"The Problem is That Puerto Rico Does Not Have a Say": Students' Critical Reflections on Service-Learning in Post-Maria Puerto Rico

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Abstract: This study explored the reflections of graduate social work students from a public university in the Midwest region of the continental United States, following a service-learning course in San Juan, Puerto Rico during the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. The course linked academic study and civic engagement through organized service with Proyecto ENLACE, a public corporation that unites eight communities and twelve grassroots organizations located along the estuary banks of the El Caño Martín Peña. Nine students and two faculty members repaired and painted a community center building. Faculty facilitated opportunities for critical reflection on the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression in the context of working with communities during the reconstruction phase of the disaster. Students met with Puerto Rican community members and social workers to learn about their experiences and perspectives. Qualitative analyses of a student focus group revealed themes in students' learning processes, students' perceptions of trauma and resilience among community members and disaster relief workers, environmental justice in Puerto Rico, and the increased visibility of macro-level practice opportunities. We recommend critical reflection as a valuable pedagogical tool for social work education and requisite for skill development and transfer learning.

Keywords: Service-learning; disaster social work; environmental justice; Puerto Rico; critical theory; trauma; resilience

Natural disasters result in personal and collective trauma (Bauwens & Naturale, 2017; Fernando & Hebert, 2011; Jha, 2015; Jones et al., 2012; Lowe et al., 2015; Pintar, 2006; Prewitt Diaz, 2017). Despite being viewed as acute events, natural disasters can irrevocably change the lives of the people that they affect. Disasters may also be protracted and compounding, particularly in the era of COVID-19 (Garriga-López, 2020). A trauma-informed and culturally responsive understanding of trauma and resilience requires an awareness that the impact of a traumatic event or events (e.g., natural disasters) on individuals and communities cannot be separated from an understanding of systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Sherwood et al., 2021). Over a decade ago, Pintar (2006) wrote of Hurricane Katrina, "the trauma people suffered was caused not only by wind and water but also by entrenched poverty, governmental neglect, systematized corruption, and institutional racism" (p. 54). Similarly, Jha (2015) observed that individuals who are oppressed, impoverished, and disadvantaged are disproportionately impacted. In 2017, Hurricane Maria reportedly "lifted the veil" that obscured social and economic inequality on the Island (Rivera, 2018, para. 4).

Following a natural disaster, individuals may be subjected to personal suffering and bear witness to the suffering of others. Displacement, loss of property, and disruption of employment and life activities can further complicate recovery (Fussell & Lowe, 2014; Vasterling, 2008). In Puerto Rico, survivors of Hurricane Maria reported feelings of intense grief, guilt, vulnerability, disbelief, and fear; a sense of confusion and disorientation; loss of order, routines, and familiar environments; loss of dwellings and built structures; and loss of personal and familial identity that is derived from cherished personal and sentimental items (Prewitt Diaz, 2017). In the aftermath, survivors described time as "before Maria" and "after Maria" (Torres, 2018, p. 11).

An individual's ability to utilize personal resources to cope with disruptive events such as a disaster is referred to as *resilience* (Richards & Dixon, 2020). Six months after Hurricane Maria, Torres (2018) observed that 40% of the population still had no electricity, thousands of homes were without roofs, and communication networks remained impaired or non-existent in remote locations. These factors, in combination with weak infrastructure, poor water quality due to a lack of power at water treatment facilities, and an already over-stressed economic system, would be expected to result in a low level of resilience. However, low levels of personal resiliency can be mitigated by community-level resilience (Patel et al., 2017). Patel and colleagues (2017) credited Puerto Rico's resilience to having a "strong, unified, and skilled*"* community:

> Hours after the hurricane passed the Island, individuals went out into the streets to help each other, and nonprofit organizations adapted their agendas to incorporate relief into their work plans. In the absence of government aid, the third sector assumed responsibility for providing help to the Island—it is thanks to them that Puerto Rico has been able to lift itself up at all despite the challenges. (Torres, 2018, p. 14)

Context

Hurricane Maria made landfall on Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017, with winds over 155 mph, just below category 5 (Pasch et al., 2017). The Island was inflicted with 30 inches of rain in a day. Only two weeks after Hurricane Irma had saturated the ground with water, wind and rain continued for 30 hours. Damages were catastrophic, with the entire Island losing power, the destruction of homes, buildings, and roads, and the loss of access to lifesaving resources, medical equipment, and services. It is estimated that over 4,965 people died as result of Hurricane Maria and its aftermath (Kishore et al., 2018).

Many of the people of Puerto Rico live in precarious social, economic, and environmental conditions. Prior to Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico's debt situation escalated to a financial crisis. A sizable portion of the debt is owed to predatory vulture hedge funds in the United States (US), further exacerbating Puerto Rico's colonial condition (Stanchich, 2017). Congressionally imposed austerity measures intended to correct the debt crisis were implemented in 2016. According to US Census data from 2018, of the 3.2 million people living on the Island, over 43% are living in poverty, more than twice the rate in Mississippi (19%), the poorest state in the US (Glassman, 2019). Health care is similarly inaccessible to many people of Puerto Rico, leading to elevated rates of chronic conditions (e.g.,

hypertension, diabetes, and asthma), and to more people reporting fair to poor health (35% compared to 18% in the US overall; Michaud & Kates, 2017). Power outages caused by Hurricane Maria detrimentally impacted the economy in general and, more specifically, the ability of Puerto Rican health care professionals to care for their patients. Electricity is crucial for "powering dialysis and oxygen machines, to enabling hand and water sanitation, equipment sterilization, and refrigerated storage of vital medications" (Johnson, 2017, para. 13).

Puerto Rico continues to suffer from the compounding impacts of COVID-19, hurricanes, a crushing debt crisis, and numerous earthquakes. One of the critical problems that Puerto Ricans face during the coronavirus pandemic is that the US federal government does not see Puerto Rico as a priority, in large part because residents of Puerto Rico cannot vote for US presidential candidates in national elections (Garriga-López, 2020). "Puerto Ricans also know that little or no help is forthcoming, in part because shipping restrictions mean that Puerto Rico is effectively embargoed – the Island is unable to trade with or receive aid from any country other than the USA" (Garriga-López, 2020, p. 269).

Course Development

The first author, a faculty member at Western Michigan University, taught service-learning courses in Puerto Rico on an annual basis between 2013 and 2018. Within these courses, one activity was to have students meet with social work faculty and students at the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón, School of Social Work, in order to learn about the experiences of social workers in Puerto Rico. Additionally, students participated in a guided bike tour (Bici-Caño) of the G-8 communities where they were able to interact with El Caño Martín Peña (ECMP) community leaders and learn about the community organizing work of Proyecto ENLACE. In the context of established relationships, a service-learning project following Hurricane Maria was identified by Proyecto ENLACE staff.

Service work was planned for students to remove debris, resurface the exterior walls, and paint a community center structure. This work served as preparation for ECMP youth to design a new mural on the front of the building. The mural would depict images of homes with roofs and reflect the new vision for the center to address home reconstruction. The center, formerly a site for literacy programs, rapidly transitioned to a site to distribute water, food, supplies, tarps for covering damaged roofs, and a place for residents to charge their cell phones during prolonged power outages. The mural would serve as an important symbol that the center was responding to the community's needs.

Service-Learning Course

The service-learning course in Puerto Rico was a 15 week, three-credit graduate social work elective course. The course included online, in-person classroom, travel, and service-learning components. Nine MSW students from Western Michigan University participated in classroom and online activities for 10 weeks prior to engaging in service-learning activities. The service component occurred over a period of seven days in March of 2018.

When the course was developed and scheduled, faculty had not anticipated a disaster occurring in Puerto Rico. Hurricane Maria had not yet occurred, and therefore the course content and assignments were not intentionally designed with a focus on trauma and resilience. Students reviewed assigned readings and videos on the history, culture, diversity, and political status of Puerto Rico and a reading focused on the process of critical reflection. Course readings were augmented to include content on disaster relief work.

Course objectives included that students would:
1. Explore cultural self-awareness and "other culture" awareness demonstrating a level of attentiveness, respect and open-mindedness with competing ideologies, different cultural behaviors and new experiences.
2. Acquire an appreciation for the diversity in "ways of being" among different cultures.
3. Engage in individual, small and large group activities to assist with managing personal conflict and tolerating ambiguity in intercultural settings.
4. Analyze and discuss the challenges and opportunities that arise from dynamics that impact communities (e.g., historical, political, social, public opinion/ perception, power/ control, and resources/ capital/ assets).
5. Practice intercultural understanding, empathy and sensitivity through experiential activities that support skill development.

The Council on Social Work Education competencies for the course were: 1) *Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior*, 2) *Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice*, and 3) *Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice* (CSWE, 2015, p. 7). The CSWE competencies were aligned with course activities and evaluated through graded discussion posts, a journaling activity, and a final self-reflection paper. The final papers were not included as a data source for this study.

Formation of the ECMP, the G-8, and Proyecto ENLACE

The ECMP community was formed in the aftermath of a hurricane. In 1928, Hurricane San Felipe Sagundo destroyed the homes, lives, and livelihoods of the Island's farmers. As a result, San Juan experienced rapid emigration of people moving to the urban areas of the Island in search of a better quality of life. Along the ECMP canal, substandard dwellings were built on top of mangrove wetlands. Today, the ECMP community is densely populated and home to over 26,000 people who live along the 3.75 miles of estuary waters. The ECMP lacks infrastructure needed to address wastewater, causing the canal to frequently flood homes, schools, and businesses in the region, often with water up to six feet deep. Over 3,000 structures still discharge raw sewage into the remains of the canal (Brodine, 2017).

Despite being located in the highly developed financial district of San Juan, the ECMP community has a long history of poverty, marginalization, unsafe living conditions, and environmental hazards, resulting from decades of exploitation and social exclusion. In 2004, a community-based non-profit organization, the Grupo de las Ocho Comunidades Aledañas al Caño Martín Peña (G-8, 2021) was formed to promote community development and prevent involuntary relocation and gentrification of ECMP residents by

developers. The G-8 brings together the leadership of eight communities and 12 grassroots organizations to promote "real and effective" participation of residents in eight communities in collective decision-making (G-8, 2021, paras. 3-5).

Working closely with the G-8, Proyecto ENLACE is a public corporation established to coordinate "policies and projects aimed at the restoration of the Caño Martín Peña" waterway and to promote "the urban, social and economic equitable and comprehensive development of the adjacent eight communities" (Urban Waters Learning Network, 2021, para. 1). Proyecto ENLACE has gained international recognition, developed hundreds of millions of dollars in grants, and received numerous awards, notably the United Nations (2015) World Habitat Award for their work in establishing a community land trust to prevent gentrification of ECMP residents.

Critical Reflection and Study Purpose

This study explored the reflections of graduate social work students from a public university located in the Midwest region of the continental United States who participated in a service-learning course in San Juan, Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria. The course linked academic study and civic engagement through an organized service-learning experience in collaboration with Proyecto ENLACE. Proyecto ENLACE is a public corporation that connects eight communities and twelve grassroots organizations located along the estuary banks of the El Caño Martín Peña. Students repaired and painted a community center building. Students also met with Puerto Rican community members and social workers to learn about their experiences and perspectives.

Faculty structured opportunities for students to engage in a process of on-going critical reflection, concurrent with and following service learning activities through group debriefing sessions and individual written assignments. Critical reflection was focused on making connections between the disaster in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria and Puerto Rico's colonial condition. *Critical perspectives* examine how power operates and is created within a society, "especially how power functions through individual people's implicit thinking to maintain unequal social relations and structures" (Fook, 2008, p. vii). *Critical reflection* is a method for "uncovering this implicit thinking" to address power imbalances and inequalities, and as such is an integral component of social work education (Fook, 2008, p. vii). For example, students critically reflected on first-person accounts of the history of social, economic, environmental assaults perpetrated on Puerto Rico. Students noted the distinction in language use made by a community member who asserted that Columbus "arrived" but did not "discover," because –he was "lost." The people of Puerto Rico existed before and independent of European conquest. Similarly, "slaves" were not taken from Africa. Rather, "people" of Africa were stolen, trafficked, and enslaved in Puerto Rico. In modeling critical reflection during debriefing sessions, we made connections between current and historical realities in Puerto Rico and the use of discursive power. In the reflective process students became conscious of the colonial oppression inflicted upon the Indigenous and African people of the Island, a form of power that is embedded within and functioning through the language of dominant narratives.

Method

This HSIRB approved qualitative study was conducted on-site in San Juan, Puerto Rico following a service-learning course. Guba and Lincoln (1998) identified four knowledge paradigms: positivism, postpositivism, constructivism, and critical theory. The epistemological assumptions of each paradigm have implications for the selection of methods for social research. Our research relies on a critical, phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of students participating in a service-learning course following Hurricane Maria. We examined the interplay between meaning-making, social interaction, social location, and systems of power and privilege. Critical theory assumes that reality is produced through historical and on-going social and political processes; social circumstances that exist now are understood as reflections of deeply embedded structures that serve the purposes of the powerful (Williams, 2006). Applications of critical theory aim to expose, deconstruct, and challenge dominant narratives.

Sampling and Data Collection

Participants included graduate-level social work students enrolled in an elective social work course (n=8), seven identifying as female and one identifying as male. One student identified as African, one as African American, and six students identified as Caucasian. Study participants engaged in a focus group in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in March of 2018 on the last day of the service-learning component of the course. Participation in the focus group was voluntary, and participants provided written informed consent. One student enrolled in the course declined participation in the focus group. The importance of confidentiality was emphasized before the start of the focus group and was also included in the informed consent document.

The focus group was 90 minutes in length. Participants were asked four open-ended questions focused on the service-learning component of the course: 1) "What were the high points of your learning experience?" 2) "What were the low points in your learning experience?" 3) "In what ways do you think that communities in Puerto Rico have been traumatized?" 4) "In what ways do you think that communities in Puerto Rico are resilient?" The focus group discussion was facilitated by a co-instructor not involved in the grading process. A research assistant documented when each participant spoke, utilizing their participant number. Data were stored in password-protected files.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were used to create a verbatim transcript for analysis. Data were de-identified (e.g., participants were assigned numeric codes). Initial lists of codes were developed using an inductive coding process and a manual review of transcript data by two independent coders. To minimize researcher bias, an external coder was used (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). Initial codes were based on the relevant literature, observations during the research process, and the researchers' content-related expertise. The two coders compared code lists, discussing discrepancies and points of incongruence. Through a collaborative process, the coders came to consensus on a revised set of codes. During the second cycle

of coding, the transcript was mined for exemplary quotes, with special attention to negative cases. In the third stage, codes were written on index cards, using the tabletop method of individual theme development (Saldaña, 2016). We achieved consensus on the six categories which form the basis of our themes (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Categories of Major Analytical Concepts*

Category	Subcategories	Variables/Terms
1 – Challenging Assumptions about Puerto Rico	1.1 Political status	Taxes, exploitation, colonial, representation, voting, say
	1.2 Cultural norms	Collective, individualism, self-expression, passionate
	1.3 Economic conditions	Inequality, finances, debt crisis, poverty,
	1.4 Lack of awareness	Live in a bubble, "forgotten Americans," ignorance
2 – Power Dynamics of an Inadequate Disaster Response	2.1 Ineffective relief efforts	FEMA, delays, anger, frustration
	2.2 Opportunism	Vultures, taking advantage, saviors, heroes
	2.3 Lack of consultation	Making assumptions, know/knowledge, experts, listening/not listening
3 – Encountering Trauma from Natural Disasters and Marginalization	3.1 Disaster-related trauma	Triggers, rain, vulnerable, destruction, survivors
	3.2 Poverty-related trauma	Poor, infrastructure, sewage, tough
	3.3 Emotional responses	Cry/not cry, tearful, guilt, afraid/fear, anxious, anger, numb
4 – Experiencing Self-Determined and Resilient Communities	4.1 Community self-determination	empowering, self-reliance, action, fight, challenge
	4.2 Community resilience	Resilience, resist, strength, stay, together, abandoned
5 – Environmental Justice and Puerto Rico	5.1 Climate crisis	Climate, hurricanes, Mother Nature, global warming
	5.2 Disproportionate impact	ECMP, vulnerable, stratifying lower, flooding
6 – Increased Visibility of Macro-Practice	6.1 Need for macro-level skills	Need, demand, critical, policy
	6.2 Visibility of macro-practice	Eye-opening, seeing, community, mobilize
	6.3 Broadening of career goals	Explore, change, macro, clinical, future

Results

Narrative data gathered from a student focus group were organized around six themes representing students' reflections on their experiences in the service-learning course. The themes were: challenging assumptions about Puerto Rico, the power dynamics of an inadequate disaster response, encountering trauma from natural disasters and marginalization, experiencing self-determined and resilient communities, environmental justice and Puerto Rico, and the increased visibility of macro-level practice opportunities.

Challenging Assumptions About Puerto Rico

In the process of critical reflection, students reported that their assumptions about Puerto Rico were challenged, consistent with the pedagogical approach to the course. Students described learning for the first time the complex and contradictory nature of social, economic, and political relations between Puerto Rico and the US. Puerto Rico is a part of the US, while it also maintains a unique national and cultural identity. Puerto Rico is an occupied territory of the US with limited autonomy for self-governance. At the same time, Puerto Ricans pay taxes as citizens, but are denied voting privileges and representation in Congress, contributing to further colonial exploitation. Students acknowledged their limitations in understanding and expressed their sentiments that Puerto Ricans are the "forgotten Americans." Students also adopted terminology from the perspective of Puerto Ricans, identifying themselves as living on "the continent" while using "on the Island" as a new center or point of reference.

> *I believe that in the continent we live in a bubble…basically, unaware of what is going on in Puerto Rico.*

> *The federal government has made the debt crisis here so much worse…these laws imposed on the economy prevent Puerto Rico from taking control of its finances…the problem is that Puerto Rico does not have a say in how it is governed from Congress.*

Students found this opportunity challenged their thinking. ECMP community members imparted new perspectives. The experience afforded students the opportunity to reflect upon social subordination and the need for consciousness raising. Students noted the following:

> *I love what Carlos* [pseudonym] *said about what needs to happen to make this right, to bring a solution. He was like "You need to change people's minds. You have to transform their paradigms." I was like, awwww man, that's deep. The older we get, the more indoctrinated we get…[we] find our place in the ranking and, ya know, don't step out of line, because you might lose what you have. Where kids [by comparison] don't have all that conditioning and social scripting so they're like, "Yeah, I'm calling BS... I'm going to push back on this."*

Students developed an appreciation for the collective values of Puerto Rico, as well as an awareness of the individualistic values embedded in hegemonic US culture. One student reflected on what she learned:

> *I think a lot from yesterday, in talking with a community member, a lot of that really did hit pretty hard and there were points where I did feel like I was tearing up. He had a lot of wisdom and a lot to share in his 70 years of experience… because we're so individualistic as states-people* [continental US]*, and to see his involvement in his community and that perception of "we're in this together."*

Students also found new reference points for assessing the value of authenticity and emotional expression. By comparing their own implicit ways of thinking and reacting with what they observed in Puerto Rico, they gained perspective. Students described how they experienced interactions with Puerto Rican social workers involved in community organizing.

Another thing …was seeing how passionate everyone was, all the social workers. I don't know whether saying "[expletive]" *was really part of their language, but they got loud, and I really appreciated that because seeing such passionate people and how they're angry, they're pissed off, they should be that way! They shouldn't be complacent…They were angry about the things that were going on before the hurricane.*

[After the experience] *I guess I feel more free to express my opinion. I feel like in the States—the mainland, we're taught to suppress our opinions and don't challenge authority and so I learned to conform.*

Students also became aware of the limited rights and resources that Puerto Ricans have in the US Congress and were able to reflect on the increased level of structural oppression of Puerto Ricans, considering Hurricane Maria.

Power Dynamics of an Inadequate Disaster Response

Students expressed frustrations over the relationship of the US with Puerto Rico and the mismanaged governmental disaster relief efforts following Hurricane Maria. One of the most frequently discussed skills that students reported developing was listening. Students expressed that FEMA agents, and non-Puerto Rican volunteers, who came to help with disaster relief assumed they knew what Puerto Ricans needed and failed to listen to them.

It really pissed me off hearing about all the stuff that was delayed, like he was saying. You know, '40 days for FEMA'… and they didn't come until after a month… And then all these people just taking all this money that's getting donated instead of helping the people.

Vultures?

Yeah. It just really struck me.

Students critiqued the opportunism of "vultures" who came to take advantage of the crisis in Puerto Rico at a time of vulnerability. For example, non-local contractors such as Whitefish Energy Company, LLC, located in Whitefish, Montana won a lucrative federal contract to repair the electrical grid in Puerto Rico and were considered "vultures" by local community members. Students came to understand that while individuals and organizations may have been well-intentioned, the services were not always beneficial, reasonably priced, or culturally responsive to the community. Moreover, people and organizations with local expertise could have been better employed in disaster relief efforts. Students shared that this was a powerful learning opportunity, revealing the importance of empowering clients to direct services based on what they need. Students also discussed

their awareness of the privilege of disaster relief workers who came in the immediate aftermath.

It's just infuriating that people come here, they take hotel rooms, they take supplies, or they come here with tablets… Like, really? There was just a major hurricane. No one really has power. It's just mind-blowing how inconsiderate people can be.

They [community members] are saying "people come here, and they think they're helping and they're not." That can make us check ourselves before we go do something in our own town that might not be so helpful as well.

I realized the last thing the people in Puerto Rico need was someone to come in acting like they know what they're doing, because odds are, they don't… what probably would have been more beneficial is if the people who came to help actually asked what needed to be done or what was already set into motion.

Through reading and preparation for the travel component of the service-learning course, students understood that they would work *with* the community and recognize the expertise and knowledge that is already present, rather than seeing themselves as experts, saviors, or heroes for Puerto Rico.

And what I got from this experience is I'm not necessarily going to go home and be like "wow, I helped Puerto Rico so much" We learned from them. It's not what we give to them, it's what they give to us, type of experience, because there's so much knowledge to be found here.

Encountering Trauma From Natural Disasters and Marginalization

One of the more challenging aspects of the students' experience was hearing about the trauma from hurricanes occurring in close succession (Irma and Maria). Students spoke about how damaging the hurricanes were to not only physical structures on the Island, but to the people who could not escape. Students noted the willingness and vulnerability of survivors to share their experiences of trauma.

You talk to people here that are so willing to tell their trauma, to tell their experiences and that's a really vulnerable part of their lives that they're letting us into that space… I think it's incredible because I don't think a lot of other people and other places would be so willing.

Students expressed that they felt honored to hear the trauma narratives of community members. They also shared their understanding of trauma triggers. Six months after Hurricane Maria, what would typically be perceived as an ordinary experience (e.g., rainfall) became trauma triggers for survivors. One student empathized with a Puerto Rican social work student who shared her experience with trauma triggers.

Janelle [pseudonym for Puerto Rico social work student] told us about the destruction she witnessed, just how scary it was to be somewhere in the midst of a natural disaster with no way of escaping…that to this day even when it rains

*really hard, she gets anxious … afraid that she will have to face that same
situation again.*

Students also acknowledged the chronic trauma of being poor and marginalized in
Puerto Rico, a situation which was present before Hurricane Maria. The ECMP community
has no wastewater infrastructure. Sewage overflows and enters into people's homes.
Children wade through polluted water en route to school. Families routinely go without
electrical power and sanitation for long periods. A student described how an ECMP
community member used emotional suppression as a trauma survival strategy.

When Jose [pseudonym] *said yesterday, "you learn from the time you're a small
child…there's no time to cry, you just need to survive," I was like, "aww," you
know…that hit me.*

Likewise, students observed the unrepaired damage to signs, buildings, and roadways
that lingered for months. One empathized with the triggering dimension of daily activities,
living among the structural ruins of Hurricane Maria.

*To see some of the damage as if it were just last week… and to know that people
who live here have to see that and be reminded everyday of what they went through,
I can just assume that that's really triggering. You know, to see billboards
completely caved over, signs…on the highway they were bent and moved 90
degrees from the winds… and to see that still. That's rough.*

In addition to identifying traumatization, students also found that they encountered
resilient and self-determined communities. In particular, students found the community of
ECMP to be a model in this regard.

Experiencing Self-Determined and Resilient Communities

As the students spent time in Puerto Rico and met with community leaders and citizens,
a recurrent message they encountered was one of self-determination and community
resilience. When discussing disaster relief in Puerto Rico, many ECMP residents expressed
that if they did not have a self-determined mindset and take action themselves, then nothing
would be done. More broadly, Puerto Ricans described how the government has left them
to solve problems and find solutions on their own.

*I think one of the highs is how determined the people are to fight for their equality
and, you know, fight for their homes. That's just really empowering to me. They
want to stay…they want to make things better.*

Despite receiving limited support from the Puerto Rican and US governments for
disaster relief efforts, the Puerto Rican citizens who stayed relied on each other, as well as
on community-based organizations to fight for their homes.

*There is so much resilience and so much pushing forward… they're going to
persist…yeah, a lot of people did leave the Island after the hurricane…but the
people that are here, are here for the long run.*

The following exchange between students reveals how they felt empowered to critique systems that oppress vulnerable communities. They observed how the ECMP community organization with whom they interacted taught youth and teens to challenge the status quo through consciousness-raising and action.

But I definitely think, seeing how they are instilling in the children to speak up for themselves is so amazing and I think it's something we can bring back and that we can start—we had a big talk about it the other night, a bunch of us… about how we don't feel like in the States that they're teaching you that's it's ok to have your own voice.

To criticize the establishment?

Yes. And it might take you a little while until you're older to start really questioning…questioning for yourself, thinking for yourself, and questioning everything around you. So, I definitely think that that is something we could take with us and something that we can start to change. I think it starts with us… it's not going to start with our parents.

Students learned that teaching youth to critically reflect and act was instrumental to creating and sustaining social change. Through dialogue and critical reflection, students also made connections between their experiences with community members, hurricanes in Puerto Rico, and climate change.

Environmental Justice and Puerto Rico

Climate change and the disparate impact on marginalized communities is increasingly viewed as a human rights issue (Benevolenza & DeRigne, 2019; Chen et al., 2020). Environmental justice is predicated on the notion that those who are most vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change are also those that are contributing the least to global warming (Chen et al., 2020). This understanding enabled students to contemplate the impact of global warming and how it is contributing to the marginalization of vulnerable communities.

I think one of the lows is just what we are doing, as a world…global warming. That's what's causing their flooding and their hurricanes and that's just adding more to their poverty… That one lady we were talking to the other night, she said the islands in the Caribbean are going to be gone. And these people's homes are going to be gone forever… they're not going to have the chance to fight.

There's a wealth in all this knowledge of how we are interacting with people, how poverty works, how these social injustices are stratifying them even to lower and lower situations after every major storm.

Upon reflection, students found bitter irony in what they came to understand from talking with Puerto Rican community organizers. They learned that "nature" was not the enemy and hurricanes are anything but a natural disaster.

When he [community member] *said that "Hurricanes are not our greatest enemy…or disaster…they don't create the biggest disaster. It's the people." So, I was like, "whoa!" You know?*

Mother Nature was not their biggest enemy… it was the people. That will haunt me forever.

Students were able to not only recognize the power that the US has over Puerto Rico, but also the privilege that political leaders and wealthy individuals in Puerto Rico have over the community of the ECMP. Despite being a low-wealth community located along a waterway, they have resisted pressures to gentrify their homes.

They've [developers]created this narrative of it being dangerous, or it being poor, they're trying to put pressure on those communities to move so they can gentrify the area. And they've [ECMP community members] hunkered down, and now they have the land trust, they're like "We are not moving! We know, even though it's polluted, this can be cleaned up and it can be rebuilt."

It [conversations with community members] *made me aware that political leaders abandoned the citizens…in doing what they needed to survive the storm, these leaders, you know, selfishly hoarded all the resources for their own use.*

In addition to identifying environmental justice issues, students found that they saw new opportunities for macro-level social work practice. Students were able to envision a future that included macro-level opportunities.

Increased Visibility of Macro-Level Practice

Social work students place emphasis on the micro-practice career paths; 82% of new social workers report securing employment in direct or clinical work (Salsberg et al., 2020). However, professional competencies include political engagement, advocacy for marginalized communities, and the advancement of social change. Participation in service-learning was an opportunity for students to see "what macro social work might look like," by interacting with community leaders, organizers, and Puerto Rican social workers engaged in disaster relief efforts.

Being in school I've always thought I wanted to do interpersonal work, but now I'm more open to macro and it's just something I really want to explore after being here.

Knowing that the demand for macro social work is so much higher in many other parts of the world, to come with an education from Michigan in macro social work…I feel like that is a skill that I can bring and something that's valued.

For me, I think it has definitely changed my social work career. I'm in the very early stages of studies and such, but from the classes I've taken so far, micro has really been emphasized, but being here and seeing that macro, macro is an option and that it's something that I think I would really want to do…it has been eye-

opening. Just seeing how people come together in this organization and how they mobilize themselves and how critical the social workers are to that.

In times of political instability and increasing social and economic inequality, macro-level practice skills are needed. Structural oppression is arguably more evident in times of disaster. Exposure to disaster relief contexts can expand one's sense of professional identity as it is constructed through dialogue and action.

Discussion

It can be challenging to teach social work students how to confront oppressive assumptions that are embedded within dominant discourses. Social workers must first engage in self-examination to confront the oppressor within themselves, in order to effectively confront oppressive systems (Quiñones, 2007). Latin American educator, Paulo Freire reminded us that oppression is an inevitable component of any helping profession (Freire, 1968/2018). In the present study, students reported that their assumptions were challenged by a process of critical reflection consistent with the aims of the course and the pedagogical approach. Similarly, students observed the traumatic impact of Hurricane Maria and chronic marginalization, as well as self-determined and resilient communities. Students reflected on the power dynamics of disaster relief work in Puerto Rico, the environmental assaults on the Island, and the expanded visibility of macro-level practice opportunities.

For social workers to effectively assess, engage and intervene with others, we need to continually reflect on how we intentionally or unintentionally collude with systems of power, privilege, and oppression. "Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must reexamine themselves constantly" (Freire, 1968/2018, p. 60). Pedagogy that engages students in on-going critical self- reflection and action is necessary to empower communities and promote human well-being. In this regard, the ECMP community serves as a model, with deep expertise and experience to offer social workers, community organizers, and disaster relief workers.

Cultural immersion (e.g., within a service-learning course) involves episodes of decentering or dissonance resulting from cultural experiences for which one has no frame of reference (Cordero & Rodriguez, 2015; Pittman & Gioia, 2019; Samavar et al., 2007; Sherwood et al., 2018). These uncomfortable experiences, sometimes described as disorienting dilemmas contribute to transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000). Cultural immersion experiences combined with consciousness-raising activities challenge students to examine themselves, their own biases, and their roles as oppressors. Newfound self-awareness, skills, and transfer knowledge (see Diaconu et al., 2018; Gray & Schubert, 2011) are not quickly converted to mastery, but rather, emerge as a result of questioning and practice. Faculty, field instructors, and mentors play key roles in facilitating transfer knowledge into new contexts.

Within the service-learning experience, students acknowledged limitations in their knowledge about the social, economic, and political status of Puerto Rico. Some reported confusion and disbelief that Puerto Ricans, as American citizens pay taxes, and yet are not

represented in Congress. Examination of this contradiction, (e.g., the tenet of American history that "taxation without representation" is unjust) opened a space for examination of other knowledge deficits. Awareness of the limits of one's knowledge helps to build a foundation for humility and professional growth.

In listening to Puerto Rican social workers, students began to understand exploitative elements of disaster relief. Those seeking to benefit monetarily from the crisis were identified by community members as "vultures." Similarly, students observed that communities experienced FEMA as slow, inept and presumptuous, failing to consult with local experts and recognize the knowledge and strengths of the people of Puerto Rico. Students recognized that the people of Puerto Rico did not have a "say." Students were able to translate or transfer this new knowledge to their work "at home." One student related the need to "check ourselves before we go do something in our own town that might not be so helpful, as well."

Students reflected on the chronic and acute traumatization of communities in Puerto Rico, resulting from economic exploitation, marginalization, and lack of infrastructure, as well as from the suffering and destruction caused by Hurricane Maria. Trauma was viewed as a collective experience, consistent with the findings of Prewitt Diaz (2017). As one community member put it, "You learn from the time you're a small child…there's no time to cry, you just need to survive." Students bore witness to trauma narratives as well as protective strategies for coping with trauma. Sounds of rainfall or viewing toppled structures triggered trauma responses in hurricane survivors.

Social capital, or "the resources available to the individuals within the community undergoing a threat to their resilience," can be used to bolster an individual with fewer personal resiliency factors (Kulig et al., 2013, p. 762). Students experienced communities as self-determined and resilient in their reconstruction efforts following Hurricane Maria. In particular, they observed the work of Proyecto ENLACE and its agile pivot from community organizing to prevent gentrification to community organizing to provide immediate and long-term disaster relief.

Students learned that Hurricane Maria was a disaster, but anything but "natural." They noted that it was "people," and not "Mother Nature" that was the problem. Students and community members co-created an understanding of the connections between climate change, colonial oppression, and extreme weather events such as flooding and hurricanes. The service-learning experience also made visible opportunities for macro-level social work practice. While micro-practice with individuals and families conjures specific images of working with clients in therapeutic settings, images of how one would work with client systems in macro-practice work are more diffuse. Some students conveyed that prior to the course, they did not fully comprehend what macro-level practice could "look like." Students reflected that their experiences in Puerto Rico led them to appreciate the value of macro-level practice skills focused on community organizing, disaster relief work, and advocacy for structural change. Their discussions with organizers from Proyecto ENLACE and Puerto Rican social workers enabled students to expand their sense of professional identity to include macro-level practice.

Limitations

Limitations of this qualitative study include the small and somewhat homogenous sample that does not reflect the diversity of students in social work. Additional expenses associated with a service-learning course may have influenced the resultant sample and limited student accessibility. Potential participants with physical disabilities may have been excluded due to the physical demands of the service-learning component. Another limitation includes the researchers' presence during the focus group, which may have influenced participant responses. A strength of the study is that even with these limitations to accessibility and inclusion, the use of thick description improves the trustworthiness of the data by deemphasizing generalizability. Instead, the study offers enough detailed information that readers can determine the "fittingness" or "transferability" of the findings to their own context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Babbie, 2017, p. 452).

Implications for Social Work Education

Whether man-made or natural, disasters will continue to inflict destruction, human suffering and trauma around the world, while disproportionately impacting vulnerable communities. Increasingly, the distinction between natural and human-made disasters is becoming immaterial because all disasters, whatever the cause, have a human component (Dominelli, 2015). Hurricanes, earthquakes, and flooding are a result of the cumulative impact of climate change (Chen et al., 2020). *The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development* places emphasis on "the social challenges of climate change and environmental degradation and the need for human environments which support life and well-being" (International Association of Schools of Social Work, et al., 2020, p. 8).

There was a failure of governmental responses to Hurricane Maria. Lack of investment in infrastructure, electrical, stormwater and sanitary systems led to the social, economic, and environmental disaster that befell the Island after Hurricane Maria. Non-profit organizations such as the G-8 adapted their agendas to incorporate disaster relief efforts into the scope of their work. On-going financial and service investments are needed in local organizations such as Proyecto ENLACE.

Local knowledge, leadership, social networks, and governance structures should be central to disaster relief work (Patel et al., 2017). The ECMP community has much to teach us about disaster response, trauma, and resilience. The ECMP was among the most vulnerable communities in Puerto Rico due to longstanding poverty and the lack of infrastructure. However, the ECMP "barrios" built extensive social and community networks prior to the hurricanes through their collective work to establish a public land trust and their efforts to abate recurrent flooding. Their work helped build a foundation of community resiliency factors as well as a strong philosophy that "we're in this together."

The dynamics of power in disaster relief work are complex and contradictory. Humanitarian aid has become a profitable endeavor that exploits local communities (Dominelli, 2015; Jha, 2015). Students analyzed the power dynamics of disaster relief and political relations between the US and Puerto Rico. Significant challenges face those who respond to disasters, including social workers, who are among the array of professionals

that provide vital care (Sweifach et al., 2013). Social workers intervene to assist in immediate and long-term recovery, working with individuals, families, communities, organizations, and governments. Social workers may be victim-survivors, many ignoring their own needs to help others (Dominelli, 2015). Social workers may imagine themselves as heroes or saviors, conflating their own needs with the needs of those whom they serve (Flaherty, 2016). Social workers may also oppress people in circumstances of disaster when they fail to acknowledge individual agency and community strengths, listen to their expressed wishes, respond in culturally responsive ways, and understand local political structures.

Faculty facilitated opportunities for consciousness-raising and collective action (service-learning work), following interactions with Puerto Rican social workers and ECMP community members. In response to their experiences, students examined their implicit thinking and the ways in which dominant narratives serve to create and maintain power structures. Contradictions within their own internalized dominant narratives became more apparent, enabling students to challenge their assumptions. Without critical reflection, social work interventions may be ineffective, or worse detrimental (Flaherty, 2016). Service-learning in the aftermath of a disaster afforded students unique opportunities to apply critical perspectives and critical reflection, develop new skills and knowledge, and engage in action to advance social justice.

Well-planned service-learning programs can stimulate academic inquiry, promote interdisciplinary learning, civic engagement, career development, cultural humility, and other professional and intellectual skills. Teaching in the aftermath of a disaster presents unique opportunities and challenges (Chansky, 2019; Findley et al., 2015; Yordan-Lopez et al., 2018). Opportunities may include an impetus to rethink teaching approaches, leverage resources in a new manner, and increase empathy. Students and faculty may also experience trauma, secondary traumatic stress, risks to physical safety and well-being, and culture shock (McAuliffe et al., 2019). It should be noted that no adverse impacts were identified during the time period of this study. The faculty investigators provided close observation and support to students. Data related to secondary traumatic stress effects were not collected in this study, although it is recommended as a variable in future research.

Learning in the context of disasters may also reveal previously unacknowledged social and economic inequalities and power imbalances. In the era of COVID-19, the world is reckoning with the legacies of racism, colonialism, and violence. Collective consciousness-raising is also occurring within the social work profession. Social work educators must reckon with the intergenerational impacts of social and economic inequality, climate change, personal and collective trauma exposure, COVID-19 and the inadequacy of international responses to these intractable social problems. We contend that the increased visibility of underlying structural factors in the context of disasters (see Jha, 2015; Pintar, 2006) aligns with the increased visibility of opportunities for macro-level practice. We emphasize the need for on-going critical reflection, so that in the context of disaster relief efforts, social workers minimize the propensity to collude with oppressive systems. We conclude that critical reflection, necessary for skill development and transfer learning, is a valuable pedagogical tool for social work education.

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