

1 INTRODUCTION

2 Service-learning programs are increasingly adopted in medical education curricula as they
3 have been shown to develop skills beyond that usually acquired in the classroom, such as
4 communication, empathy, and professionalism; skills which have much bearing on their
5 future career as health professionals.^{1,2} The traditional service learning approach has largely
6 adopted the charity model, without much thought to the structural factors that perpetuate
7 these situations of inequality. Thus the charity model is criticized for being patronizing, and a
8 form of forced-volunteerism. In fact it only serves to sustain the currently existing
9 hierarchical relationship between those serving and those being served, perpetuating the state
10 of inequitable social distribution.³

11 It was noted by Mitchell⁴ that without deeper reflection and examination of the root
12 causes of social imbalance, service learning programs seem to provide no benefit beyond
13 making students feel good about themselves. As such there is currently a move toward
14 critical service learning or the change model, which seeks to remove the inequalities that
15 create the circumstances of need; ultimately removing the need for service altogether. To
16 illustrate the difference between the two approaches - a service learning approach might
17 encourage students to conduct fund-raising activities for the poor, while social awareness
18 urges students to scrutinize the political and economic decisions that created these social
19 imbalances to begin with.⁴

20 The first step toward adopting this approach is by having a discussion on privilege and
21 oppression. The issue of privilege arises where certain parties or groups are denied things
22 which are of value because of the group they belong to.⁵ Students involved in service
23 learning programs are generally from more privileged backgrounds compared to the
24 communities they serve, creating an asymmetrical relationship between the students and the
25 communities they are serving.⁶ Often, coming from a state of privilege has led students to

26 adopt an us-them mentality; and form negative stereotypes of the communities they serve.
27 Indeed the ‘who is to blame’ mind-set is pervasive among those doing the ‘serving’,
28 assuming that the entire situation of those ‘served’ was predetermined by their
29 socioeconomic background, race, gender etc. These preconceived notions may then interfere
30 with their interaction with the populations served by these organizations.⁷

31 A study by Chiznik et al discovered that there is a connection between how students
32 view themselves and how they view others, in that if students have a simplistic view of
33 themselves, they would apply the same understanding to others.⁷ Thus it is imperative for
34 students to critically reflect on having advantages simply because of the group they belong to
35 i.e. the privileged one⁸, so that they are cognizant of structural factors that are present in
36 situations of inequality; and do not attribute the inequalities to behavioural, personal, or
37 psychological problems.^{9,10}

38 Students should not be blinded to the current status quo and view it as acceptable or the
39 norm, but instead realise it is a problem and question it⁴; and only by first acknowledging
40 their own state of privilege will they be able to tackle the current systems of inequality.⁸ As
41 noted by Green, a thorough examination and discussion on issues that bring about privilege
42 such as race or class, is essential in order to avoid further perpetuating the states of
43 imbalance, which created the need for service learning to begin with.¹¹ This has been echoed
44 by others who support discussions on privilege being front and centre.^{12,13}

45 This situation is particularly relevant to students enrolled in a Community Engagement
46 Elective (CEE) unit, which is offered to year-3 undergraduate Pharmacy students in a local
47 private university; where students are attached to various non-governmental organizations
48 (NGOs) and undertake activities such as fundraising; and giving health-related talks ~~among~~
49 ~~others~~. Further details on this unit can be found elsewhere.¹⁴ In this CEE unit, there is little
50 diversity in race and social class; and most students come from middle to high-income

51 backgrounds. The majority of students have also never had any personal experience with
52 oppression and inequality, and have never been exposed to underprivileged communities.
53 This can prove disastrous as when faced with issues of privilege for the first time, students
54 feel uncomfortable, out of their element, and experience periods of disequilibrium³; often
55 displaying feelings of guilt, anger, and shame. This can then impede effective engagement
56 with the organizations they are attached to,¹¹ and as such it is equally important to identify
57 and address any negative emotions students may feel with regard to privilege and oppression,
58 as this will help students engage more effectively.

59 We thus conducted a Privilege Walk Activity (PWA)⁹, with the purpose of bringing
60 about an awareness of privilege and making students realize that privilege and oppression
61 interlock, and that both have most likely affected each one of them in one way or another;
62 both positively and negatively. This activity, introduced by McIntosh¹⁵, is significant as it
63 encourages each student to not only understand, but also realize their own positionality in
64 terms of privilege and oppression.⁷

65 It has been suggested that learning is enhanced when the educators and students share
66 intersubjectivity⁷, and this can only be achieved if educators understand and address
67 students' preconceived notions about privilege and oppression to maintain on-going
68 conversation and facilitate learning.⁸ Otherwise, social interaction can break down and lead
69 to resistance. Thus the aim of the study is to investigate students' perceptions of the PWA
70 and its impact on their views on social justice. Feedback obtained here can be used to
71 examine students' preconceived notions about social justice issues to identify better ways to
72 boost learning and mitigate resistance.

73 **METHODS**

74 **Study Design and Subjects**

76 This was a cross-sectional pilot study involving undergraduate Bachelor of Pharmacy
77 students enrolled in the CEE unit in a private university. There was a total of 23 students
78 enrolled in the unit.

79

80 ***Procedure***

81 Participants were each given a card which detailed the purpose and expected learning
82 outcomes of the PWA (Appendix 1), and were asked to stand shoulder-to-shoulder along a
83 starting line. Then, as 20 “privilege statements” were read out one by one, the students each
84 stepped forwards or backwards according to the privileges they had received or lacked as
85 they were growing up. If a statement was not relevant to a participant or, for his or her own
86 reasons, a participant did not wish to respond; he/she was to remain standing still. At the end
87 of the PWA, participants shared their reflections as the facilitator asked a series of questions
88 (Appendix 2).

89

90 **Survey of Impact of Privilege Walk Activity**

91 Upon completion of the activity, a verbal explanation was provided to students about the
92 rationale for the study, what would be required of participants, the voluntary nature of
93 participation, and the assurance that non-participation would not result in any form of
94 disfavour. In addition, participants were assured of their confidentiality. Voluntary sampling
95 was used and consenting students were invited to complete an online survey immediately
96 after the activity, which was accessible for one month.

97

98 **Study Instrument**

99 The questionnaire was adapted from a study by Young¹⁶, and edited to suit the objectives
100 of the CEE. Face and content validity was done involving experts in the field of medical and

101 pharmacy education, service learning and survey design; utilizing a 3-round Delphi Method
102 Nine of the questions employed a 5-point Likert scale response, while the following three
103 open-ended questions were asked at the end of the questionnaire:

- 104 1. Which of the statements did you find most meaningful or ‘eye-opening’? Why?
- 105 2. What thoughts were going through your mind as you moved forward or backward?
- 106 3. How might knowing about power and privilege affect your approach to your service-
107 learning elective?

108

109 **Ethics**

110 Approval for the study was given by the [Monash University Human Ethics Committee](#)
111 [\[CF15/2861- 2015001178\] relevant ethics committee.](#)

112

113 **Statistical Analysis**

114 Data were analysed using Microsoft Excel 2013, and presented using descriptive
115 statistics. Continuous variables were expressed by median with interquartile range displayed,
116 whereas categorical/nominal data were presented using frequency and percentage. Response
117 options of a 5-point Likert scale were assigned ‘Strongly agree’ (5) to ‘Strongly disagree’ (1).
118 For open-ended questions, responses were analysed using content analysis, and common
119 themes were highlighted.

120

121 **RESULTS**

122 A total of 18 out of 23 students responded (78.3%). There were 15 (83.3%) females and the
123 average age of respondents was 21.5 (\pm 0.62) years with a range from 21-23 years. All
124 students were of Malaysian Chinese ethnicity except for one who was of Malay ethnicity.
125 Table 1 illustrates the median ratings of students in response to the PWA. More than 60% of

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126 students strongly agreed that the activity provided them with some insight about the different
127 privileges people had growing up. However approximately 20% of students indicated that
128 they did not feel comfortable sharing their opinion and experiences about privilege.
129 Nonetheless, approximately 80% claimed that the PWA helped them realise the effects of
130 privilege and that it would help in their communication and interaction with those being
131 served by the NGOs they will be attached to.

132 Four main themes emerged from the qualitative analysis. Statements here are presented
133 verbatim, except where explanations or grammatical corrections are warranted.

134

135 ***Preconceived notions***

136 Some students expressed shock that their own peers came from families where their parents
137 had to work day and night to support the family, or had single-parents.

138

139 | “That statement on “being raised in a single parent family” because I always thought it was
140 | a social issue and I never thought that some of my peers have experienced it.” (#8)

141

142 | “To know that there are people coming from single ~~parent-families~~ ~~parents~~. It did not occur
143 | to me that people around me come from such a background. This further proves that one’s
144 | background does not define a person!” (#4)

145

146 With regard to thoughts that were going through their minds as they moved forward or
147 backward, a few expressed nervousness, shock, and surprise to see their friends moving to
148 different lines.

149

150 | “I am surprised that some people moved forward or backward which was ~~out of~~not my
151 expectation.” (#7)

152

153 ***Feelings of gratitude***

154 Two students felt that being on different lines did not justify any special privileges to anyone,
155 and that everyone should be on the same line as they are all the same. On the other hand,
156 many expressed gratitude ~~as that~~ it made them appreciative of their privileges ~~they had~~.

157

158 “I am really thankful for what I have and I am determined to give back to the community.”
159 (#6)

160

161 “I’m lucky to have my parents even though I’m not as privileged as others.” (#10)

162

163 “Parents working days and nights to raise the family. It reminds me of the effort they’ve put
164 to cater for me having just enough, and also providing~~but the~~ comfortable living I have
165 today.” (#14)

166

167

168 ***Effect of PWA on self-reflection***

169 Students felt the session made them more reflective, and encouraged them to adopt a more
170 optimistic approach to life; in spite of their circumstances.

171

172 “At first, it (moving forward or backward) was as though it was just to answer questions. In
173 the middle part of the questions, it occurred to me that moving forward was when you have
174 certain privileges and moving backwards was because you had to sacrifice certain things or

175 had less comfort than the others. Towards the end, it was just lines to remind you of what you
176 had in life and ~~that~~ what you should not assume everyone has the same things as you do. It taught
177 me to reflect and be more selfless.” (#13)

178

179 Having obtained the knowledge of struggles faced by others also made
180 ~~participants~~ realise the need to be more tolerant, instead of complaining and blaming
181 others.

182

183 “As I moved forward, I felt grateful yet embarrassed. This was because it made me realize
184 how blessed I am given the privileges and yet, I still whine or rant about petty things.” (#4)

185

186 It also made ~~students~~ realise that it is up to them to decide who or what they want
187 to make of themselves.

188

189 “.....So I think what ~~determines~~ determines your future is not solely your background but
190 more importantly the decisions you have made.” (#7)

191

192 **Impact of PWA on approach to service learning**

193 On the final question about how knowing about power and privilege might affect their
194 approach to their service-learning elective, students mainly commented that it taught them to
195 be non-judgmental when dealing with these populations.

196

197 “Everyone has their own story and background. Never judge someone who has lower
198 privileges. I’ll treat everyone with dignity and respect.” (#10)

199

200 “It will affect strongly how I interact with the people I meet. It taught me to be humble again.
201 As we grow up and especially socialising with people in private universities, I tend to forget
202 how hard it ~~has been~~ was for my parents ~~to work~~ and also ~~that e-~~others ~~who~~ have ~~less~~ not so
203 ~~much~~ luxury in theirs. I ~~will~~ would treat them without any of the judgemental thoughts or
204 stigma that society has about them, ~~or the~~ and not be fearful of mixing with certain groups in
205 the community due to their different traits.” (#13)

206
207 Students claimed they felt more encouraged to serve the less privileged after the
208 activity and now viewed the service learning elective as an opportunity to grow as a person.
209 They also expressed the fact that being aware of the differences in power and privilege would
210 encourage them to be more respectful, considerate, and sensitive during their attachments.

211
212 “It taught me to be more sensitive to others especially with NGO's that consist of less
213 privileged children/women/families.” (#4)

214
215 “I learnt that we should be more open minded and considerate about others in the community
216 as each member of the community we live in may have come from ~~v~~ery different
217 backgrounds and have had to face their own challenges in life.” (#5)

218
219 A student also commented that it helped embed in their minds the notion that everyone
220 should be treated equally, irrespective of social status, and to treat others as how one would
221 like to be treated.

222 “~~Be~~ ing grateful and treat the people equally even though they ~~are~~ might be underprivileged.”
223 (#7)

224

225

226 **DISCUSSION**

227 | Introducing social justice into pharmacy health care education ~~such as pharmacy~~ not only
228 | produces competent professionals, but hopefully individuals ~~ones~~ who are aware of ~~the~~
229 | ~~reforms needed to solve problems of~~ access and equity issues; and ~~are also motivated~~ are able
230 | to institute societal change. O' Connell and co-workers addressed the importance of
231 | incorporating patient-centred, culturally-sensitive health care knowledge and skills into the
232 | pharmacy curriculum.¹⁷ They ~~have~~ emphasised highlighted the need to include topics such as health
233 | disparities, social justice, disabilities, religion, and sexual orientation. Educators have faced a
234 | myriad of challenges when incorporating the topic of privilege into a curriculum^{9, 18, 19}, thus
235 | community engagement or service learning may be an ideal pedagogical model for students
236 | to gain a learning experience on social justice.

237 | ~~From~~ In our study, ~~the a large~~ majority of students agreed that they had learnt more
238 | about themselves in relation to privilege, and that the activity had challenged them and
239 | helped them realise the effects of privilege. Most students said that they were not ashamed
240 | ~~about of~~ the privileges they had, and believed that the PWA activity would help in their
241 | communication and interaction with the community they would be serving during their CEE.
242 | Students ~~reflected on mentioned that they had never realised~~ their individual own unearned
243 | privilege in society, and some expressed feelings of guilt, thankfulness, ~~and~~ sadness or
244 | empathy. Such responses are said to commonly occur when students are introduced to
245 | learning about privilege.^{9, 20}. Thus this study ~~on privilege~~ serves to demonstrate that having a
246 | single class session on privilege can bring about an awareness in pharmacy students ~~of~~ in their
247 | own personal privileges. Such an activity, prior to their service learning elective, ~~is hoped to~~
248 | will hopefully alter perceptions from a help them move away from the 'who is to blame'
249 | mindset and ~~translate transcend~~ to a better understanding of social power.

250 Ferber and Storrs ²¹ observed that when teaching students ~~regarding about~~ race and
251 gender privileges, strong emotional reactions were observed. It is thus crucial that educators
252 acknowledge and validate the feelings evoked within ~~the~~ students and have them reflect on
253 inequities remind them of the inequitable present in society system in which we live.
254 ~~However, while it~~ is important to communicate tell them that it is not their fault that
255 inequities exist; ~~it is also essential to state~~ but that awareness of that now that they are aware
256 ~~of the~~ inequality is the basis for , they have an opportunity and a responsibility and of to be
257 ~~advocates of potential~~ change.²² Placing them in their CEE with organizations that support
258 social change is the next step on vital to this on-going journey.

259 Less than a quarter (22.3%) of the students ~~however, did feel~~ felt uncomfortable sharing
260 their opinions and experiences about the PWA; and indicated that the activity did not help
261 change their views on who is to blame for social inequalities. ~~As noted earlier, s~~Such
262 responses ~~which might~~ may indicate denial or resistance, ~~are to be~~ and is not un-expected from
263 among a portion of the participants.^{9, 23} It could also ~~be due to the fact~~ reflect that that some
264 students already have prior ~~an~~ understanding of privilege and its consequences ~~to begin~~
265 ~~with. One way of dealing with denial or resistance is for t~~The PWA facilitator ~~to must~~
266 attempt to create ~~as positive and safe~~ an environment ~~as possible for so~~ students ~~to~~ openly and
267 honestly express themselves without fear of censure or judgement. The atmosphere has to be
268 one of mutual respect, understanding, and empathy.²⁴ Another way to reduce such discomfort
269 is to work in smaller groups, which might enhance the feeling of safety.²⁰ Yet another
270 approach is to pre-empt such responses by saying upfront that feelings of discomfort, denial,
271 and resistance are perfectly normal and acceptable; and are often the precursors to
272 understanding and growth.²³

273

274 **Limitations**

275 ~~Some limitations of t~~his study is limited byare the small number of participants, and the
276 lack of a control group. Due to the homogenous nature of the participants, ~~we were unable to~~
277 ~~conduct any inferential statistical analyses, and~~ findings ~~might also be skewed and~~may not
278 represent the general undergraduate population in Malaysia or especially in other countries.
279 In addition, sinceAs this was an online survey, we were ~~also~~ unable to further probe
280 ~~students do any probing~~ based on responses to the open-ended questions, ~~which might have~~
281 ~~limited the richness of the data collected~~.

282

283 CONCLUSIONS

284 The PWA managed to raise in participants an awareness of privilege, and an ability to
285 empathize with others. Reminding students often that this is only the beginning of their social
286 consciousness and activism, can motivate them to find their own avenues and niches along
287 this path. This will then hopefully translate to future pharmacists who are eager to step away
288 from behind the counter and out of their lab-coats; and become agents of positive societal
289 change.

290

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