

Poverty and Human Capability 102

Fieldwork

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3:05-4:00 (Th)
Reid 302

Office Hours: 3:30-6:00 MWF
and by appointment

Purpose

This fieldwork course unites astute observations from sustained volunteer experience and learning from reading some of the best literature on domestic poverty. You will interpret and assess what you learn from volunteer work in light of the readings in Poverty and Human Capability 101 and vice versa (that is, your volunteer work should shed critical light on the readings). The purpose is to join thought and practice to the end of better understanding poverty and plausible ways to diminish or eradicate it. This integration of traditional academic study and observations while serving others is at the heart of a Shepherd Program education.

Requirements

1) You will work approximately two hours each week with persons or groups that suffer some of the deleterious effects of poverty. You should complete 20 hours of volunteer work by the end of the term. (You should try to meet with your agency and its clients two hours each week, but schedules and bad weather may make it difficult for everyone to complete 24 hours of service and associated activities. If you can invest 24 or more hours, I will recognize the additional hours of service in my assessment of your course work.) You have selected a volunteer activity in accord with your interests in social services, education, psychology, medicine, law, community action, etc. NB: each of you is working with a different small slice of poverty. In 101 we learn that poverty has many faces and about many different aspects of poverty. You will work with one segment of the larger problem, although your observations are likely to reveal multiple aspects of the larger problem.

Collaborate with Wendy Lovell (Holekamp Hall 203 x8784) and your volunteer placement supervisor to arrange for the logistics of your work. You have received detailed instructions from Ms. Lovell about this process. Follow the instructions and contact Ms. Lovell or your supervisor if you have difficulties with the logistics of your placement. You should begin work the week of January 9. Your supervisor at the agency should be your first point of contact regarding logistical issues. We expect you to contribute to the mission of the agency where you work (this contribution is limited for some legal placements) and to have opportunities to learn via first-hand contact with the clients or patients at your agency. You may also learn from paper work for the agency, but you should not commit more than half of your volunteer time to paper work. (If you do paper work, ask permission and take time to peruse the files for information relevant to the course.) It is important that this placement fit with your interests and long-term developing career or civic aspirations so that you can integrate what you learn from the volunteer work and from the readings in 101 with your major studies and your plans for the future,

however indefinite the later may be. You may also learn that you do not have a long-term interest in the kind of work (e.g., with education, mental health, law) that you are volunteering to do. That can be a valuable discovery.

You are expected to keep a log of your hours, which should total at least 20 by the end of the term. The log must be approved by your supervisor and submitted (electronically or in hard copy) to Ms. Lovell at the time you submit your last journal entries to me. Remember that you will also be expected to evaluate your agency, the supervisory relationship, and your overall volunteer experience along with your evaluation of this seminar. Your evaluation helps us to improve the selection of agencies and the experience students have working with each agency.

Some of you will want to continue your volunteer work after the term. It could become part of your work as a Bonner Leader, with the Nabors League, Campus Kitchen, Habitat for Humanity or some other service organization. (Indeed, your work this term for 102 may be a continuation of service to the community that you are already rendering, e.g. Project Horizon.) The Shepherd Program will continue to support this volunteer service and provide needed assistance with transportation. You have no obligation to continue volunteering with your agency, but **you do have an obligation** to be sure that both your supervisors and those with whom you work know that you will be terminating your work at a specific time. **Closure is crucial!**

2) You will keep a journal of observations from your fieldwork experience in conjunction with the readings in Poverty and Human Capability 101. Please see addendums to this syllabus regarding participant observation in your fieldwork and journaling for this course. You will submit your journals to me on three occasions for my review and comments: 1) **Friday, February 17** and 2) **Friday, March 30** (one week prior to final week and in time for me to comment on them before you write your final essay) 3) **after you have completed your last participant observation**. I ask to see your journals periodically in order that my comments may (I hope) benefit you in writing your papers.

Be sure to make a journal entry on the same day that you volunteer. Do not delay! The entries to not have to be more than a few paragraphs—sometimes a little longer—and they will discipline your thinking about the observations you are making. If you delay, it will impede the effectiveness of your reflections.

3) We meet for one hour each week to discuss your volunteer work in relation to the readings in 101. Not every reading, nor every topic, will relate to every person's volunteer experience. For example, readings about welfare policy bear only indirectly on work in a Head Start classroom; however, Head Start volunteers will have much to say about education and poverty and families and poverty. They may also notice the difficulties, such as childcare and income for nutrition and child rearing, that confront poor working families. You decide which aspects of our readings connect most significantly with your volunteer experience. In some cases you may find that the readings neglect or deal inadequately with an aspect of poverty you experience. Say so! It is interesting to know what the literature neglects as well as what it addresses. Some of our classes will focus on particular themes and readings and some of them will offer you an opportunity to identify connections between your field observations and any aspect within in the entire range of readings. During weeks when your volunteer experience

does not connect directly with themes we discuss from the readings, you can still participate by asking questions of those who are drawing connections between their service and themes in the readings. You will learn, as I do, from the field experience of others as well as from your own observations.

You have not completed or will not complete the same readings for 101. (Different sections assign somewhat different readings, although there will also be significant overlap. Although you are welcome to read some of the new assignments if you wish, you are not required to do so. You will need to review (peruse may be the right word) some the readings from the term in which you took the course. You will then read brief sections of these readings with care to interpret them in light of your fresh firsthand observations. You will do poorly in the course if you do not refresh your thinking about some of the 101 readings. You are also welcome to utilize readings from other poverty courses you have taken, but you should not omit obvious connections to the readings in Poverty and Human Capability 101—or omissions that you think the literature in poverty 101 should address. As you make observations and reflect, the connections to the readings will ultimately become apparent. Be patient. Don't concoct artificial and superficial connections. There is no formula. You make your connections by being thoughtful about what you read and observe. I learn new connections from each 102 class and the students that discover new insights of their own impress me the most.

Since your performance will be evaluated in part on the basis of your contributions to the discussions, you should plan on writing a brief (three-to-five, double-spaced pages) essay expanding on your weekly journal entry in the event you must miss a class. This might be a slight expansion of a journal entry or two. It is important that you compel yourself to reflect on your volunteer experience each week. This course requires no intense reading; the course will be valuable to you if you persistently reflect on connections between your fieldwork observations and the themes that stand out in the readings.

4) The course requires one or two essays offering your sustained and refined reflections on ways in which the readings in 101 and/or another poverty course and your volunteer experience inform each other. Each paper should explore one to three poverty issues (e.g., income measurements as indicators of poverty, behavioral conditions for receiving assistance, healthcare as a cause of poverty or as a preventive factor, society's obligation to care for those who have made mistakes, or family instability as a cause of poverty) that relating the readings and to your experience prompt you to consider more deeply. Cite the themes, passages, paraphrases, and quotations from the readings that are factors in your critical reflection on these issues. You do need to document your sources! If you can show how two or three different issues relate to each other and reflect a common insight about the relation between thought and action, so much the better for the coherence of your paper, but coherence is not a sine qua non for a good paper, as it is for 101.

The first five-to-seven page (double-spaced) paper is optional (but recommended) and due on **Tuesday, February 28**. You will have received my comments on your journals during the Washington holiday break. The second paper (approximately the same length if you complete the first paper and twelve pages if you do not submit the first paper) is due on **Sunday, April 8 at 6:00 p.m.** Good journaling and note taking in class will lead almost spontaneously to good papers. (Good note taking is not in this case writing down everything you hear from me or

others but notes to yourself about the connections you are making between your observations and the readings.) The papers will virtually write themselves.

Schedule of Classes

- Jan. 12 Discuss participant observation and journaling in relation to your volunteer work. You should have completed or at least scheduled your first two hours of volunteer work. We will hear from each of you about your placements and any early connections you have already made between your fieldwork observations and the readings, and we will discuss the *challenges and rewards* of making your own connections between field observations and the readings in 101. Ms. Lovell will join us, if possible.
- Jan. 19 Describe your work, the kinds of poverty you are encountering, and any preliminary connections you are discovering with themes in the readings. Everyone can participate.
- Jan. 26 Who are the poor you have met and talked with? In what ways are they poor, if they are really poor? Can their poverty be measured by absolute or relative income deficits or only by capability deficits? If both, how are they related? Readings from Meyer and Wallace, Eberstadt, Besharov, Iceland, Shipler, Sen, and Blank are all relevant to this conversation.
- Feb. 2 What causes the poverty that you are observing? To what extent do irresponsible individual behavior, deficient capability, inadequate public assistance policies, the labor markets, or just plain misfortune contribute to the poverty you observe? Readings from DeParle, Shipler, Sen, Nussbaum, Freeman, and Mead are relevant to this discussion.
- Feb. 9 We will continue exploring causes of poverty. In addition to the factors highlighted for Feb. 2, do the culture of poverty, government or institutional permissiveness, and a sense of defeatism have a role in causing the poverty that you observe? Lawrence Mead thinks so. Students currently enrolled in 101 may not have read Mead yet, but the rest of us will offer you a brief preview.
- Feb. 16 What role does family composition and stability play in causing the poverty you are observing? Are family problems exacerbated by inadequate, poorly executed, or ill-advised government assistance and support? Readings from Amato and Shipler, Cancian and Reed, Magnuson and Votruba-Drazil, and Professor Murdock's lecture should all be relevant. Students have completed the course in a previous term may also refer to Waldfogel, but be sure to explain your observations to students taking 101 this term. We may also be offering students enrolled in 101 a preview of some other readings and of Professor Murdock's talk.

- Feb. 17 **Turn in your journals for my enlightenment and comments. Please submit in electronic form if you are typing the journals or in written form if you prefer the conventional medium for journal writing.**
- Feb. 28 **Optional (but recommended) mid-term essays are due in electronic form. You will have received comments on your journals during the Washington break. You may consult with me for a *slightly* delayed paper if your scheduled is complicated by other factors. I urge you to submit this optional paper if you are ready and can fit it into your schedule.**
- March 1 Do inadequate education and healthcare play a role in the poverty you are observing? The readings in Shipler and the lecture by Professor Murdock are pertinent. Keep in mind the role that families and neighborhoods play in health and education and the capability deficiencies. By this time, current enrollees in 101 should have read all of the pertinent materials.
- March 8 How does your field experience inform your views about our obligation to those who are the poor and about obligations that poor persons have to others and to society? Think especially about Goodin's duty to protect the vulnerable and White's conception of reciprocity. What about promoting virtuous behavior and the status of being a full citizen that Mead's paternalism advocates? Do you think some of your clients or patients deserve a chance to renew capability that they have lost or never received, as Beckley (relying partly on Sen) contends? Do your observations reinforce or undermine claims in the readings? We will once again be anticipating some of the readings for students currently enrolled in 101. My hope is that these previews will help you in the 101 discussion.
- March 15 We will continue our discussion of March 8 and involve those who were unable to participate in that discussion. Everyone should make observations that bear on the question of who is obligated to do what to diminish poverty. By this time current 101 students should have read most of the pertinent readings.
- March 22 For this session, we will invite a supervisor from an agency 102 students serve in order to talk about the mission and work of the agency and answer your questions about how that agency seeks to diminish poverty. Guest speaker to be named.
- March 29 Does the current public assistance and system bear positively or negatively on the poverty you are observing? Readings from DeParle on welfare reform in Milwaukee, from Currie on the "invisible safety net," from Christopher Howard on welfare policy, or from Jacobs & Ludwig, Swartz, Scholz et al., and Waldfogel (all in the Cancian and Danizger volume), as well as Professor Diette's lecture will also be pertinent. For current 101 students working with clients with addiction problems, lack of job skills, and other barriers to employment and parenting, I will preview the Shipler reading. It will be relevant to your volunteer experience.

- March 30 **Turn in your journal entries for my comments prior to writing your final essay. I will try to return the journals with comments early in the next week.**
- April 5 This seminar will prepare you to finish your final essay. What are the most prominent connections that you have discovered in which the readings and your field work experience inform each other? How have you changed or deepened your views as a result of reflecting on these connections? This oral presentation of the tentative themes for your final essay welcomes contributions from as many members of the seminar as the hour permits. All should be able to participate if called upon.
- April 6 **Turn in your hours log to Ms. Lovell and your final journal entry to me unless you plan another visit during final week. If you plan to make another visit to your agency during final week, you may turn in your final journal entries and hours log after your final visit to the agency. Remember that you have to submit your hours log to Ms. Lovell in order to receive a grade and credit for the course.**
- April 8 **Turn in final essay: five-to-seven pages if you submitted a paper on February 28 and twelve pages if you did not. Once again, submit the essay in electronic form and you will receive comments in electronic form. You are welcome to turn the paper in on Friday or earlier if you wish to avoid writing a paper during the final exam period.**

Grading

Final grades will be based equally on the journals, contributions to the discussions, and the essays. The final essay will weigh a little more heavily than the mid-term essay in determining the grade. Your volunteer work will not be graded. Think of it as your contribution to others and your opportunity to learn from them. You may and should include this volunteer work on your résumé. It is part of your co-curricular work at Washington and Lee, and you deserve that kind of credit for it. The academic credit work for this course is what you do in the seminar classes, the journals, and the essays; those achievements are, of course, not possible without the benefit of your volunteer work, a principal source of learning as well as an opportunity to serve.

Poverty and Human Capability 102: Assuming the Role of Participant Observer

You may find it awkward, at first, to turn your volunteer service into a learning experience. That's healthy. You do not want to turn those with whom you work into subjects of investigation, but you need not do that. You will be performing service as a typical volunteer; however, you will also make observations that bear on the readings in Poverty and Human Capability 101 and other poverty courses you have taken. Your role as a volunteer and observer is the essence of fieldwork. You can serve and observe simultaneously.

Fieldwork is often termed participant observation when the researcher makes observations without disturbing the environment, program, or population under study. Field research does not lend itself to quantifiable conclusions produced in controlled laboratory studies. Instead, field research observes human behavior and interaction, and as a result, is typically presented in qualitative anecdotes or ethnographies. Not all fieldwork is participant based, but your provision of service to a community agency necessitates an involved observer. You will engage the people with whom you work in conversations about their lives, their achievements, and their struggles, but you will not conduct second-party critical interviews or convene focus groups. An additional distinction between fieldwork as investigatory research and as participant observation is the purpose or intended research outcome. Most research initiates with a hypothesis. However, participant observation, unless pursued for the purpose of program evaluation, fits better with an open agenda. Therefore, participant observers formulate and revise hypotheses throughout their time in the field. They seek to avoid observations from a preconceived hypothesis. Your observations will either confirm, challenge, or supplement hypotheses posited and defended in poverty studies readings, but you should not begin your observations with an agenda or set of hypotheses that you seek to prove or disprove. That approach turns the persons with whom you work into subjects of examination.

Keep in mind that your observations will not match perfectly with every reading in 101. If you are working with children and families in a Head Start Program, your observations are not likely to relate directly to welfare assistance or responsibility to work, but they are likely to bear on family history and stability as well as parenting practices and the relationships schools have to families. Work schedules, transportation, and childcare may also be considerations. You may see connections between special needs regarding language, nutrition, social maturity, and psychological health and Amartya Sen's claims that capability must account for individual variations, e.g., kidney disease. Don't force connections between your specific fieldwork experience and the readings; allow connections to emerge from your thoughtful observations. This is not a "paint-by-the-numbers" exercise. I do not have specific expectations for what you should discover. New discoveries arise every term. Your observations will relate to some of the issues discussed in the readings, and if they are penetrating observations about an important but small slice of the 101 readings and are different from what I have heard from previous 102 students, I will be satisfied, and you will be appropriately rewarded.

Gaining access and establishing trust across economic and cultural barriers is always a challenge. All of you are well educated for your age; most of you are from relatively financially well-off families; all of you are over 17 and under 23. The people with whom you work, including many of the supervisors, are typically older or younger, less well-off financially, less well educated, and have fewer social and cultural experiences beyond their immediate friends. They confront different struggles from yours and have markedly different concerns, e.g., how to parent a young child and work rather than how to balance class preparation and social life or how to find steady work rather than how to contemplate a future career. It will take time and empathy to become well acquainted. However, after becoming acquainted, initiating conversations with clients (and agency supervisors) should become natural, just as with any other new friend, and should yield insights without being intrusive. It is quiet natural, for example, to ask a five year old who refers to his father, what his father does or where his father lives? Wouldn't you want a new friend to ask about your family? If a supervisor at your agency mentions poor working conditions or poor compensation, she or he is inviting a discussion. Engage it! You will not be conducting an interview but learning from a new acquaintance about his or her concerns.

As a participant observer, constantly adjust your personal perspective to that of the agency or client(s) you serve, remaining sensitive to the client's needs and desires. Remember that there are existing conceptions of Washington and Lee students in the community (by both clients and supervisors) that you may need to overcome. (Your personal humanity is no more apparent to them than the humanity of a single-mother of two and Free Clinic patient who works at Wal-Mart is apparent to you.) Remember also that you are there to serve others. Your observations will flow from interaction that takes place through your service. You will gain greater access and trust as the persons with whom you work become convinced that you are helping and befriending them. Don't expect them to become instantly grateful that you are giving a little of your time to help others. Some of the people you meet have not been dealt with in a kindly fashion by those in the mainstream of our society; you will have to earn their respect and friendship. Some of them are surly and rarely grateful for anything, just as is the case with some of your peers at Washington and Lee. Why should we hold impoverished persons to a higher standard of virtue than others? When you have established trust, you will be able to ask more personal and probing questions with the expectation that your new friends will answer you forthrightly. This need for trust means, of course, that you will succeed to a greater extent if you can achieve a constant relationship with specific persons over several weeks or the entire term. Don't be reluctant to get to know some of the children, residents, or patients better than you know others. Don't keep your distance!

Finally, maintain a vow not to expose the lives of your new acquaintances. **Use pseudonyms** in the class discussions and in your journal reports. Remember that others in the class, including the instructor, may encounter these same individuals in other contexts. (NB: You may encounter some of your clients working at W&L or shopping at Wal-Mart.) Don't divulge information that will prejudice any of us in our relationships to your clients and supervisors. Confidentiality is of utmost importance in field research. That does not mean that you should spare us the complicated and personal details of lives; it means only that you should not divulge who those persons are, whether they are your supervisors or your clients.

Initially prepared by Avery Flinn Gholston, Shepherd Service-Learning Coordinator, 2003-05.

Poverty and Human Capability 102

Keeping Your Journal

Journals are personal observations, but they are not private. They are not diaries. Think of your classmates and me as your audience. We may not interpret your observations in the same way you do, but we want to know what responses your volunteer experience evokes. Write about your personal observations—including about how your experience impacts you emotionally and shapes your self-understanding. Do not worry about writing things that are inchoate or that you contradict or retract later. Journal entries do not constitute a formal and coherent paper. Holding your entries to that standard will deprive you of the kind of free flowing thinking journaling demands. You will want to impress us with some penetrating insights, but you do not need to refine your comments and achieve consistency among your journal entries. You will not need to revise previous entries because you come to disagree with them or find them insufficiently refined. Journaling is progressive. Since participation observation keeps an open agenda, your journal entries may reflect changes in your thinking during the term.

You may use journals that you purchase and write in longhand. If so, please be sure that you write legibly. I have to read it! You may also type your journal entries in an electronic file and submit an electronic copy. Adopt the method with which you are most comfortable. Whichever method you use, complete your entries *shortly after* your volunteer work. We want to know your fresh thinking. We want to see progress in your thinking and not the cumulative thought of several weeks of observations.

Journal entries should include: a **brief** account of what you do; observations about the setting in which you work; observations about the agency and staff with whom you work; observations about your clients, students, or patients and their families; observations about policies that bear on the lives of the people with whom you work; and self-reflection about your own reactions to what you see and hear as well as about how your views and attitudes change as a result of your fieldwork observations. They should also include your preliminary thinking about connections, or lack thereof, between the readings in 101 and observations from your volunteer work. Journal entries do not have to be highly detailed; in fact, they can be so long that your keenest observations are buried in a mass of trivia. They should be penetrating without burdening yourself with complete and highly refined statements. Embryonic and incomplete thinking need not be trite and superficial. I don't want to read the latter. On the other hand, you will have little thoughtful to say if you set standards so high that you cannot report thinking in process.

Remember that your relationship to your clients and your supervisors is confidential. Use **pseudonyms** in your journals as well as in your remarks in class. Bring your journals to class so that you can read from them when appropriate.

Good journaling will help you write good papers. As the term progresses, your journal will become something like notes to yourself—and to me—on themes that you will develop in the papers connecting the readings and your fieldwork observations. My responses to your journal entries should also help you develop those connections. You may cite and footnote your journal in your papers.