

Examining social problems and their causes

Goals for this reflection

1. Students will be able to weigh and consider several possible causes of social problems, including systemic and structural causes in addition to individual and community-level causes.
2. Students will explore the distinction between service and social change and the potential of each to effectively address social problems.

Length

20 minutes

Best time to use this reflection

After the halfway point of the service project or placement. (November or April)

Materials needed

1. Blackboard/white board, or chart paper.
2. 1 copy of “River Parable” handout for each student in the class.
3. 1 copy of “Causal Analysis” handout for each student in the class.

Preparation

1. Make copies.
2. Review in-class procedure below.

IN-CLASS PROCEDURE

1. Read “River Parable” (2 minutes)
Pass out copies of the river parable to each student. Read the handout to students or invite students to read the river parable aloud. Readers may alternate sentence by sentence or paragraph by paragraph. Alternately, a single reader may be chosen to read the whole passage aloud.
2. “River Parable” discussion (5 minutes)
Prompt students to discuss the “River Parable” handout with the following questions:
 - What is this parable saying about the culture of service that emerged in the village?
 - Do you think the villagers are doing good?
 - What do you think this parable means?
 - Allegorically, what do you think the following things in the parable stand for: the river; the bend in the river; the full-time helpers; the elaborate systems for picking bodies out of the water?
3. “Thinking upriver” about causes (5 minutes)
Invite students to imagine themselves traveling upriver. They should creatively brainstorm as many explanations as possible for what could be causing all those people to fall into the river every day. What could be going on up there? Is it accidental? Are people being foolhardy, walking too close to the river’s edge and then falling in? Could there be an epidemic of a disease that causes people to fall into the river? Are they being pushed in? By what or by whom, and why? What are the factors causing so many people to fall into the river? Could there be another source of danger - something causing people to flee and jump into the river? Write all suggestions down –no matter how farfetched – on the board or on a large piece of chart paper.

4. Service analysis (6 minutes)

Pass out the “Casual Analysis” handout to each student. Invite students to fill out the “Casual Analysis” handout. (At the professor’s discretion, students may work individually or in groups. Students can be grouped by placement agency or with students serving in similar placements – for example, early childhood development, ESL, etc.).

5. Reporting back (2 minutes)

Ask small groups or individual students to share their responses to questions 1, 2 and 3 at the end of the “Casual Analysis” handout. Identify points of agreement and disagreement about service and social change.

Post-reflection

Ask students to finish filling in their “Casual Analysis” if they haven’t already. As an extra step, ask them to write a short personal response to the following quotation from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the context of their service learning experience:

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

River Parable

Once upon a time there was a town that was built just beyond the bend of a large river. One day some of the children from the town were playing beside the river when they noticed three bodies floating in the water. They ran for help and the townsfolk quickly pulled the bodies out of the water.

One body was dead so they buried it. One was alive, but quite ill, so they took that person to the hospital. The third turned out to be a healthy child, who they then placed with a family who cared for it and enrolled it in school.

From that day on, every day a number of bodies came floating down the river and, every day, the good people of the town would pull them out and tend to them – taking the sick to hospitals, placing the children with families, and burying those who were dead.

This went on for years. Each day brought its quota of bodies. The townsfolk came to expect a number of bodies each day. They also worked at developing more elaborate systems for picking them out of the river and tending to them. Some of the townsfolk became quite generous in tending to these bodies and a few extraordinary ones even gave up their jobs so that they could tend to this concern full-time. And the town itself felt a certain healthy pride in its generosity.

However, during all these years and despite all that generosity and effort, nobody thought to go up the river, beyond the bend that hid from their sight what was above them, and find out why, daily, those bodies came floating down the river.

Causal Analysis

	<p>Describe a problem you have seen in your service learning work. Don't diagnose or analyze; just state the problem.</p> <p>Example: In the river near our village, we encounter a steady stream of people in danger of drowning.</p>	
1	<p>Focus on individual behavior. Identify one possible cause of the problem at this level.</p> <p>Example: The riverbank is steep and slippery upriver, so it's fenced off as a dangerous area. But some people choose to jump the fence and walk around the riverbank area anyway. Often they fall in.</p>	
2	<p>Focus on community. Identify one possible cause of the problem at this level.</p> <p>Example: The community doesn't put enough signs, fences, or patrols near the riverbank to keep people away. Also the community doesn't have enough other places to go for recreation.</p>	
3	<p>Focus on social structures.* Identify one possible cause of the problem at this level.</p> <p>Example: Poor people are at greater risk of falling into the river because property values are lower near the riverbank, so more poor people live there.</p>	
4	<p>Focus on social systems.** Identify at least one cause of the problem at this level.</p> <p>Example: Some people don't have access to adequate education about outdoor safety or swimming.</p>	
5	<p>Focus on policy.*** Identify at least one cause of the problem at this level.</p> <p>Example: Erosion has caused the riverbank to get steeper and slipperier over the years. The erosion has been caused in part by factories upriver. Making the riverbank safer for everyone will mean better regulation of the factories and their environmental impact.</p>	
	Other possible cause (at any level)	
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*Here a social structure refers to a patterned social arrangement. Examples of social structures include class, gender, race, ethnicity, family/clan, religion, etc, etc, etc.

**Here a social system refers to an organized method (or set of methods) for accomplishing something in a society. Examples of social systems include political systems, economic systems, healthcare systems, education systems, legal systems, etc, etc.

***Here policy refers to a rule, regulation or guideline enforced in a society.

1. Do you think service can solve the problem you've identified? To what extent? Why or why not?

2. What would need to change in order for all the possible causes you've identified to be adequately addressed?

3. Do you think such a change is possible? Why or why not?