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THE EFFECT OF PRIVILEGE ON STUDENTS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: A CASE STUDY AT WESTVILLE BOYS' HIGH SCHOOL

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THE EFFECT OF PRIVILEGE ON STUDENTS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF SOCIAL
RESPONSIBILITY: A CASE STUDY AT WESTVILLE BOYS' HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract

Schools have the potential to cultivate a sense of social responsibility among students. Because students from privileged backgrounds are often removed from the oppression of structural injustice, it may be more difficult to cultivate a sense of social responsibility among these students. This study explores how social class affects students' constructions of social responsibility by assessing how students perceive privilege, structural injustice, and social responsibility. Interviews were conducted with four white, male, Grade 11 students at Westville Boys' High School, a former Model C school with a large percentage of students from upper-middle socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, observations were conducted with a Life Orientations class section that addressed social issues. The study revealed that the participants' desire to maintain a positive self-image prevented them from fully acknowledging the role structural injustice has in perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Instead, students supported the myth of meritocracy by placing much of the onus on the individual to escape the cycle of poverty. In order to encourage the development of social responsibility among privileged youth, schools should foster dialogue and spaces for students to explore social structures, the link between privilege and oppression, and social responsibility.

Introduction

Since the abolishment of apartheid in South Africa in 1994, the education system remains highly segregated. Although there have been efforts to combat the racial discrimination imbedded in educational institutions during apartheid, the legacy of apartheid has prevented the realization of equal access to quality education for all children. Given the stark disparity of privilege among students from different schools and the recent history of apartheid within South Africa, it is interesting to determine whether students who are from privileged backgrounds understand the reality of inequality. It is particularly alarming when students devalue the importance that structural factors in perpetuating inequality. Because many of these students have the potential to become strong agents of positive social change, it is imperative that they are receiving a holistic, accurate education on concepts surrounding structural injustice.

Although in many ways the public institution of education perpetuates social inequality through the imbedded remnants of apartheid legislation, there are still methods of resistance within education that are used to enact positive social change. During apartheid, there were key moments of rebellion within the education sphere that were used to enact justice. For example, in the 1976 Soweto student uprising, 10,000 students protested the mandatory implementation of Afrikaans as the primary language of instruction in township schools. Students advocated for their basic human rights in the education arena. The power of education as a means to enact social change was critical during the years leading up to liberation.

Recently, there have been efforts to foster a sense of social justice within the classroom setting. The social outreach and community service programs available for

students often vary depending on financial status of the school and resources available. For that reason, private schools and Model C schools tend to have the necessary funding to provide community service programs for their students. Often in these schools, many students tend to come from racially and socioeconomically privileged backgrounds. A 1994 study that looked at the enrollment in formerly white schools showed that only ten percent of the enrollment in formerly white schools comprised of students of color.

Although there has been research on students' construction of social responsibility, the intersection of social class and social responsibility is a particularly interesting topic. This study looks at how students in Grade 11 construct a sense of social responsibility. My primary objective was to evaluate how students from privileged backgrounds develop a sense of social responsibility through interviews that explore their understanding of structural injustice, ability to empathize, and primary motivations for participating in community service. Because recent research has shown how individuals from higher socioeconomic classes have a harder time empathizing, it is interesting to note whether privileged students' constructions of social responsibility rely substantially on an emotional and academic understanding of the inequality prevalent in society, a desire to improve one's self-image, or other drives to engage in community service. In addition, given recent literature on the connections between privilege and oppression, it will be interesting to determine whether individuals who hold more privilege are willing to sacrifice that privilege to lessen the oppression of other marginalized groups.

This paper begins with a review on the current literature relevant to the subject matter. This section starts with a brief overview of the history of education inequity

present in South Africa before moving on to discuss the intersection of privilege, empathy, and social responsibility within the sphere of education.

Next, the paper addresses the methodology used to carry out the project. The section elaborates on the interview and observation methods, research site selection process, and a few limitations present in this study.

The findings section follows with six sub-sections: Factors Contributing to Student Motivation for Community Service Participation, Students' Perception of Present Inequality, Students' Opinions on Structural Injustice, Optimism for Positive Social Change, Students' Senses of Social Responsibility, and Perceptions of Privilege. Each sub-section explores how students interpret the various topics related to privilege, injustice, and social responsibility.

The paper concludes with an analysis of the findings and recommendations for further study. In this section, recommendations include exploring the effect different types of privilege may have on social responsibility as well as how teachers' hidden biases may affect students' understandings of social issues.

Literature Review

South Africa's educational system still remains highly segregated since the end of apartheid in 1994. There are currently two school systems: one functional and one that is failing. The functional system has derived from the historically-white, former Model-C schools that now still maintain their larger amounts of funding, resources, and high-quality teachers. Many of these former Model-C schools remain well funded and predominantly white due to continued spatial housing segregation. Conversely, previously black African township schools are falling behind their historically-white counterparts. Due to the Bantu Education Act, the social mobility

of black students was significantly hindered. The legacy of apartheid still remains intact through the segregation and inequality imbedded in the educational system. How students from these Model-C schools combat social injustice remains to be seen. Because these students often hold socioeconomic, racial, and educational privilege, they are the individuals who tend to have the greatest amount of resources to contribute to enacting change. Pieces of literature delve into the concept of privilege and how that privilege can be addressed within the educational arena to combat the growing inequality present among different social institutions.

Privilege is often tied to the oppression of another group of people. In order to cultivate the next generation of socially responsible citizens, it is important to foster an understanding of the relationship between privilege and oppression among students. In Peggy McIntosh's article, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack," McIntosh discusses how spheres of education often fail to address how privilege can impact oppression. McIntosh specifically addresses white privilege, but her argument also extends to other forms of privilege: "I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege...My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture... My schooling followed the pattern my colleague Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow 'them' to be more like 'us'" (McIntosh, 1989: 4). McIntosh explains that those who are privileged often do not understand how their privilege contributes to systems of oppression.

Because it is difficult to address the links between privilege and oppression, encouraging privileged students to develop a sense of social responsibility can be challenging. A growing

body of research addresses which factors are necessary in creating agents of change among privileged youth. However, there have been few consistent themes throughout these studies. However, several studies delve into the link between social class, empathy, and social responsibility, with findings that show how individuals from a higher socioeconomic class have lower levels of empathic accuracy than their lower socioeconomic class counterparts. In addition, other researchers suggest that it is often these privileged students who have a harder time empathizing, a lower willingness to recognize the structural injustices present in society, and a tendency to blame inequality on individualistic factors such as laziness, intelligence due to social class, and perseverance. Although there are many barriers to achieving educational equity, it is important that all students are motivated to combat injustice. In this case, focusing on how to motivate privileged students to become agents of change could prevent the perpetuation of inequality.

There have been a few governmental programs that attempt to prevent the widening gap in access to quality education for all children. Because many children are at risk of falling into the cycle of poverty, the government hopes to combat the factors that increase the opportunity gap through the introduction of the Life Orientation learning area. The Department of Education describes the goals of Life Orientation as “the study of self the self in relation to others and to society...Life Orientation guides and prepares learners for life and for its responsibilities and possibilities...It equips learners to solve problems, to make informed decisions and choices and to take appropriate actions to enable them to live meaningfully and successfully in a rapidly changing society” (South African Department of Education, 2003). However, in reality, the effectiveness of life orientation programs in achieving the Department of Education’s anticipated goals varied depending on the resources available to each school: “The general impression given

by respondents teaching in government schools was that most teachers in government schools, and in particular those in rural schools, were ill-equipped to cope with the demands of the life orientation programs. The response of the teachers in the former Model-C schools was different...they described how they worked together to achieve results...their general teacher training, the quality of their input in the teaching task, and their access to the newest information in textbooks and the internet had enabled them to equip themselves for the task” (Prinsloo, 2007: 165). Although the government has been trying to implement initiatives that have the potential of successfully combating several factors responsible for increasing the disparity of educational opportunities, the education system still remains heavily stratified.

In addition to government efforts, several NGO’s have been working to promote civic education programs in schools in the hopes of cultivating the next generation of civic leaders. Among primary and secondary school children, civic education programs have become increasingly popular in recently democratized countries due to the belief that democracies function the most effectively when the country’s citizens endorse democratic values. In the South African context, even with the establishment of democracy in 1994, the country is still dealing with the remnants of apartheid legislation, which is why civic education could be a beneficial tool in overcoming a few of these structural barriers to equality. In South Africa, the USAID-sponsored program, Democracy for All, has implemented civic education programs in not only privileged schools but also other schools of lesser resources. The program involved training university students to teach South African high school students about issues related to democracy, human rights, elections, conflict resolution, and how citizens can participate responsibly in democratic politics. The 1998 study shows that civic education has the potential to

be an effective agent in increasing democratic values and skills with the right pedagogy and classroom climate (Finkel, 2005: 359).

Affecting current students can have a large impact on South Africa, especially given the newly democratic system established a little over twenty years ago. Effective implementation of civic education in the country could increase levels of tolerance among students, resulting in higher tolerance levels for future generations of South African citizens (Finkel, 2005: 335). In terms of factors necessary to fully realize effective implementation of these programs' promotion of democratic ideals, the study mentioned the importance of high-quality teachers and active teaching methods in the transmission of fundamental democratic values: "The results demonstrate that when individuals are trained by high-quality instructors and with active, participatory methodologies, changes in democratic orientations can be of reasonable magnitude" (Finkel, 2005: 359). However, similar to the implementation of the Life Orientation programs, only well-funded schools will have the resources to provide high quality teachers. Education inequity in the South African educational arena filters the type of student body that will have the appropriate resources to allow for effective transmission of civic education ideals.

Privileged students and schools have the ability to positively affect many of the injustices present in society. Schools within the upper-socioeconomic tier of the education system with a greater amount of resources, a larger amount of highly-qualified teachers, and a larger set of privileged students have the power to influence their students to understand the importance of social responsibility and reality of their privileges. Because racially, socioeconomically, or educationally privileged students are more likely to be further removed from the reality of the societal injustices, it is especially important to target these students to become effective agents of

change and encourage an understanding of the structural factors present in perpetuating inequality.

In order to increase the likelihood of privileged adolescent students positively affecting society, empathy and an understanding of other individuals need to be developed. Recent studies have shown that individuals from higher socioeconomic classes have lower levels of empathic accuracy than individuals from lower socioeconomic classes. When considering the South African education system in which one system caters to predominantly socioeconomically privileged students, it becomes even more imperative that social responsibility and empathy are developed in these privileged environments due to the lower prevalence of those qualities. In a study done by Michael Kraus, Stephanie Côté, and Dacher Keltner, the research team looked at how social class influences an individual's ability to accurately gauge the emotions of another person. They found that participants from a higher social class were less able to judge the emotions of another person than their lower social class counterparts. The research team explained that, "Lacking resources and control, lower-class individuals tend to focus on external, social context to understand events in their lives. As a result, they orient to other people to navigate their social environments. One prediction that follows from these tendencies is that lower-class individuals should be more accurate judges of emotions of others than upper-class individuals are" (Krause et al., 2010: 1721).

The importance of empathy cannot be understated. A recent review of prejudice reduction listed empathy as one of the most important tools in reducing prejudice: "developing perspective taking and empathy in children is one of the most effective mechanisms for reducing bias... This mechanism is equally application to changing youths' attitudes about the poor" (Mistry et al., 2011: 4). The intersection of social class and empathy is important in gaining further insight into

how students from privileged backgrounds construct their sense of social responsibility and empathy for those less privileged and how that construction could lead to positive social change.

One of the barriers in cultivating a sense of social responsibility among privileged youth can be attributed to a desire to maintain a positive sense of self at the expense of the oppression of others. Studies have shown that many students who are privileged will refrain from empathizing with those less fortunate in order to protect a positive sense of self. One study, carried out by Scott Seider, investigated the impact of a literature and justice course about homelessness on the civic development of privileged adolescents. What Seider found was that not only did students see a decrease in empathy for the homeless over the course of the semester, but they surprisingly also gained an increased understanding about structural factors that contribute to homelessness. However, this increased understanding led to students solidifying their belief in the justness of equal opportunity. A belief in equal opportunity is often correlated with the belief that if individuals work hard enough, there will be equal access to opportunities for success, which diminishes the role structural factors play in societal issues such as poverty. Seider concludes that, “privileged teens learning about the causes of poverty and homelessness resisted feelings of empathy or responsibility for the homeless to protect their existing worldviews and sense of self” (Seider, 2010: 26). Seider goes on to say that, “protecting their existing worldview and sense of self required these teenagers to characterize the position of the homeless at the bottom of the class structure as warranted” (Seider, 2010: 24). Although there are programs that appear promising, unfortunately they have the potential to end up unsuccessful in cultivating a sense of social responsibility among privileged adolescent students. It is imperative that educational efforts target this population of students to help cultivate a larger number of civic leaders to decrease the inequality.

Because effectively cultivating social responsibility is difficult, it is vital to question how schools with greater resources are attempting to instill a sense of social responsibility in their students and combat the injustices present in society. Several studies look at the effects of community service and service learning on students' sense of social responsibility. Richard G. Niemi, Mary A. Hepburn, and Chris Chapman conducted a study on the motivations for young adults to participate in community service. Driven by the decline of American high school student civic engagement, Niemi and his research team explored how to increase student investment in the civic arena by delving into the impetus behind student's involvement with community service. Community service, different from service learning, is defined by Niemi as "voluntary work in the community that is not linked to the school curriculum, although it may be encouraged by or even arranged by the school" (Niemi, 2000: 49). Among the factors that contribute to an effective community service impact on students, Niemi mentions that students tend to gain more from service if they have preparation before service and opportunities for reflection and evaluation following service. In addition, when a school requires that students partake in community service instead of encouraging the student to participate by helping arrange for their service, the effect of sustained participation in service is not as statistically significant (Niemi, 2000: 53).

Additionally, it is important to critically examine the student motivations for community service engagement. Niemi delves further into this area by explaining that after participating in community engagement students often experience "high levels of satisfaction and feelings of good personal relationships, but changes in attitudes of personal and social responsibility were quite small (3-5%), though considered significant" (Niemi, 2000: 50). Instead of promoting an understanding of the impact of structural factors pervasive in societal injustices, the community

service programs in Niemi's study resulted in an increased positive self-image among the students who participated in service.

Another study done by Susan Jones explains the importance of integrating a student's community service into his or her identity. When this intersection of identity and service occur, "[the students] had developed a passion for a social issue, a more active stance toward social change, and an emerging commitment to social responsibility" (Jones, 2003: 522). If service programs are not encouraging students to develop a sense of social responsibility, there needs to be a way to restructure these programs to promote the development of civic duty to combat societal injustices, especially among privileged students who are further removed from the realities of structural injustices and more likely to blame inequality on individuals instead of structural factors.

Another method of encouraging an understanding of structural factors and increasing empathy involves the implementation of service learning. Service learning, different from community service, is defined as "community service that is incorporated into school courses. The service interval in the community is typically preceded with preparatory session intended to provide an informational and conceptual framework and awareness of social/political issues related to the service assigned" (Niemi, 2000: 48). In a study done by Shirley A. Hollis comparing community service and service learning, the researcher found that carefully-planned service learning was much more effective in preventing students from objectifying community residents and blaming them for their own problems. Given the studies done on how privileged individuals have a harder time empathizing, it is imperative that students are involved in programs that move away from objectification and instead, generate a greater sense of empathy and an understanding of structural factors present in situations of inequality. Hollis explains that

often people look to blame structural inequalities on individualistic explanations such as laziness because “structural conditions often seem remote to students who have little exposure to disenfranchised people and who may have little understanding of the historical conditions that create poverty, welfare, and homelessness” (Hollis, 2002: 209). Hollis goes on to mention the effectiveness of service learning in pushing students to understand structural injustices: “students who were involved in the service learning portion of the study were more likely to attribute the social problems they observed to structural factors than to cultural differences or personal/psychological problems” (Hollis, 2002: 208). Hollis’s study shows the importance of well-designed service learning programs in generating broader understandings of structural factors responsible for inequality and greater senses of empathy for those with less privilege among students with a large amount of privilege.

Because privilege and oppression are interconnected, it is important that students from privileged backgrounds recognize and confront the benefits they receive from the inequalities present in society. Through the cultivation of empathy and carefully-planned service learning programs, privileged adolescent students can be motivated to develop a sense of social responsibility, which will be important in combating many societal injustices in the future.

Methodology

The research conducted for this project was carried out at Westville Boys’ High School (WBHS) in Durban during the month of April 2015. Field work consisted of semi-structured individual interviews with four, Grade 11 white, male students at WBHS. In addition, observation of a Life Orientations class helped construct a better understanding of how social issues were taught to students at WBHS.

WBHS was ideal for this project due to its social outreach student programs as well as its history as a former Model C, historically white school. These historically white and former Model C schools tend to have greater access to funding and resources. The spatial housing segregation present in South Africa and the school's ability to charge higher fees from their students contribute to the continuation of race and class stratification within the education system. The system of "soft zoning" allows any student to legally gain access to any school in their residential district as well as another district if there is space. Although children from other districts can technically enroll in any school, most historically-white schools are in formerly white-designated suburbs, which often leaves limited spots for students who live outside those neighborhoods. Parents without the necessary funds to pay these fees will be exempt from paying because schools cannot refuse student admission based on limited finances. However, given the high demand for admission into many of these former Model C schools, the Model C school administrations will often have a surplus of families able to pay for the fees, and will be less likely to accept a student from a lower socioeconomic background. Therefore, most of the students within these former Model C schools, such as Westville Boys' High School will be privileged within a socioeconomic, racial, and educational context.

Initially, I had planned to conduct two focus groups with two different age groups of students, shortly followed by in-depth semi-structured individual interviews with two students from each focus group. However, due to time constraints within the students' daily schedules, I was unable to conduct the focus groups with different age groups. Instead, I conducted one-on-one individual interviews with four students who were all white, male students in Grade 11. These students benefited from racial, socioeconomic,

gender, and education privilege. All the students interviewed had been involved in the school's community service program and were chosen by the school's outreach coordinator. The interviews were conducted in a private classroom and were recorded with a digital recording device. The privacy of the classroom allowed students to discuss many of these sensitive topics in a safe, enclosed environment.

In addition, I observed one Life Orientations class that introduced social issues to the students to gain a broader understanding of the manner in which structural injustice was presented to students.

Interviews were semi-structured; a basic outline was followed, but the interview carried on in a conversational manner as the interview progressed. Follow-up questions were asked about students' beliefs on certain concepts. Through my interviews, I hoped to gain a sense of how students perceived privilege, structural injustice, and social responsibility.

Limitations of the Study

I had intended to use the focus groups to address less complex questions surrounding community service, privilege, and social responsibility. The focus groups were intended to act as both a means to interview a group of students and a means to familiarize the participants with the interviewer. Because of the lack of focus groups, the students may not have felt as comfortable answering some of the in-depth questions surrounding some of the complex topics.

In addition, this project lacked different age groups of students. Preferably, it would have been ideal to interview Grade 9 students and Grade 12 students to explore how perceptions change throughout the course of their educational career.

Because of limited time, I was unable to observe more Life Orientations classes. Observing the different teaching styles of introducing social issues to students could have provided a more holistic understanding of how social responsibility is introduced to students from classroom lessons.

Furthermore, my role as a researcher could have influenced my participant's responses. The students may have attempted to show themselves in a positive light by filtering their answers in order to appear more socially conscious. I entered this study understanding my personal biases and opinions surrounding structural injustice and an individual's limited agency to escape the cycle of poverty. My interview questions were formulated in an open-ended manner in order to give participants the opportunity and freedom to take the conversation in whatever direction they felt most comfortable.

Factors Contributing to Student Motivation for Community Service Participation

All four of the students interviewed were involved in the community service programs at Westville Boys' High School. Exploring how students create the motivation to engage in community service could be important in isolating the factors that contribute to the cultivation of social responsibility among students.

The primary motivations for the students' participation in community service revolved around parental influence and the desire to reinforce a positive self-image. Matt¹, a grade 11 student with one year of community service, placed a large emphasis on the importance of community service in supporting a positive vision of himself: "[Community service] helps us to see the other side of the community...it also helps build self-esteem. [It] makes you feel good about yourself; you're helping other people..."² Both Rob, a grade 11 student who had been involved in community service for four years, and Joseph, another grade 11 student with four years of community service, responded that their participation in community service was heavily influenced by their families; however, both students incorporated references to their privilege when explaining their family's ability to help others. Joseph elaborated on his family's involvement with community service by mentioning that, "My family's like one of those families that likes helping people and stuff. It's always been a thing that we do, like, donating to the church and stuff..."³ Similarly, Rob referenced similar themes in his response: "So that's why we're able to look at the poor people, and go like we can help them. And at home, I'm very privileged now. So, we are able to give a lot to the people."⁴

¹ All names used from this point on are pseudonyms

² Matt. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

³ Joseph. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

⁴ Rob. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

Both students made references to a certain amount of socioeconomic privilege within their families, which allows them to donate goods.

Students' Perception of Present Inequality

Students' perception of current social issues in South Africa revealed an understanding of disparity of equal opportunity and equal treatment for different groups of individuals. The students interviewed also revealed opinions that these inequalities are unfair. However, these perceptions must be deconstructed to determine whether students are willing to use their privilege to combat injustice when they believe that inequality is inherently unfair.

Rob, one of the grade 11 students involved in community service, expressed his opinion that success is not equally accessible to every individual in South Africa: "there's no way that those people coming from an unprivileged home have the same opportunities I get."⁵ Rob's explanation shows an understanding of how his privilege allows him certain opportunities that are inaccessible to individuals from backgrounds with fewer privileges.

James, another grade 11 student involved with community service, shared his opinion on the justness of the lack of equal opportunity within South Africa. He mentioned, "it's not fair [for those people] because it's not their fault on how they've been brought up. It's just [their] circumstances."⁶ James acknowledges the injustice of the disparity of opportunity allotted to different groups of people.

⁵Ibid.

⁶ James. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

Many of the participants revealed beliefs that showed an understanding of the injustice of inequality. However, it is necessary to delve deeper into how students account for their belief in justness while addressing how their own privilege plays into that inequality.

Students' Opinions on Structural Injustice

Because individuals from privileged backgrounds may not experience the oppression of structural injustice, it is important to explore how these students' opinions on the limited agency an individual may have when it comes to escaping the cycle of poverty.

Ms. Jane, a Life Orientation teacher at Westville Boys' High School, emphasized the importance of structural factors present in perpetuating inequality. For the first half of her class period, she lectured about the importance of community service and introduced several social issues. She explained, "Unemployment causes a lot of other social issues... we need to know why and how they are linked...we can't just get rid of all social issues. Instead, we'll take one social issue at a time and figure out how we can ease each social issue within our communities."⁷ Involving the students through active participation, Ms. Jane then drew a diagram on the whiteboard to show the interconnectedness of many social issues.⁸ She placed much of the onus on the students to continue to develop a sense of social responsibility by telling them, "I've done this to show you that everything can link to everything else...it's up to you to find these links and understand."⁹

⁷ Ms. Jane. Life Orientation Classroom Lecture on Social Issues. Lecture. 22 April 2015.

⁸ Appendix A

⁹ Ms. Jane. Life Orientation Classroom Lecture on Social Issues. Lecture. 22 April 2015.

Although the Life Orientations curriculum contained a section that focused on social issues, the students interviewed still devalued the importance of structural factors in perpetuating injustice. To determine their perceptions of structural injustice, the students responded to the question, “Some people say that the homeless themselves are primarily to blame for being homeless. Do you agree or disagree with that statement?” Often, many of the students acknowledged the harmful effects of inequality present in early childhood, but placed the onus on the adults to work hard later in life to combat the initial inequality present in their early lives. Many perpetuated the myth of meritocracy: if people work hard enough, they will be able to escape the cycle of poverty, become successful, and achieve as much as individuals from privileged backgrounds. By assuming a large amount of individual agency for individuals in poverty, the students rejected the heavy impact structures of oppression hold.

James, a grade 11 student involved in community service, responded that he both agreed and disagreed with the notion that the homeless are primarily to blame for being homeless. He explained, “Your parents could be poor, so you won’t have a good education from the start, so that will obviously affect you in the later stage of life. But then also, there are ways you can, yourself, make an effort to get somewhere. So, some of the underprivileged people are just being lazy.”¹⁰ James validated the existence of the inequality present in the beginning of one’s life, but then went on to argue that individual agency can combat a lack of equal access to opportunity.

¹⁰ James. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

Rob, another grade 11 student involved in community service, echoed many of James' thoughts in his interview. Rob began by strongly opposing the idea that the homeless are primarily to blame for their homelessness by arguing that:

No one wants to be homeless...So see things that happened in the past have led to them being homeless.. But it's their choice what they do about it. So a lot of people aren't doing anything...And then there are definitely maybe 60% of them that are trying their hardest to get out of it, so it's not their fault that they're there but it is probably their fault that they're staying there.... I mean there are a lot of stories of people who come from shacks, and then they've got a good job because they put in the extra lessons and go to places where they can get help for free. Like my mate, for example, she comes from a township. But every Thursday night she's learning how to use a computer, and every Tuesday she's getting taught Biology and Maths, all for free. So, she's definitely working, and it makes a difference.¹¹

Similarly to James, Rob believes that although people cannot prevent the early stages of homelessness, individuals have the agency to escape the cycle of poverty if they work hard enough. He then uses the example of his friend, who is from an environment with fewer resources, to argue that because she works hard enough, she will be successful. Therefore, he implies that anyone should be able to escape the cycle of poverty with hard work. His comparison of his friend from a township to an individual living in poverty belies a belief that hard work and individual agency can overcome oppressive structures.

Although there were many students who devalued the effects of oppressive structures, a couple students referenced past apartheid legislation that contributed to the current structural oppression. Joseph, a grade 11 student involved with community service for four years, explained the dangers of emphasizing individual agency in escaping cycles of oppression: "If you look at apartheid...there's still effects of that today, and some black families, they don't have as many privileges and stuff like that."¹²

¹¹ Rob. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

¹² Joseph. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

Despite the fact that many of these students believe that inequality is inherently unjust, they still referenced the validity of meritocracy in their explanations for poverty. By placing importance on hard work in escaping poverty, the students were able to maintain positive self-images; they contributed the successes they have achieved to their hard work instead of their personal privilege.

Optimism for Positive Social Change

Many students maintained a large amount of optimism for the positive social change that could occur within the lifetime of their generation as well as the amount of social change one individual can enact. Within the context of privilege, it is important to evaluate whether this optimism stems from a sense of hope or from a lack of understanding of the limited agency one individual may have to enact change when faced with the strength of structures of oppression. Rob, a grade 11 student, explained the optimism he holds for future social change:

There's hope when I see the people trying to help [others], but then there's also despair when I know that we can't help everyone. It's impossible to help everyone... We definitely will be able to fix it because we're born after the apartheid era, so we don't look at anyone differently, but it's going to take a lot more than our generation to fix the current situation.¹³

Rob's sense of optimism stems from his belief that people are viewed equally and that people "don't look at anyone differently."¹⁴ His optimism is infused with a lack of understanding of the current inequality of treatment for different marginalized groups present in society.

¹³ Rob. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

¹⁴ Ibid.

On the other hand, Joseph, another grade 11 student, placed more weight on the agency individuals hold to enact positive social change without referencing structural factors that keep these systems of inequality in place. Joseph explained, “I think that if you help someone, it’ll be like a chain. So if you help one person, then that will help with the next person, and you can change a whole community just by one person.”¹⁵ Both students reinforced the notion that individuals have a significant amount of agency to combat structures of oppression, which contributes to their optimism for positive social change.

Students’ Senses of Social Responsibility

Given the students’ belief that the inequality is unjust, when asked how their futures would intersect with making the world a fairer place, almost all students provided general responses. None of the students wanted to enter into careers specifically for social justice motivations.

Matt, a grade 11 student involved in one year of community service, responded that he had “no idea”¹⁶ about how he would go about incorporating social justice into his future career, explaining that “I’m hoping to go into business, so I don’t think I’ll be involved too much [in community service].”¹⁷ Matt showed little interest in pursuing a career involved with social justice. Joseph, another grade 11 student, said he would be doing “pretty much the stuff I’m doing today like donating to charity and doing all that I

¹⁵ Joseph. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

¹⁶ Matt. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

¹⁷ Ibid.

can.”¹⁸ Unlike Matt, Joseph showed an increased amount of interest in incorporating social justice into his future career, but did not exhibit a large amount of detail or passion.

Rob, a grade 11 student, explained how he would incorporate social justice into his future piloting career:

I want to be a pilot, but what I can do with pilot is I can ask my flying school if we can go to the people in the middle of nowhere where our planes can get access to and drop off stuff for them. So if you can start a scheme like that where you can get to the people that don't have any access even if you just drop it from a helicopter. So I've thought about that and ways to get the food to those people.¹⁹

Rob's career is very specific, yet he appears to have thought about how to incorporate social justice into his desire to become a pilot.

Although none of the students were planning on entering into a profession specifically for social justice motivations, many of the students thought of ways to incorporate the concept of donations or acts of service within their specialized careers.

Perceptions of Privilege

Given that the students interviewed benefited from racial, gender, educational and socioeconomic privilege, it was important to ask the students how they perceived that privilege within their understanding of structural injustice.

Students were asked the question, “When you see individuals with less economic privilege than you or some of your friends do, how does that make you feel?” James, a grade 11 student, indicated his discomfort with his privilege and the injustice of unequal treatment for individuals with differing amounts of privilege:

Well, it doesn't make you feel good...some parents might be more wealthy than others, but that doesn't mean the boys should be less privileged because we all rely on

¹⁸ Joseph. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

¹⁹ Rob. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

our parents. That's quite hard because just coming from a wealthier family and someone coming from a poorer family doesn't mean that the two boys should be treated differently.²⁰

James noted the discrepancy in how society treats those with more and less privilege.

Matt, another grade 11 student, explained how he felt when he was faced with the disparity in privilege: "Just like you feel really bad for the people at first, and then you just want to figure out a way to help them, and like it sticks with you for a while."²¹

Matt's association of a negative feeling when he sees the stark contrast in privilege implies an understanding that privilege distribution is unequal and inherently unfair.

Joseph, a grade 11 student, also contrasted the amount of privilege he has with the lack of privilege others hold: "It makes me feel like almost bad because I know that I have so much and other people have so little."²² All students associated negative feelings when confronted with the disparity in privilege between themselves and other individuals who hold a significantly lesser amount of privilege.

When asked what privilege meant to them, the students' responses varied. Several explained their discomfort with having unearned privilege while others viewed their privilege as "earned."²³

James, a grade 11 student, mentioned the unfairness of privilege: "Privilege is having what others don't. I think...that people here in South Africa will get privilege for certain things just because of their race or their gender. I think everyone should have the equal schooling no matter how wealthy their parents are because it's not really your

²⁰ James. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

²¹ Matt. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

²² Joseph. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

²³ Matt. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

fault.”²⁴ James’ perception of privilege shows his belief that a lack of privilege often leads to lack of opportunity in different areas of life, such as education. Rob, another grade 11 student, explained privilege in terms of equal access to opportunity:

For me, privilege is the opportunities that I have. [If] someone else who’s in the exact same level as me doesn’t get those opportunities...I see myself as more privileged... But if he feels unequal, and he was failing because he wasn’t working I don’t see that as making more privilege than him, but when he can’t have access to it and I can, I see myself as more privileged... Preferably, everyone must have the same [privilege]. I’d like to have the same privilege I have now, while everyone around me can experience the same privilege as I have... So if we can try to bring the standard of living up [for others], without putting our’s down too much...then everyone will be equal.²⁵

Rob placed an emphasis on hard work when it came to validating his privilege. While he acknowledged that privilege refers to the opportunities he may unfairly have, he argued that if someone does not work hard and does not have the same opportunity he does not view that as having more privilege. In addition, he referenced the intersection of privilege and structural factors by suggesting that others’ privilege should be raised without sacrificing his own privilege to equalize things. Joseph, another grade 11 student, detailed how he dealt with privilege. He explained that his privilege “makes [him] feel like it’s unfair, but there’s nothing that [he] can do about it, so [he] just ha[s] to appreciate it and know how lucky [he is].”²⁶ Joseph did not link his privilege with the ability to enact positive social change.

The four students interviewed all associated negative feelings with their privilege, but several interviews showed a lack of reference to the connection between their

²⁴ James. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

²⁵ Rob. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

²⁶ Joseph. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

privilege and oppression. In addition, with all the students, there were several references to an unwillingness to sacrifice their amount of privilege to support social equality.

Conclusion

The students interviewed for this study reinforced many concepts found in previous research concerning how privileged youth construct a sense of social responsibility. Despite the variety of responses, all participants referenced the importance of maintaining a positive sense of self through their perception of privilege, community service, and inequality. When questioned about their privilege, many students understood the injustice of receiving these privileges at birth, yet were unwilling to use their privilege to combat inequality. None of the students interviewed presented a passion to combat social injustice through their specific future career goals.

To maintain a positive self-image, the students interviewed initially responded that homeless individuals were not entirely to blame for being homeless. However, as their interviews continued, the students referenced the power of hard work and the validity of meritocracy. Their belief in the myth of meritocracy showed a refusal to acknowledge the heavy role structural factors play in the cycle of oppression. In several responses, students alluded to the influence structural factors could play in affecting an individual's ability to succeed. An intriguing finding is that the students refused to place the entire onus on the individual to escape the cycle of poverty. Their opinions validated the injustice of inequality present during early stages of life, but placed the responsibility on the individual to work hard to escape the cycle of oppression. These views allowed

students to maintain the myth of meritocracy and their perception of their success as earned through hard work instead of the arbitrary, unjust distribution of privilege.

The students' optimism for social change on an individual level and macro level belied a devaluation of the effects of structural injustice. Many students maintained a great deal of hope for the amount of social change an individual could enact. This optimism could be attributed to their privileged backgrounds and their detachment from the reality of oppressive structures. This lack of understanding can be seen through several interview responses concerning their perception of inequality within society. If more attention is given to educating students on the importance of structural injustice, classrooms could become a greater space of resistance to combat injustice by cultivating the next generation of socially responsible citizens. While the school had a Life Orientations course that contained a brief section on social issues, there needs to be an entire course or designated spaces within schools dedicated to exploring social structures, the link between privilege and oppression, and social responsibility. With the creation of these spaces, teacher training may be needed to appropriately introduce the relationship between structures of oppression and individual agency in order to remove blame from individuals caught in cycles of oppression. Because these issues are complex and nuanced, it is imperative that teachers approach these topics in a sensitive and holistic manner. Cultivating an understanding of these structural injustices is vital, especially among privileged youth who may be further detached from these issues of injustice. In addition, fostering dialogue around how to use privilege to effectively combat oppression could be paramount in increasing the number of privileged youth passionate about combating injustice.

Recommendations for Future Studies

My recommendations for future studies include comparing how teachers' perceptions of their students differ from students' constructions of social responsibility. This could be done by interviewing teachers on how socially aware they believe their students to be. Perhaps, hidden teacher biases affect how social issues and privilege are presented in the classroom. If it is found that teachers' biases of how entitled their students appear to be affects how socially aware students are, perhaps spaces need to be created to engage teachers to realize their hidden biases.

It would also be beneficial for further research was done on how different types of privilege affect students' constructions of social responsibility. This topic contains many possibilities for future research and is vital to cultivating a commitment to social justice among the next generation of citizens.

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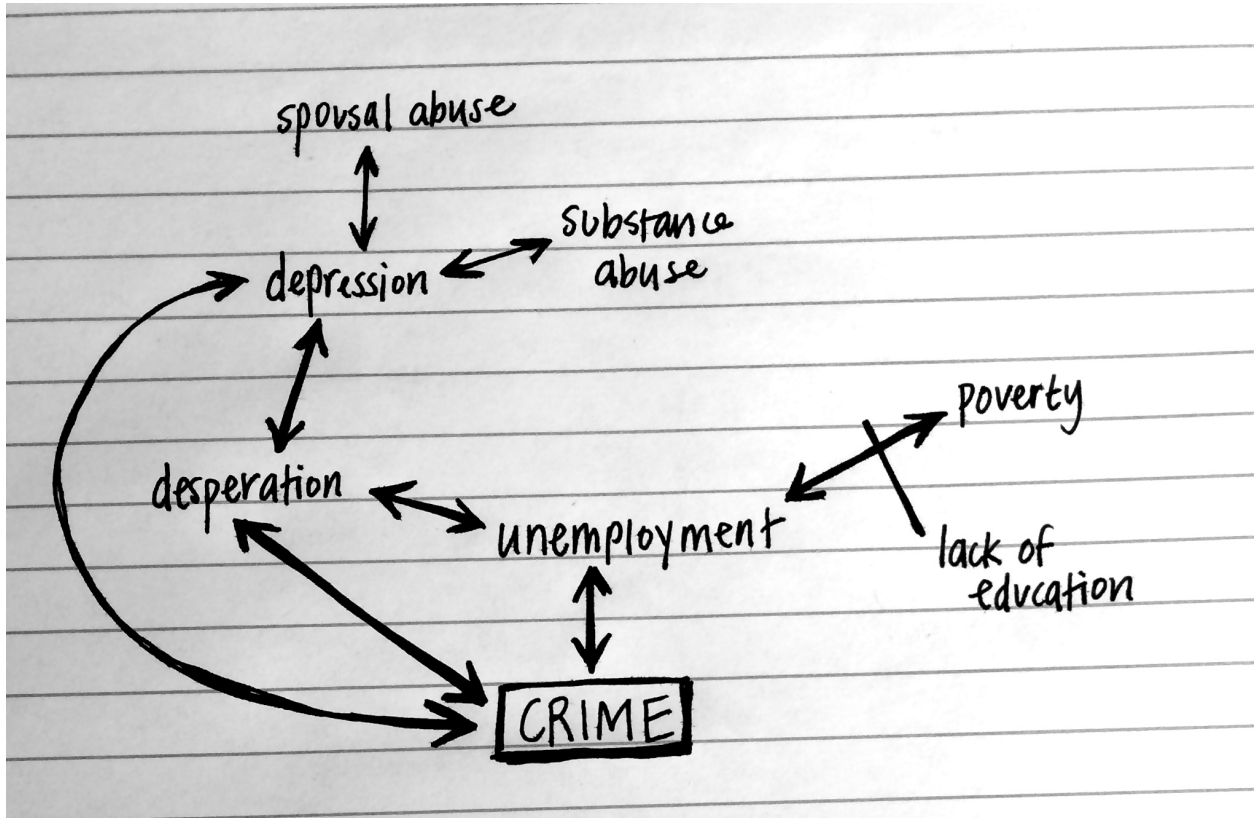
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Matt. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

Ms. Jane. Life Orientation Classroom Lecture on Social Issues. Lecture. 22 April 2015.

Rob. Grade 11 Student. Interview. 22 April 2015.

Appendix A: Life Orientations Board Diagram



Appendix B: Student Interview Questions

1. What year & age?
2. How long have you been involved in community service?
3. How frequently do you participate in community service?
4. What motivated you to start community service?
5. What motivates you to continue your community service?
6. How do you hope to integrate your community service with your future aspirations, if at all?
7. How closely do you follow or participate in political events?
8. How much positive social change do you think one individual can enact?
9. How, if at all, do schools with service outreach programs play a role in affecting local communities?
10. What priority level does community service hold for you?
11. What does community service mean to you?
12. How do you perceive the difference you are making with these community service projects?
13. What connection do you see between your community service and the current issues present in society?
14. How do you feel when you see individuals with less economic privilege than yourself?
15. In your opinion, how do people become poor?
16. Some people say that the homeless themselves are primarily to blame for homelessness. Do you agree or disagree and why?
17. Do you think the government has a responsibility to help the poor? Why or why not?
18. Does everyone in South Africa have the same opportunity to succeed? Why or why not?
19. In your opinion, how do people in South Africa become successful?
20. How prevalent do you believe racism is in today's society?
21. What does privilege mean to you?
22. What types of privileges do you think you have, if any at all?
23. How does someone's privilege affect those who do not hold the same privilege, if at all?
24. In a more equal society, would you have more or less privilege? Explain.
25. How much hope do you have that our generation will be able to affect the inequality present in the world?

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form for Student Participants and Parents

CONSENT FORM

My name is Carin Jin Xie, and I am a student at the School for International Training (SIT) Program based in Durban. I am conducting a case study of high school students to understand how students construct their sense of social responsibility. You may be asked to discuss your experience, what motivates you, and your opinion on social responsibility. The information received will be incorporated into a formally written academic piece.

Rights Notice

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT ISP proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by a Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. If at any time, you feel that you are at risk or exposed to unreasonable harm, you may terminate and stop the interview. Please take some time to carefully read the statements provided below.

Your Rights: Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or exposed to unreasonable harm, you are free to end the interview. You may choose to answer whichever questions you feel comfortable answering. There will be no negative repercussions for not participating or withdrawing in the middle of the interview.

Confidentiality: All names in this study will remain completely confidential and fully protected by the interviewer. The data will be recorded by hand and with a tape recorder, and then stored safely in electronic files. The original documents will then be destroyed. If you do not want the information recorded, please let the interviewer know. By signing below, you give the interviewer full responsibility to uphold this contract and its contents. The interviewer will also sign a copy of this contract and give it to the participant.

Contact Information: If you have any questions or concerns about this study, feel free to contact the researcher, Carin Jin Xie (c.jin.xie@gmail.com), her faculty advisor, Deevia Bhana (bhanad1@ukzn.ac.za) or the Academic Director of SIT, Imraan Buccus (imraan.buccus@sit.edu).

By signing below, you agree to participate in this study and acknowledge that you have read and understand the contents of this contract. Please keep your copy of this form.

Parent's name printed

Parent's signature and date

Participant's name printed

Participant's signature and date

Interviewer's name printed

Interviewer's signature and date

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form for Clearance from Principal

My name is Carin Jin Xie, and I am a college student conducting an independent study project as a part of a research module, which is focused on interview methods. This study will look at how students construct a sense of social responsibility. Involvement in the study involves being asked questions in a face-to-face interview in which participants may be asked to discuss their experience with community service, their motivation for community service, and their opinion on social responsibility. I will conduct the interviews with a tape recorder and record the answers by hand.

Risks and Discomforts: There are no risks or discomforts that are anticipated from your child's participation in this study. All participants' identities will remain anonymous in the publication of the project, unless the participant chooses otherwise, but for the purpose of keeping data and interviews properly, names will be temporarily attached to information and then the name will be removed or changed when using the interviews or any information in the final project.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to the children as a result of their participation. However, students' participation will contribute to a broader understanding of how students construct a sense of social responsibility within the context of education.

Confidentiality: Students' names and any other identifying details will never be revealed in any publication of the results of this study. The anonymous results of the research will be published by myself to my study abroad program, SIT, as a part of the final project.

Withdrawal without Prejudice: Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. Both the school and students are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time. Students are also free to refuse to answer any question.

If you would like more information about research or the research methods module, you may contact myself at c.jin.xie@gmail.com or (072) 624-6140, my faculty advisor, Deevia Bhana, at bhanad1@ukzn.ac.za, or the Academic Director of SIT, Imraan Buccus at imraan.buccus@sit.edu. Please keep your copy of this form.

I give consent for Carin Jin Xie to approach learners to participate in this study.

I have read the Project Information Statement explaining the purpose of the research project and understand that:

The role of the school is voluntary.

I may decide to withdraw the school's participation at any time without penalty.

Students will be invited to participate and that permission will be sought from them and also from their parents.

Only learners who consent and whose parents consent will participate in the project.

All information obtained will be treated in strictest confidence.

The learners' names will not be used and individual learners will not be identifiable in any written reports about the study.

Participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

I may seek further information on the project from Carin Jin Xie at c.jin.xie@gmail.com or (072) 624-6140.

Printed Name & Position Held

Signature

Date