Review Essay

Tackling Social Problems through Service-Learning

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Social Problems: A Service-Learning Approach

Corey Dolgon and Chris Baker

This social problems text is well-designed and written in a thoughtful and appealing manner. It provides recent data describing major social problems confronting the United States and presents the data through clearly laid out tables and graphics. It offers a primer on key sociological concepts and theoretical perspectives and then applies them consistently throughout the book in order to explain the emergence and persistence of these problems. In this sense, it is comparable to many other recent social problems texts. Further, it comes with a set of on-line resources for students and teaching assists for faculty through the publisher’s website (also like many introductory level texts), all of which are helpful and readily accessible.

However, what distinguishes this work, and what I appreciate most about it, is the extensive integration of service-learning case studies and examples throughout the book. There is also an intentional, yet subtle, encouragement of student activism throughout, conveyed through success stories of students’ organizing campaigns from college campuses around the country. Such cases offer hope and empowerment for students who may otherwise conclude that some of these social problems are completely intractable. For readers of the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, the service-learning examples alone are likely enough to lead social problems instructors to adopt this book. Yet I would also recommend this book even to those not interested in integrating a service-learning approach in their course, based on this sense of helpfulness and the dozens of examples of contemporary success stories of social change.

The authors, Corey Dolgon and Chris Baker, follow a standard format throughout the substantive chapters of the book, chapters two through ten. They start each chapter with a compelling example of a student engaged in a service-learning project addressing the social problem discussed in the chapter. This is an effective device as it draws in the reader to be interested in the problem while humanizing the impacts the problem has on real people. It also offers a sense that even though the problem may be huge and that powerful forces are behind the structural arrangements in place, that human agency can make a difference. The authors then move to describing the problems through the use of statistics and how the problems have changed over recent decades. The graphics are simple yet persuasive as data are marshaled to build the case for how social pressures and intentional policies have altered the impact of the problem in the past. Dolgon and Baker then move to explain the patterns of the data through the functionalist, symbolic interactionist, and conflict perspectives, noting how social movement pressure from below has historically ameliorated or lessened the problem, whereas inaction or mobilization from above has led to increases in inequality or worsening of the problem. The chapters then conclude with three extended case studies of service-learning examples that have made an impact at the local level. The examples are well chosen to reflect different theoretical perspectives, thereby enabling students and faculty members with different theoretical predispositions to find examples that resonate with them in each chapter. They also represent an incredible array of partnerships between community-based organizations and institutions of higher education; racially and ethnically diverse students, faculty and citizen activists; urban, rural and suburban locations; social class, gender, and sexuality diversity; and project types—ranging from direct service, to advocacy, to organizing, to action research. This, too, serves to spark civic engagement, as virtually every reader of the book can see himself or herself in the shoes of engaged participants in these projects, addressing problems in their own community. I appreciate Dolgon and Baker for their intentionality and careful selection of examples and case studies that set this
book apart from other social problems books.

In the Introduction chapter, Dolgon and Baker start by disclosing Dolgon’s activist roots in graduate school working with the Ann Arbor Homeless Action Committee. Although the example is brief, it draws in the reader and also suggests that institutions of higher education themselves are major institutional actors that can adversely impact the local community. This sets the stage for numerous examples throughout the book whereby student activists target universities to force them to change their employment and labor practices, student services programs, and environmental practices. They move quickly to define social problems and draw on classic statements such as C. Wright Mills’ distinction between personal trouble and public issues (1959). Readers are introduced to the service-learning pedagogy and its key elements of preparation, action, reflection, evaluation, and celebration. They then move on to remind students about the nature of sociological study, distinguishing it from individualistic or psychological understandings to social issues. Relying only on the materials presented in this introduction, this book would be appropriate whether or not students have had an introductory sociology course.

The first chapter continues this introduction to a sociological perspective, defining basic concepts and the three main theoretical perspectives. The authors convey the sociological perspective by defining social structures, institutions, values and norms, and social facts. Yet they connect these to individual agency and social change, leading to more examples of students effecting change through their service-learning projects. The main theoretical perspectives—functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and conflict sociology—are introduced with a corresponding case study to illustrate the value of applying these theoretical perspectives. I especially appreciate their selection of United Students Against Sweatshops, because of its nationwide impact and its presence across so many campuses during the 1990s and 2000s. Each of the chapters ends with a personal interview of a long-time activist in one of the movements discussed in the chapter, a very brief chapter summary, a set of questions (to test for content learning rather than prompting discussion), a glossary, related websites, and references cited in the chapter. All of these back-of-the-chapter items are helpful for students engaged in the materials and mastering the content of the chapter. The one thing lacking is a set of discussion questions that are more open-ended that would challenge the student to apply these learnings to their context or invite them to examine alternative approaches to those presented in the chapter. A set of reflection questions could be added to the website that would assist instructors seeking more open-ended discussion in class, challenging students in ways that assist their growth in overcoming stereotypes and assist their values development. There could be some generic reflection questions posted on the site that could be used in virtually any discussion of students’ experiences in the community, such as the “three-whats” approach (What did you see? So what did you make of it? Now what will you do about it?) (Reed & Koliba, 1995). And there could be specific questions for each chapter that would help prompt students to apply what they are experiencing in the community with what they are reading about in the text. As all service-learning practitioners know, it is not the experience itself that creates students’ learning, but in the thinking about the experience and applying readings to their experience that students’ learning is dramatically enhanced (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Chapters two through ten focus on a particular social problem. Dolgon and Baker’s selection of social problems corresponds to that of most social problems texts, with chapters on poverty and inequality; the economy, work, and unemployment; race, gender, sexuality, and multiculturalism; the family; the environment; education; community, crime, deviance, and justice; health care; and globalization. The condensing of these social problem areas into nine substantive chapters makes for some very extensive coverage in some of the chapters. Of course, no introductory level book can provide comprehensive coverage of all major issues. I suspect that the limit of ten chapters may be a market-imposed strategy, to enable classes operating on a quarter system to adopt the text. Yet it seems that the authors are trying to cover too much ground in some of the chapters. Their combining of race, gender, sexuality, multiculturalism, and identity in chapter 4, as well as justice, deviance, crime, and community in chapter 8 are examples of this which has the consequence of giving too little attention to any of these. While it is clear that the authors value the contributions of the civil rights movement and consider racial discrimination to be an ongoing social problem, they are not able to give adequate attention to the current impact of racial discrimination and the struggles against racism today. I would have preferred for the authors to have had a separate chapter on race, racism, and the struggle for civil rights that would have included examples of contemporary efforts to promote racial equality in addition to coverage of the civil rights movement. This is my most serious substantive critique of the book, yet it would not deter me from adopting the book as it would be relatively simple to add further readings or case study materials to extend the basic materials presented in this chapter.

Chapter two focuses on poverty, inequality, and
homelessness. The authors make several important distinctions early in the chapter, noting for example that although inequality exists in all societies, poverty is a result of the way that a society distributes its resources. Thus, poverty can take on different forms depending on a country’s economic and political systems, cultural norms, and values system (p. 50). Homelessness likewise can take on different forms in different locations, depending on how poverty is handled and how the political-economy responds to the lack of affordable housing (p. 50). The authors then turn to a statistical portrait of income and wealth inequality in the United States and how this has changed over the last four decades. Dolgon and Baker do a nice job of describing our American culture’s reliance on the “myths of the self-made man” and our general hyperindividualism. In their brief history of the U.S. welfare system, they describe how welfare policies have always assumed the male’s responsibility to work and provide for his family and draw on Linda Gordon’s work (1994) to show how our original Aid to Dependent Children welfare policy had to be framed as a response to mothers being victimized by death, mishap, or irresponsibility of the presumed male provider (p. 59). They trace the politics of the New Deal era and the War on Poverty with an ongoing cultural understanding of hyperindividualism and notions of “deserving” vs. “undeserving” poor. They then apply the conflict theory to understand the war against the poor of the 1990s, which they describe as the ongoing framework for understanding the contemporary debates over tax cuts for wealthy families initiated by President George W. Bush and recently renewed by President Barack Obama. The case studies at the end of the chapter are framed in terms of each of the three theoretical frameworks: for the conflict perspective, an organizing campaign against welfare cuts; for the functionalism perspective, an examination of the functions of a community’s farmers’ market; and from the symbolic interactionist perspective, a writing program to raise consciousness of students in poor communities.

Chapter three, “On the Job: Work, Workers, and the Changing Nature of Labor,” provides a bleak, yet I would contend accurate, picture of the economy from the perspective of the working and middle class workers in the United States. Dolgon and Baker emphasize the decline of labor unions and the rise of workers’ alienation, the deindustrialization and sectoral transformation of the economy, and the relative decline of workers’ wages of the last century. I believe that they have portrayed the working conditions of the “average” working person accurately and such conditions are not at all promising. Yet having spent the last quarter century at an elite institution of higher education, I have seen my students pay very little attention to these depressing conditions for the working and middle classes. I believe that part of this is denial and part is self-preservation of those in more privileged positions—to believe that they are “above” such threats to their potential employability, even in an increasingly globalizing economy. What I would have liked to see would be more inclusion of a discussion of outsourcing of middle class and professional jobs and the threats to employment facing those with college and even graduate school education—some of whom are the likely readers of this text. Nevertheless, I believe that the authors do challenge the readers to consider how even their employment prospects will be impacted by ongoing globalization and the continuing transformation of the U.S. economy into a bifurcated knowledge-based and service economy. I would note that I especially applaud the selection of the Pomona Day Labor Center (started in 1998) as one of the case studies (pp. 109-12) and the biographical highlight of scholar-activist José Calderon in this chapter (pp. 113-4) because of the effective work that they have done for more than a decade, powerfully impacting the day laborers’ lives, students’ learning, and the larger community’s political response (Calderon, 2007).

I mentioned above that chapter four left me feeling short-changed by the focus on race, gender, sexuality, multiculturalism, and identity all in one chapter. The chapter covers this much territory by starting at the micro level and moving to the macro level, starting with a focus on prejudices and stereotypes, moving to collective identities and structural inequalities, and then focusing on identity-based social movements that have effected change. Dolgon and Baker then spend roughly three to four pages on gender, race, and ethnic differences in institutional achievements (in sports, in educational attainment) and income and wealth disparities. The authors use the distinction between institutional discrimination and attitudinal discrimination to shift their focus on sexual orientation and disabilities, citing harassment and hiring practices as indicators of attitudinal discrimination. Brief but well-written boxed inserts on “The Five Sexes” and “Whiteness” introduce students to some contemporary controversies in the debates over sexual identity and racial privilege, based on the work of Fausto-Sterling (1993) and McIntosh (2004). Their longer boxed insert on “Affirmative Action” is well-written and packs a punch for white students who have been unaware of the historic affirmative action policies and practices that have privileged whiteness for most of the five centuries of this country’s history. The chapter ends with very brief descriptions of the civil rights, women’s and gay rights movements, and case studies focused on multiculturalism, race, and homophobia.
Chapter five on the family focuses on family problems, such as divorce and domestic violence. What is most valuable about this chapter is the authors’ focus on placing such family problems in both a structural and historical context. Structurally, increasing divorce rates and decreasing rates of traditional families are explained through economic disruptions and market changes that have led to work and role overload, especially for women. Increasing education and workforce participation for women have complicated family arrangements, but in complex ways. The authors show how simplistic political critiques bandied about in the culture wars are either factually inaccurate (such as increasing women’s education levels being correlated with lower divorce rates, contrary to conservatives’ claims that women’s education has undermined the family) or more complicated than portrayed in the media. Along the latter lines, the high rates of U.S. teen pregnancy are discussed but are explained as being strongly related to family poverty and living in distressed communities. Effective interventions that lower the rates of teen pregnancies are educational programs that focus on sex education and reproductive health as well as community involvement programs. The authors also note the historical changes in family structure, starting with pre-industrial extended family patterns that experienced great upheaval in the industrial era—leading to women’s and children’s exploitation in the early factory system—followed by yet another wave of disruptions caused by the deindustrialization and globalization of the last half century. They also note the greater variability of historic family patterns that existed, especially among racial and ethnic minorities, which were disrupted by political and economic domination and the imposition of middle class, Caucasian norms.

Chapter six on the environment starts with illustrations from universities that have been particularly active in reducing their environmental footprint through the use of renewable energy sources, conservation and recycling programs, on-campus gardens, and green buildings. Institutions of higher education such as Bowdoin, Bates, and Berea Colleges and Western Washington and Central Oklahoma Universities serve as strong role models that likely will inspire students on other campuses to organize and advocate for stronger green measures to be taken on their own campuses. The statistical portrait of U.S. energy consumption, especially when compared to the rest of the world, can only shock and disturb the reader in light of our gluttonous U.S. per capita consumption rates of fossil fuels and carbon emissions. The authors raise some of the major factors contributing to these massive rates, such as our automobile dependence and consumerist culture. The authors discuss global warming resulting from greenhouse gas emissions in a straightforward manner and do not make reference to the political debate promulgated by the climate change-deniers. While I believe that such a portrayal of the scientific consensus over global warming is indeed appropriate, I wonder whether student readers should not be equipped to face the political reality of massive investments by fossil fuel companies to generate a countermovement of climate change denial with pseudo-scientific claims. Similarly, the presentation on nuclear power seems remarkably balanced, noting the pros and cons of nuclear energy. A boxed insert provides a summary of the costs of nuclear meltdowns at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl in terms of lives lost, property loss, and disease rate increases. This is labeled as the United States becoming a “risk society,” suggesting that the United States and other industrialized countries now debate and rationally decide how much risk we are willing to accept in the name of comfort, convenience, and progress. It strikes me that the authors have diluted their critique of nuclear power and allowed the climate change denial industry too much legitimacy by not explicitly disputing their claims. The chapter closes with a discussion of the environmental movement and its emergence in response to the catalyst of Rachel Carson’s book, Silent Spring (1962), and as a response to a series of environmental disasters in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Love Canal, Bhopal, Chernobyl, and the Exxon Valdez spill). One of the case studies at the end of this chapter describes the “action research” model of service-learning, through which students engaged in community-based research with a community partner to address a community-identified problem. In this case, the students of an environmental sociology class at the University of Nebraska at Omaha undertake lead toxicity testing in poor communities in collaboration with the Lead Safe Omaha Coalition to identify high exposure levels to lead among those living in poor neighborhoods (Rajaram, 2007). I appreciate this inclusion of a community-based research case study, as I believe it challenges our understanding of how knowledge is produced and that scientific research occurs within a values framework that can either reinforce the status quo of structural inequalities or explicitly challenge them (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003). Another extended case study at the end of this chapter provides a clear understanding of the environmental justice movement through the work of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University.

Chapter seven, “Why Can’t Johnny Read?,” focuses on the crisis in our education system. This chapter contains the most examples of effective service-
learning programs in which college students work with students in poor schools to have measurable impacts on the lives of the young student learners. This chapter also features a brief portrait of Jonathan Kozol, a powerful voice and contemporary prophet, who speaks and writes on behalf of poor children, shining a spotlight on the deplorable conditions of their schools and living conditions (Kozol, 1989; 1992; 2005). The authors present a compelling statistical portrait of dropout rates, educational attainment, and standardized test scores by race and class, showing the systemic differences in outcomes on all measures. They dig beneath the surface, once again, to show these inequalities to be explained by dramatic differences in funding and residential segregation. They distinguish between de jure segregation once implemented through Jim Crow laws and de facto segregation currently sustained through housing market segmentation and real estate practices. They illustrate how court-ordered attempts to integrate schools have been undermined by white flight, realtor practices, and FHA policies that have resegregated cities by race and class. There is a brief historical review of public education’s role in preparing workers for the kinds of jobs needed by the economy and the operation of a “hidden curriculum” in the schools, despite the rhetoric of meritocracy and “education as the great equalizer.” Their discussion of the No Child Left Behind legislation illustrates how this policy is but the latest version of preparing massive numbers of future workers who lack critical thinking skills through “teaching to the test.” They also explore the media’s complicity in not holding schools accountable for students’ success but rather serving their corporate owners’ interests of undermining teachers’ unions, privatizing the public sector, and strengthening corporate interests and profits (Kinchehloes, 2006).

In Chapter 8, “What Price Justice,” the focus is on crime, deviance, and building community. Once again, the chapter begins with a compelling story of service-learning students, this time from the Project Community class at the University of Michigan, engaged in service at the local jail to assess services provided to the inmates. This leads the students to see the needs of inmates for basic life-skills and literacy. The students come to understand how life chances are structured as a result of where one grows up and the opportunities one has. The statistical presentation focuses on the disparity between the generally declining rates of crime over the last two decades and the public perception of crime as increasing. This is explained as a fear of crime that is manufactured to justify “get tough” politicians’ policies and fundraising strategies as well as corporate interests—the profits pouring in to the new “prison-industrial complex.” The United States’ high rates of incarceration are examined through the conflict perspective, explaining the greater criminalization of certain types of drug crimes. At the same time, much white collar crime is overlooked, due to class bias in police enforcement and prosecutorial discretion. Recent events such as Bernie Madoff’s Ponzi scheme and the deregulation of the investment industry leading to a “culture of banditry” are described as being so extreme that they threaten the well-being of everyone by leading to devastating economic crises. The authors note that although the forms of crime have changed over time, the historical practice has been to severely punish and criminalize behavior among the lower classes and immigrants and to overlook comparable behavior among middle and upper classes. Such class and racial disparities are applied to youth and juvenile delinquency incarceration rates and to the practice of racial profiling. The crime of rape is discussed in its various forms and special attention is paid for the college student reader to party rape and date rape, where alcohol and drugs are used to make potential victims more vulnerable. Impressive service-learning case studies are described at the end of the chapter, focusing on gang-intervention work, a drug rehabilitation program, and a prison tutoring program.

The portrait of the U.S. health care system in chapter nine describes the now-widely known but widely denied reality of the United States having the most expensive health care system in the world, yet leaving large numbers of the population without insurance or access to care. This is due to inequalities generated by our reliance on market mechanisms for distributing health care and high levels of economic inequality. Simply stated, the working poor whose incomes are too high to receive Medicaid but too low to be able to afford insurance are the most likely to not have health insurance. Such low incomes are highly correlated with race and ethnicity, so lack of health insurance is disproportionately found among people of color. This impacts children especially hard, as children of color have higher rates of a range of diseases and illnesses and higher infant mortality rates. The authors also focus on disparities in health outcomes by gender and lifestyle factors such as stress and tobacco use. Their history of the health care system points to the fairly recent development of the medical-industrial complex (Relman, 1980). In the early days of U.S. history, most health care was delivered through home visits by doctors, which could be afforded by middle and upper class households. The poor, immigrants, and working classes were treated in centralized infirmaries only when they were extremely ill. It was these centralized facilities that evolved into our large hospitals and medical
centers of today, requiring such centralization due to the growing reliance on technology and the increased efficiency of such centralized delivery centers. The political interests of health care providers, hospitals, drug companies, and their allies opposed attempts to develop national policies for universal coverage for fear of government regulation of their profits. The authors describe the increasing medicalization of society over the last half century with the successful resistance of the industry to most government regulation, leading to the dramatically increased cost of health care in the United States. Case studies described at the end of the chapter include a medical school service-learning class designed to promote prevention and education initiatives, a service-learning partnership with a community health care worker program, and another action research project focused on asset-mapping and community organizing around health care issues.

The final chapter focuses on globalization, introduced by an enticing description of an international service-learning partnership that takes students to Brazil, Northern Ireland, Tanzania, and Bolivia to do community development work. This provides the framework through which Dolgon and Baker introduce the challenges posed to indigenous economies by globalization. The effects of globalization are examined statistically in terms of increased trade across all nations for all sectors of goods, for its effects on global migration, and for its generating of national policies for universal coverage for health care in the United States. Case studies described at the end of the chapter include a medical school service-learning class designed to promote prevention and education initiatives, a service-learning partnership with a community health care worker program, and another action research project focused on asset-mapping and community organizing around health care issues.

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Overall, I would recommend this book most highly for use in Social Problems courses, whether or not a service-learning pedagogy is employed in the course. I would also recommend considering this book for other lower division sociology courses that focus on inequality or even a general introductory sociology course taught with service-learning. The latest development of the service-learning movement that focuses on civic engagement has spawned the emergence of new courses in this area, for which this book would also be a most useful resource. The richness and diversity of the case studies makes this book a valuable teaching tool. It may also serve as a source of inspiration and resource for student activists. For those seeking not only to understand the world but also to change it, this book is a most welcome addition to our library.

References


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