

"One Day It Will Happen For Us": The Power of Academia in Community-University Service-Learning Partnerships

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Abstract

This qualitative research explores the community-university partnership experience from the perspective of community organizations engaged in a service-learning (SL) relationship with a private university in a developing country with a collectivist culture. The research explores the relational exchange among partners and foregrounds the issues of power and power redistribution in SL partnerships. The conceptual framework used is informed by conceptions from Dewey (1986), Freire (1996), values of democratic engagement (Saltmarsh et al., 2009), and the critical SL framework (Mitchell, 2008). Findings indicated that faculty were engaged in a traditional SL model in which the focus was not on the process of engagement but on the outcome of the SL experience. The definition of a partnership from community partners was linked to gains and to current or future access to resources. The perception and definition of power impacted community respondents' reactions to the power dynamic in the ongoing interactions. Being situated in a collectivist culture seemed to impact the community members' acceptance of unequal relationships. Findings suggested that in a collectivist context, partnerships cannot be examined without considering the context and culture in which the relationship takes place, as both will impact how a community partner defines an authentic relationship and, accordingly, what they expect from the partnership. The power of academia can be intimidating to community partners, so faculty must proactively map out power differentials and initiate reflections and discussions on power dynamics as part of the partnership building process.

Context and Background

The positive impact of service-learning (SL) on student learning outcomes is well documented, but there has been less exploration of benefits to community partners and of the nature of the partnerships created (Bahng, 2015; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Kaschak & Letwinsky, 2015; Morton & Bergbauer, 2015; Schmidt & Robby, 2002). In the Arab world, literature on SL is rare; only one small-scale qualitative study was identified at the time of this research, conducted in Egypt by Shalabi (2013), which attempted to address the gap in research that investigates partnerships as the unit of analysis in a non-Western context. The study examined the nature of a SL partnership between a private university and five community members and provided insight into the nature of the ongoing transactional relationship from the perspective of the community partners. Although community representatives were keen on the relationship progressing to become transformational in nature, the study did not investigate which factors must be addressed for this progress to happen.

Public health seeks to address complex problems and, as such, needs participatory approaches adopted by community-based

participatory research (CBPR) to ensure partners' equitable participation. These approaches seek to conduct interventions that engage community members as equal partners and foster relationships in which benefit is mutual and power is shared. In fact, building partnerships is a key principle in CBPR, which supports building "collaborative, equitable partnerships in all research phases" (Wallerstein et al., 2005, p. 31). As an experiential pedagogy, SL involves public health students in structured service to respond to a community need and provides them with venues to practice their acquired knowledge within the context of collaborative partnerships between a community organization and an academic partner (Gregorio et al., 2008).

In 2012, public health faculty at a prominent private university that has been serving Lebanon and the region for decades incorporated SL to enhance student-learning outcomes and engage underserved communities and groups. These SL initiatives focused on community organizations in one underserved community in the Beirut suburbs. In Lebanon, the number of civil society organizations increased between 1958 and 1964, when these organizations were recognized by the

state. In the post-1975 war era, they played a highly active role and grew to become service providers in the absence of public services. Lebanese NGOs have played a critical role in empowering civil society and contributing to progress and development (Bissat, 2002; Smith, 2001). Community organizations usually provide services to local residents such as free clinics, afterschool activities for children, and health awareness sessions for different groups.

In a public health context, it is critical to ensure that SL partnerships between the university and community partners are maintained and positively impact the surrounding communities. Power inequities between partners present challenges to the creation of authentic, reciprocal partnerships. In the context of this research, a partnership is a relationship created in a SL experience between the faculty (academic partner) and the community organization (public, private or international organization), which also hosts students registered in courses that incorporate a SL pedagogy. It entails ongoing interactions between the faculty member and the focal point at the organization, an exchange of benefits, and the power dynamic within which the interactions take place.

Literature Review

Increasingly, SL has been adopted as an experiential pedagogy that improves student learning outcomes as well as students' leadership and communication, civic engagement, and critical thinking skills (Bahng, 2015; Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006; Bringle et al., 2006; Eyler, 2002; Furco et al., 2010; McDonald & Dominguez, 2015; Mitchell, 2008). Community organizations' motives to engage in SL may range from building capacity (Edwards et al., 2001), to accessing university expertise (Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006; Edwards et al. 2001), to building personal connections and mentorship with faculty members (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Worrall, 2007). Organizations might also value a partnership with an academic partner for benefits that extend beyond SL interactions, such as the university's capacity to assist in achieving the organization's mission and the enhanced visibility and credibility that the relationship may confer to the organization (Gazley et al., 2012). SL does not aim to provide relief or charity but to create reciprocal, authentic partnerships with organizations serving local communities. Eventually, the networks created can be means for building social capital in communities (Sandy & Holland, 2006).

The success of a SL program is contingent upon the nature of the relationship established between the community site and academia; mutual understanding of needs, effective communication, and a positive interaction climate can ensure a quality relationship (Darby et al., 2013). Fostering quality relationships depends on the motivations of both partners (Darby et al., 2013). Factors such as "valuing and nurturing" (Sandy & Holland, 2006, p. 32) and "reciprocal long-term engagement" (d'Arlach et al., 2009, p. 13) are perceived as priorities in a partnership. A collaborative process that is reciprocal and interactive creates a supportive climate for knowledge exchange and mutually beneficial outcomes (Ngai et al., 2010; Nichols et al., 2015). The intensity and diversity of interactions as well as shared decision-making can bring partners closer.

Relationships do not have to be equal in all aspects to be satisfactory. Satisfaction depends on whether the partnership is perceived as "equitable and fair" (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002, p. 509). If the relationship is inequitable, the party who has benefited less will attempt to reduce its investment in the relationship in an attempt to regain equity, or it might opt to terminate the relationship. A campus-community partnership that lasts a long time does not necessarily reflect a close relationship and may instead reflect a dependency; it may maintain a power difference that is preventing one side from building capacity to be independent (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

Partnerships can encounter challenges due to cultural differences and differences in each partner's expectations. These differences require partners to negotiate their roles and expectations to agree on rules of engagement. Such negotiations are usually conducted within a social context and power dynamic that must be considered early in the partnership (Sandmann & Kliever, 2012). A situation in which a partner has more resources and responsibility in running activities will lead to a power imbalance. Although the capacity of the community partner to say "no" to academia can indicate empowerment, this might not translate into any action to modify an imbalance; community partners may maintain the status quo for hope of a future benefit (Mitchell & Rautenbach, 2005).

SL cannot happen without a partnership. Yet unless the partnerships are "authentic, equitable and democratic" (Shalabi, 2013, p. 81) and relationships are characterized by "closeness, equity and integrity" (Clayton et al., 2010, p. 5), the positive outcomes of SL may

be compromised. Much of the support that SL has received has derived from its perception as a form of civic education that can promote democratic engagement (Battistoni et al., 2009; Benson et al., 2000; Hurd & Bowen, 2020). A democratic engagement framework can lead to change in an organizational culture and structure by questioning power distribution and decision-making processes. Such an approach can enable community members to engage in discussions of relevant social issues, thus narrowing the gap between higher education institutions and community members (Sandmann & Kliever, 2012).

Researchers using community partnership as a unit of analysis have discussed democratic engagement in the context of examining ongoing interactions, reciprocity, and power dynamics governing partnership interactions (Kniffin et al., 2020). Democratic engagement is about purpose and process: *Process* is how those on campus are initiating community engagement and how this engagement is taking place, and *purpose* is about enhancing a democratic culture within and outside campus (Saltmarsh et al., 2009). Democratic engagement does not undermine expertise present in academia but is critical of expertise that excludes other sources and forms of knowledge. In a democratic framework, a new culture for academic institutions is needed in which partnerships shift to become reciprocal, inclusive, and collaborative in nature (Dostilio, 2014; Saltmarsh et al., 2009). The resulting relationships will result in a power imbalance between the university and the community (Shiller, 2017). Experiencing these power patterns is political, and power differentials present in the relationship should be explicitly addressed (Clifford, 2017; Mitchell, 2008; Saltmarsh et al., 2009).

Although partnerships are a way to include community organizations in identifying and implementing solutions to existing problems, they in fact allow higher education institutions to maintain their privileged status (Boyle & Silver, 2005). The organizational structures, academic calendar, and knowledge creation role of the university can result in power differentials in the partnership (Sandmann & Kliever, 2012). The discussion of power in the literature of SL partnerships has focused on revealing inequality in relations that are intended to be equitable (Camacho, 2004; Davis et al., 2017; Dempsey, 2010; Sandmann & Kliever, 2012). To the extent that a partnership is a social activity, as described

by Sandy and Holland (2006), power relations existing within the context of that partnership impact its effectiveness.

Power exists everywhere in all social interactions, and human subjects often exist in complex power relations in which they are in a state of struggle against a form of power (Foucault, 1982). Paulo Freire (1996), whose work, like that of Dewey (1986), has been used as a theoretical underpinning in SL, discussed these struggles. Deans (1999) compared Dewey and Freire, who were both critical of education that is static, disconnected, and elitist and built their philosophies on concepts such as experience, problem-solving, consciousness raising, social action, and transformation. Tew (2006) used structural approaches to understand how power is operationalized in social relations. Privileged groups have access to resources and can exercise power over other groups. As such, power is not an entity to be owned or possessed but rather a situation in which a dominant entity benefits and those on the receiving end have inhibited capacity to express their demands and apply their capabilities.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research was informed by conceptions from Dewey (1986), Freire (1996), and values of democratic engagement (Saltmarsh et al., 2009). Using these theories, the following aspects were used to define the conceptual framework: an emphasis on building authentic, reciprocal partnerships; addressing power differentials; and creating partnerships that can bring about social change. These three aspects constitute the components of the critical SL model proposed by Mitchell (2008). With its focus on mutual benefit, creating social change, and redistribution of power, this model embraces values that faculty try to uphold in adopting a SL pedagogy. This makes critical SL an appropriate framework to guide an understanding of SL experiences and the authenticity of the partnerships created between the academic public health program and its community partners.

Sampling Strategy and Data Collection

My choice to investigate community-university partnerships arose from my background in public health and health promotion and community health and my identity as a public health practitioner. Both of these disciplines seek to promote social justice

by empowering communities to change conditions impacting their health. I taught SL courses for 2 years and have been a member of the SL Taskforce, which was created by the faculty in 2012 to coordinate SL activities. My experience teaching SL courses made me question the authenticity of the partnerships and how that might be compromising potential benefits to the community.

A center was created by the faculty and charged with the task of initiating contacts with community organizations and providing logistical support for faculty members and students. Following this initial contact, the faculty member could visit the organization to discuss their course's specific needs. At the end of the course, a center staff member would visit the site preceptor and conduct an interview to inquire about their experience with students throughout the course. The number of community organizations varied each semester depending on the courses offered and the organizations' readiness to host students. The type and affiliation of organizations varied: Out of 10 local NGOs, two were connected to international counterparts, three were government-affiliated hospitals, and four were centers associated with ministries or municipalities. The duration of each partnership also varied; some organizations collaborated with the university only once, while others were engaged every semester.

Maximum variation purposeful sampling strategy was adopted based on the preset criteria of organizational affiliation and duration of partnership, which varied due to reasons related to satisfaction with the partnership, availability of projects to host students, and courses being offered at any one time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Sixteen semi structured interviews with community organizations and six with faculty members who teach SL courses were conducted between May and July 2019. The same interview questions were used with both groups. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board (ID number: SBS-2018-0602). Interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Data was coded and categorized using Dedoose software.

To ensure systematic data analysis, I followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2018), starting by reading transcriptions repeatedly and referring to actual audio tapes for clarification. Inductive coding allowed me to identify themes from the data. I used open coding and created concise codes of significant characteristics. At a later stage, some data was collated. I reviewed and compared codes

within the different clusters, trying to connect codes that would eventually be used to construct themes. Reviewing themes followed. In the first round, four themes were constructed, three of which were related to power. However, after examining each theme, these were recategorized to three themes: motives to enter a relationship, reciprocity and relational exchange within the partnership, and power, with two subthemes: power of academia and powerlessness and acceptance of academia power.

Findings

Motives to Enter the Relationship

All faculty respondents emphasized student learning outcomes as a motive for adopting SL. The community organizations offered opportunities for students to engage in field experiences, which are crucial to the teaching of public health, as one faculty (F.1) explained: "The objective was to enhance students' learning and civic engagement." Faculty were also motivated by the positive feedback received from students in their course evaluations: "Feedback from students in SL courses is always better. It builds skills students need as public health professionals" (F.2).

Community respondents, on the other hand, articulated three categories of motives, all of which reaffirmed the privileged position of the academic partner and reflected a unidirectional knowledge flow: access to human capital and resources, research expertise, and the reputation of the university. Access to students and supervisors' knowledge and skills and collaborating on research projects were significant motives for organizations that usually lack resources and research capacity. Although the credibility of and trust in the university were cited by all organizational respondents, the expectation to benefit from this reputation was indirectly expressed by 10 of the 16 organization representatives.

Relational Exchange: Positive and Negative Attributes of the Relationship

Community respondents listed personal connections with individual faculty, trust, and respect as positive factors in the relationship. Satisfaction with individual faculty, however, did not mask the fact that community respondents were dissatisfied by the overall low engagement of faculty and the sporadic relationship, which existed only when students were present. Physical presence of faculty gave the site credibility, a sense of worth, and acknowledgment of the

work the organization does for students. The fact that faculty rarely appeared in person led to frustration, as one respondent from a public hospital (S.16) commented: "Someone was supposed to come with them [with students]; it was never happening; not even once; students always came alone." This placed the respondent in an awkward position with the departments in which students were going to be placed because of the high value community respondents placed on personal connections with academic faculty. The interrupted presence due to differing time calendars was another negative attribute, as it limited the extent to which community organizations could benefit from the relationship.

Community respondents were hopeful that, with time, the relationship with faculty might become reciprocal. One respondent from a local NGO (S.13) expressed a willingness to accept the status quo of the partnership while attempting to try to benefit more: "Will keep nagging, maybe one day it will happen for us." This perspective was shared by one faculty respondent (F.3) who referred to continuity in the relationship and noted, "I think the longer we work with them [community organizations] the more equal the relationships become."

Access to resources and future collaboration opportunities, visibility for the community organization, a supportive work environment for staff, a fresh perspective on their work, technical expertise, and free labor were benefits community representatives mentioned they gained from their relationships with the university. Collaborating with the university offered visibility to organizations and enhanced their credibility in their context, as one respondent from a local NGO (S.12) commented: "The relationship with the university brought visibility to the organization." This resonated with another respondent from a public hospital (S.16), who stated, "When patients and staff see that we are hosting public health students from the university, this is something important for us."

However, despite reported benefits, seven community respondents expressed an imbalance in the relationship whereby only faculty were able to achieve their goals (student learning outcomes) and benefit from the relationship. The respondent (S.7) from a public hospital described the imbalance: "Faculty met their goals. We are giving faculty what they want. We are doing it as a service. We gained one thing: the name of the university

at our center." Community respondents felt that the evaluation system in place served students' interests and not those of the organization or the ongoing relationship. The assessment tools used did not inquire about the dynamics of engagement. The respondent from one public health facility (S.7) sounded exasperated when they noted, "The evaluation is for students, not for the relationship." This situation led to feelings of exclusion whereby community respondents were denied space to provide feedback and express their needs and concerns.

Power Dynamic in the Partnership: Defining Power and Awareness to Power Differential

Faculty and community respondents described power in terms of the entity that had more expertise, resources, and reputation as well as the ability to get what they want, to decide freely, and to say "no" to the other partner. They defined power as a "state," "condition," or "power within."

Community respondents struggled with the questions on power. They were able to easily describe interactions with faculty members, but they were unable to describe how these interactions reflected an underlying power dynamic. Responses such as "The question is a bit difficult" or "I never thought about this matter" were stated often. The interview as part of this research, it seemed, was the first time an open discussion about power had taken place, as one respondent from an international organization (S.2) affirmed: "This is the first time I think about these matters openly and I am seeing the gaps."

Following the initial expressions of unease and surprise, community respondents tried to minimize the significance of power issues by focusing on their relationship with individual faculty members and the actual or expected benefits from this relationship. The fact that their organizations chose to freely join or leave the relationship led five of the 16 community respondents to perceive the power relationship as balanced, where no one partner was trying to dominate the other. All 16 community participants expressed awareness of the university's "power" as an academic institution in terms of resources and expertise. However, none related a perception of this power differential as a factor that affected ongoing interactions. Another respondent (S.7) stated, "There is no power here, Faculty send whom they want, they are taking what they want, there is no power here." Community respondents were clearly unaware that when faculty decide

whom to send and under what conditions, this is an indication that faculty are using their power to run things the way they wish.

Faculty had no problem discussing power issues. Despite having an advantage in terms of resources and privileges, they expressed having no intention of controlling or coercing the community partners. One faculty member (F.5) noted that because there is trust in the relationship, the knowledge power of academia is used to “influence and mentor,” not to play the “upper hand.” However, not having the intention to dominate or control does not necessarily mean that power dynamics are not impacting the relationship. As another faculty member (F.2) noted, “I don’t think they [community organization] are aware of what they will be missing if the university doesn’t do it [implement SL] right. Yes, they are gaining, but there is much more to gain but they don’t see it.”

Reaction to Academia Power

Community respondents brought up negative attributes of the partnership, including low faculty engagement and the interrupted relationship that existed only when students were present, as factors that, if modified, could enhance reciprocity and render a more equitable distribution of power in the relationship. Nine community participants expressed having to compromise their own priorities in favor of the students. Although they understood that students have academic commitments, this did not prevent them from feeling the relationship was unfair. They expressed frustration since they were the entity possessing the field expertise, and possession of expertise is how they defined power. The respondent from a local NGO noted:

This is academia, and students have specific objectives. I used to wish students could work on another task [that was] more of a need for us. Now I set my priorities with those that the faculty propose for the students. (S.10)

Feeling helpless because of exclusion from decision-making led nine community partner participants to report that they had been demanding changes without success. “I wish there was some flexibility for us,” the respondent from an international organization (S.2) stated after a pause, adding, “I would have preferred that we agree together on conditions; this [conditions]

is being forced on us.” The respondent changed their tone to one of despair and added that they understood the challenges encountering academia, noting, “We have no control over these issues.”

Fear of disrupting the relationship was a major concern for all community respondents, as it could compromise current or future benefits. As such, organizations chose to accommodate conditions set by faculty and to normalize the situation, noting that it was expected that organizations accommodate academia. As one respondent (S.10) reported, “I am dealing with an academic institution. It is normal that they set their conditions. I consider it the duty of the NGO to accept this.”

Management at several community organizations insisted on maintaining a relationship with the university and the faculty despite the extra burden on staff and the lack of a clear benefit from hosting students in SL partnerships. Several organization respondents justified accepting the students, despite the limited benefits or unsuitable conditions in place, on the grounds that it was their organization’s mission to help others. When I tried to understand this attitude during the focus group meeting, the respondents confirmed that this type of thinking is rooted in the culture of community organizations and civil society.

Discussion

Public health programs are increasingly adopting experiential pedagogies such as SL that are well suited to achieving public health competencies (Anderson et al., 2011). In such a context, the aim of the SL partnership is not limited to achieving student learning outcomes; a social justice agenda must be embraced that seeks to address structural inequities (Bahng, 2015). To achieve this agenda, participatory, inclusive democratic engagement must take place. This was not the case for partnerships in this research.

Findings indicate that, similar to other traditional higher education institutions, there was a preference among academic partners to adopt a framework that privileges academic expertise, and faculty were engaged in a traditional SL model that focused on the outcome of the SL experience and not on the process of engagement. When SL is the outcome, partners’ motives become restricted to tangible benefits each side can gain, occurring interactions are not participatory, and reciprocity cannot be

achieved. The community partners' definition of a partnership was linked to current or future access to resources. Each community partner had their own subjective understanding of the partnership. There was no attempt to examine or deconstruct the system of power inequality. In agreement with most literature on community-university partnerships, findings indicated that the benefits were tilted toward the academic partner.

The community respondents' declared motives to engage in the relationship were similar to those surfaced in other literature: extra free labor, technical expertise, and motivation of staff (Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006; Edwards et al., 2001). However, as expected in a context of need, most community respondents valued the relationship beyond the SL project and were motivated by the reputation of the university and the benefits this reputation might bring their organizations (Benson & Harkavy, 2000; Dorado & Giles, 2004; Sandy & Holland, 2006). In a context where public support is limited, partnerships with a credible university can offer legitimacy to community organizations and can enhance the "status and moral authority" of organizations in the area they serve (Boyle & Silver, 2005, p. 246; Smith, 2001).

The interrupted and shallow relationships prevented the creation of safe spaces and functional structures that would allow democratic engagement and power sharing (Bringle et al., 2009; Gerstenblatt, 2014). The existing structures did not provide space and continuity to build trusting relationships, which prevented an open discussion of expectations beyond student engagement (to the extent that these expectations were perceived as rules to abide by and not to question). Authentic relationships are contingent on maintaining continuity and meaningful ongoing interactions (Mitchell, 2008). Diverse and frequent interactions over a prolonged period can bring parties closer and increase trust in the motives behind academia's involvement in the partnership (Bringle et al., 2009; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Interruptions, however, can be perceived as a threat to the relationship and a reminder of partners' distinct needs (Sandmann & Kliewer, 2012). Specifically, they imply that the needs of students and their timelines will determine what community needs can be addressed by the relationship at any given time. The partnerships created reinforced the power imbalance and maintained the powerful position

of the academic partner. Power was held and applied by the academic partner, who possessed the responsibility of initiating and maintaining the partnership.

Relationships do not have to be transformational to be successful. A relationship can be transactional, in which both parties benefit from short-term tasks, but no long-term commitment is occurring or expected (Crockett et al., 2022). This differs from a transformational relationship, in which partners are committed and able to grow and change over time (Clayton et al., 2010). The exchange of benefits taking place can be described as an "exchange" orientation to reciprocity, where each partner's motives lead to varied justifications to sustain the relationship (Dostilio et al., 2012). Given the value community respondents placed on connection with faculty, they were willing to accept the status quo despite existing unequal conditions. Demanding change might risk the relationship, and they were unwilling to take that risk.

Both community organizations and faculty respondents were unable to clearly describe the power dynamics in the relationship since both tended to define power as a "thing or a state," which is too narrow of a definition to capture the complexities of social interactions in which power comes into play (Tew, 2006). Rahnema (1992) cautioned against "manipulated participation" wherein participants, although they do not feel forced into taking any action, are actually led to act in certain ways (Rahnema, 1992, as cited in Osman & Attwood, 2007, p. 18). Tew (2006) wrote about how those who are privileged and possess power may not be conscious of this power or have any intention to "oppress others," just as those in the weaker position may not be aware of the realities of being suppressed beyond a feeling of frustration or blaming the self for not doing a better job. Both "power over" and "power with" can coexist and lead to either productive or negative outputs (Rowlands, 1997). For example, interpersonal relations can offer opportunities for collaboration while simultaneously maintaining a system of inequality in the way they are structured. This could explain why, in this research, community organizations expressed satisfaction with the interpersonal dimension of the partnership despite the relationship with the academic partner being inequitable. It might also explain why the community organizations, who denied any power issues in the relationship,

perceived the freedom to decide whether to remain in the relationship as an indication of equal power among partners.

Foucault (1982) argued that power exists everywhere in the different and changing positions that individuals occupy in their relationships. As such, at any point, individuals in a relationship have the capacity to apply power in ways that can modify the ongoing power dynamic (Golob & Giles, 2013). According to this view, individuals are not free to apply power based on their free will and rational intentions. This is because the power that exists in all interactions and social practices can direct individuals' capacity to make it seem as if they are acting for themselves, when in reality contextual factors force them to act in certain ways (Tew, 2006).

The findings of this research align with this understanding of power. Although influence is one form of power, in this research it was not perceived as a coercive attempt by the faculty partners to control or exert "power over." The absence of coercive power, however, does not exclude the presence of other forms of power being enacted and impacting the relationship. This could explain why faculty members did not attempt to examine the system in place in order to ensure power sharing with their community partner. For example, faculty members did not question or examine the level and extent of community partner engagement in the decision-making process or the extent to which a safe space was created where the community partner could express their concerns. Shefner and Cobb (2002) argued that if the collaboration is "uniting actors with different agendas and power differential" (p. 293), despite good intentions, the difference in power will lead to differential outcomes for the partners. Unless attention is given to the existing power hierarchy, the group with more power will dominate. When academic faculty select a community organization for an SL partnership and assign students to complete an assignment, this allows power to be held with students and the course instructor. Unless SL activities are carefully facilitated, they can unintentionally become "an exercise in patronization" (Pompa, 2002, p. 68).

The findings of this research cannot be interpreted outside the context of a developing country and a collectivist culture. Cultural aspects of the Middle East, in particular Hofstede's cultural difference dimensions of individualism–collectivism and power distance, must be

considered when discussing opportunities for collaboration between community organizations and higher education institutions (Cachia et al., 2020). In a collectivist context, there is more tolerance for power inequality. Power issues are not usually discussed overtly for fear of disrupting social harmony (Dirani, 2006; Jabbara, 1989). It is not surprising for organizations to feel uncomfortable discussing power issues. In fact, respondents did not seem to consider power differential as a significant matter. Being situated in a collectivist culture seemed to impact the acceptance of unequal relationships. Although during the interview community respondents became aware of the inequitable conditions in the relationship, this did not prevent them from justifying and accommodating these conditions. Lebanon is a collectivist culture in which social harmony is favored, making it highly unlikely that an organization would question the practices of the university for fear of disrupting the relationship in place (Khakhar & Rammal, 2013). A collectivist culture values relationship building. The length of the relationship, frequency of interactions, and commitment of its participants will impact how open and transparent discussions become and how close the partners are to one another (Khakhar & Rammal, 2013).

Conclusion

This study is the first in Lebanon and the region to bring into the open a discussion of power and reciprocity within a SL experience. Adopting the critical SL framework (Mitchell, 2008) permitted the exploration of ongoing interactions and the power imbalance in the SL relationship. Introducing culture into the framework further allowed me to interpret and understand the perception of power among partners, which will have implications for how power is discussed and partnerships created and sustained in SL relationships in similar contexts.

The findings of this research indicated that basic collaborations can happen even if they do not meet the components of the conceptual framework, including participatory and relational engagement, transformational relationships (collaborative, reciprocal), and addressing power differentials. However, in such circumstances, these collaborations will not lead to authentic partnerships that can empower community organizations and improve social conditions impacting health in the chosen community. It is also worth noting that although reciprocity can

lead to equitable interchanges, the relationship can “be maintained in inequitable conditions” (Dostilio et al., 2012, p. 22). The faculty is situated in a research university mostly rooted in traditional models of education, wherein researchers are the experts and the university is the entity where knowledge is created. Such models place power and control in the hands of academicians and do not fulfill the expectations of a democratically engaged partnership.

The conceptualization of power by Foucault (1982) has implications for how we think about SL partnerships. The analysis of power relations necessitates clearly identifying factors such as the conditions surrounding the relationship, the objectives of those who are exercising power and their means for doing so, as well as the structures and systems in which power is institutionalized (Foucault, 1982). Awareness of power issues is a first step in beginning to discuss how roles can change and how partners can be brought closer in a relationship.

For community engagement to have its intended impact, the theories and models that inform it must be informed by community development and not solely by learning and teaching research methodologies. For example, CBPR approaches to community-based research methodology, which include concepts of participation, research, and action, embody principles that can inform community-based SL, such as addressing power relations, acknowledging existing assets, making decisions jointly, and reflecting on the process of engagement. These principles can inform community engagement structures to avoid SL charity models that emphasize student learning (Hammersley, 2012). Considering that the nature and frequency of interactions are key for the partnership, faculty must revise the existing SL structures and process of engagement. If partners aspire to transformational relationships, faculty can consider collaboration strategies to help reach such a stage. For example, partners could collaborate to create partnership evaluation tools (Crockett et al., 2022).

Because of the cultural context and existing norms regarding power relations, an open discussion of power issues with a powerful entity will not happen naturally and needs to be planned as part of the partnership building process. Faculty must take responsibility for their role and discuss power dynamics up front with the community partner.

In Lebanon and the region, SL is a young field, and not much research, if any, has been conducted to inform best practices for its implementation. The findings of this research indicated that in a collectivist context in a developing country, partnerships cannot be examined without considering the context and culture in which the relationship is taking place. In relations of power, tensions can arise when the issue of participation is discussed. Participation is a pathway for empowerment but has also been criticized as creating systems of inequality (Hammersley, 2012). Ensuring participation may be challenging in a collectivist context for fear of disrupting the status quo. Mapping the power imbalance and acting to reconfigure it are key to ensuring equity and justice in the partnership (Mitchell & Latta, 2020).

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study was the sample type. I selected my sample purposefully based on a judgment that these community partners could provide rich and relevant information about the partnership experience. Although I conducted interviews with respondents from all community organizations that the faculty had been collaborating with, the fact remained that I interviewed community partners who had collaborated with one faculty in one university. Community partners who have collaborated with other faculties in the university or even other universities could have perceived or experienced partnership differently.

Another possible limitation may have been the context of the interview, which could have highlighted a power asymmetry between the interviewer (myself), who was asking questions (academic partner), and the interviewee, who was providing answers from the community perspective. This power asymmetry had the potential to lead to participant bias whereby respondents may have wanted to present a positive image of the partnership with the university.

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