RESEARCH

HIGHLIGHTS FROM SCHOLARLY JOURNALS

EDUCATION

Empathy Through Service

BY MARILYN HARRIS

National service programs can provide researchers with a valuable lens through which to measure how participants' biases and perspectives evolve as a result of their direct experience with the people they seek to help.

By building empathy through such personal contact, service initiatives and similar real-world interventions are suspected to help cultivate among their volunteers an understanding of the disadvantaged communities they target. But even though more than 125 million Americans have participated in such programs since the 1960s and have provided plenty of anecdotal evidence, official studies of the effects of these programs have been lacking.

Cecilia Hyunjung Mo, an assistant professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley, and Katharine M. Conn, a senior research scientist at Teachers College, Columbia University, approached this problem by studying Teach For America (TFA), one of the more prominent civilian national service programs to arise in the last half century. They wondered whether TFA, which recruits top college graduates to teach in low-income communities, helped its new teachers take the perspective of their disadvantaged students and better appreciate their circumstances. What they found "suggests that a promising strategy for social progress may be the expansion of National Service programs and the creation of other nationwide opportunities for sustained interactions between privileged and less privileged groups," says Charles Behling, psychology professor emeritus, who codirected the University of Michigan's Program on Intergroup Relations.

TFA was established in 1990 with a mission to enlist, develop, and mobilize future leaders to "grow and strengthen the movement for educational equity and excellence." More than 50,000 recent college graduates have participated in the program by working as full-time teachers serving 10 million children, mostly Hispanic or African-American, who attend the lowest-income schools in 36 states.

TFA requires a commitment of two years and typically requires the participants to move into or near the communities they serve. "It provides participants with the opportunity to closely see the life of their students (and other staff and teachers in the school) and their families, hear their stories, and develop a causal understanding of their life history," Mo says.

Further, because the competition to secure a TFA position is intense—it's not unusual for 5 percent of a university's senior class to apply—those chosen are likely to be among the top of their peer group. Critically, more than 80 percent of TFA alumni surveyed for the research came from middle- or upper-income families and were at least second-generation college graduates, and nearly two-thirds of them were white. "To the extent that 'white privilege' exists, this is another indicator that the average TFA participant is part of a more advantaged class," the researchers write.

Since 2007, a threshold screening score has been used to refine and quantify the TFA admissions process. The researchers used this screening data for their study, selecting those applicants who fell just short of the admissions threshold and those who scored just high enough to qualify for admission and went on to fulfill their commitment. The two groups fell within a narrow range of scores, such that several years later the main difference between them could be attributed to their having spent two years teaching for the program. The researchers surveyed a total of approximately 32,000 applicants about their attitudes on systemic injustice, class-based injustice, the relationship between class and education inequality, and racial injustice.

The surveys revealed strong evidence that participation in TFA increased individuals' ability to empathize with the disadvantaged. TFA alumni were more likely to recognize that the disadvantaged faced real systemic injustice. Specifically, alumni proved about 10 percent less supportive of the current US political system than applicants who hadn't been accepted into the program. They were also significantly more likely to attribute poverty to systemic issues than to poor people's lack of individual effort.

Despite the TFA participants' increased recognition that US political institutions are failing some of the citizens they purport to serve, they are not generally prone to complacency. "Many alumni who are coming out of the program are working in public service to remedy some of the problems they saw during their service," Mo says.

"Mo and Conn's excellent paper clearly points to ways that national service and other programs can help privileged persons become more

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ADAM McCAULEY

effective in the pursuit of justice and quality," Behling says. "But the first step is to be sure these programs are structured in ways that meet the requirements of productive contact." For instance, he suggests careful facilitation of dialogues by experienced peer leaders—something that TFA has built into its summer institute and orientation program. "Otherwise, the progress will probably not be duplicated," Behling says. ■

Cecilia Hyunjung Mo and Katharine M. Conn, "When Do the Advantaged See the Disadvantages of Others? A Quasi-Experimental Study of National Service," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 112, 2018, pp. 721-741.

NONPROFITS & NGOS

Poorer Neighborhood, Fewer Charities

BY MARILYN HARRIS

The neighborhood is one of society's central organizing principles. Differences among neighborhoods shape the welfare of their residents, for better or worse. The factors that might influence outcomes are many, from the accessibility of education and jobs to the density of supermarkets with fresh produce.

David Clifford, a lecturer in demography at the University of Southampton, believes that one such factor could be the number and sustainability of charities located within neighborhoods. He decided to examine the density of charitable organizations among neighborhoods of varying

degrees of poverty over a 25-year period, to see whether he could pinpoint any general patterns.

"One strand of theory about the importance of local area context suggests that different residential areas may differ in terms of organizational resources," he says. "The focus on charitable organizations in particular reflects theory emphasizing that voluntary financial resources, and the enabling resources for voluntary participation, that support local charitable organizations may vary according to the characteristics of the people in the area."

Clifford reviewed nonprofits in England localized by neighborhood: a total of 127,392 charities during a period that saw 38,504 creations and 36,992 dissolutions. The charities' missions were diverse: Most worked with the young, while the rest focused on the elderly, the disabled, specific ethnic groups, or other populations.

Clifford believes that the longitudinal data offer a more complete picture than a snapshot of the relationship between neighborhood deprivation and the density of charitable organizations. "To be a salient feature of inequality in individuals' residential environments, difference in the density of charitable organizations according to deprivation should endure over time even as neighborhoods experience organizational turnover," he writes.

Using a UK government index to catalog some 32,000 poor neighborhoods, Clifford examined not just the presence or absence of organizations but the rates of charitable founding and dissolution through which any differences endured over time. Broadly, the data revealed that the poorest neighborhoods, those most in need of help, had the least success in sprouting and maintaining charitable organizations.

"The results suggest that, while encouraging the development of new organizations in deprived areas is important, there is also a real need to consider strategies to support the sustainability and survival of organizations already working in these areas," Clifford said.

"The story of the stability and location of community-based charitable nonprofit service organizations in England mirrors what we find in the United States," says Scott W. Allard, Daniel J. Evans Endowed Professor of Social Policy at the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Policy and Governance. "There are too few nonprofits with too little capacity located in the neighborhoods and communities most in need."

Clifford found that the socioeconomic status of neighborhoods affects local charities in several ways. For instance, although income from individuals' donations and legacies is the largest source of funding for the UK's charitable sector, a third is derived from fees they may charge for goods and services. Poorer areas are likely less able to provide the income needed to keep the charity afloat.

By calculating the relationships among neighborhood context, the type and density of charitable organizations per 1,000 people, and the rates of foundation and dissolution of the charities, Clifford showed a direct correlation between neighborhood context and the density of charities. Less deprived neighborhoods had a much higher density of charities than more deprived neighborhoods. And yet, the most deprived neighborhoods had slightly more charities than the only slightly less deprived. Clifford says that this discrepancy likely relates to how public funding was targeted to the most deprived areas.

The data showed that differences in the rates of foundation and dissolution mirrored the density patterns. The rate at which charities were founded was 0.82 times lower in the most deprived areas compared with the least deprived, and the rate at which they were dissolved in those areas was almost twice that in the least deprived neighborhoods. Organizational

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