailing emotion. The Latin etymology of the word “compassion” means to suffer with another. Similarly, the American Heritage Dictionary (2000) defines compassion as “the deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it.” In other words, the experience of compassion refers to a relationship in which an external observer develops a deep sorrow for another’s misfortune and, simultaneously, a strong desire to alleviate this pain. This definition brings attention to the practitioners’ likelihood of feeling frustrated and discouraged when realizing that their power to alleviate suffering was inevitably limited. Engaged helpers feel the suffering, want to help, but are inexorably limited in the range and effectiveness of their actions.

When the relative powerlessness of helpers clashes with their sense of themselves as able to help, they are likely to feel disappointed about their job and their adequacy. In addition, if the limitations in the possibility to help collide extensively with personal views of the self as effective helper, people will feel guilt for having contradicted some dimensions of meaning that are central to their identity (Kelly, 1955). Nevertheless, it is critical to realize that these feelings of disappointment and guilt are telling and, if properly addressed, instrumental in strengthening the most agreed-upon dimension of therapeutic effectiveness: the relationship between client and clinician or, in this case study, between learners and community of service.

One of the main risks in taking this relationship for granted or neglecting it is to lose perspective on the limits of one’s power and responsibility. This loss is central in the psychological phenomenon of “compassion fatigue,” which refers to the traumatization faced by “healthcare providers when they witness the suffering and pain of their patients” (Najjar, Davis, Beck-Coon, & Doebbeling, 2009, p. 287). Not surprisingly, compassion fatigue was first described in nursing, a field known for humane care and dedication (Joinson, 1992). Unfortunately, the relational meaningfulness of this phenomenon is somehow lost in its contemporary descriptions in traumatology literature, which define it mostly in terms of symptoms: as “a state of exhaustion and impaired functioning, with specific symptoms reflecting the re-experiencing of the traumatic event (e.g., through recurrent dreams or intrusive thoughts), avoidance/numbing (e.g., efforts to avoid trauma-associated thoughts or activities, diminished affect), and persistent arousal” (Arnold, Calhoun, Tedeschi, & Cann, 2005,
p. 242; Figley, 1995). Such a focus on symptoms is useful for diagnostic and descriptive purposes, but it isolates feelings and experiences from their relational, cultural, and historical contexts.

Although the services provided were nonclinical and the students were not trained or in-training practitioners, many class members developed intense, caring, and genuine relationships with the refugees with whom they worked. Similarly, for some members of the refugee community, the bond with the service-learning students became very meaningful. Because the refugees had been in the USA for just a few months (or weeks, in some cases), for most of them the relation with the class students was the first, “nonprofessional,” and non-sporadic interaction with members of U.S. society. Especially for those refugees that had the least contact with and knowledge of American society, like the stay-at-home mothers and the elderly, to have regular and friendly contacts with American students helped to normalize “the Americans” in the eyes of the newcomers and to facilitate the transition to the new society and culture. Some class participants became points of reference for the refugees who sought out students for informal conversations regarding U.S. culture and advice on practical issues, like how to read a telephone bill or how to make sense of a junk-mail lottery ticket announcing, “You won one-million dollars!”

In one instance, a refugee mother invited two service-learning students to her house for afternoon tea and cookies. The students had never met the woman before, but they had worked extensively with her children. While offering tea and baked goodies that she prepared according to traditional recipes from her home country, she proudly told the students that they were the first Americans to come to her house as guests. She hoped that many more people would come in the future. In the following weeks, the students felt a “strange sense of embarrassment” when they saw the woman. They wanted to avoid her, but they also felt embarrassed and guilty to want to do this. The students knew that this woman was taking active steps to counter her cultural isolation, but they also realized that her expectations to have Americans friends would collide with the locals’ reticence and suspicion toward strangers and the isolating stratification of the U.S. society. The students reported that they did “not know what to say or to do.” They empathized with the woman’s isolation, but at the same time they realized their impotence to help her. Through written reflections and class discussions, these students were able to situate the refugee woman’s invitation within dynamics of acculturation (Berry, 1997). She was narrating herself, her house, ethnic food, and relational practices with the students, who symbolically represented “the Americans” and the promise of this woman’s cultural integration. Even more significantly, they reached theoretical and psychological insights about the ways in which their emotional responses reproduced the society’s expectations of failure and implicit discrimination toward foreigners.

If the students had neglected or not shared their emotional reactions, they would have not reached this important insight about the psychological significance of the event. It is likely that their negative feelings would have become increasingly hard to hide and, eventually, this would have affected their performance of service and their satisfaction from it (Rothschild,
This instance is a reminder of the importance for service-learners in human or social disciplines to make a habit of reflecting on the emotional aspects of the helping relationship. In turn, this reflexive practice and the use of the class as support are likely to help understanding and managing compassion fatigue (Meadors & Lamson, 2008; Wright, 2004).

**Compassion Fatigue: Experiences in the Classroom and in the Community**

In Psychology and Social Engagement, one of the unexpected consequences of the class’s strong engagement in service was the over-identification of some students with the population they served and, to an extent, with the act of serving. I initially saw this phenomenon as related to the novelty of the experience, the students’ excitement about being active in the field, and individual personalities. However, more than half of the students reported that they worried about and felt responsible for the well-being of the refugees. Similarly, a number of students expressed the broad impact of the service-learning on their identity, through comments such as “serving has given a new meaning to my life.” The frequency and distribution of these occurrences seemed to suggest that the course impact on students was linked to cultural and discursive dimensions, more than to idiosyncrasies of single students.

As I described above, the class participants felt pressured to construct themselves through pre-established standards, values, and expectations related to being psychology majors. In addition to the students’ personal constructions of their roles and identity, dominant discourses in psychology, like the focus on needs and pathologies, directed the class’s concerns, field observations, and practices. For instance, the course’s tie to psychology as a helping profession encouraged students to feel responsible for possible negative consequences of the termination of service. The students’ status as graduating seniors in psychology further strengthened their own expectations to be helpful in the community. This application of psychology was both direct, through service, and indirect, through empathy, compassion, and the raising of social awareness about refugees in Pittsburgh, Pa. For example, the students were extraordinarily proactive in starting and managing fundraising events. Although this responsibility motivated and engaged students, it also highlighted the inevitable limits of power and agency, including the students’ ability to create change.

The tension between responsibility and power was a major contributor to compassion fatigue for some students. Responsibility without power is a recipe for frustration and helplessness. The empathy and sense of responsibility of students exacerbated their compassion and its fatigue, which derived from the students’ awareness that their ability to help was limited. The students felt they were participating in a “saving” or “healing” discourse which, despite being an important element of professional identity for many of them, they could not master. A number of students reported recurring and intrusive thoughts, avoidance of service-associated activities, and experiences of irritability. Class discussions about the termination of community service were marked by teary eyes and students’ self-reported feelings of guilt.
Learning to recognize the limits of one’s possibilities and to control the “savior fantasy” is a crucial formative process for beginning counselors (Stein, 1994). In addition, the savior fantasy or complex has been described as a key component of compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995; Gentry, 2002). The following are two examples of students’ savior fantasies:

I became increasingly angry with other classmates who didn’t seem to care much about the field projects. . . . I worried about the ways in which the refugees were influenced by all the people involved in the service-learning. I felt I needed to give the refugees more and do more to show them that we truly cared about their current situation.

Another class participant wrote:

I have become extremely sensitive to any comment made by others that negatively judges those who are less fortunate. I have become defensive, not just toward refugees but even when people talk about immigrants or foreigners. If someone makes negative comments about people on welfare or anyone who speaks a language different than English, I immediately become angry at that person.

The students’ desire to protect the served population from forms of social discrimination and neglect translated into specific practices that had relevance both at the psychological and social levels. Many students worried about the future of the individuals and families with whom they worked. They became advocates for refugee rights to dignity in resettlement (the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was one of the texts I adopted in this course). It is likely that, beyond these altruistic feelings, the students were expressing their desire not just to protect the refugee community, but also to assert and safeguard their own identification with some of the dominant discourses in psychology, like the adoption of responsibility and power by the psychologist and the expectation to create change.

In addition to internal processes of identification, empathy and desire to help, the experience of compassion fatigue was tied to students’ participation in discourses that guided the formation of their professional identities. In particular, the students’ psychological challenges with identification and separation served as important reminders of the need to anticipate and understand the impact that service-learning may have on the identity of students and, consequently, to offer structured and spontaneous events for the expression, elaboration, and examination of those struggles. For example, unlike trainees in mental health disciplines, the service-learning students did not have access to the ongoing support of individual supervisors, who typically help learners recognize and operationalize their reactions to clients. While the intent of any service-learning course is to promote student knowledge and community change (Jay, 2008), it is pedagogically constructive to reflect not just on community interventions but also on the limits in power and responsibility that are linked to expectations of social or psychological change in the community of service.

If the phenomenon of compassion fatigue is inevitably and functionally tied to strong engagement with the served population, then its interpretation along the lines of PTSD and
medical symptoms does not help us understand the dynamics of power, ethics, and responsibility that are present in community service and educational context. The pressure for students to develop a professional identity is located within the social and cultural expectations of psychology, as well as the perceived responsibility to contribute to the wellbeing of refugee individuals and families. From this perspective, compassion fatigue in the context of community service-learning is not as much a syndrome as a set of relational constructions which are tied to both the emotional and professional development of students (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997).

Conclusions

The service-learners’ emotional engagement with the community can be a source of challenging psychological reactions concerning the development of identity and responsibility. Rather than being pathological or negative, these reactions, within some limits, are opportunities to learn about recipients and providers of service. In this study the students realized that their weekly service provided significant support to the lives of the persons they served. On the one hand, this realization contributed to the students’ perception of self-efficacy and ability to care. On the other hand, it evoked psychological tensions regarding the braiding of power, responsibility, and attachment.

Such interweaving of identity and performance is implicit in any meaningful social service, but it became especially important in the context of this service-learning course because of its novelty for the students and because it encouraged many students to challenge and re-construct their views of themselves and their careers. In this sense, the course embodied “a post-structuralist perspective [that] suggests that service-learning is a site of identity construction, destruction, and reconstruction” (Butin, 2003, p. 1684).

Psychological dynamics of compassion, engagement, “responsibleization,” and identity formation concur to service-learning’s potential to be deeply meaningful for the students’ personal and relational identities. Because these dynamics are likely to appear in community service-learning that entails direct work with persons, they should be anticipated and examined in the classroom and with the community partner through ongoing reflections on personal commitment and emotional involvement. Encouraging reflections at an intimate and somewhat vulnerable level (Behar, 1996) is a pedagogical process that may generate important psychological and community insights.

Rather than being a mere external observer, the engaged student contributes to constituting the field and the Other, which are understood not as objects of observation but as reflected in the self of the researcher. Accounting for ones’ positionality and reflexivity is an epistemological act which, as Mosselson (2010, p. 484) writes, is necessary to “understand how my ‘self’ was understanding the ‘selves’ in the interviews.” For instance, in considering their positions as service-learners and their social constructions of refugees, students could critically reflect on some of the ways in which their work might contribute to the psychological divide.
between the helper and the needy. Additionally, by attending to their selves and emotional reactions, students may feel encouraged to see their identity not as a static picture but as a relational process. Especially when active in the field, this process is embedded in ongoing tensions and unresolved conflicts, for instance between empowering the community clients and playing the “savior” role. From this viewpoint, ambiguities, emotional reactions, and compassion fatigue are not temporary issues to be fixed, but are processes to be understood as professional tools that influence the quality of service (Boutilier & Mason, 2007; St. Louis & Barton, 2002).

Jung (1961/1989) claimed that the wounded physician is the only one capable of healing others (Hodge, 2009). By allowing reflection on their own vulnerabilities and emotional responses to community service, students were able to better understand their roles as counselors, confidants, and advocates. Although engaged discussion on compassion and attachment may require psycho-educational support for students, service-learners will benefit from an open and safe classroom environment in which to debrief, reflect on, and examine their relationships with the community of service. This process is crucial to ensure learning, foster compassion, and transform “identification and sympathy into empathy comprehension” (Bateman & Holmes, 2003, p. 116).

Students may also learn from class discussions that they are not alone in their struggles and that other class members share their feelings. The awareness of a time and place in which students can share their challenges and collaborate with peers may provide a much needed sense of support. In Psychology and Social Engagement, collaborative support groups offered the chance for open discussions of personal concerns, most of which were related to boundaries (e.g., the savior fantasy) and ethics of power and responsibility. In addition to personal challenges, students were encouraged to share their accomplishments. Especially for the class participants who struggled with the demands of compassion and identity formation, the promotion of feelings of self-pride and efficacy based on their community work was an important therapeutic strategy (Radley & Fingley, 2007; Tehrani, 2007).

Compassion fatigue, over-identification, and distancing reactions are intra-psychological as well as social and cultural dynamics. They provide knowledge about the served community, the dominant discourses that shape a discipline, and the students’ professional and relational transitions in identity formation. As a consequence, the students’ dynamics of field engagement and emotional reactions become tools of critical learning that shed light on the expectations, standards, boundaries, and power/responsibility dynamics of undertaking community service. They help interpret the rapport with the other and encourage meaningful and genuine work relationships. Rather than either pathologize or romanticize the helper’s “state of exhaustion and impaired functioning” (Guggenbühl-Craig, 1971), it is important to critically reflect on the psychological impact of compassion fatigue as well as its potential to facilitate empathy, provide knowledge, and allow the practitioner to be a “wounded healer” (Kirmayer, 2003) and a vulnerable participant-observer (Behar, 1996). Professionals or volunteers who are actively engaged in the field will significantly benefit from expressing and
examining the emotions engendered by their work (Najjar et al., 2009). Similarly, personal and public reflections on compassion fatigue and psychological tensions help students to understand their emotions, feel engaged in their community service, and develop trust in their personal abilities, limits, and identities as agents of social change positioned within dynamics of culture and power (Boyle-Baise, 2002). Failing to do this can cause clinicians to be vulnerable to emotional distress, disengagement, burnout, and poor judgment (Meier, Back, & Morrison, 2001). Class discussions and exercises that specifically invite service-learners to explore their vulnerabilities, challenge their assumptions, and understand their (dis)placement in the field are powerful tools to improve the students’ performance of service and their active learning from it.
References


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