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# A Service-Learning Reflection of Psychology Students on Mental Health Issues among Selected Female Residents of Barangay Cantil-e

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Service-learning as community engagement enables students to become aware of their life stories and people. Valuable knowledge and skills obtained are obtained beyond the classroom. The broad range of mental health issues combined with marital/partner domestic interactions created a complex and socially unstable home environment for women. The lack of mental health resources for marginalized communities has driven Silliman University Service-Learning (S-L) to consider the women's mental health challenges on the family's success. This study is a descriptive research that uses the four stages of service-learning. The data were gained from class assessment methods and in-depth interviews of female residents of Barangay Cantil-e, Dumaguete City, Philippines. The findings revealed that communication amongst spouses/partners ideally focused on lack of financial means, influencing family harmony and resulting in verbal and physical altercations. Although Psychology students who are doing service-learning can actively participate and contribute to the community's developments, it is recommended that local government agencies establish mental health awareness and services for their overall residence well-being.

**Keywords:** Mental Health, Family Discourse, Health Awareness, Service-Learning, Reflection

## INTRODUCTION

In early 2019, students of the Silliman University Psychology Department enrolled in the Service-Learning (S-L) coordinated an S-L outreach with local officials in Barangay Cantil-e, Dumaguete City, Philippines. It

is an opportunity to engage with residents of the university's surrounding areas and apply and practice classroom-taught theories and psychological approaches to understand their use better. Conducting such experiences allowed the students to appreciate a common approach to learning that will instill the essence of providing for one's community to build a better society. In psychology, there are four primary goals significant to the field: to describe, explain, predict, and change or control behaviors. These goals are the substance of most theories and studies to understand the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes that people face in their daily lives (Kalat, 2017). With psychology's goals as the premise of the outreach, the students had sought to explore the mental well-being of women living in marginalized communities by searching for local areas with limited resources to conduct group therapy-style interventions.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), an issue arising from mental health now plays a significant role in achieving global development goals. Included in its Sustainable Development Goals is mental health. Although developing countries are progressing, people with mental health conditions experience human rights violations and stigma. It can significantly affect individuals' total well-being, including their family and capacity to participate in community activities (WHO, n.d.). Furthermore, mental health is a global area of research and practice that emphasizes enhancing health and reaching equity to all community members (Castillo, 2019). The broad range of mental health issues combined with spousal/partner domestic interactions has created a complex and socially unstable home environment for women residents of Barangay Cantil-e. These women who are housewives perform several functions to achieve family cohesiveness. The scarcity of mental health resources for marginalized communities has driven Silliman University Service-Learning (S-L) to consider the effects of women's mental health well-being on the family's success. Social support has long been considered to impact the mental health of women.

A study carried out by Coker et al. (2003) to find out the mental health status of women found that good social support was associated with a significantly reduced risk of a range of adverse mental health outcomes. Moreover, further higher levels of emotional support can modify the effect of intimate partner violence on health. Issues in psycho-social outreach include the idea of service-learning as one of the methods for students to explore. Considering the need for enhanced mental health awareness

for marginalized communities as part of the teaching and learning goals, service-learning is an effective method. This method is like a double-edged sword, psychology which, like many other courses, employs S-L to achieve the primary teaching goal of students' understanding of specific theories in psychology and community awareness. It may further impact students' leadership skills and critical thinking through the rising sense of social care because "service-learning translates theory into practice, statistics into real people, and ideas into action" (Community Service Center Mary Graydon Center, 2005).

As a pedagogical strategy, service-learning allows students to be involved in community outreach. It enables them to participate in real-life problem solving that strengthens their knowledge in connecting lessons learned from the classroom and their service in the community (Warren, 2012). Service-learning as a teaching method involves students interacting with the community through social projects and/or activities. Social projects/activities are conducted in line with classroom-taught material that prepares students to coordinate, organize, and execute a reciprocal learning experience amongst the students and community participants. This learning approach provides an opportunity for the students to learn while conducting actual activities in society. A study done by Oracion (2007) stated that community engagement enables the students to become aware of the community's life story and its people. Students obtain valuable knowledge and skills that are not learned inside the classroom.

Another benefit of service-learning is promoting social awareness of the millennial generation. The millennial generation is more immersed in social media and technology and has less direct contact with their community since they interact more digitally. If their learning process is also exclusively conducted away from the community or social life, it will encourage the missing sense of social awareness. Thus, service-learning is seen as a bridge to empower students to see and solve problems in their communities, where students could learn about a particular issue or problem, then discover how to take action in a positive way (Farber, 2011). Unlike social media, which is more attractive to millennials, social awareness needs encouragement to be created for them to learn it by themselves.

According to WHO, an issue arising from mental health now plays a significant role in achieving global development goals. Mental health is integrated into the Sustainable Development Goals, and although countries

are progressing developed, people with mental health conditions undergo human rights violations and stigma. It can significantly affect individuals' total well-being, including their family and capacity to participate in the community actively (WHO, n.d.).

Service-learning has significant aspects of being applied, in this case, psychology students observing the phenomenon of mental well-being. The mental well-being of an individual or group can certainly be connected to any social issue. However, the critical missing part is the interaction with society itself during the process of learning. Applying service-learning with their psychology course provides students with essential tools and knowledge related to the given issues and a deeper awareness of the community's dire problems. Furthermore, service-learning provides reciprocal experiences where both the academic institution and the community needs are met. It is a collaborative effort that reduces social inequities in challenging situations (Aclaró-Naranjo et al., 2018).

Issues surrounding mental health and women's domestic violence protection are two major global social issues today (Tutty et al., 2021; Knight & Hester, 2016). The student's ability to pursue a community outreach project regarding mental health and domestic violence would enhance their first-hand experience of the significant impact in a community. Inserting the two themes through a service-learning outreach raised the students' understanding of recent social problems. The students were required to do a community project on helping a marginalized sector in the community. The platform was to send them to meet the society bringing the issues they have learned into actual activities to empower the society in a community project conducted in a group. More specifically, "students can deepen their understanding of individual leadership, systemic change, and social responsibility in the context of a local, national, and global multicultural society" (Community Service Center Mary Graydon Center, 2005).

It is essential that local communities, health professionals, volunteers, and other stakeholders effectively collaborate because mental health can significantly contribute to total well-being and human development. WHO advocates the government to make strategic plans to utilize available community resources, strengthen the mental health care in the community and provide cost-effective delivery of mental health care services to disadvantaged groups (Venkateswaran & Vincent, 2018). The students who are also stakeholders are required to set the idea of the activities and execute

it within the society by doing a “direct Service, a type of service engaging students face-to-face with people” (Community Service Center Mary Graydon Center, 2005). Students enrolled in Silliman University’s Designing and Managing a Service-Learning Program course do this type of service. Once they have done the activities, they must submit a personal reflection paper highlighting their experience to the teacher, how the S-L outreach enhanced their learning needs, and the importance of community outreach.

This paper aims to describe the conduct of Service-Learning activity by the students of Silliman University in Barangay Cantil-e among female residents in Dumaguete City. Specifically, it looked into how the various stages of the S-L were able to help students further develop knowledge and apply skills in the community and how the community benefited from the students’ engagements with them.

## METHODS

This study is a qualitative descriptive research done by describing the actual observation by the students of their experience outside the classroom. The students studied Psychology and enrolled in the S-L certificate program as an enhanced learning opportunity with their undergraduate studies. The students enrolled were required to complete 18 credit hours to obtain the S-L certification. This study’s course requirement is classified as Designing and Managing a Service-Learning Program. Students conducted a community project during the semester, and the students decided on mental health status as a course requirement. Participants of the study were the selected female residents of Barangay Cantil-e, Dumaguete City, Philippines. Consent forms were given to all participants for their approval to be part of the S-L activity before starting the activity.

The data needed to answer this study’s mentioned problems were gathered from class assessment methods and in-depth interviews with the participants. The first method, class assessment, was done by conducting direct observation to determine the severity of the mental health problems in the barangay. The assessment was conducted utilizing a needs assessment questionnaire to discover the urgent need of barangay regarding their overall mental health status. Interviews were conducted to pinpoint specific mental health topics that would benefit the residents, leading to domestic spousal welfare.

The data were analyzed using the four stages of service-learning, which are as follows, (1) preparing an idea of service-learning activity, (2) determining and surveying the site to do community projects, (3) conducting community projects, and (4) reflections. “Reflection” functions as the essential stage of every service-learning activity, as it connects the classroom studies with community implementation to present holistic learning for the students.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This community outreach examined how the impact of limited mental health initiatives created family discourse. Through in-depth interviews, commonalities were discovered amongst the participants, resulting in a free flow of ideas, and thematic analysis was employed. Additionally, mental health disorder tendencies were apparent, addressed through progressive mental health initiatives.

This section describes the four steps employed by the students, which can be briefly explained as follows:

### Step 1: Preparing an idea

Before working as a group to discuss a sub-topic relevant to the main given topic, the students were encouraged to understand the project they would conduct. Defining and understanding the concept is very important to lead the students to stick to the project’s goal. For example, in the project, the students described the meaning of “mental health” and the importance of doing a project to “assist community members,” elicited their answers and discussed them to quickly bring them to determine the sub-topic of their community project activity. They then discussed choosing the best sub-topic to target what community demographic they would help. Furthermore, the specific actions they set to allow the recipients—preparing ideas functions to encourage them to express their opinions and trigger their awareness of social issues within their surrounding communities. Within this step of preparing ideas, some students mentioned they could learn how to plan and run a program, respect other group members’ opinions, and distribute equal jobs for each group member. Others admitted that they became more confident and more active in making the right decision for their group,

including anticipating unexpected things that might happen when the project is running.

### **Step 2: Determining and surveying the site to do the project**

This step aims to involve the students in fundamental small-scale research. They surveyed the community target demographic by looking into the established measures utilized by barangay officials and interviewing them. Some data of the prospective recipient's identity, address, house condition, and job were gained, leading them to decide whether the students would help them. After the decision had been made, students conducted another visit and agreed on a day to perform their helping activity. Two key points in this step are enhancing the students' ability to gather information, which is the basis of research skills, and providing them an opportunity to discuss and execute their ideas, which is the essence of leadership.

### **Step 3: Conducting the community project**

Executing the plans is the most awaited moment for the students since they would be facing an actual dynamic condition of the society directly, where unpredictable things can happen. This third step functions to implement the students' planning, in which the experience of Service-Learning happens and where the students translate ideas into action. When meeting the community directly, they did activities as planned, practiced note-taking of their problems and solutions, and recorded their activities through pictures. During the in-depth interviews, a gap between what had been planned and what was happening in the service surfaced. The students discovered that not all participants gave positive responses as they first expected. The student's face in the environmental campaign is probably a good example of such a gap. A group that invited participants to group discussions found difficulties persuading them to join the discussions, even though they were offered refreshments.

The common problem was that participants brought children to the discussions, and although there were activities for the kids, the participants were reluctant to allow their kids to participate. That

problem made the group think a solution to encourage and comfort the participants that their children were in safe hands and safe conditions while in group discussions. It shows how the students can work well with others, where communication skill is hoped to develop (Center for Public Service, 2015).

The added activities such as the open forum and dialogue allowed the students to listen to women with varying issues. Commonalities were discovered among the participants, resulting in a free flow of ideas and suggested solutions to the problems. The common challenges, such as marital/partner domestic interactions, suppress the housewives' communication. The findings revealed that most of these women are economically challenged. Communication amongst spouses/partners focused on lack of financial means, directly impacting family harmony and resulting in verbal and physical altercations. Moreover, these housewives perform several functions and are bombarded with voluminous tasks yet keep silent to achieve family cohesiveness.

Additionally, mental health disorder tendencies were apparent. These women's struggles are assumed by most but are rarely discussed outside of the family setting, thus impacting their mental status and family disturbances. As the S-L Psychology students listened, they gathered information from the participants and asked them their possible solutions to the problem at hand. The women themselves could figure out some possible solutions to their problem, but some can be addressed through progressive mental health initiatives.

#### **Step 4: Reflections**

As designed in the syllabus, community project activities need to be reported through written reflections. "Following Reflection Service" is a term used to refer to a process in which students can start to see the depth and meaning of their engagement. Furthermore, the written responses thoroughly discussed their change of their emotional knowledge towards the service (Center for Public Service, 2015; Community Service Center Mary Graydon Center, 2005).

This exposure made the Psychology students realize the valuable rewards of Service-Learning through reflection and sharing of knowledge as evident in their note-worthy S-L journal entries such as



the following: “Service-Learning encourages people to be the solution in their communities, and it allows participants to develop skills in critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership, decision making, collaboration, and communication. Most importantly, it builds positive relationships with community members, connects their experiences to academic subjects, develops a deeper understanding of themselves and empathy and respect for others, and increases public awareness of mental health as a social issue.”

The students believe that they have successfully achieved their engagement objectives to a certain extent. This excerpt from student reflection is a manifestation of such success:

Service-learning is experiential learning where I get a concrete experience. As a student, I can learn easily since service-learning also focuses on the community’s problems; its teaching method is one of the best ways to teach students about humanity. It teaches students not just to empathize but also to sympathize. Service-learning programs guided students on how to become more responsible citizens. It also trains students how to make strategic plans to solve the problem of the community they were exposed to.

A reflection is a bridge between activities in the community and the content of the course subject in education (Bringel & Hatcher, 1999). Based on the the students’ quotes above, it is apparent that they could connect between their past actions made or achieved and their future actions.

## CONCLUSION

Service-learning as experiential-based learning increases social awareness and academic enhancement of students’ practicing psychological functions in their community. The effectiveness is concluded at how each of the four steps functions to achieve the learning goals. The S-L students developed a fostering social interaction with communities and learned the value of a positive mental health climate. Service-learning conducted through community projects is an interactive method in promoting mental health

awareness. Furthermore, service-learning achieved through the community projects guided by the mentioned four steps has encouraged the psychology students to improve their leadership qualities as service leaders. The students' excerpts reflected this leadership competence (intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies), moral character, caring disposition, self-leadership, continuous self-improvement, and self-reflection (Shek & Leung, 2015).

Engagement in community-based experiential learning activities exposed students to factors and opportunities known to mediate academic achievement, including opportunities for students to act autonomously, develop collegial relationships with adults and peers, and boost their self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy (Furco & Root, 2010). The students also admitted that the community project was an excellent method to see the classroom lectures be put to good use. They stated that they enjoyed each step as a fun way to learn. It means that the students positively respond to the project and the knowledge and experience through the project.

## RECOMMENDATION

Service-learning allowed the students to engage in community issues which included mental health. Mental health is essential because it can help one cope with the stresses of life, be physically healthy, have good relationships, make meaningful contributions to one's community, and realize one's full potential. Although Psychology students who are doing Service-Learning can actively participate and contribute to community's developments, it is recommended that local government agencies establish mental health awareness and services for their overall residence well-being.

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