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Community, Reciprocity, and Collaboration: Reflections on Catholic Social Teaching'sNotions of Subsidiarity and Participation

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Community, Reciprocity, and Collaboration: Reflections on Catholic Social Teaching'sNotions of Subsidiarity and Participation

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ABSTRACT: This paper poses two applications of Catholic social teaching's concepts of subsidiarity and participation to academic community engagement. The first pertains to the very general use of the term community. The second refers to a distinction between reciprocity and collaboration.

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The future of humanity does not lie solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of peoples and in their ability to organize. It is in their hands, which can guide with humility and conviction this process of change (Pope Francis, 2015).

Over the years, I have wrestled with some of the language used in engaged scholarship, teaching, and learning.[1] The words we choose are meaningful in reinforcing the status quo or helping change behavior. While I aim to use language that fits my aspirations, I am not sure that I, or others in community engagement fields, do this with sufficient consistency (Beckman, Penney & Cockburn 2010).

In reflecting upon such language challenges, I find that two concepts from Catholic social teaching, *subsidiarity* and *participation*, often guide my intended practice. In what follows, I will describe how these concepts speak to me about two particular language issues.

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1 Because so many terms are used to describe the work discussed in this article, I will clarify here at length how I am using *community engaged scholarship, teaching, and learning.* I will be referring to: (1) research, broadly understood, that involves campus constituents in collaboration with non-academic perspectives and expertise, specifically focused around social challenges, whether carried out by college or university faculty or staff members or students, through formal course work or in any other ways, e.g., as a faculty member's scholarly agenda; (2) student learning through service-learning courses or other for-credit, co- or extra-curricular options involving learners in making contributions in communities, including through community-based research; and (3) faculty members' teaching or otherwise mentoring of students in point 2 above.

THE MEANING OF COMMUNITY

First, I am regularly troubled by the way we, e.g., practitioners of community-based learning, use the word *community*. We tend to use it vaguely. We implicitly include, when we use it, groups and individuals that differ considerably from one another. When we say *community* we may be referring to a geographic area, such as a city or county. We might instead be thinking about agencies that provide services to people in need, such as people who are homeless or have diabetes. Or we may be meaning the people who are living a particular challenge, such as children who are poor or men who have been incarcerated. In conversation about our work, however, we seldom clarify which of these we actually mean.

I am surely influenced here by my earlier experience teaching development economics, where I could easily see problems resulting from lumping together diverse groups under a single heading. There was a tendency in my field to locate all the countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia within one category labeled un- or underdeveloped. Economists liked to come up with sweeping policies of a one-size-fits-all nature for all of the countries in this category. Out of such an orientation arose neoliberalism, which has rocked the globe for decades, with its requirements, mainly furthered by arguably the most powerful institution in the world, the International Monetary Fund, which essentially forced any debt-troubled economy to cut government spending and to privatize (Dietz 1995). Such singularly focused policy has been devastating to many unnamed groups who have lost jobs or suffered as the prices of necessities arose as a consequence.

In reality, so-called underdeveloped countries differed in many significant ways, as did the subgroups within each, by race, religious affiliation, degree of industrialization, length of time since independence, geographic size, resource base, and more (Todaro & Smith 2014). Policies did not effectively address the needs of such subgroups, or the poorest countries, and often worsened them, because they did not target those needs.

Although the scale of activity is much different nowadays, I still often have a similar reaction when we use the word *community* to mean the countries in those regions which were lumped together and labeled undeveloped. The particularities of the individual communities we are working with can be very important for the work we do. Perhaps no one in the field would contest this point, and yet I have found over the years and still to this day that the term "community" is used without the precision and clarity which would enable us to engage with our students and colleagues to work toward specific improvements for specific groups, geographic areas, or individuals.

I have wondered if our lack of specificity in our use of the term community occurs because our interest is not the attainment of improvements for such groups or organizations. Our essential attention is placed, in contrast, on student learning. Precision about the term *community* loses importance to the degree that our efforts are tuned to assuring that student experiences are beneficial for their development, rather than to local social change. I am suggesting here, however, that we ought to be concerned about the short and long term impacts in the communities of our work, and that being more thoughtful about how we use the word community will help foster such attention.

Furthermore, it is problematic in that we tend to use the term *community* to refer to all off

campus individuals or groups and *campus* to refer to "internal" university constituents. This usage, though unavoidable at times, tends to intensify the divide between on and off campus worlds, perpetuating the notion that the campus is where privilege is, where resources exist, and where important decisions can be made about the allocation of resources which affect off campus communities. There may be a perception that the university is only interested in its own goals, which may include attracting certain types of faculty to a sophisticated metropolitan area over supporting collaborations to find solutions to local health disparities.

Often when we speak of "off campus" as community and the university constituents as "campus" we are in effect emphasizing a resource and power gap. This can undermine collaborative efforts toward the good of both sides of such a divide. This may not matter to most in a university community, but it should matter to those of us involved in academic community engagement. In community-based research, for example, an explicit aim is social justice. Thus, issues of equity are in the very nature of the work. The work should serve to diminish the privilege of the few and foster a broader sense of sharing. We would do better to break down divisions, rather than reinforce them by the categories we use.

Obviously, campus is a member of the larger "off campus" geographic community; it is a type of resident, a citizen. As well, many working at the university are part of any number of smaller communities off campus, including neighborhood organizations, non-profit boards, social service agencies where they volunteer or consult, churches, and many more. It is probably safe to say that a high percentage, if not most faculty and staff of other non-online universities, are residents of the local geographic community in which the institution that pays them is situated. The gap between campus and community is, at least to some extent, artificial.

It is also true that there are many communities on a campus. On multiple occasions, I have noticed faculty members and students assuming that the community-based education center's use of the word community refers to student groups. And well it could. What a difference it makes, though, if we use community to refer to on-campus groups versus off-campus.

As I have reflected for quite some time on the guidance I might receive from Catholic social teaching (CST) about these language issues, subsidiarity and participation consistently come to mind. I will move to discussion of the second language challenge, however, before commenting on the CST connections that seem salient to me.

RECIPROCITY AND COLLABORATION

A second language usage that is unsettling to me pertains to the term "reciprocity," or, in verb form, reciprocate. One definition for reciprocate is "to do something for someone because the person has done something similar for you…" (Cambridge Dictionaries online, n.d.). Reciprocity is, thus seen, a synonym for mutuality.

We, in the engaged scholarship, teaching, and learning fields, do not use this term incorrectly, and the concept is quite critical to doing the work well. When arrangements are made for students to contribute to off-campus organizations as an element of service-learning classes, for example, it is essential that organizations where students contribute

get something they need and want in return for the learning experience they offer students. My sense is that most places that foster service-learning are attuned to the importance of such reciprocity.

My concern is that we tend, implicitly, to see reciprocity as sufficient to describe the exchange between ourselves in the higher education realm and the communities off campus (or on) with which we work. I don't think it is.

I want to use *collaborate* as well as *reciprocate* to describe what we do. To collaborate is "to work with another or others on a joint project" (Cambridge Dictionaries online, n.d.) or to work *with*, "to work together or with someone else for a special purpose…" (Cambridge Dictionaries online, n.d.).

In this case, each of us might see ourselves as one among many participants in an effort to accomplish something we all want. Perhaps, in this scenario, college students and faculty along with staff at a center for people who are homeless and the homeless residents, clients or guests sit down and talk about a common goal which will serve them all, and then the student work in the service-learning class is focused on some aspect of that. Students still get learning; the center assisting homeless people still gets help with something needed. There is reciprocity. But there might be more of a common end for all parties attained over time. It could even be as large as reducing homelessness measurably in a geographic area.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (n.d.), known since the early 1900's for its many contributions within higher education, defines community engagement using both words, reciprocity and collaboration. It asserts collaboration as the larger, framing concept.

"Community engagement describes collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global)…" (NERCHE, n.d.). This suggests that the university, or its various units, has an investment in something that other partners around the table also care about. Then the definition brings in reciprocity: "for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Cambridge dictionary online, n.d.). Reciprocity seems to describe here the manner in which collaboration is lived out.

If we add the word "collaboration" when we describe our engaged scholarship, teaching, and learning, we may have a slightly different and perhaps larger framing for what we do than if we use reciprocity alone, and this larger frame might be worth exploring. It is also worth considering that we may also have to "listen" more to the desires of off campus community partners in determining where to allocate university resources.

In the late 1980's, the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) (n.d.) was formed by higher education institutions which saw themselves as anchors for the well-being of their local geographic communities, communities that faced a myriad of social challenges. As anchors, CUMU members take their missions to work with their local communities as a key aspect to address social distress in their vicinity, such as manifestations of poverty. The University of Louisville, one member school, focused its anchor role in the portion of the city with the worst quality of life indicators, the west side.

Two aspects of the way this school fulfills this anchor role warrant noting here. First, the manner in which the decision was made to focus resources on the west side; it was through

multiple years of discussion between university representatives and an area resident council. The decision was not made unilaterally by the university, though without question the university's interests were considered as it was a key partner in whatever was to be done. The decision certainly was not made by individual faculty members, in other words those actors whose interests often determine universities' local community investments through service-learning. Nor was the decision made by the school's public affairs office. Rather, there was a collaboration between campus partners and other local interests. Part of the university board's evaluation of the president of the university is based on a score card that notes improvements attained on the west side through investments of university resources. This tying of a high-placed university official's success to measurable social improvement in a portion of the city selected collaboratively by university and off-campus community partners seems noteworthy.

SUBSIDIARITY AND PARTICIPATION

In the abundant Catholic social teaching literature, it is clear that the principles outlined are not only statements of what is held important by the church. In addition, they are meant to give concrete guidance, to set direction, to be applied to life. As Sullins puts it, "As with any system of moral thought, Catholic social thought is concerned with applying general or normative truths to particular choices and actions"(Blasi & Sullins, 2008: xii).

So how might we apply the concepts of subsidiarity and participation to the concerns I have raised? How might they give us guidance in our choices about behavior?

According to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, "Subsidiarity is among the most constant and characteristic directives of the Church's social doctrine and has been present since the first great social encyclical" (2005: 81). It deals most directly with the role of government. It "…puts a proper limit on government by insisting that no higher level of organization should perform any function that can be handled efficiently and effectively at a lower level of organization by human persons who, individually or in groups, are closer to the problems and closer to the ground," writes William Byron (1998) about subsidiarity, the eighth principle he outlines. *Economic Justice for All* (USCCB, 1986, November) tells us that governments should only do what individuals and private groups cannot. The principle of subsidiarity rests as well on a belief articulated in *Charity in Truth* (Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, June 29): that the person is always capable of giving, of contributing.

This is not to say that government has no role. The role of government is still critical. In *Centesimus Annus* we read that: "Various circumstances may make it advisable that the State step in to supply certain functions." (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005: 82).

The failures of the 1980's Reagan era new federalism provide an example of the need for the highest government level to act. During the 1980's in the U.S., responsibilities that had previously been held at the federal level were given to or back to states, an apparent example of the application of subsidiarity. For example, there had previously been federal determination regarding the amounts of assistance to be provided to low- income households in each of the states. With new federalism, such decisions were put in the hands of the states. The result of this change was a dramatic lowering of assistance from previous years in certain states. Much criticism was levied against the Reagan administration for

the policy shift (O'Connor 1998; Pear 1982). Clearly it was important for government to give some guidance to states so that certain basic human rights could be upheld. An important role of government, then, should be to help those smaller units closer to the challenges to manage by themselves, as possible (USCCB 1986) and to take leadership when they cannot.

Turning to the concept of participation, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2005), the most recent and comprehensive compilation of Catholic teaching, leaves participation out as a formal stand-alone principle. While it had been highlighted in some discussions earlier as a principle in its own right (Byron 1998) or in conjunction with discussions of the role of family and community (USCCB n.d.-a), in the *Compendium* it is viewed more as a means for carrying out subsidiarity.

The concept of participation suggests that the voices of those who will be affected by decisions ought to be heard in related decision-making processes. It would not be sufficient, for example, that local government, instead of the federal government, makes decisions for the local area, though this could be viewed as an expression of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity is not adequately expressed if the voices of those who are affected by decisions made by local government do not have a place in the decision-making process. Participation becomes a "regulating factor" telling us how people and organizations ought to act (USCCB, n.d.-a).

The efforts the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) (USCCB, n.d.-c) manifests the working together of these two notions of subsidiarity and participation perhaps better than I have observed in any organization. As one of its two major aims, the CCHD provides loans to local grassroots groups and organizations across the U.S. to address poverty-related issues. Thus, it is putting resources at the level of action closest to the social challenge to be addressed, as subsidiarity would urge. The following comes from the CCHD website and speaks to the role of participation: "The belief that those who are directly affected by unjust systems and structures have the best insight into knowing how to change them is central to CCHD. CCHD works to break the cycle of poverty by helping low-income people participate in decisions that affect their lives, families and communities."

DISCUSSION: APPLYING SUBSIDIARITY AND PARTICIPATION TO UNDERSTANDINGS OF COMMUNITY, RECIPROCITY, AND COLLABORATION

Several years ago, I was invited by my University's office of research to participate with the Community Health Enhancement Program (CHEP) of my state's National Science Foundation (NSF) Clinical Translational Science Institute. It was widely recognized by funding organizations, doctors and others with an investment in public health that many who had health needs across the state, for example those struggling with diabetes, were not informing the design of federally funded research. Their experiences, the specifics of their needs, their symptoms, their questions were not being considered. Thus, study results were not as helpful as they might otherwise have been. To help rectify the situation, CHEP was established. It brought together health care providers from all parts of the state as well as individuals receiving or in need of service to learn more about how research proposers might include missing information in proposed studies (CHEP, n.d.).

At the first such meeting, a day-long event in our state's capital city, I listened to people who were not receiving but in need of health-related information and services, and thus most definitely excluded from research design. I was reminded that many people who are not proficient in English are not able to avail themselves of health care services, especially when relevant information is shared via computers and cell phones that they cannot afford and do not have access to. I heard compelling, though not surprising, stories of the difficulties people faced in getting to the sites where services were provided and interviews, surveys and other research instruments used. Lack of transportation and childcare loomed large as constraints. To the extent that such information from relevant people is absent, research results are less thorough, less useful.

One of my colleagues works through a local organization with individuals who are HIV positive. She discovered that many people she had come to know who were HIV positive were not availing themselves of medical services in our city, though it seemed as if they knew that such services existed and could surely have benefited from receiving them. Primarily, these were African American and non-heterosexual individuals. Using community-based research offered through a college course, she set out to find out why they did not take advantage of such potentially valuable services. She had a hunch that service providers were missing something; that they were not in fact attuned sufficiently to various needs of those she had come to know. She wanted to explore this possibility, and indeed found this was the case.

Both of these stories, that of CHEP and that of my colleague, speak to me of the importance of subsidiarity and participation. In both cases, the concerns of the people facing serious social challenges were not included in the research or services being provided, through no fault most likely of the researchers or service providers. Research was designed and conducted and services decided upon at some level that, probably unintentionally, failed to recognize these individuals. This is not subsidiarity (nor effective research). It is what subsidiarity seeks to avoid.

Without explicitly using the language, CHEP and my colleague were practicing subsidiarity. They went to considerable lengths to engage with those closest to the issue in question, that is, those who were not availing themselves of or able to reach needed services. The CHEP organizers and my colleague listened; actions were subsequently informed by what they heard. In the case of my colleague, those who expressed their voices ultimately formed an organization to obtain the kind of support that would meet their needs.

As subsidiarity urges, action should be taken at the level closest to whatever concern is in question; the notion of participation urges that relevant voices for action be invited in to the discussion. If I am going to practice subsidiarity and participation, I should consider, in my activities, if those whose needs and concerns are important are heard and acted upon. Using community as a blanket term is not helpful. It is the specifics of who people are that I need to know.

Indeed to find those whose voices are excluded requires a refined way of using the concept of "community." In the situation of my colleague, even defining the community as specifically as those who are HIV positive would not have identified those who were closest to the issues, that is, those who were not included in studies because they were not taking advantage of services. The definition had to be even narrower. HIV positive individuals

who were not taking advantage of service had to be sought out if a related research design were to incorporate their concerns and their knowledge about what was working and what was not. The more specific we can get, the better we are listening. The better we are listening, the better we can assure that the participation of those closest to the issue in question is involved.

What, then, about reciprocity? And collaboration? When is reciprocity, the mutual exchange between two parties, enough? When, instead or in addition, ought we join into a common project, through collaboration? And what might that look like? Can subsidiarity and participation help guide us here?

My colleague's joining with HIV positive individuals was not for the purpose of mutual exchange. She was not seeking reciprocity – a one-on-one exchange – explicitly. I would argue that she was hoping instead to find collaborators in an endeavor of value to all involved. Her approach might have differed from that of many social service agencies, or even research studies, where the staff or the academics decide what is to be done and how. They provide the services; they come up with research results that someone else applies. But this colleague was, I believe, espousing a type of collaboration in which she was a member, a participant, who cared about the outcomes as did the others in the group. A familiar quote comes to mind here: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."[2]

I am not sure how much the concepts of subsidiarity and participation help us in one-to-one activities, such as tutoring, or even in making arrangements with community partners for college students to contribute as part of service-learning classes, something those who facilitate service-learning do. In such cases, reciprocity is probably sufficient, that is, assuring that both parties benefit in some way that is agreeable to both. Nonetheless, even in these cases, subsidiarity can give us guidance by encouraging us to ask: am I working with the people who most need this service? Are there others I might be reaching out to, like the gay individuals who are HIV positive, who very much need a service but do not get it, who are not visible?

In cases, however, in which there is a common goal, such as improving high school graduation rates across a certain geographic area or reaching food security in a county, collaboration comes to play, and questions can obviously be asked such as: Are the appropriate people involved in the discussion? That is, those whose lives will be most affected by decisions and actions to emerge, and thus those who have important information to offer? These are the questions that subsidiarity and participation pose, whether in an office task force, a neighborhood organization, or a United Way sub-committee.

It may be that out of such discussions, well informed by many if not all who are affected, better choices can be made for creating the one-on-one situations where reciprocity comes to play. Here is an example. Students are tutoring incarcerated individuals studying for

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2 According to the International Women's Network Lilla (https://lillanetwork.wordpress.com/about), this quote has been attributed to Lilla Watson, who prefers it be credited to aboriginal activists in Australia in the 1970's.

their GED's. Reciprocity occurs at the very least in that the student tutor learns from the experience, as does, though differently, the incarcerated individual. Reciprocity might also exist in that the university staff person or organization which arranges for the students to tutor has verified that this tutoring service meets the needs of the community partner running the tutoring program. Yet the guiding principle of subsidiarity might urge us to ask further: were the right persons involved in the discussion to create this tutoring program? Were the needed voices heard? Is the program itself one that serves well our joint concerns—all of us in the geographic area—for a safe, crime free environment where all can thrive?

To what extent does Catholic social teaching impose upon us an urgency to ask these kinds of questions? As community-engaged scholars, teachers, and students, I suggest such questions ought to be on our minds.

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Mary Beckman, Ph.D., directs a program in community-based research that offers grants to teams of faculty, community partners, and students to conduct research on issues of local concern. An economist and faculty member, Mary co-developed the University's Poverty Studies Interdisciplinary Minor and has codirected and taught in the program. She oversees a number of Center initiatives and, generally, helps guide the evolving academic vision for the Center.

Mary was a tenured faculty member at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania for many years where, in addition to her teaching and scholarship, she directed a first-year seminar writing program, developed with a colleague the college's writing across the curriculum program, led the creation of a Latin American studies minor, and participated on most major college committees, including tenure and promotion. She came to Notre Dame in 2001 to assume the position of associate director of the Center.

Her publications can be found in journals including Journal on Excellence in College Teaching, Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, Review of Radical Political Economics, Women's Studies Quarterly, and in books, for example, Handbook of Engaged Scholarship: The Contemporary Landscape. Volume Two (2010) and Teaching the "isms": Feminist pedagogy across the disciplines (2010). The focus of her research and writing currently is on the impact of academic community engagement in communities.