RESISTING OBLIGATION
How Privileged Adolescents Conceive of Their Responsibilities to Others

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In this mixed-methods study, I found that the majority of 17 and 18-year-old adolescents from a privileged suburban community conceived of themselves as possessing little or no obligation for the well-being of those who are less fortunate. These adolescents offered numerous rationales for this perspective that ranged from a defense of capitalism to the assertion that one's obligations are limited to family and close friends. In order to consider the attitudes of these emerging adults, I drew upon their student writing from a course on social justice issues as well as survey and interview data collected at the start and conclusion of the social justice course. I utilized these data to investigate the reasoning underlying these adolescents' beliefs about obligation.

In his speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Illinois Senator Barack Obama urged his fellow citizens to consider themselves members of a "single American family." He explained that,

> If there's a child on the south side of Chicago who can't read, that matters to me, even if it's not my child. If there's a senior citizen somewhere who can't pay for her prescription and has to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it's not my grandmother. (Obama, 2004)

In these words, Obama echoed the sentiment expressed by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1968) that Americans of all backgrounds and creeds "are caught in an inescapable web of mutuality" (p. 1). Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) has gone even further in his work on cosmopolitanism, arguing that, "We have obligations to others … that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of shared citizenship" (p. xv). According to Appiah, an individual's obligation to others extends even beyond the boundaries of nationhood.

At the foundation of Obama, King, and Appiah's assertions is the belief that the world is a better place when individuals feel a sense of obligation for the well-being of others. However, I describe here a study that found

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many privileged adolescents do not conceive of themselves as possessing such obligations. In this study, I investigated these adolescents' attitudes towards obligation in order to consider the implications for educators and educational institutions responsible for the development of privileged youth.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Supporting Obama, King, and Appiah's claims about the importance of obligation are findings from two classic studies on moral exemplars. First, in their study of German citizens who acted as Holocaust rescuers, Oliner and Oliner (1992) found that the primary characteristic distinguishing rescuers from other German citizens was their capacity for "extensive relationships" (p. 249). By "extensive relationships," the Oliners referred to these rescuers' "stronger sense of attachment to others, and their feeling of responsibility for the welfare of others, including those outside their immediate familial or communal circles" (p. 249). In other words, the German citizens willing to take on the dangerous roles of rescuer and protector *extended* their sense of responsibility beyond their close circle of family and friends.

Colby and Damon (1992) reported similar findings in their study of 23 Americans who exhibited exemplary moral leadership. Specifically, Colby and Damon observed that, "It is not so much that the exemplars' orientation to moral concerns is unusual but that the range of their concerns and the extensiveness of their engagement are exceptionally broad" (p. 303). In other words, what distinguished Colby and Damon's "moral heroes" from ordinary people was not the lengths they were willing to go to aid other people, but rather the fact that they were willing to go to such lengths for individuals outside their close-knit circle of family and friends.

The Oliners (1992) and Colby and Damon (1992) offered important insights on how "moral heroes" conceive of their obligations to others; however, the ways in which "ordinary Americans" conceive of their obligations to others are more complex and contradictory. On a 2003 survey of American political values, almost 70% of Americans agreed that the government has a responsibility to take care of people who cannot take care of themselves (Pew, 2003). Likewise, almost 70% of Americans agreed that the government should guarantee every American citizen enough to eat and a place to sleep (Pew, 2003). At the same time, Wuthnow (1991) reported that 80% of Americans believe a serious problem in the United States is people only looking out for their own selfish interests. Ladd and Bowman (1996) noted that Americans are far more accepting of social inequity than are their European and Asian counterparts, and Miller, Bersoff, and Harwood (1990) reported that men and women in India are significantly more likely than Americans to view "responsiveness to another's needs as an objective obligation" (p. 41). Miller et al. also found that small children in America and India initially held similar beliefs about obligation but that, as these children grew older, Indian children described a deeper sense of obligation to others while American children described a diminished sense of obligation to others.

Because this study focused on a sample of 17 and 18-year-old high school seniors, it is worthwhile to consider the scholarship on the beliefs of America's emerging adults concerning obligation and responsibility. Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, and Korn (2007) reported that 67% of college freshmen in 2006 described helping others who are in difficulty as an objective they considered to be essential or very important. Likewise, 73% of these freshmen indicated their support for universal health care in America, a figure that was significantly higher than the 59% of college freshmen who supported such a plan 20 years earlier in 1986 (Pryor et al., 2007). Finally, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement reported that 78% of the college students surveyed across 12 different college campuses believed themselves to have a responsibility "to get involved

to make things better for society" (Kiesa et al., 2007).

On the other hand, Pryor et al. (2007) reported that only 11% of the freshman class of 2006 was contemplating joining the Peace Corps or AmeriCorps upon graduating from college whereas twice as many freshmen (22%) in the class of 1966 had considered these options 40 years earlier. Also, in response to the statement, "Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now," Pryor et al. (2007) reported that agreement with this statement dropped from 75% in 1976 to 65% in 1996 to 58% in 2006. In other words, over the past 30 years, emerging adults in America have become significantly *more* convinced that the wealthy have a right to keep what they earn.

These data suggest that America's contemporary emerging adults exhibit beliefs about social responsibility that are as complex and contradictory as those demonstrated by older Americans. In order to understand more fully the way in which America's emerging adults conceive of their obligations to others, it is necessary to focus upon a smaller sample of young people and to collect from them richer, "thicker" data (Geertz, 1973). Such was the goal of the study described here.

METHODS

Here, I describe the site and participants involved in this study as well as the data collection and data analytic methods employed.

Site

Glennview, Massachusetts[1] is an upper-middle class suburban community located approximately 15 miles Southwest of Boston with a population of just under 14,000 people (Glennview, 2007). The median family income in Glennview is $98,600, and the median home value is $670,800. Glennview High School enrolls approximately 750 students, and more than 90% will go on to enroll in a 4 year college. Seniors at Glennview High School fulfill their English/language arts requirement by choosing two semester-long courses from among the English department's five course offerings: creative writing, humanities, youth in contemporary literature, African American literature, and literature and justice. The Glennview High School 2006-07 course catalog offered the following description of the literature and justice course:

> In this course students will examine the question, "How do we determine what is just and unjust in the world in which we live?" Topics will include prison policy, juvenile justice, issues of poverty such as homelessness and hunger, and illegal immigration. Students will explore issues of ethics, justice, and obligation to others through various fiction and nonfiction works.

As is made evident in the short course description above, Literature and Justice sought to expose students to social issues such as poverty, prisons, homelessness, and racism as well as to various political and philosophical perspectives on addressing these issues. Typically, students were assigned to read several different pieces about a particular social issue for homework and then debated the various perspectives expressed in these assigned pieces the following day in class. A copy of the literature and justice syllabus is available online as Appendix A at http://scottseider.googlepages.com/resistingobligation.doc

One unit of Literature and Justice focused on global poverty and moral obligation. During this unit, literature and justice participants compared the infant mortality rates of various countries around the world; studied the "hunger profiles" of several different nations contending with hunger problems; watched a *60 Minutes* documentary on malaria in Tanzania; and learned about the efforts of an innovative antipoverty organization called Heifer International. Finally, students read essays by utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer (1999) and objectivist philosopher Ayn Rand (1964) on the issue of obligation to the less fortunate;

debated the opposing viewpoints of these two philosophers; and concluded the unit by writing their own "philosophies of obligation."

Participants

This study's sample consisted of the 40 Glennview High School seniors enrolled in two sections of the literature and justice class during the 2006-2007 school year. All 40 students were high school seniors from the town of Glennview. There were 21 males in the sample and 19 females. All 40 identified as white. Additionally, 2 students identified themselves as "upper class"; 18 identified as "upper middle class"; and 20 identified themselves as belonging to the middle class. In terms of religious affiliation, 25 of these students identified as Catholic; 5 as Protestant; 3 as Jewish; 2 as Muslim; 2 as "other" and 3 as unaffiliated. All students in this chapter are referred to by pseudonyms.

From these 40 participants, I selected a purposeful subset of 10 students to participate in interviews at the beginning and conclusion of the literature and justice course (Maxwell, 1996). In selecting these 10 students, I strove to achieve maximum variation by constructing an interview pool that was diverse in terms of gender and religious affiliation (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Within this subgroup, there were 6 males and 4 females, all of whom identified as White. One student identified as upper class; 6 as upper middle-class; and 3 as middle-class. Four of these students identified as Catholic; 2 as Protestant; 2 as Jewish; 1 as "other" (Wicca) and one as unaffiliated.

Data Collection

I surveyed all 40 participants at the start of the fall semester in mid-September and again at the conclusion of the fall semester in late January. The survey consisted of questions intended to ascertain students' attitudes on the various social issues considered in the literature and justice course: criminal justice, homelessness, poverty, humanitarian aid, immigration, education and the environment. Each of the survey items utilized Likert scales in which a "1" represented strong disagreement and a "7" represented strong agreement with the given statement. The survey items themselves were adapted from items on more than 15 existing surveys including the American Values Survey (Center for American Values, 2006); World Values Survey Questionnaire (Institute for Social Research, 2002); Americans on Foreign Aid and Hunger (Program on International and Policy Attitudes, 2001); and International IEA Civic Education Study (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 1999). A copy of this study's survey tool is available online at http://scottseider.googlepages.com/resistingobligation.doc as Appendix B.

I also collected copies of all written assignments completed by students participating in Literature and Justice. Most relevant to this study was the 3–4 page "philosophy of obligation" essay completed by 38 Glennview seniors in literature and justice. This writing assignment was submitted for a grade as the concluding assessment of the course's unit on world hunger and global poverty. In this assignment, students were asked to articulate the objectivist and utilitarian perspectives on obligation and then to explain their own beliefs about whether (and to what extent) individuals possess a responsibility for the less fortunate. Two Glennview seniors (among the 40 in the sample) failed to complete this assignment.

I also selected a diverse group of 10 Glennview seniors enrolled in literature and justice to participate in in-depth interviews. I interviewed each student twice in order to allow for prolonged engagement with each subject (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The first interview took place at the start of the fall semester in mid-September, and the second interview took place at the conclusion of the Fall semester in late January. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. A copy of the interview protocol is available online as

Appendix C at http//scottseider.googlepages.com/resistingobligation.doc.

Finally, I conducted 13 observations of the literature and justice class. Conducting a classroom observation entailed recording the subject matter discussed during the class period as well as scripting the comments, questions and observations offered by the course's instructor and students.

Measures

As described above, this study's survey tool investigated students' attitudes towards a number of different social issues raised by the literature and justice curriculum: criminal justice, homelessness, domestic poverty, humanitarian aid, immigration, education, and the environment. To consider the core underlying constructs tapped by the survey items in each of these sections, I conducted principal components analyses (PCA) on this study's pretreatment survey data regarding attitudes towards each of these topics. The results of these PCA's are shown in Table 1 of this article's appendices. For each of these social issues, the PCA indicated that one key construct appeared to be measured by the survey items about each of these social issues. I formed composites representing students' attitudes towards each of these seven social issues that showed good internal consistency reliability (see Table 1 for the Cronbach's for each composite). Like the survey items that make up these composites, each composite was measured along a 7-point Likert scale in which a "1" represented strong disagreement and a "7" represented strong agreement with a social justice orientation towards the particular social issue.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The transcripts from all 20 interviews with Literature and Justice participants (two interviews apiece) were coded using etic and emic codes drawn from the scholarship on adolescent development, emerging adulthood, civic engagement, and social justice education. I checked the reliability of my codebook and coding process by enlisting a colleague from the Harvard Graduate School of Education trained in qualitative methods to code 20% of the student interviews. In comparing our inter-rater reliability, we achieved a Cohen's Kappa (unweighted) of .85, which is considered to be a "very good" strength of agreement (Fleiss, 1981).

Upon completing the coding and categorizing of the transcribed interviews, I constructed matrices that juxtaposed the themes and patterns emerging from the data with the relevant scholarship (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I also developed narrative profiles for all 10 students who participated in qualitative interviews

Similar to the analysis of these interview transcripts, the student work completed by all 40 literature and justice participants and my field notes from 13 observations of the literature and justice class were coded using etic and emic codes. I then grouped these codes into categories in order to allow patterns, themes and analytic questions to emerge (Maxwell, 1996). The multiple types of qualitative data collected and analyzed in this study—interviews, student work, and classroom observations—allowed for triangulation of data (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Such triangulation allowed for comparison of students' *descriptions* of their beliefs and attitudes against the work they produced as members of the literature and justice class as well as my own observations of their learning processes in the literature and justice class itself.

Quantitative Data Analysis

I began my quantitative analysis by fitting a logistic regression model to consider the relationship between students' dichotomous beliefs about obligation (OBLIGATION) and their initial attitudes (PREATTITUDE) toward the composites for criminal justice, homelessness, immigration, poverty, humanitarian aid, educational equity, and the environment. I

included in this taxonomy independent variables that controlled for any confounding effects of students' gender (GENDER), religiosity (RELIGIOUS), class status (CLASS), and academic achievement (GRADES). I also considered the interaction between these demographic variables and students' initial attitudes towards the various social issues (PREATTITUDE). I relied upon Generalized Linear Hypothesis (GLH) testing of each model's -2LL statistic to arrive at a final model. These taxonomies of fitted models can be found in Table 2 in this article's appendices.

RESULTS

Interviews with literature and justice participants and analyses of their student work revealed that the majority believed affluent individuals to bear little or no responsibility for the wellbeing of those who are less fortunate. Here, I draw upon several different sources of data— in-depth interviews, initial and follow-up surveys, student work and classroom observations—to report on these emerging adults' beliefs about obligation and social responsibility.

Key Finding #1: Interviews with Students

In two rounds of qualitative interviews with 10 Glennview seniors enrolled in literature and justice, I found that 7 of these students rejected the idea that affluent individuals bear an obligation or responsibility for those who are less fortunate. For example, Dan explained during his follow-up interview in January that, "I think it's a great thing if you help out homeless people, but that's not like your responsibility." With this comment, Dan echoed the perspective he had expressed at the beginning of the school year that, "I think it (homelessness) is mostly the problem of the person. Like they probably grew up in a tough situation, but it's up to them to fight through their problems and like work hard and get through life." Another student, Jonny, made a similar point in January when he observed that, "It should be 100% encouraged by the business world and society to give money to people in need, but it should not be frowned upon if one decides not to." This perspective, too, was consistent with Jonny's explanation at the beginning of the school year that. He explained:

> Responsibility kind of implies that it would be wrong for them (wealthy people) to not [help poorer people], and I don't think it would be wrong for them. It's not their responsibility to help anyone else but themselves, their family, and their friends.

Michelle added:

> A wealthy family who loves spending money on like luxuries and 20 million cars that they don't even drive, I think they can afford to donate some money to charity or whatever, but you can't really say what people are supposed to do with their own money because it's their money they worked hard for. So it's kind of tough to say stuff like that.

Finally, Frank seemed to sum up the attitudes expressed by the majority of his classmates when he noted, "I think that it's not so much a responsibility as it is an act of goodwill." He continued:

> An obligation. I mean that's a strong word that describes that people have to do things. We have the choices to do good things. And a lot of times people do good things—I'm not downplaying the value of those at all—but I feel that if someone really doesn't want to give money to someone, they don't have to.

In contrast to these perspectives, three of the Literature and Justice students who participated in qualitative interviews asserted that affluent individuals *do* bear some obligation to those in need. For example, Annie offered the following explanation in her January interview:

> I definitely think there's a responsibility. I mean, if you have the resources to help other people, then I think you should…. Yes, people are entitled to have luxuries if they earn them, so you shouldn't be expected to give [away] like everything. But, if you can help, you should.

Andrew added the following perspective:

> I think there is a responsibility because if people on top didn't give to the people on the bottom of the world, then we wouldn't have a middle class, kind of. It would just be the rich and the poor. And like the rich would have a very extravagant life, and the poor would have terrible lives. So, I think the way things are set up it's almost like a necessity to have the rich give back.

Finally, Richie expressed agreement with Annie and Andrew's perspective but also sounded a cynical note about the attitudes and actions of affluent individuals. He explained:

> I'd say they're very much obligated to do it (help those who are less fortunate). But whether or not they follow through on that obligation is a completely different story because I mean most rich families don't think about people below them, I think. It's more—how can I get myself even richer?

In this sample of 10 privileged adolescents, then, the clear majority described the affluent as possessing little responsibility for the less fortunate while a small minority of these adolescents believed affluent individuals do possess such obligations. In order to consider more closely the divergent perspectives of these two sets of students, I turned to the larger sample's beliefs about obligation as laid out in their "philosophy of obligation" essays.

Key Finding #2: Perspectives on Obligation

Of the 38 Glennview High seniors who completed the "philosophy of obligation" writing assignment, 13 (34%) expressed their belief that affluent citizens possess a responsibility for the wellbeing of those who are less fortunate. Twenty-five Glennview seniors (66%) argued that no such obligation exists. That said, it should be noted that I have included within the "obligation" group any student who described *any obligation at all* to support those in need. For example, one Glennview senior, Jordan, wrote:

> The only people who are obligated to help others in need are those who can easily afford to help. What this means is that if someone is a multi-millionaire, then that person should have no problem with giving away some of his or her money to charity.

In these words, Jordan restricted the burden of obligation to the very wealthiest of Americans, perhaps the top tenth of one percent of income earners. Nonetheless, Jordan was counted among the 13 students who cited an obligation to support others because he did state that an obligation for others exists in some circumstances.

Several other students who cited an obligation to help others set the bar very low in terms of the *size* of this obligation. Kelly, for example, wrote that, "Everyone should be obligated to donate some portion of his or her salary whether it is five dollars or thirty-thousand dollars." Here, Kelly unequivocally cited an obligation to help others but expressed her belief that this obligation can be met by as little as a $5 annual donation.

The Glennview senior who described the strongest sense of obligation to others was Annie. In her philosophy of obligation assignment, Annie wrote:

> If you are planning to buy yourself a $1,000 high definition plasma screen TV even though your current TV works fine, you should buy yourself that TV and then donate $500 to charity. If you have enough money to spend $1,000, you would also be able to afford to give up $500. Or even better, you could wait to buy the TV until a year later when it wouldn't be as expensive, and then donate the extra money you saved.

Among this study's participants, Annie was unique in arguing that the purchases of luxury

items should be considered in the context of other, more altruistic ways in which such money could be spent.

Key Finding #3: Perspectives on Lack of Obligation

While 13 of the Glennview seniors in literature and justice described a sense of obligation to the less fortunate, almost twice as many students asserted that individuals have *no* obligation or responsibility to help others in need. These privileged adolescents offered several different explanations for this perspective.

Keep What You Earn

Nine Glennview seniors argued that wealthy Americans have worked hard to earn their money and therefore have no responsibility to spend their hard-earned dollars on others. For example, Lauren wrote that, "People work to earn money, and it should be up to their discretion how they wish to spend it…. If that means not giving any money to foreign aid, then so be it." Lucy added emphatically:

> If someone wants to buy a new car, they should. If someone wants to redecorate their house, they should, and if they need a suit, get it. They work for their money and they have the right to spend it on themselves.

Karen explained that, "The American population should not have to live without privileges just to help others." A final example comes from an article by Douglas who argued that, "We work too hard to attain our own goals to worry about people in need in other countries; helping could interfere with our own goals." Interestingly, Douglas added later in his article that, "You should not be punished for working hard and living in the United States." It would seem that Douglas perceived an obligation to help the less fortunate as an unfair "punishment" of the wealthy.

Focus on Family and Friends

Eight other students asserted that a moral obligation to help those in need extended only to one's family, not to strangers. As Julie explained:

> An individual person has two obligations in their life. One is to themselves, and the other is to their family. A person must take care of themselves and their family before worrying about anyone else. No one is obligated to donate their hard earned money or time to anyone else.

Here, Julie expressed her philosophical belief that an individual's responsibilities extended no further than the family unit. Several other students echoed Julie's thoughts. For example, Evan explained that, "There is no reason to be giving away money that I have worked hard for to people I don't know." Likewise, Frank argued that, "To say one is obligated to help strangers is nonsensical because they never owed the person anything to begin with." Perhaps the student who expressed this sentiment most strongly was Brittany. She wrote:

> People work hard to earn a living and make money to provide for themselves and their family members, not to give money away to others who have no importance to them and their lives. Hence the point in having large income jobs. People do not have an obligation to just give or perhaps throw away their money like that.

Brittany's use of the phrase "throw away their money" to describe charitable contributions was a particularly vehement (and negative) reaction to the question of whether affluent individuals possess any responsibility for the wellbeing of others.

Defending Capitalism

Four other Literature and Justice students argued against an individual's responsibility to help others by citing the merits of capitalism. One student, George, explained that, "The only logical way to better human life is to form

a competitive environment, where some people will win and others will lose." Another student, Nathan, argued that a world in which the affluent take responsibility for others at the expense of their own luxuries "is absurd and would cripple the capitalist country that is the United States." A third student, Kiernan, theorized that a world in which the affluent assume responsibility for the poor would be "ridiculous." He wrote that, "Although it would make the world a better, more equal place, it is extremely unrealistic. It is like a little kid buying a pack of candy, keeping one piece, and giving the rest away. It just doesn't happen." In these words, Kiernan acknowledged that a world in which obligations to others exist would not only be a "more equal place" but also a "better" world. However, Kiernan dismissed such a possibility as counter to basic human motivations.

Moral Freedom

Two students—Kathryn and Jennifer—offered a somewhat different perspective than the rest of their classmates in arguing that they had no right to offer judgments about the obligations of others. Kathryn explained, "There is no black and white universal code for everyone." She believed, instead, that, "It is better to accept that everyone has a different view on the issue, and all people are entitled to follow their own beliefs." In these words, Kathryn offered a perspective that Wolfe (2001) referred to as a belief in "moral freedom." Jennifer offered a similar perspective in arguing for a relativistic morality in which affluent individuals must decide for themselves the appropriate degree of responsibility to others. Specifically, Jennifer wrote that affluent individuals should rely upon their "gut" and "conscience" to inform their decisions about the "right thing to do." Both of these students are categorized within the "no obligation to others" camp, then, because they declared equally valid a perspective that called for tremendous responsibility to the less fortunate and one that called for *no* responsibility at all

Key Finding #4: Initial Differences in Worldview

An important question about the findings presented thus far is whether the adolescents in this study began Literature and Justice with solidly formed beliefs about moral obligation or whether they were strongly influenced by their study of this topic. Recall that participants in this study completed surveys about their attitudes towards a variety of social issues at the beginning and conclusion of the Literature and Justice course. When I compared the initial attitudes of the 13 Glennview seniors who cited an obligation to help others to those of the 25 Glennview seniors who cited no such obligation, I found statistically significant differences between these two sets of students on the composites for three of the seven social issues covered by the survey.

Specifically, logistic regression revealed that (after controlling for a students' academic achievement) the fitted odds that a Glennview senior would cite an obligation to help others was 4.2 times the fitted odds for a student whose initial empathy and support for the homeless was one unit less on the composite of attitudes towards homelessness ($p < .02$, see Table 2A for results of GLH test). Put more simply, there was a statistically significant (positive) relationship between students' initial empathy for the homelessness and their likelihood of citing an obligation to help others.

A similar relationship existed between students' beliefs about obligation and their initial attitudes towards poverty. Specifically, after controlling for students' academic achievement, the fitted odds that a Glennview senior would cite an obligation to help others was 5.1 times the fitted odds for a student whose initial empathy and support for those contending with poverty was one unit less on the composite of attitudes towards poverty ($p < .005$, see Table 2B for results of GLH test). In other words, there was a statistically significant (positive) relationship between students' initial empathy towards those contending with poverty and

their likelihood of citing an obligation to help others.

Finally, logistic regression revealed that (after controlling for students' academic achievement) the fitted odds that a Glennview senior would cite an obligation to help others was 3.26 times the fitted odds for a student whose initial support for humanitarian aid was one unit less on the composite of attitudes towards humanitarian aid ($p < .03$, see Table 2C for results of GLH test). Put more simply, there was a statistically significant (positive) relationship between students' initial support for humanitarian aid and their likelihood of citing an obligation to help others.

In short, then, a relationship exists between Glennview students' beliefs about obligation and their initial attitudes towards the poor, homeless, and those in need of humanitarian aid; however, logistic regression revealed that students' beliefs about obligation were not significantly predicted by their initial attitudes towards criminal justice, immigration, educational equity or environmental issues. The means and standard deviations for students' initial and posttreatment attitudes on all of these composites can be found in Table 3.

Key Finding #5: Field Notes on Pedagogical Neutrality

In an interview, the Literature and Justice instructor, Mrs. Allington,[2] explained that she considered her role to be closer to that of moderator than lecturer. Specifically, she explained that, "It's my intention to keep my views to myself as they relate to these [social] issues." According to Mrs. Allington, although students in literature and justice often questioned her about her views on a particular issue, they had difficulty determining when she was expressing a personal viewpoint and when she was playing "devil's advocate." The comments of the 10 students who participated in qualitative interviews underscored this perspective. In their follow-up interviews at the conclusion of literature and justice, 9 students explicitly rejected the possibility that the course had attempted to push a particular viewpoint upon them. For example, Jonny explained that, "Mrs. Allington never once said this is how you are supposed to feel or this is how I feel, and that is what is good about the class." Likewise, Brendan noted, "She would never really tell us her opinion. She'd always just play devil's advocate."

My field notes across 13 different classroom observations also supported Mrs. Allington's claim that she both offered her students multiple perspectives on social issues and generally withheld her own beliefs on these issues. For example, in my field notes from a classroom observation conducted on December 21, 2006, Mrs. Allington asked her students comprehension questions to ensure that they understood the previous night's reading from Ayn Rand's *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964):

ALLINGTON:	According to Rand, helping other people can interfere with your own goals. How?
Student #1:	It can stop you from making money.
Student #2:	Might need to put your own goals on hold to help someone else first.
Student #3:	What if your goal was to help others?
ALLINGTON:	What would Rand say to that?
Student #3:	She'd say you have low self-esteem.
ALLINGTON:	Rand says we have a responsibility to ourselves. If we are concerned with helping strangers, we threaten our own morality. What does that mean?
Student #4:	If you really want to help others, do what you really should be doing.
ALLINGTON:	She says love and friendship are profoundly personal, selfish values. She says sacrifices for those you love are selfish. How?
Student #5:	Selfish because you're doing it to help yourself.

In this dialogue, Mrs. Allington practiced what Simon (2001) referred to as "pedagogical

neutrality." She worked to ensure that her students understood the thrust of objectivist Ayn Rand's philosophy rather than offering her opinion on the philosophy itself.

Likewise, my field notes revealed Mrs. Allington to be practicing pedagogical neutrality in a class held on December 18th. Students spent the first half of the class period watching a *Sixty Minutes* documentary about the prevalence of malaria in Tanzania. My field notes below recorded the discussion that followed the documentary:

ALLINGTON: So just to reiterate, what's causing the deaths [in Tanzania]?
Student #1: The main reason is poverty.
ALLINGTON: Anyone remember how much they spend on healthcare per person in Tanzania?
Student #2: $2 a day.
ALLINGTON: What causes diarrhea/hunger?
Student #3: Mothers only have time to feed their children once a day.
ALLINGTON: What else?
Student #4: Lack of clean water.
ALLINGTON: All our water is highly filtered, but we'd get sick if we just drank from a nearby lake or river.
ALLINGTON: What was the average income in Tanzania?
Whole Class (in unison): $250 a year.
ALLINGTON: What would it take to fix some of those health problems?
Student #5: $20 million dollars. $5 per kid a year.
ALLINGTON: What did the Red Sox sign their new pitcher for?
Student #6: $100 million.
ALLINGTON: Interesting that in the film they juxtaposed hunger and the military.
ALLINGTON: Why doesn't hunger get more media attention?
Student #7: Makes people feel bad. The tiniest water fountain could be like their holy grail. Makes me feel bad, spoiled.

In this dialogue, it is worth noting that Mrs. Allington's pedagogical neutrality seemed to slip a bit at the tail end of the question-and-answer session. Specifically, her question about the salary of a pitcher for the Boston Red Sox seemed to reveal her belief that more aid could be directed towards struggling countries such as Tanzania. These excerpts from my field notes, however, offer a sense of the pedagogically neutral teaching style and atmosphere that students generally experienced in literature and justice.

DISCUSSION

When de Tocqueville (1835/2000) visited America in the early 1800s, he praised Americans for simultaneously maintaining a deep belief in individualism and a commitment to the public good. However, in their study of commitment in American life, Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) reported that Americans now speak a "first language" of personal goals and ambitions and only a "second language" of moral and social obligations. Supporting this claim is scholarship that found contemporary Americans to be significantly less likely than Europeans, Asians, and Indians to treat alleviation of another's needs as an objective obligation (Ladd & Bowman, 1996: Miller et al., 1990).

In seeking to account for different conceptions of obligation across different cultures, Shweder (1990) argued that there exist three different ethical frameworks upon which individuals and cultures typically structure their beliefs: ethics of autonomy, ethics of community, and ethics of divinity. According to Shweder, an ethic of autonomy places an individual's rights and liberties at the center of its belief system while an ethic of community prioritizes the individual's roles and responsibilities as a family member and community member. Finally, an ethic of divinity prioritizes the beliefs and values espoused by a particular religious authority. To use Shweder's framework, then, de Tocqueville (1835/2000)

expressed his admiration for Americans' ability to hold both an ethic of autonomy *and* an ethic of community; however, Bellah et al. (1985) asserted that, in the contemporary United States, the ethic of autonomy has become the predominant belief system. The philosophies of obligation offered by the majority of the 38 adolescents in this study support Bellah et al.'s claim. Certainly a sample size of 40 limits the generalizability of the findings reported in this article; however, the beliefs expressed by this study's 40 young adults unquestionably warrant further study of how privileged adolescents conceive of their obligations to others.

It is, of course, possible (perhaps even likely) that the lack of social responsibility described by the majority of the Glennview seniors in this study is indicative of their current developmental phase rather than the perspective they will maintain throughout their lives. Arnett (2004) has characterized emerging adulthood—the developmental phase at which the Glennview seniors in this study are on the cusp— as the most "self-focused" age of life. Consumed with their friends, schoolwork, college applications, future career choices, and prospect of leaving home, these young people may simply have been too focused upon the upheaval in their own lives to contemplate their obligations to others. Evidence for such a possibility lies in the responses of the 10 young adults interviewed for this study about what in their lives they currently found to be meaningful. Four of these young adults cited school as the most meaningful aspect of their lives, noting that school is "shaping my future" and "will determine what kinds of jobs I can get." Two students cited family and friends as "constant support systems," and 2 students were unable to offer an aspect of their lives they currently found meaningful.

Only two of the 10 students who participated in interviews described as meaningful an interaction with individuals outside their orbit of family, friends, and teachers. Specifically, Dan described as meaningful the community service he participated in alongside his Armenian American family at a local Armenian nursing home. Likewise, Richie cited a trip he had taken with his church youth group to post-Katrina Mississippi to help rebuild houses destroyed by the hurricane. Aside from these two examples, however, the 10 high school seniors interviewed for this study were deeply focused upon the family, friends, and teachers with whom they interacted daily when it came to describing meaningful aspects of their lives. Research by Arnett (2004) suggests that such a worldview may be entirely typical (and temporary) during the "self-focused" period of emerging adulthood. However, an America in which emerging adulthood is characterized by little concern for those outside one's daily orbit remains a cause for alarm. Arnett also characterizes emerging adulthood as the period of life during which individuals typically embark upon the career pathways that will influence the rest of their lives. Possessing a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others seems crucial for young adults to aspire to positions such as teacher, public defender, community organizer, social worker, and doctor.

Moreover, America, like many nations, has depended historically upon its college campuses to raise the voice of protest against injustice. It is often college students who have the time, idealism, autonomy, and freedom from financial constraints to raise the cry of injustice on behalf of those who might otherwise not be heard (McAdam, 1988). The impetus to advocate for the world's most marginalized citizens, however, requires a sense of care and responsibility for the well-being of such groups and individuals. If the Glennview seniors in this study, and other privileged adolescents like them, enter college with a sense of social responsibility that extends no further than their family and friends, many battles against injustice will cease to be fought.

As a result of this alarming possibility, political leaders and scholars holding a diverse range of ideologies have called upon parents, schools and communities to explicitly educate

their children about the responsibilities and values of good citizenship. Oliner and Oliner (1992) concluded their study of Holocaust rescuers with the assertion that, "Schools need to become institutions that not only prepare students for academic competence, but also help them to acquire an extensive orientation to others" (p. 258). They argued that such preparation "can not only help individuals resist the destructive impulses in society but also empower them to accept the obligation to do so" (p. 258). Likewise, conservative commentator David Brooks (2001) has criticized American parents and educators for becoming "tongue-tied and hesitant when it comes to what makes for a virtuous life" (p. 50). He wonders why parents and educators are perfectly willing to guide and regulate the lives of young people in virtually every domain, "but when it comes to character and virtue, the most mysterious area of all, suddenly the laissez-faire ethic rules" (p. 53).

In the nineteenth century, the final graduation requirement at many American universities was a "capstone course" on moral philosophy taken during a student's final semester of university and often taught by the university's president (McClellan, 2001). Rather than assuming a position of pedagogical neutrality, these capstone courses explicitly sought to teach students that responsibilities and obligations accompany the privilege of education. Today, in a world where college freshmen cite increasing one's earning power as the primary role of a college education and privileged high schoolers conceive of themselves as possessing little responsibility for the less fortunate, perhaps educational institutions at both the secondary and postsecondary levels would do well to cap off their students' academic careers in a similar fashion (Pryor et al., 2007).

The findings from this study make it clear that the curriculum and pedagogy of such capstone courses would require significant reflection and consideration in order to have the desired effect upon students' commitment to social responsibility. Nonetheless, working to deepen young Americans' sense of responsibility for others is an imperative goal towards which to strive. Not to do so risks allowing the inscription on the Statue of Liberty—"Send these the homeless, tempest-tossed to me"—to become an historical remnant rather than a pledge renewed by each ensuing generation (Lazarus, 1883).

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NOTES

1. A pseudonym
2. A pseudonym

APPENDICES

TABLE 1

Results of Principal Components Analysis on Pre-Course Survey Data (N = 40)

	Principal Components Analysis		
	Eigenvalue	*Variance*	*Cronbach's*
Attitudes Towards Education Equity Composite	2.14	54%	.70
Attitudes Towards Homelessness Composite	5.68	57%	.91
Attitudes Towards Humanitarian Aid Composite	2.62	53%	.76
Attitudes Towards Poverty Composite	2.88	58%	.81
Attitudes Towards Immigration Composite	2.44	61%	.78
Attitudes Towards Criminal Justice Composite	1.85	46%	.59
Attitudes Towards the Environment Composite	2.17	72%	.81

TABLE 2

Table 2A: *Taxonomy of Nested Logistic Regression Models That Display the Fitted Relationship Between Whether a Glennview Senior Describes an Obligation to Help Others as a Function of his/her Initial Attitudes Towards Homelessness (n = 40)*

Predictor	*Model 1*	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*	*Model 6*	*Model 7*
Intercept	−.65~	−4.60*	−5.61*	−3.60*	8.11	4.96	21.86~
INITIALHOMELESSATT		.89*	1.02*	.96*	.77~	1.42*	−2.95
GENDER			.73				
RELIGIOUS				−.73			
CLASS					−12.3		
GRADES						−4.28*	−10.82*
INITIALHOMELESS x GRADES							1.64
−2LL	48.824	42.096	41.299	40.08	39.77	29.09	27.24
AIC	50.824	46.096	47.299	46.08	45.77	35.09	35.24
Odds Ratio Estimates		2.42	2.77	2.61	2.15	4.15	.05

~ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

TABLE 2B

Taxonomy of Nested Logistic Regression Models That Display the Fitted Relationship Between Whether a Glennview Senior Describes an Obligation to Help Others as a Function of his/her Initial Attitudes Towards Poverty (n = 40)

Predictor	*Model 1*	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*	*Model 6*	*Model 7*
Intercept	−.65~	−5.82**	−8.19**	−4.82*	6.88	4.13	−141.2
INITIALPOVERTYATT		1.25**	1.62**	1.41**	1.15*	1.62**	54.76
GENDER			1.48				
RELIGIOUS				-.90			
CLASS					−12.43		
GRADES						−4.11*	44.58
INITIALPOVERTY x GRADES							−17.77
−2LL	48.82	37.62	35.10	35.00	35.06	25.47	23.19
AIC	50.82	41.62	41.10	41.00	41.06	31.47	31.19
Odds Ratio Estimates		3.49	5.05	4.11	3.17	5.05	>1000

~ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

TABLE 2C

Taxonomy of Nested Logistic Regression Models That Display the Fitted Relationship Between Whether a Glennview Senior Describes an Obligation to Help Others as a Function of his/her Initial Attitudes Towards Foreign Aid (n = 40)

Predictor	*Model 1*	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*	*Model 6*	*Model 7*
Intercept	−.65~	−3.19~	2.39~	−2.27	9.95	5.27	−51.32
INITIALFOREIGNATT		.55	.69	.57	.48	1.18*	19.25
GENDER			.57				
RELIGIOUS				−.57			
CLASS					−13.04		
GRADES						−4.11**	14.99
INITIALFOREIGN x GRADES							−6.07
−2LL	48.82	46.52	46.02	45.16	42.59	32.23	31.38
AIC	50.82	50.52	52.02	51.16	48.59	38.23	39.38
Odds Ratio Estimates		1.72	2.001	1.77	1.63	3.26	>1000

~ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

TABLE 3
Initial and Follow-Up Mean Attitudes of "Obligation" and "No Obligation" Students on Social Issues

Table 3A: *Summary Statistics for Initial Mean Attitudes of Literature and Justice Students (N =40)*

	Students Who Cite No Obligation to Help Others	*Students Who Cite An Obligation to Help Others*
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*
Education Equity Composite	4.02 (1.23)	4.65 (1.10)
Humanitarian Aid Composite	4.39 (.99)	4.91 (1.05)
Homelessness Composite	3.96 (1.06)	4.95 (1.19)
Poverty Composite	3.53 (1.02)	4.75 (1.00)
Immigration Composite	3.78 (1.47)	4.56 (1.03)
Criminal Justice Composite	4.13 (.94)	4.68 (.87)
Environment Composite	5.17 (1.02)	5.56 (.86)

TABLE 3B
Summary Statistics for Follow-Up Mean Attitudes of Literature and Justice Students ($N = 40$)

	Students Who Cite No Obligation to Help Others	*Students Who Cite An Obligation to Help Others*
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*
Education Equity Composite	3.15 (1.15)	4.21 (1.22)
Humanitarian Aid Composite	3.73 (1.22)	4.91 (.92)
Homelessness Composite	3.48 (1.07)	4.73 (1.01)
Poverty Composite	3.68 (1.06)	4.93 (.65)
Immigration Composite	2.74 (1.32)	4.06 (1.20)
Criminal Justice Composite	3.94 (1.11)	4.75 (.80)
Environment Composite	4.92 (1.50)	5.46 (.88)

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