Recent feminist disagreements about the role of service-learning in Women’s Studies classes echo the care ethics controversies of the 1980s and 1990s. Both service-learning and care ethics have been criticized by feminist skeptics for being socially conservative. It is argued that advocates of service-learning and care ethics, by too readily embracing women’s traditional caretaking roles and overlooking the power imbalances associated with these roles, encourage women to embrace their subordination, not their liberation. Feminist advocates of both service-learning and care ethics disagree with this analysis. Advocates of service-learning see an overlap between the aims and goals of Women’s Studies classes and service-learning courses, both of which emphasize the relation between theory and practice. Care ethicists, for their part, argue that institutionalizing an ethic of care would promote feminist aims. Our experience teaching “Feminism and Families,” a course integrating service-learning and care ethics, demonstrates that neither care ethics nor service-learning are inherently socially conservative; both can be used in Women’s Studies classrooms to promote such key feminist pedagogical aims as connecting theory and practice, confronting and addressing privilege, and helping students understand political change needed to create a society that genuinely cares for all its members.

Feminist skeptics have criticized both service-learning and care ethics as socially conservative. Yet feminist advocates of service-learning find overlap between the goals of Women’s Studies classes and service-learning courses, which both emphasize the relation between theory and practice. Care ethicists argue that institutionalizing an ethic of care would promote feminist aims. Our experience teaching “Feminism and Families,” a course integrating service-learning and care ethics, demonstrates that neither care ethics nor service-learning are inherently socially conservative; both can be used in Women’s Studies classrooms to promote such key feminist pedagogical aims as connecting theory and practice, confronting and addressing privilege, and helping students understand political change needed to create a society that genuinely cares for all its members.

Care Ethics, Service-Learning, and Social Change

Jean Keller and Sheila Nelson
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John’s University

Rachel Wick
Minnesota Women’s Press

Reviewing these debates may well leave feminist teachers perplexed. Does utilizing service-learning and care ethics in the classroom reinforce a self-sacrificial ethic of care already too prevalent in feminine gender training? Or can the two together create a unique opportunity for students to apply in-class gender study to better understand women’s status in society? This paper will demonstrate that integrating service-learning and care ethics into our course, “Feminism and Families,” provided a unique opportunity for students to bridge theory and practice, and provided students with the necessary tools for creating a political vision, grounded in actual experience, of a caring society.

“Feminism and Families,” a course developed and team-taught by a sociologist and a philosopher, served double duty as our college’s applied ethics senior seminar and as the gender and Women’s Studies capstone.¹ The course’s overarching goal was to provide students with an understanding of the structural factors that affect contemporary families, and create or contribute to poverty. By combining 30 hours of service-learning with course readings in care ethics, feminist theory, and social scientific research on women and poverty, we were able to achieve three important course goals. Working with poor and working class families improved students’ comprehension of the intersections of gender, race, and class, and how they contribute to the feminization of poverty. Students were also given the opportunity to move beyond a purely intellectual knowledge to a personal recognition of their own privilege. Given that 93% of our student body is white, and the majority of our students are at least middle class, we saw addressing privilege as an important course goal. Finally, the combination of care ethics, service-learning, and background readings on poverty (e.g., Albelda & Tilly, 1997; Berrick, 1997) helped students move from a theoretical understanding of the challenges
facing families today, to a personal understanding, to creating a political vision for social change. In reflecting on their service, students made complex and multi-layered diagnoses of where and how social support systems for U.S. families had broken down.

Pedagogically, “Feminism and Families” was a highly successful course in terms of the level of student engagement and analysis. Key to its pedagogical success was effectively using service-learning reflection sessions in the classroom, and paper assignments that required students to apply Joan Tronto’s (1993) analysis of the four phases of care to service-learning assignments. The readings and techniques that made this class so successful can be adapted for use in a variety of courses.

We will begin by briefly reviewing the care ethics and service-learning debates, laying out the feminist skeptic and feminist advocate positions. Then we will explain what we hoped to achieve by integrating care ethics and service-learning in the classroom by showcasing and analyzing two student experiences with the course.

Part I: Feminist Skeptics’ View of Care Ethics and Service-Learning

Care ethics was developed as a philosophical ethic in the 1980s and 1990s, in the wake of Carol Gilligan’s In a Different Voice (1982), which claimed that when confronted with ethical problems, women tend to utilize an ethic of care, while men tend to use an ethic of justice. Feminist philosophers found care ethics’ emphasis on the relational view of self and partial regard toward known and cared for others a refreshing alternative to the individualistic, rights-based, autonomy-oriented justice theory that then dominated debates in moral and political philosophy.

Yet not all feminists were equally enamored with care ethics. Margaret Urban Walker (1992) voiced the concern of many when she asked whether “women’s morality” was “a familiar ghetto, rather than a liberated space” (p. 166). Critics of care ethics, focusing on its classic early formulations by Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, object that this approach reflects a feminine behavior of self-sacrificial care for others under oppressive conditions, rather than providing a feminist ethic that will strengthen women’s sense of agency and activism. Sarah Hoagland (1991), for example, argues that it is not a “warm concern for a girl’s projects” but rather “a curbing of her projects as well as her abilities and an instilling of both guilt about others and deep concern about others’ opinions about her” that predisposes women to be caring (p. 254). And a series of critics have taken issue with Noddings’ insistence that a moral agent must maintain a caring attitude toward the cared for at all times, lest her ethical ideal of herself as a caring person be diminished. Given the frequency with which women are the victims of violence in their intimate relationships, such a view seems more likely to perpetuate women’s oppression than to facilitate their liberation (Card, 1990; Davion, 1993; Hoagland, 1990, 1991; Houston, 1990). Care ethics has also been criticized for its parochialism, both in the formulation of the theory and in its scope of application. On the one hand, it has been criticized for perpetuating a history of exclusion that has haunted feminist theory by positing a “women’s morality” that generalizes from some (privileged) women’s experiences to all women (Tronto, 1993). Care ethics is parochial in this first sense, then, because it reflects the limited experience of the white, middle class, primarily heterosexual women who have developed the ethic. Noddings’ version of care ethics, in particular, has been criticized for parochialism in the scope of the theory. Claudia Card, for example, objects to Noddings’ claim that our moral obligations are strongest toward those who are closest to us, arguing that this approach, in effect, leaves persons who are geographically or socially remote outside our sphere of moral concern. Given that the actions of persons in the U.S. have had, and continue to have, significant adverse effects on persons at far corners of the globe, this result is seen as both morally problematic and politically naïve. Some feminists, therefore, have questioned whether care ethics should be considered a feminist ethic at all (Scaltsas, 1992; Tong, 1993). As can be seen even from this brief review of the literature, care ethics too readily can be used to reinforce a conservative social agenda of restrictive gender roles for women, ignoring differences among women, and promoting concern for “one’s own,” rather than acting as a theory that can promote transformative social change to create a society that equally respects and cares for all its members, including its caregivers.

Similarly, questions have been raised regarding the philosophy underlying service: service in our society tends to be apolitical or politically conservative. As such it may actually be antithetical to the goals of Women’s Studies, reinforcing traditional gender roles rather than empowering women and creating genuine social change. Three major criticisms are particularly relevant to this paper. First, service work, whether in college or in the broader
society, is disproportionately done by women. At
our institution, for example, more women than men
engage in service-learning and more than twice as
many female as male students participate in spring
break service trips and Volunteers In Service To
Others (VISTO), our campus volunteer program.4
By utilizing service-learning in a Women’s Studies
course, therefore, we could be inadvertently rein-
frrcing women’s traditional role as caregiver.

This view of service as women’s work becomes
even more problematic in light of the second major
criticism—that service experiences, rather than
opening students’ eyes to the need for political
intervention and systemic change, can lead them to
interpret social problems as resulting from individ-
ual deficiencies, personal inadequacy, and/or moral
weakness. Thus while actively engaged in serving
individuals, students may remain blind to the
essentially political problems underlying the situa-
tions they are encountering. The need for political
and structural change is never addressed because
students assume that when those being served over-
come their flaws and begin to act responsibly, their
problems will dissipate. Since women have tradi-
tionally taken care of those incapable of caring for
themselves, this type of service would once again
stereotypically be regarded as the realm of women,
while apparently having little or nothing to do with
the political arena traditionally dominated by men.

The third criticism of service-learning is that the
limited exposure to diverse populations may actual-
ly strengthen stereotypes and many students’ sense
of privilege, rather than encouraging them to exami-
ne the intersection of race, gender, and class with
power in our society. While service-learning is
intended to be characterized by mutuality, differ-
ences in class and educational level, as well as the
service recipients’ stressful situations, result in a
large gulf between students and those they serve.

This gulf makes mutuality challenging at best; it is
difficult for students to recognize how their own
privilege impacts understanding their service experi-
ence. Undergraduate students can too easily identify
themselves, as service-providers, as the person with
answers, with resources, with the ability to “empow-
er;” “those with” busily engaged in bestowing on
“those without.” Viewing “reality” through the lens
of their own privilege, students may find themselves
interpreting behavior and judging individuals other
than carefully critiquing societal structures. As a
result, they may fail both to confront their own prej-
udices and deal effectively with the very real differ-
ences between social groups.

Thus, all too often in our society, service is equat-
ed with charity, rather than with political change.5
Service-learning, then, can be seen as contributing to
efforts to stabilize situations and reassert order and
social control, instead of promoting the goals of lib-
eration and social transformation.

Despite the potential social conservatism of
these two approaches, we decided early on to inte-
grate care ethics and service-learning into our
class. The dominant justice tradition in moral theo-
try emphasizes individual rights over connection,
impartiality over partiality, and universality over
particularity. Yet within the family, persons are
connected through bonds of partial regard and fam-
ily members are encountered as concrete individu-
als with specific needs, interests and abilities.
Given these characteristics of the family, care
ethics promised to be more useful than the justice
tradition for analyzing the family. We would, how-
ever, need to find an account of care ethics that
could do the requisite conceptual work while
avoiding the well-known pitfalls of earlier versions
of the ethic. Likewise, service-learning seemed to
be the best way to accomplish the course goals
mentioned earlier: to help our relatively homoge-
nous and privileged group of students understand,
on both an intellectual and a personal level, how
gender, race, and class intersect and contribute to
poverty; to push students beyond a purely intellec-
tual knowledge to a personal recognition of their
own privilege; and to develop a political analysis of
the family. In our course, students analyzed their
service-learning placements through the lens of
Joan Tronto’s (1993) care ethics, which required
that students address the political dimension of
care. Service-learning, on the other hand, made real
Tronto’s four phases of care, by providing an arena
in which its application could be tested. Integrating
these two with course readings on the feminization
of poverty helped us achieve the goals articulated
above.

Part II: Feminist Advocate’s View of Care
Ethics and Service-Learning

Joan Tronto’s Care Ethics

By developing a political argument for an ethic
of care that carefully analyzes how care is gen-
dered, raced, and classed, Tronto’s (1993) version
of care ethics is able to avoid the social conserv-
vatism of earlier incarnations of the ethic. Tronto
points out three ways in which the labor of care has
been devalued: it has been relegated to the private
sphere; confined to the moral domain; and associ-
ated with powerless social groups. Her version of
care ethics is private and public, moral and politi-
cal, and intended to be a shared concern for all. By
demonstrating how the labor of care is gendered,
raced, and classed, and arguing for a more equi-
table distribution of care labor across social groups, Tronto avoids parochialism in formulating her theory. By proposing care as a political ideal that must be institutionalized to benefit all, rather than conceiving care as a moral obligation that is stronger toward those to whom we are closer, her theory avoids parochialism in its scope. At the same time, her call to institutionalize care politically allows her version of care ethics to avoid the conservative gender implications that haunted earlier versions of the ethic. If Tronto’s vision of care was realized, the burdens of care-giving would be partly shouldered by the broader society, which would recognize, value, support, and engage in care. Not only would this reduce the current costs paid by female caregivers, it would also make care giving more attractive to men.

While in the course students read and discussed Tronto’s (1993) entire book, we found her four phases of care, combined with her analysis of how each of these phases is gendered, raced, and classed, provided an especially useful framework for students to reflect on their service-learning experiences. With this theoretical framework, students could pinpoint where social service agencies were/were not successful in meeting their clients’ needs for care, and see more clearly how the work of caring for others is distributed across social groups in the U.S. Given the importance of Tronto’s analysis in our course, we briefly lay out her four phases or aspects of care below.

“Caring about,” the first phase of care, encompasses the initial recognition of the need for care; without someone “caring about,” needs for care is not seen and cannot be acted on. Tronto (1993) describes caring about as involving both the recognition of a need and making the assessment that this need should be met (p. 106). “Attentiveness” to the need for care is its corresponding virtue. Attentiveness is a cultivated habit that requires a person to “suspend one’s own goals, ambitions, plans of life, and concerns, in order to recognize and be attentive to others” (p. 128).

“Taking care of,” the second phase of care, assumes some responsibility for the needs identified by the first phase and determines how to respond to them. In this phase, one moves from recognizing the need for care to taking responsibility to act. Responsibility is the corresponding virtue. “Taking care of” is often mediated through institutions. For example, I may “take care of” the problem of pregnant teenagers by writing a check to the appropriate service agency, contacting my local congressperson to increase welfare spending, or working with a community group to introduce sex education in the schools. On Tronto’s (1993) account, one’s responsibilities within a care ethic extend beyond obligations formally entered into; however, how far one’s responsibility extends remains unclear. She suggests that the extent of one’s responsibility rests on a number of different factors, including that one’s actions or failure to act resulted in a need for care or that a pressing need for care will not be met if one does not take responsibility for it (p. 132).

“Caregiving,” the third phase of care, is concerned with the hands-on provision of care. Caregiving typically is more physical and immediate than caretaking. In the example given above, social workers at a shelter for pregnant teenagers are the caregivers who do the actual, hands-on work of tending to the teens’ needs. Competence is the corresponding virtue. In order to ensure that care needs are actually met, it is necessary that the care provided be of adequate quality.

Acts of care come to completion in the final phase of care, “care receiving.” When the care recipient improves as a result of the care bestowed, we are assured that that person’s caring needs have actually been met. Responsiveness is the corresponding virtue. When the care recipient responds to the care in some way, whether that be by thriving or verbal acknowledgement, the act of care is completed and the caregivers receive acknowledgement that they have appropriately recognized, adequately taken responsibility for, and competently addressed a need for care.

Each of these phases of care is gendered, raced, and classed in a particular way. As Tronto (1993) points out, in a society that devalues care, “caring about” and “taking care of” are associated with the more powerful while “care giving” and “care receiving” are left to the less powerful (p. 114). “Taking care of,” for example, is associated more with public roles than private ones, and more with men than with women (p. 115). It is typically the privileged people in our society who have the financial resources and/or connections necessary to handle needs for care through monetary donations or by enlisting the intervention of the appropriate institutions. Hands-on caregiving, by contrast, is overwhelmingly done by men and women of color, and by white women. “In 1989, 97.1% of childcare workers were women... Among cleaners and servers, 94.9% were female, 36.5% were Black, and 19.5% were Hispanic” (pp. 113-114). Needless to say, the least well off and, in many ways, least valued members of our society, are the recipients of care—children, elderly, sick or handicapped, and poor.

Tronto’s (1993) version of care ethics addressed the feminist skeptics’ major concerns. Her termi-
Feminist Advocacy of Service-Learning

It was our hope that service-learning would provide a context for our students to apply and test Tronto’s (1993) version of care ethics. We felt comfortable integrating a service-learning component into our course because, despite concerns about the possible social conservatism of service-learning, it has also received strong support in Women’s Studies programs. Feminist advocates of service-learning point out the clear similarity between feminist pedagogy and service-learning goals—both are participatory in nature, focused on the interplay between scholarly inquiry and human experience, and concerned with promoting positive social change. Service-learning, as a form of feminist pedagogy, attempts to present students with a renegotiated experience of community (Gilbert, 2000), one in which the intersections of gender, race, and class are more apparent. If this is the case, we should be able to overcome the three limitations of service-learning discussed in Part I.

While service may at times reinforce women’s traditional role as caregiver, advocates of service-learning assert that involvement in service can empower women by giving them a sense of agency and moving them into the political realm. Tobi Walker (2000) sees service “as a prepolitical step, demanding that individuals confront both the causes and results of social issues” (p. 33). Women students, when reflecting on their experience in service-learning, frequently noted that they began to define community differently, felt more connected to a broader public, and revised their beliefs about the forums in which they had a voice (Gilbert, 2000). We were hopeful that our students, armed with an understanding of Tronto’s (1993) phases of care, would critically examine and challenge the gendered nature of caring work in their service setting.

Secondly, students engaged in service-learning need not remain stuck in politically-conservative deficiency models of thinking. Walker (2000) insists: “We should not be using service simply to educate students to address social problems, we should be teaching students to solve those problems through politics” (p. 35). While doing service, students come face to face with how economic injustice, racism, sexism, violence, and poverty affect real people—but in addition they see hope and encounter people actively engaged in working for justice and equality. As service-learning narrows the gap between theory and activism, students think more about formal activist roles and their own ability to create change (Gilbert, 2000; McDaniel, 1999). An effective service-learning course makes politics more relevant to students, as they are encouraged to examine how even providing service is political. In “Feminism and Families” we asked our students to evaluate whether, and at what phase, care broke down in the organization or in a situation where they were providing service. Especially when examining the first two phases—caring about and taking care of—students had to critically assess the political dimensions of care. In doing so, we believed that the political processes involved would become strikingly evident.

Although we recognize that the reinforcement of stereotypes, and a sense of one’s own privilege and entitlement, can occur when students move into unfamiliar settings, we agree with feminist advocates of service-learning who remind us that the experience can break down barriers and decrease social distance. Through their projects, distances between students and those served begin to shrink, as do the distinctions between “knower” and “learner” and “subject of study” (Gilbert, 2000). Students frequently comment that they learn as much about themselves as they do about the people they serve. As they explore differences and similarities between themselves and the people with whom they are working, the systemic nature of oppression becomes more obvious. For the willing student, service-learning provides an opportunity to confront one’s own prejudices and deal with them. Audre Lorde asserts: “It is not our differences which separate women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences” (as quoted by Trigg & Balliet, 2000). We believed that by incorporating service-learning into our course, it would become increasingly difficult for students to ignore these differences or take their privilege for granted. We wanted students to see how stereotypes dehumanize certain groups and how multiple systems of oppression impact individuals and groups. Perhaps more important than anything else, students would see the complexity of the problems facing those served. As Washington (2000) notes, stereotypes are challenged as students gain “insight into the depth, humanity, and multidimensionality of a group whom they had previously thought of only in monolithic, unidimensional terms” (p. 108).

Thus, we hoped to provide an experience of service characterized by mutuality that would avoid critics’ limitations and actualize the benefits lauded by advocates. We designed reflections and assignments...
intended to examine critically the political dimensions of the care being given, and to explore the questions of privilege and stereotyping. We wanted to provide an experience of community service that was effective in the sense described by Trigg and Balliet (2000): “Effective community service is collaborative, nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, respectful, and transformative, embracing the same goals as effective feminist teaching methods” (p. 90).

The first week of class, students were asked to either commit to a minimum 25 hours of service with a service organization that focused on the needs of families, or to do a research project. We made the service-learning project optional because students would be working with vulnerable clients, many of whom were children; hence, it was essential that they be willing and committed volunteers. We also recognized that even the opportunity to participate in service-learning is a form of privilege—some job-dependent students do not have the time or flexibility of schedule to allow them to engage in service-learning. Of the 17 students in the class, 13 chose service-learning.

During the semester we had three reflection sessions with our students. These sessions gave students the opportunity to look more objectively at their service, to step back from the urgent demands placed on them while serving, and to analyze not only what was going on, but why. As important as these sessions were for the students themselves, they were also important for us as instructors, because listening to the students enabled us to assess what students understood, and discover where they were confused or had misinterpreted key ideas from readings. Reflection sessions and student papers provided us with a forum where we could challenge the students, push them to think more critically, to move beyond the focus on the individual to look at systems and structures, asking questions that students could continue to ponder the next time they returned to their service site. The concrete stories and student encounters provided rich material to draw upon when discussing central concepts.

Part III: Student Perspectives on “Feminism and Families”

We will now present two contrasting student experiences with “Feminism and Families.” These two cases suggest the range of student responses to service-learning, and point out several issues of which teachers utilizing service-learning should be aware. “Elisa” and Rachel were, in many ways, each other’s counterparts. Both students were bright and engaged, social justice-oriented Gender and Women’s Studies minors, from white middle class backgrounds, each of whom had already taken a class with one of the instructors. Their experiences with this class were significantly different, however. Elisa struggled throughout the semester with her service-learning placement at a homeless shelter. While she understood the structural causes of poverty on a theoretical level, she was unable to transfer that knowledge to her service-learning placement. Our experience with Elisa is worth discussing here because of the contradictions she embodied and the important lessons we as instructors learned from her. She clearly demonstrates the intractability of privilege in our society, and the difficulty of recognizing how the lens of privilege distorts one’s vision of reality. She also illustrates how pedagogically important reflection sessions and feedback are when using service-learning, so that both instructors and peers can continually challenge students to examine more closely the structural constraints on those served.

Rachel, by contrast, was one of the students who was able to make the hoped for connections between class readings, discussion, and the service-learning placement. We invited Rachel to co-author this paper because her final essay indicated that she had done an exemplary job of satisfying the course goals outlined in the introduction to this paper—goals that, despite her undisputed intelligence and effort—largely eluded Elisa. We believe Rachel’s story provides strong evidence supporting service-learning’s use in the Women’s Studies classroom. Examining the experiences of these two students helps us see the successes of this course as taught as well as gain insight into ways to revise course goals and improve pedagogical approaches to course content.

“Elisa”

Elisa, a white, female Minnesota student, is a campus activist who gravitates toward gender and social justice classes. While she mastered the course’s theoretical material, service-learning was a deeply troubling experience for her. She became increasinglyfrustrated with her perception that the homeless shelter she worked at only provided housing and did not change the residents. She stated in her final reflection paper:

I had an overwhelming number of negative reactions to the people I encountered at the shelter. Is this because I have been raised in a family that I would consider wonderful, and because I see all of these families struggling through issues such as abuse, marital problems, lack of love, lack of commitment, lack of ability to succeed (educationally, financially,
Elisa’s reactions were sincere and she was articulate in expressing her questions and inner struggle. But she had not yet learned to ask the structural questions: What if structures of inequality and oppression prevent people from acting on their knowledge? What if it is privilege that makes knowledge effective? Elisa lacked sensitivity to the anxiety and frustration that comes from desperation; she seemed unaware that homelessness makes parenting extremely difficult at times, even for the best of parents. While Elisa’s inability to question the individualistic explanations of poverty and utilize Tronto’s (1993) political and structural critique was in part a function of her lack of experience, it also reflects an inability or a resistance to recognize the power of one’s own privilege. Just as the structural constraints of poverty made it difficult for the people Elisa was serving to get out of their situations/mindsets, so also did being entrenched in a middle-class world make it difficult for Elisa to get out of hers. Her understanding of poverty was constrained by her own privilege.

Elisa’s reflections on her service experience highlight those middle-class constraints. First, negative stereotypes, which so dominate societal representations of the poor, are pervasive and not readily dismantled. In this case, a student who had intellectually separated herself from these stereotypes and in the classroom had acknowledged the structural causes of poverty, when confronted with the actual situation, reverted back to a deficiency model. She finds herself negatively judging those she served, viewing family problems and destructive behaviors as the causes of poverty rather than as its outcomes. These attitudes persisted despite our emphasis throughout the course on the institutional, economic, and structural factors that make it extremely difficult for families and individuals to “fix” the problem of poverty on their own.

A second middle-class constraint is the strong belief that one’s own culture and morality are superior and universally applicable. True to her class background and privilege, Elisa believed that she brought with her the answers people needed, the ability to empower those she served. At the second reflection session, Elisa observed that she thought the residents and their children would benefit if she were allowed to pull aside the residents and give them some childrearing lessons. She assumed that she, a 20 year old, single, childless, college student knew more about childrearing than the working poor parents she encountered at the shelter. She assumed that her cultural background gave her the “right answers” which, if conveyed to and adhered to by those “others,” would allow them to accomplish what, in her estimation, is best for them.

Since part of our rationale for using service-learning was to have students understand the interconnections among gender, race, and class, and to encounter their own privilege, Elisa’s story may seem to demonstrate that service-learning does not always work—at least not for all students. On the other hand, the service-learning experience, in particular the reflection paper and reflection session, highlighted Elisa’s sense of privilege in a way that previous academic courses addressing gender, race, and poverty had not. The course left this bright articulate young woman clearly struggling with extremely significant questions. She recognized contradictions in herself that might not otherwise have surfaced. This is most clearly seen in her final reflection paper:

> Are my negative reactions due to the fact that I sometimes am an idealist and I want everything to be well, rather than being satisfied with small advances? Are my negative reactions due to the fact that I have ingrained stereotypes in my mind? Or are my negative reactions really, truly right on target, exposing truths and identifying real problems that need to be fixed in peoples’ lives or within our societal system of care? Am I being too judgmental, or am I being realistic and offering a fresh look at things? Maybe it’s tough love. Maybe I just don’t have enough patience to deal with people who do not have their lives together. I honestly don’t have a clue what exactly the roots of my frustration and uncertainty are.

I feel that I can at least say that my service-learning experience has exposed some part of my being that is significant and worth further exploration. I have identified and developed strong feelings and opinions about certain things, and I have raised some questions and uncertainties about other aspects related to service, poverty, and various other elements of society. It has been a beneficial experience.

Elisa’s honesty about the tensions she was feeling allowed the course instructors to gently, carefully push her to think more carefully about her assumptions. Thus, while service-learning did not have the desired outcome with this particular student, it did point out to the instructors a disconnect between Elisa’s theoretical and gut level understanding of poverty, while raising some important questions for Elisa.

As instructors, our experience with Elisa taught us that in order to make possible more student progress toward the goal of recognizing their priv-
ilege, it is important to address privilege in class with students before they begin their service-learning placements. Once in the field, students need opportunities to dialogue with each other about their experiences and share varied interpretations of what they are finding. Finally, rather than get frustrated with students like Elisa, it is important to welcome such eminently teachable moments. Elisa’s honesty and directness brought to light some of her struggles and contradictions, which allowed us both to affirm her and the challenges she was facing, while gently pushing her forward toward a more political critique of homelessness.

Rachel was a student with a background very similar to Elisa’s. In many ways, their initial reactions to service-learning were similar. However, Rachel was able to make connections that continued to elude Elisa. We believe Rachel’s story supports the feminist advocate view that service-learning can be an effective tool for students to connect in-class theoretical learning to the “real world.” We would estimate that about half the students in our course had an experience that tended toward the Rachel end of the spectrum, although she was by far one of the most articulate and insightful of our students.

Rachel

When service-learning was first offered in the “Feminism and Families” course, I had mixed feelings about participating in the program. Service work requires dedication, and with a full schedule of classes, a job as a teaching assistant, and extracurricular activities, I was hesitant about the time commitment. But I also knew service-learning could be very rewarding. I had previously volunteered at a battered women’s shelter and enjoyed my role as a child advocate. I was able to gain firsthand knowledge about the problem of domestic violence and connect with some very strong and endearing children. It was with that experience in mind that I decided to participate in the service-learning program.

In retrospect, service-learning was not just a positive experience; it was an invaluable learning tool. Service-learning brought to life the complex intersection of race, class, and gender that we had often discussed but never really confronted in Women’s Studies courses. I am a white, middle class woman from a small midwestern town, someone who has never really faced any financial or emotional hardships. Through the Children’s Mental Health Mentoring Program I was able to foster a relationship with a mother and her daughter, “Bobbie” and “Camille,” a family of a very different socioeconomic background and structure than my own.

My initial reaction to this family situation was typical of privileged women: I had the “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” mentality. Bobbie was receiving worker’s compensation, and each time I visited the home she was lying on the couch, watching television. The house was always a mess, with food, clothes and miscellaneous junk lying around. My opinion was that Bobbie should start working, clean up her home, and take care of her daughter, Camille. I attributed the problems in this family to Bobbie’s poor decisions and a lack of responsibility.

At our first reflection session, I was able to share with my classmates these conflicting feelings I was having about Camille’s care and home environment. Because this session was informal and open, I felt I could also share any practical concerns I had about participating in the program. For example, my particular service-learning placement required an even greater time commitment than I had anticipated. Camille lived in a small, isolated rural town with a population of about 50, a bar, a church, and an old park. Each visit I would pick her up, bring her into a nearby city or campus community for activities, and then drive her home afterward. While I realized how important it was for her to be out in the larger community, each visit meant a lot of time and driving on my part. This type of initial discussion was therapeutic and probably necessary for any student involved in service-learning, but I also found it could become too specific or too personal. In other words, I was doing a lot of processing but not much analysis. Discussion about service-learning needs to move beyond this level if the experience is to challenge students’ beliefs and get them thinking about broader social change.

When we applied Tronto’s (1993) version of care ethics to our individual service-learning experiences in the second reflection session, the level of discussion and analysis rose, from the personal to the social and the political. The four phases of care provided an excellent framework for discussing the service-learning experiences. I started thinking about my own service-learning experience in terms of “where care was breaking down” rather than whom I thought was failing as a mother or provider or housekeeper. I first applied the four phases of care to Camille’s participation in the Children’s Mental Health Mentoring program and found that this practice of care was successful. Her mother, Bobbie, had “cared about” her daughter’s mental health and possible depression. She and social services “took care of” Camille’s needs by involving her in the Children’s Mental Health Mentoring Program. I, as her mentor, did the actual “caring.” In this program, “caring” meant bringing Camille into
the community, scheduling activities for us to do together, and offering her both guidance and friendship. Camille seemed responsive to the care I provided. She continued to go to school, looked forward to our visits, and enjoyed the activities and time we spent together. Camille’s participation in the Children’s Mental Health Mentoring Program seemed to demonstrate a successful practice of care.

While it became clear that social services and the current network of care were benefiting Camille, I realized that they seemed to be neglecting her mother. Based on conversations with Camille, my brief contact with the social worker, and my personal interaction with the family, I began to recognize that Bobbie was the one who needed care. So, I applied the four phases of care to her situation. Through this analysis, I was able to see where care was breaking down, and analyze the difference between applying the justice tradition and an ethic of care to this situation.

I need not go further than Tronto’s (1993) first phase of care to understand where care was breaking down in my service-learning experience: no one “cared about” Bobbie. The respect for autonomy and focus on impartiality characteristic of a rights-based, justice theory provided insight as to why Bobbie’s caring needs were neglected. As an adult, Bobbie is assumed to be an autonomous and competent individual, capable of determining her own need for care. Because of this respect for autonomy, Bobbie’s vulnerability and dependence are labeled character flaws. She is responsible for the problems in her life, because they are a result of individual deficiencies, and this makes it justifiable for me to judge her character and maintain distance from her problems. The impartiality of our justice tradition also fosters this distance: impartiality typically does not allow for a contextual view of morality, a view that takes Bobbie’s history and hardships into consideration.

What our justice perspective fails to recognize, and what Tronto’s (1993) care ethic clearly points out, is that our concept of constant and pervading autonomy is a myth. “Throughout our lives, all of us go through varying degrees of dependence and independence, of autonomy and vulnerability” (p. 135). If we were to institute an ethic of care, we would view ourselves as interdependent rather than independent and autonomous. “Since people are sometimes autonomous, sometimes dependent, sometimes providing care for those who are dependent, humans are best described as interdependent” (p. 162). In the case of Bobbie, Tronto’s care ethic would help us recognize that she is vulnerable and may be going through a stage of dependence. If vulnerability and dependence were no longer seen as signs of weakness, our society might be more willing to recognize Bobbie’s need for care and we would be less quick to judge her.

The boundary between the public and private also contributes to our neglect of Bobbie’s personal need for care. Clearly, Bobbie and Camille are contained in the private sphere. Bobbie is female, unemployed, and a single mother; she stays at home and does the emotional caregiving work that has historically been viewed as a private concern. When Bobbie realized she was unable to meet her daughter’s caring needs within the private sphere, she sent Camille into the public sphere to participate in the Children’s Mental Health Mentoring Program. Camille’s needs became a public concern, and she received the care she needed. Bobbie, on the other hand, remained in the private sphere where her needs continued to be ignored. Bobbie apparently felt she could not cross into the public sphere on her own behalf, to advocate for herself and receive the care she needed. Social services, too, seems to have refused to cross the boundary between the public and private; they failed even to recognize Bobbie’s needs, as a woman and a caregiver who was struggling. The individualistic take of our political system, which relieves inter-personal relations to the private sphere, prevented workers from making the connection between Bobbie’s and Camille’s well-being. As part of a network of care, Camille’s need for care could only be met if Bobbie was also cared for.

If, as Tronto (1993) suggests, we were to re-draw the boundary between the public and private, care would become a public and political concern (p. 96 and chapter 6). In the case of Bobbie, our society would be responsible for Bobbie’s caring needs, both because she is a woman who is worthy of care and because she is a caregiver for her daughter, Camille. On a larger scale, care as a valued public concern could have the power to transform our society’s approach to child care altogether, by making it a public concern. In a society that made a public, political commitment to care, communities and social institutions would share with parents the responsibilities of caring for children (pp. 165-166). This might enable parents like Bobbie to better care for their children and themselves.

Without the opportunity to connect with Bobbie and Camille through service-learning, “Feminism and Families” might have been a very different course. While I would have read a lot of theoretical material on women and poverty, I would not have been able to witness its effects firsthand. Furthermore, had I not participated in service-learning and applied Tronto’s (1993) care ethics to this experience, I would have continued to
approach struggling families (particularly those in poverty) as I had before—with feelings of pity, blame, and even anger. Instead, I left “Feminism and Families” with a greater understanding of the financial and emotional struggles of families in poverty and the societal constraints that keep them there. And the application of Tronto’s theory allowed me to recognize caring for all families, regardless of race, class, or gender, as an important moral and political responsibility.

Conclusion

Our experience with “Feminism and Families” demonstrates that neither care ethics nor service-learning are inherently socially conservative; both can be used in the Women’s Studies classroom to promote such key feminist pedagogical aims as connecting theory and practice, confronting and addressing privilege, and helping students understand the kinds of political change needed to create a society that genuinely cares for all its members. Whether care ethics and service-learning serve a conservative or a progressive agenda depends on how each is presented and utilized in the classroom. In our course, the combination of Tronto’s (1993) ethic of care with service-learning, enriched by social, political, and economic readings, helped students achieve our overarching course goal of developing a personal and political analysis of the causes of poverty. Rachel’s experience with the course supports the instructors’ perception that utilizing a theoretical framework to analyze students’ service-learning experiences was instrumental in helping students develop a more critical and politically informed understanding of their placements. This understanding, in turn, allowed them to better analyze the extent to which our social institutions embody an ethic of care. At the same time, Elisa demonstrated both the importance of preparatory work with our students, if we wish them to confront the intractable issue of privilege, and the importance of recognizing that whether or not students successfully address this issue in our classroom may be as much a developmental issue as a pedagogical one.

On the theoretical level, “Feminism and Families” supports Tronto’s (1993) claim to have developed a politically useful account of an ethic of care. Rachel, and students like her, successfully used care ethics to analyze their service-learning experiences and go beyond the purely personal and immediate situation to raise broader theoretical and political questions about the provision of care in our society. At the same time, service-learning made real Tronto’s four phases of care and pushed students to think critically about “caring about,” “taking care of,” and “care-giving.” The realization that there are versions of care ethics that are usefully applied to analyze existing social systems and develop a vision for social change is of theoretical importance for persons who have been engaged in the care ethics debates of the past 20 years.

Notes

1 “Extending the Classroom Walls,” a generous grant from the Bush Foundation, freed up the faculty resources necessary to team teach this course.

2 It should be noted that this objection does not apply only to Noddings’ version of care ethics but rather is a risk run by any version of the ethic that embraces partiality toward known and cared for others as a moral good.

3 Given our use of care ethics in our course, we invoked as our ideal attainment of a genuinely caring society, governed by a moral and political conception of care, rather than appealing to the just society. The key way in which we see a political conception of care differing from the feminine conception just criticized is that the political conception focuses on the importance of creating social and political institutions that support the work of caring. This includes providing the requisite support for caregivers and working to ensure that the burdens of care are distributed equitably across social groups. We think this political conception of care incorporates the best components of the care and the justice traditions.

4 The numbers are as follows. Participation in spring break service trips; 1999: 78 men and 173 women; 2000: 68 men and 193 women; 2001: 63 men and 199 women. VISTO; 2000: 158 men and 387 women; 2001: 154 men and 361 women. This gap persists despite our student development staff’s gender specific efforts to encourage both our male and our female students to carry out our institution’s mission commitment to service. More female than male students participate in service-learning, although the participation gap here is somewhat narrower, probably because service-learning is typically a course requirement, not a volunteer experience that relies solely on the student’s own initiative. Service-learning Participation Rates: Spring 2001: 86 men and 138 women; Fall 2001: 82 men and 175 women.

5 For an interesting critique of service-learning as a form of charity that can reinforce the “do-goodism” of student participants, see the October 1996 discussion of service-learning in the archives of the Society for Women in Philosophy e-mail list serve. (http://www.uh.edu/~cfreelan/SWIP/)

6 Tronto refers to these as “elements,” but the description she provides of these elements fits squarely into the virtue tradition in moral philosophy. Her “elements” are character traits that need to be cultivated and carried out in a practice if the prescribed task is to be done well. Hence, we prefer and will use the term “virtue” rather than “element.”

7 Tronto gets her data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, The Statistical Abstract of the United States,
Elisa, unaware of her own privilege.


We realize that by inviting Rachel to co-author this paper while speaking on Elisa’s behalf, we may seem to be placing Elisa at a disadvantage. On the one hand, we see this as avoidable, as it would be difficult to ask a student to co-author an article to demonstrate that there were certain aspects of the course she didn’t “get.” On the other hand, we think this possible problem is mitigated by the fact that Elisa’s own voice comes through so clearly in her writing, excerpted here. Finally, we wish to make clear the perspective taken in this article—Rachel and Elisa were students who shared many qualities. They seemed, however, to be at different stages in a developmental process when it came to their ability to wrestle with and recognize both their own privilege and the complex array of factors that contribute to poverty.

Our developmental understanding of Rachel’s and Elisa’s story seemed to receive unanticipated support this past year when one of the instructors encountered Elisa at an alumni event. During our course and the year after, Elisa questioned her ability to engage in direct service work with the disenfranchised of society, due to her frustration with “people who do not have their lives together.” (She saw this as the primary explanation for why some people are poor and others aren’t.) For the past year, the disenfranchised, specifically, young women of color, primarily mothers, are exactly the population she is working with in her paid employment, a job she took out of personal conviction. In this brief conversation, Elisa made reference to “Feminism and Families” as the single most important preparation she had for this work, as it helped her to better understand the experiences of the underprivileged women she now works with on a daily basis.

One instructor who had Elisa in a previous Women’s Studies class and a colleague who had her in another class that addressed issues of race and poverty. In both cases, the “social justice” Elisa was evident—not the class that addressed issues of race and poverty. In both cases, the “social justice” Elisa was evident—not the class that addressed issues of race and poverty.

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Authors

DR. JEAN KELLER is an associate professor of Philosophy and is former director of the Gender and Women’s Studies Program at the College of Saint Benedict/Saint John’s University. She teaches, writes, and publishes in the area of feminist ethics.

DR. SHEILA NELSON is an associate professor and chair of the Sociology Department at the College of Saint Benedict/Saint John’s University. She has published in the areas of education and nonprofit organizations. Her current research is in the area of gender and sexual orientation.

RACHEL WICK graduated from the College of Saint Benedict in Spring 2000 with a Philosophy major and a minor in Gender and Women’s Studies. She currently continues to pursue her feminist interests by working at the Minnesota Women’s Press.