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Abstract

In recent years, educators from diverse academic disciplines have created service learning courses in response to natural disasters. However, sociology courses have been slow to integrate service learning after disasters. In this paper, the learning experiences of fourteen students enrolled in a service learning course during the Fall 2011 semester at the University of Alabama are analyzed, four months after the April 27, 2011 tornado event. In this course, entitled Gender and Poverty, students were required to volunteer 30 hours over a 10-week period with an organization that assisted tornado survivors in addition to attending weekly class meetings and completing class assignments. Despite initial difficulties finding interactive service experiences for the students, post-tests and journal assignments indicated a shift in students' explanations of poverty from mostly individual-level explanations to structural explanations of poverty. The service experience also emotionally transformed the students, who through their service efforts, developed empathy for storm survivors.

Introduction

The tornadoes of April 27, 2011 brought great destruction to the Deep South. An EF4 tornado left 53 people dead and approximately 1,000 injured in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama alone. The tornado left 5,362 residences damaged or decimated in its path. The storms pre-emptively ended the semester at the University of Alabama, and many students whose permanent homes were located outside of Tuscaloosa left the city without witnessing the extent of the damage in their college town.

Despite the horrible destruction that natural disasters can inflict on communities, tornadoes and other similar events can provide unique opportunities to connect classroom learning to real-world situations. Colleges and universities have assisted in recovery efforts after Hurricanes Floyd (Steiner & Sands, 2000) and Katrina (Domangue & Carson, 2008; Mehta & Sukumaran, 2007; Richards, Novak, & Davis, 2009; Schulenberg et al., 2008) and the Christchurch, New Zealand earthquake (O'Steen & Perry, 2012), applying their specialized skills in medicine, engineering, and nursing to contribute to relief efforts. Despite an emerging body of research about the social consequences of natural disasters (Bolin, 2006; Fothergill & Peek, 2004), there is a lack of research describing how service after a natural disaster can assist students' learning of sociological concepts.

After the Tuscaloosa tornado, the service component of the service learning course, entitled Gender and Poverty, was revisited to allow students to directly assist individuals affected

by the tornado. By the time the tornado had wreaked havoc on Tuscaloosa, courses were already scheduled for Fall 2011, so the name of the course could not be changed. However, students' service opportunities could be reorganized to assist with recovery efforts. Although learning outcomes did not change, students would now study the sociological perspectives on poverty by reading applicable course materials and by completing service projects in areas of Tuscaloosa where the destruction was most widespread.

This paper describes the experiences of students who participated in the Gender and Poverty sociology course during the Fall of 2011. First, the paper reviews the sociological perspectives on poverty that students were introduced to during the course. Second, the scholarship pertaining to the benefits of service learning for students is examined. Third, the service component of the course is described. Finally, the service component of the course is evaluated based on how assisting tornado survivors affected student learning and student attitudes towards people experiencing poverty, using pre- and post-test assessments, journal entries, and personal communication with students as evidence. Analysis of the data show that despite some initial difficulties, the service learning component of the course contributed to students' comprehension of the scope of the destruction caused by the storm. Students were also able to understand and apply structural explanations of poverty and change their attitudes towards impoverished people, resulting in student

support for policies designed to alleviate poverty.

Sociological Perspectives on Poverty

Scholars who study poverty offer two main perspectives to explain why individuals are poor: individual and structural level views of poverty (for a detailed review, see Eitzen & Eitzen Smith, 2010). There are two major types of individual-level poverty explanations. The first states that the poor lack the ability and motivation to achieve wealth because of innate differences from their non-poor counterparts. Proponents of this perspective, most notably Social Darwinist Herbert Spencer, assert that because people who are poor are genetically disadvantaged, supporting policies to alleviate poverty is futile (Eitzen & Eitzen Smith, 2010). The other major individual-level explanation of poverty is the cultural inferiority thesis, also known as the culture of poverty perspective. Proponents of this explanation believe that people who are poor adapt to poverty by developing lifestyles that are in opposition to larger cultural norms. Because they have adjusted to being poor, they believe that poverty is normal and inescapable. People experiencing poverty are viewed by society as complicit in perpetuating their own poverty. The culture of poverty thesis purports that an underclass exists made up of mostly inner-city minorities who have separate value systems typified by nonmarital births, criminal behavior, welfare dependency, and drug use. The solution to poverty, supporters argue, is to change patterns of socialization that are supportive of these allegedly deviant lifestyles (Eitzen & Eitzen Smith, 2010).

On the contrary, the structural perspective explains poverty as a result of events that are out of a person's control, and is the current sociological paradigm for explaining poverty (Eitzen & Eitzen Smith, 2010). Proponents of this view believe that low wages, lack of adequate educational training, replacement of workers with machines, outsourcing, and discrimination (both current and historical), among other issues, result in the perpetuation of poverty. The structural view also asserts that poverty is exacerbated by crises. Divorce, disaster, illness, and war can lead otherwise hard-working individuals into poverty.

An abundance of sociological research supports the structural perspective on poverty. A 2013 report completed by the Corporation for Enterprise Development shows that 43.9 % of people are one missed paycheck away from financial disaster (http://assetsandopportunity.org/assets/pdf/2013_Scorecard_Report.pdf). Women who experience divorce earn 50% less income the year following their divorces, compared with a one-third increase in economic well-being for their male counterparts (Bianchi, Subaiya, & Kahn, 1999). And, most relevant to this paper, natural disasters can affect individuals' financial well-being in various ways (for a review, see Fothergill & Peek, 2004). The effects of hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, and other disasters are exacerbated when individuals are already struggling to make ends meet. Researchers have found that being poor, female, a person of color, elderly, and/or an immigrant increases one's likelihood of negative outcomes following a natural disaster, such as losing a home or job or losing a loved one (Fothergill & Peek, 2004). These accumulated stressors not only lead to profound emotional outcomes for disaster survivors, but also affect the financial well-being of families who have experienced natural disasters (Bolin, 2006; Fothergill & Peek, 2004). People without homeowner's or renter's insurance suffer the greatest financial hardship. Additionally, individuals outside city limits, who tend to have lower socioeconomic statuses, wait longer for assistance than their city-dwelling counterparts (Fothergill & Peek, 2004).

Benefits of Service Learning for Students

Evidence reveals that there are numerous positive intellectual and personal outcomes for students who enroll in service learning courses (for an extended review, see Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2003). For example, students who participated in service learning courses reported a having a better understanding of the connection between course material and the real world (Astin et al., 1999; Eyler et al., 2003). Measurements of students' critical thinking skills revealed improvement as a result of participating in these types of courses (Astin et al., 1999; Eyler et al., 2003). Students also claimed feeling empowered and having an increased awareness of the social realities of their communities, while also growing spiritually and morally as a result of their service learning experiences (Astin et al., 1999; Eyler et al., 2003). Students who participated in service learning described developing trust in others, appreciating diversity, and developing a sense of pride in their communities (Astin et al., 1999; Boyte & Farr, 1997). Service learning students also developed tolerance for individuals from different racial, cultural, and economic backgrounds (Astin et al., 1999; Eyler et al., 2003; Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Ilustre, 2002;

Sanders, McFarland, & Bartolli, 2003; Simons & Cleary, 2006). These students have also reported an interest in developing solutions to social problems as a result of participating in service learning courses (Astin et al., 1999; Eyler et al., 2003).

Providing assistance to individuals in need after a natural or man-made disaster can also be therapeutic to the volunteers. Interviews conducted by Lowe and Fothergill (2003) after 9/11 revealed the healing effects of assisting during this crisis. One subject noted,

> I think psychologically [volunteering is] a very good thing to do because you're able to work through a lot of the problems in a very constructive way and in a way you help affect the recovery, even if it's just making beds. …It's not that glamorous or glorious or anything but it's healthy, it's very healthy (p. 305).

Members of communities that have experienced destruction but were not physically harmed or did not experience financial loss have reported psychological healing through volunteering. Additionally, those being assisted have reported that being able to share their disaster experiences with volunteers was cathartic (Crabtree, 2009; Puig & Glynn, 2003). Service learning, then, results in mutual empowerment (Crabtree, 2009): helping disaster survivors with basic needs not only empowers the survivors, but also allows those volunteering to heal, and inspires students to be more aware of the social justice issues surrounding them.

Characteristics of the Course

After making the decision that the service component of this course should center on tornado relief, the first step was finding a community partner focused on tornado relief. The University of Alabama Center for Ethics and Social Responsibility (CESR) suggested a volunteer effort working from a church in Holt, an unincorporated community in Tuscaloosa County, just outside of the City of Tuscaloosa. The focus of this non-profit, start-up relief project (for which I will use the pseudonym the Tornado Recovery Project) was rebuilding Holt and assisting its residents to meet basic needs. The population of Holt in 2010 was 3,638 residents (http://www.city-data.com/city/Holt-Alabama.html), and the median household income in 2009 was $26,095, much lower than the median income of the state of Alabama, which

was $40, 489 in that same year. The racial makeup of Holt is 55.1% African American, 36.2% White, 7.2 % Hispanic, and 1.5% another race or races. The residents of Holt, then, could be defined as mostly poor or working class: those individuals "one crisis away" from poverty before the tornado. Holt is far enough from the Tuscaloosa city center to assume that most students had never visited or had even driven through the town unless they were residents of Tuscaloosa County. Additionally, Holt endured widespread damages from the April 27, 2011 Tuscaloosa tornado. According to the Holt in Action report, 247 houses, 114 mobile homes, four churches, and one school were completely destroyed (Holt in Action, 2012). The recovery effort would be long and arduous, and groups like the Tornado Recovery Project were assisting with immediate needs and long term planning. It is important to note that the Tornado Recovery Project was created solely to assist in the rebuilding of Holt and had no other ties to the Holt community or to the University prior to its establishment immediately following the April 27th, 2011 tornado outbreak.

The Tornado Recovery Project allowed 14 students from the Gender and Poverty course to volunteer for 30 hours during the Fall Semester of 2011, four months after the tornado. For the most part, students would be answering from individuals in the neighborhood who had tornado related concerns. Students with particular skills were told that they could help with physical recovery, such as rebuilding of homes. Of greatest importance to the development of this course was that students were assured that they would have opportunities to interact with storm survivors during their service. Assessment techniques, such as journals, were constructed around the assumption that students would be interacting with storm survivors. Unfortunately, although students were promised plenty of work and interaction with community residents, most students did not have these opportunities. This was neither the fault of the students nor the community partner, and possible reasons for the lack of interactive opportunities will be discussed later in this paper. After some communication with the Tornado Recovery Project leaders and the CESR at UA, over half of the students in the class (N = eight) stopped working with the Tornado Recovery Project and signed up to work with other community organizations. By week four of the course, students were performing service at Team-up, Holt in Action, Temporary Emergency Services, Habitat for Humanity, and

the Salvation Army. Each student who moved on to a new project assisted with the disaster relief efforts of these organizations. For example, one student volunteered with the Salvation Army's Angel Tree Project, which solicited donations for Christmas gifts for children who survived the tornado. Once new projects were chosen, these students had opportunities to interact with not just storm survivors, but other marginalized members of the Tuscaloosa community.

Method

Data Collection

The data for this project included assignments completed by students in the Gender and Poverty course during Fall 2011. Two sources of data were analyzed to assess how the service learning experience affected student learning: student journal entries and pre-and post-test assessments. The assignment description for the journal entries asked students to "help consider, reflect upon, and learn from the readings and your experiences with your service project." Students completed ten journal entries throughout the semester. Pre- and post-test assessments were identical, and students completed these on the first and last day of class, respectively. Here, I focus on two questions from this assessment: (1) Why are people poor? In other words, what causes poverty? List as many reasons you can; and (2) Is there anything that you would recommend to leaders and policymakers that you think would best help those in poverty? Students were informed about the study after all assessments were completed, and were asked to consent to the analysis of their course materials. All student names used in the analysis are pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed to answer two research questions: (1) How did the service learning experience impact students? (2) Did students' explanations for poverty change from the beginning to the end of the course? Both qualitative and quantitative analyses of student assignments are presented. In order to answer the first research question, the principal investigator and research assistant analyzed journal entries for emerging themes. Although the coders labeled particular themes differently (e.g. empathy vs. understanding the poor), both coders agreed that three themes emerged from the data. To answer the second research question, student pre- and post-tests were analyzed to assess changes in how the students explained poverty and people who are poor from before the course to its completion. All responses were coded for either individual- or structural- level explanations by the principal investigator and research assistant. There was complete agreement between the coders about placement of student responses into individual- or structural-level categories. These answers to both research questions are explained in detail in the paragraphs below.

Results

As stated previously, journals for all students were analyzed for themes regarding how the service experience affected them both personally and intellectually. Students described their unique service experiences, but among these entries several commonalities materialized. The most common themes that emerged from the students' journals were a grasp of the magnitude of the destruction of the tornado, frustration with the service opportunities provided, and empathy. Each theme is discussed in detail and situated within the current scholarship on service learning.

Grasp of the Magnitude of the Tornado

The first service visit to Holt was eye-opening for most of the students who had not seen the damage the tornado caused outside of the city limits. Of the 14 students, six expressed shock upon seeing Holt's storm damages. Wendy, a senior, stated "I could not believe my eyes" driving to the project site. She noted, "the area was completely hit and the only thing standing seemed to be the church." Megan, also a senior, stated that she was "in tears. My response was similar to when I saw the full aftermath of the tornado in June. I knew the magnitude of the tornado, but the extreme damage that was caused was beyond my imagination." Shannon, a senior, described Holt as "very sad. There is not much there anymore."

The students at the University of Alabama are centrally located in the city of Tuscaloosa, and there are not many reasons to drive outside of the city limits. In the classroom, students read Fothergill & Peek's (2004) article that showed that these areas are the last to receive assistance and are often ignored by the larger, immediate disaster responses. These areas often rely on nonprofit assistance in order to get back to normal functioning. Like the students, the media often forgets that large portions of land outside the city are hard hit, and thus relief efforts are mostly focused on the larger metropolitan areas. Additionally, Bolin's (2006) review of the role of race and ethnicity in

shaping vulnerability described how areas that are predominately comprised of racial minorities are also disadvantaged when dealing with post-disaster relief efforts, a description fitting of Holt. The students were able to discuss how these research articles related to their experiences in Holt.

Frustration with Service Experience

As mentioned previously, many of the students changed service projects after a few weeks because of the lack of hands-on opportunities provided by the community partner. Encouragingly, the lack of opportunities troubled students; they did not want to sit silently at a desk for three hours each week. Dana described her "unproductive" Friday spent "sitting at the front desk …just sitting…I had absolutely nothing to do." Stacey echoed these sentiments: "I want to be able to have more hands-on learning." Students who worked at the Tornado Recovery Project spent the majority of their service hours manning phones that were not always ringing. Wendy stated that she "would love to be able to volunteer and actually directly help people instead of just talking on the phone or sitting on the desk." Martha wanted to "get down and dirty", but the opportunities were not available. After speaking with the head of The Tornado Recovery Project, we agreed that students were unlikely to gain the hands-on experience that she thought could be provided to them, and she said she would not mind if some students stopped volunteering at the site. As a result, eight students moved on to other opportunities during the fourth week of service.

One of the most important criterion for choosing a research project was that students would be interacting with residents of this working class community that was so devastated by the storm. However, partnerships that are planned on a whim often have trouble meeting the goals of the professors, students, and the community partner (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Projects that arise from natural disasters are unique because priorities and needs shift from one week to the next. In Holt, debris removal was nearly complete by the time the Fall semester had begun. At this point, special skills and licenses were needed to participate in most of the hands on work that needed to be performed, such as electrical work that was needed for several rebuilt homes in the community.

Another explanation for the difficulties reconciling course goals with the Tornado Recovery Project's agenda was because of the different values of each group. Torres and Schaffer (2003) believed that in order for a campus-community partnership to prosper, a mutual worldview or goal for the community was necessary. However, the structural explanations of poverty that students were learning in the course were incompatible with the ideas about people who are experiencing poverty shared by the students' supervisor at the Tornado Recovery Project. The supervisor revealed to the students that she believed many residents who were receiving assistance from Tornado Recovery Project were making poor decisions. Her individual-level views on poverty contradicted lessons the students were learning in class, and perhaps influenced some of the students' decisions to provide service elsewhere. Indeed, many students discussed her comments in their journals, mostly remarking that they disagreed with her views about the Holt residents.

Another explanation for the incompatibility between the course and the community partner may be due to the fact that successful campus-community collaborations are typically developed over long periods of time (Holland & Gelmon, 1998). As mentioned earlier, the Tornado Recovery Project was generated in response to the tornado of April 27, 2011, so the organization did not have existing relationships with the University of Alabama or the Holt community. Thus, another criterion for a successful campus/community partnership, establishing trust through interpersonal relationships (Torres & Schaffer, 2003), was missing from this collaboration. Bringle & Hatcher (2002) maintained that campus-community partnerships are akin to romantic relationships, which must be nurtured through constant "communication, respect, and coordinated action towards goals" (p. 506). Similar to a romantic partnership, the relationship between the campus and the community partner must be terminated when "a partnership…initially had satisfying qualities, but is no longer meeting expectations" (p. 512).

The experiences students confronted at The Tornado Recovery Project presented a challenge, but the problems were consistent with other campus-community projects that did not have an established relationship. In this case, it was in the best interest of the students to allow them opportunities to volunteers at other sites that would foster interactions with storm survivors. The six students who remained at The Tornado Recovery Project, then, were able to participate in more hands-on experiences because there were fewer students to share the small quantity of work. These difficulties can arise if the timing of

the course does not coincide well with the time in the rebuilding process. However, despite initial problems, students expressed satisfaction with their service experiences.

Empathy

Despite initial problems finding hands-on service experiences, most students were eventually able to interact with the tornado survivors. By the end of the course, most of the students (N=eight) expressed empathy for individuals who experienced poverty. Students developed empathy by interacting with Holt residents who survived the storms. At The Tornado Recovery Project, James encountered Bill, an ice cream truck owner who lost his wife in the storm. James noted:

He was concerned about providing for his family. He said the storm took most of his trucks. He told me that it would be a year before he could make any more money with that business. I did not ask him how he was going to make a living between now and then. I just let him speak freely… His attitude, however, was quite encouraging.

James also mentioned a woman who survived the storm that received assistance from the Tornado Recovery Project, and was now giving back to the non-profit. Additionally, JT discussed feeling "personally responsible" for helping a man whose house had been looted after the storm by individuals claiming to be relief workers. JT, a white male from am upper class upbringing, was a survivor of Hurricane Ivan. After the hurricane, relief workers had stolen family heirlooms from his home. JT recalled, "remembering watching my mother sob over something someone had taken from us in a vulnerable position, I referred the man…for further assistance." Similarly, Shannon related when her parents sold her childhood house and her uneasiness and sadness about

moving to the demolition of a tornado survivor's generational house. She recollected:

I cried all night and did not want to hand the keys over the next morning. I know how hard it probably was for this man to finally give them permission to demolish this house.

Although her circumstances were clearly different from those of this tornado survivor, a common experience of loss was able to bond a middle-class college student to a working class tornado survivor. The experiences of JT and Shannon can be described as cathartic; they were able to experience healing from their past experiences of loss by helping others in their times of need.

The personal relationships that students built with tornado survivors who were struggling financially before the storm caused students to feel empathy for the survivors. These encounters allowed students to debunk attitudes about people who are poor. The commonly held belief that people in poverty are unmotivated individuals with deviant values was debunked through interactions with tornado survivors who were struggling financially. In fact, students related to the tornado survivors through common experiences of loss. Through these interactions, the students learned empathy, which also weakened negative stereotypes

Table 1. Gender and Poverty Students' Explanation of Poverty

Pre-Course	Individual (24)	Structural (10)
	Uneducated/no skills (8)	Unemployment (3)
	Lazy/poor choices (4)	Unforseen circumstances (2)
	Too many children (4)	Lack of government spending to fix poverty (2)
	Family history (3)	Natural disasters
	Single parenthood	Lack of resources'
	Bad parenting	Elderly
	Debt	
Post-Course	Individual (8)	Structural (10)
	Uneducated/no skills (3)	Natural diasters (6)
	Culture of poverty (3)	Poor health 3)
	Lack of willpower	Job loss (3)
	Single parenthood	Divorce (3)
		Death in the family (2)
		Racism
		Sexism
		Ageism
		System only benefits some people
		Poor schools
		Lack of insurance
		Welfare reform has failed
		Incarceration

of people experiencing poverty.

Some students even dismissed their service supervisor's opinions of the tornado survivors. Dana questioned the judgments made by one of her supervisor's at the Tornado Recovery Project. The supervisor commented on a decision made by a tornado survivor to use cash assistance received from the Tornado Recovery Project to buy college football tickets. Dana stated, "I agree that it might be her way of coping with the tornado, and perhaps I can fall victim to the same mistake if I were in her shoes." Gus seconded Dana's views: "It's easy to pass judgment on someone receiving public assistance that buys the same things as you do when you're 'working for your money'. In my opinion there's a social stigma on people experiencing poverty." Not only did students change their perspectives about poverty, but they also critically evaluated the judgments that relief providers passed concerning people experiencing poverty.

Views on Poverty

Table 1 depicts the changes from pre- to post-test for students' explanations of poverty. Results reveal a general trend from individual level explanations of poverty to structural level explanations. Answers to the questions "Why are people poor? In other words, what causes poverty? List as many reasons as you can" on the pre-test yielded 10 structural explanations for poverty, and 21 individual-level explanations. JT, a senior, answered this pre-test question by stating, "when you stop giving people money, they will make their own." James, also a senior, believed a proper goal should be to "help teach people to provide for themselves." The language reflects a "blame the victim" or individual-level perspective on poverty. The assumption is that individuals who are poor are not motivated to improve their economic situations. Stacey, also a senior, posited that "poverty is a way of life for some individuals", expressing a culture of poverty perspective. Initially, students believed that impoverished individuals have only themselves to blame for their circumstances.

However, after completing the 15-week course, student post-test responses reflected structural explanations of poverty (24 times) more than individual-level explanations (eight times). Only one of 14 students named more individual-level explanations of poverty than structural explanations after the course was completed. The students were now offering policy solutions

to end poverty. For example, the opinions about government assistance for JT completely shifted after completing the service project, believing that the government should "continue food stamp policies in a way that allows users to eat at nutritional restaurants." Additionally, James, who also worked at the Tornado Recovery Project, also expressed different views upon completion of the course, stating, "people need to be given the opportunity to get out of poverty." Stacey, who completed her service with Habitat for Humanity, offered the suggestion to "educate leaders on the different levels of poverty and to understand the struggles they must go through." These examples highlight how the transformative possibilities of a service learning course focused on social justice issues.

Discussion and Conclusion

Scholars have noted the strengths of disaster-based service-learning for the application of concepts learned inside the classroom. The service learning course discussed here was altered in response to the April 27, 2011 Tuscaloosa tornado, with the goal that students would be able to not only assist in recovery efforts, but also to learn about the meaning of poverty in the everyday lives of people who are on the brink of or currently experiencing financial disaster. Results from data collected during the Fall 2011 Gender and Poverty course, offered four months after the Tuscaloosa tornado, reveal that students had a generally positive experience with service despite an initial problem with lack of hands-on opportunities with the community partner. Students gained a deep understanding of the magnitude of the storm, and consequently, realized that many people in society are only one crisis away from a financial disaster.

The study has a few limitations. Although student journals indicate the feelings about performing service, it is not always clear if changes in students' ideas about poverty have changed because of volunteer work or because of the class materials. The data cannot indicate which learning source had a larger impact on student learning. However, it is reasonable to conclude that student learning outcomes were achieved and attitudes about poverty were transformed as a result of both classroom and experiential learning. Additionally, the students enrolled in this course were sociology minors who may have learned about poverty in other courses, resulting in existing empathy for people who are poor. A final limitation is the small sample size of 14 students. The results of this

study cannot be generalized to predict outcomes of other service learning courses that respond to a major community disaster. However, the experience of this particular service learning course can be studied by others looking to create similar courses whose service components involve the provision of relief in the wake of natural disasters. Connecting with a service organization that has established community ties may be the most fulfilling partnership in these instances. A start-up service organization with particular goals and whose priorities change based on the community's needs is helpful when rebuilding after a natural disaster, but partnerships with these newer groups may be difficult to coordinate because these organizations must be pliable to the community's needs. In the aftermath of a natural disaster, the immediate needs of a battered community are certainly more important than the learning goals of a university class. Students who worked with service providers who were institutionalized in the community were never short on opportunities to assist and interact with tornado survivors.

Individuals who become ill, divorced, or are victims of natural disasters may be on the brink of immense financial difficulties. Acknowledging the structural explanations for poverty led to student empathy for tornado survivors. Additionally, student learning outcomes for understanding sociological perspectives about poverty were achieved. Structural explanations for poverty far outweighed individual-level explanations after students completed the course. The impoverished were more likely to be seen as "down on their luck" post-course, and government involvement was viewed as a necessary step towards the alleviation of poverty.

This research was a one-time, case study of sorts, bound by time and place. However, these extreme weather events appear to be increasing, and college educators at all levels should view these events not only as teaching moments relevant to their disciplines, but also as a means to establish connections in the communities at large. Evidence suggests that service experiences affect student perceptions of the storm's consequences and about the individuals impacted by the tornado. Sociology scholars should continue to adjust their curricula when necessary to respond to significant events in their communities, whether caused naturally or by people, not just for the student learning opportunities, but also because of the civic responsibility that scholars have to their university communities.

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