"A Pesar de las Fronteras"/"In Spite of the Boundaries": Exploring Solidarity in the Context of International Service Immersion

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Abstract

The move to "internationalize" United States universities has contributed to increased interest in global service-learning. This article presents qualitative data collected by a team of faculty and students during a service immersion in Nicaragua. The solidarity model of service-learning attempts to address shortcomings of earlier approaches and deserves further examination. This study illuminated the dynamics of solidarity from a largely unexplored perspective: host families and community leaders. The analysis revealed that difference and inequality are salient themes and shape the relationships and possibilities for joint action between U.S. students and their hosts. A typology is suggested that includes symbolic, instrumental, and pragmatic performances of solidarity. By highlighting the perspective of Nicaraguan hosts, this study fills an important gap in the literature on service-learning. It also contributes to the conceptual elaboration of an often heard but rarely defined concept: solidarity.

Introduction

*T*he move toward internationalization in United States institutions of higher education has contributed to increased interest in and support for service-learning. Broadly defined, international service-learning occurs at the intersections of study abroad, service-learning, and international education *(Bringle & Hatcher, 2011)*. Along with expanding opportunities, there has been increased discussion of the various models that shape service-learning in cross-national contexts *(Sherraden, Lough, & Bopp, 2013)*. On one end of the continuum of service is the "charity" model *(Morton, 1995)*, now widely regarded as outdated and problematic *(Marullo & Edwards, 2000)*. Rooted in a "missionary ideology" *(Weah, Simmons, & Hall, 2000, p. 675)*, the charity model assumes that service is an "inherent good" and largely apolitical (*Baker-Boosamra, 2006, p. 4*). Notably, this approach avoids critical discussion of differential power and the dynamics of privilege and oppression that are often unspoken sources of tension between U.S. students and host communities. Despite mounting critiques, these

assumptions (while not always explicit) continue to shape international service-learning, and their uncritical adoption contributes to overly simplistic—and optimistic—understandings of intercultural exchange.

The solidarity model, which emphasizes partnerships, reciprocity, and collective action, has been posed as an alternative *(Baker-Boosamra, Guevara, and Balfour, 2006; Weiley, 2008)*. Because it foregrounds concerns of privilege and mutuality, this approach is more compatible with the social justice goals of many service-learning programs. Despite the progress it represents, however, solidarity does not necessarily resolve the tensions between U.S. students and host communities. We suggest that the concept and practice of solidarity deserve further examination. In this article, through an in-field study of international service-learning, we explored performances of solidarity using the voices of host community members, a rarely heard perspective on these topics.

This article is based on fieldwork conducted by a team of students and faculty during a 3-week service immersion trip to Nicaragua in May 2013. Because most research on international service-learning is focused on the experiences of student participants, we were interested in hearing from native Nicaraguans who host students in their homes (i.e., homestay families) or work with students to complete community projects (i.e., community leaders). Through participant observation and interviews ($N = 26$), we were guided by an open-ended research question: What is your experience of hosting and interacting with U.S. American students? Using elements of grounded theory, our questions led us to focus on issues of difference, action, and solidarity. Specifically, we ask: How are difference and the dynamics of inequality understood and navigated by Nicaraguan host communities? How do these differences shape the possibilities for joint action across geographic, social, and cultural boundaries?

We begin with a targeted review of the literature and, drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, propose an emergent definition of solidarity. Next we describe the context for and process of data collection and analysis and provide a snapshot of our sample. Our findings suggest that difference and inequality are salient concepts for Nicaraguan host communities, and we present examples that show wide variation in how these concepts are experienced and understood. Through analysis of the three subgroups in our sample, we suggest a preliminary typology for understanding joint action and symbolic, instrumental, and pragmatic performances of solidarity. Rather than make broad claims about the nature of

solidarity and its usefulness as a model, our study illuminates the dynamics and complexity of this concept from a largely unexplored perspective: homestay families and host community leaders. We conclude with discussion of programmatic as well as theoretical implications for students, universities, host communities, and scholars.

Background

International Service-Learning

The vast majority of scholarship on international service-learning has focused on the experiences of students and, to a lesser extent, the institutional and pedagogical implications of these programs. This literature has documented the transformative potential of international study and community-based work for students *(Meyers, 2009; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004; Stephenson, 1999)* but has left largely unexamined the experiences of host community members, including homestay families and community leaders. Our work responds to this gap and to recent calls (including from this journal) to expand the scope of inquiry to all participants *(Crabtree, 2013; Sherraden et al., 2013)*.

One example of research on host communities was provided by Baker-Boosamra et al. *(2006)*, who studied Salvadoran community partners in an international exchange with U.S. students. Their study provided a model for exploring the perspectives of community stakeholders by examining their perceptions of what international exchanges should and can be. They pointed to several limitations, such as students' language (i.e., lack of Spanish knowledge), length of the exchange (i.e., too short), and students' preparation (i.e., study of history, culture, and other background) prior to their arrival. The crucial concern for stakeholders was that students fulfill the host community's expectations for "critical reflection, public action, and ongoing communication" upon returning home to the United States *(p. 495)*. The authors concluded that international exchange programs should avoid overemphasizing service at the expense of reflection and action. This model of reflexive solidarity provides an important framework for our analysis.

We situated our exploratory case study in the broader critique of international service-learning, which has begun to address the unique challenges of conducting community-based work in cross-national contexts. Students' lack of understanding of local context

and global dynamics is one such problem, described through this paradigmatic example by Sutton *(2011)*:

> Planting trees without knowing why an area is defor-
> ested, without knowing what trees are locally valued,
> without knowing who controls the land on which the
> trees are planted is naïve, dangerous, and misses the
> research and learning opportunities in this activity. *(p.
> 126)*

Critical perspectives on service-learning foreground issues of power and have underscored the unfortunate potential for service-learning, when poorly conceived and executed, to reproduce dynamics of inequality *(Clark & Nugent, 2011)*. The current study was motivated by a similar concern that international service-learning often falls short of its stated goals—or worse.

Nicaragua–U.S. Relations

The history and present state of U.S.–Nicaragua relations provides necessary context for this study. The economic contrast between the two countries is stark: Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere; the United States is considered a global economic and political hegemon. This disparity is associated with a pattern of economic and military intervention by the United States. Most recently, many Nicaraguans attribute declining wages and persistent poverty with the Dominican Republic Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR)—a trade policy driven by largely U.S. interests that went into effect in Nicaragua in 2006. Ever present in Nicaragua is the history of U.S. military intervention and, specifically, support for the Contra counterinsurgency during the 1970s and 1980s. This legacy is still viewed as highly problematic for Nicaraguans and continues to shape the tenuous relationship between the two countries today. These factors provide a backdrop to understanding the complicated dynamics and potentially mismatched (or poorly understood) goals of visiting U.S. students and their Nicaraguan hosts.

Solidarity

With roots in the labor movement, solidarity is often associated with unity, fellowship, and collective action. In the context of international service-learning, solidarity models are offered as a counterpoint to the more limited charity model *(Baker-Boosamra, 2006; Baker-Boosamra et al., 2006; Morton, 1995; Weiley, 2008)*. This is

a productive move as it brings more attention to key questions of reciprocity, partnerships, privilege, and action. As a sensitizing concept for our analysis, we provide brief discussion of the concept here.

The salience of solidarity for this project flows in part from the specific context and history of Nicaragua–U.S. relations. The Central American Solidarity Movement was founded in the 1980s by U.S. Americans concerned about civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. What is referred to broadly as a movement actually consisted of a number of distinct but overlapping efforts by multiple organizations (e.g., Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, Witness for Peace, the Overground Railroad). The common thread linking these organizations and their efforts was a shared understanding and critique of U.S. involvement in these wars. According to movement activists, this intervention by the U.S. government and military demanded a response from U.S. American citizens. At the time, acting in solidarity with the people affected by civil wars included sending U.S. nationals to act as human rights accompaniers, organizing political action in the U.S. to defund military support of these wars, providing aid to refugees fleeing these wars, and engaging in political education of ordinary U.S. Americans about the U.S. involvement in Central America *(Coutin, 1993; Nepstad, 2013; Perla, 2008).*

In exploring the forms and definitions of solidarity, social and political philosophers have raised questions that shaped our analysis. In the introduction to her book *Political Solidarity,* Scholz *(2008)* recalls her experience as an undergraduate participating in a 3-day urban plunge. As part of a one-credit sociology course, she and her classmates spent 3 days and nights volunteering and sleeping at a homeless shelter with the goal of being "in solidarity with the homeless" *(p. 1).* Scholz used this anecdote to describe how she first came to question the nature of solidarity. She asks, "[H]ow could someone who . . . had no experience of oppression . . . possibly share the same consciousness with those who live the oppression relentlessly?" *(p. 2).* Like others *(Kolers, 2005, 2012),* Scholz pointed to how colloquial understandings of solidarity tend to overemphasize commonality and shared interests at the expense of recognizing particularity and difference (see also *Sánchez, 2013*). Drawing on this critique, we adopted a definition that balances unity and distinction, articulated here by Kolers *(2012)*: "[S]olidarity is not a sentiment or attitude, but a type of action: working with others for common political aims, paradigmatically in the context of *incompletely shared interests* [emphasis added]" *(p. 367).*

As illustrated by Scholz's question, this problem is particularly relevant to examinations of service-learning.

Methods

This study was conducted in May 2013 during a 3-week service-learning immersion trip to Nicaragua. The research team consisted of two social science faculty, the service-learning program director, and eight undergraduates. Drawing on ethnographic methods, data collection consisted of participant observation and in-depth interviews ($N = 26$). Our selection of methods and our analytical approach—reflecting our constructivist theoretical orientation—was motivated by our research question. In asking native Nicaraguans about their experiences hosting U.S. American students in their homes and communities, we hoped to capture the perspectives of this group in their own words. Although we came to the field with some sensitizing concepts, our data collection and analysis were driven by the data rather than a specific hypothesis.

Context

The Nicaragua immersion trip was established by the University of Portland in 2005. The original motivation for creating a Nicaragua service trip grew out of the complex political and economic connections between Nicaragua and the United States and (then) recent ratification of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). Students enter the Nicaragua immersion program through a competitive application process, and only one third of students who apply are selected. Students are interested in participating for a variety of reasons. Some are attracted to the idea of international travel and cultural exchange; others are motivated to learn firsthand about the social justice issues connected to global capitalism; some want to volunteer and serve. Once selected, participants commit to learning about the history and politics of Nicaragua and raising funds as a group to cover the costs of travel. As part of the preparation, facilitators aim to cultivate a critical perspective on traditional forms of service. Through readings and discussion, students are asked to consider the potential limitations of a charity model (common to many international service trips) and, in studying the history of U.S. involvement in Nicaragua, are introduced to the concept of relationships based on solidarity. Overall, the preparation is designed to give students a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the issues and ask them to consider carefully their role as participants on the trip.

In 2009, an attempt was made to deepen learning and improve the service experiences by formally partnering with organizations working in Nicaragua. In 2013, the year we conducted this study, University of Portland engaged two organizations—Witness for Peace and Foundation for Sustainable Development—as partners who would facilitate students' experience on the ground. Students' time was divided evenly between the two organizations.

Witness for Peace. In 1983, Witness for Peace (WFP) was founded as a response to the role of the United States in the Contra War. As an organization, its primary goal was to educate U.S. citizens about the social impact of their government's foreign policy. This was facilitated by media campaigns and group immersions or delegations. Delegates would accompany Nicaraguan people in war zones to document what was occurring. Based on these experiences, delegates were asked to educate others and mobilize a political response in the United States. Over time, WFP's mission has expanded to include documentation of corporate practices and economic policies in Latin America and the Caribbean. WFP is currently active in Nicaragua, Mexico, Colombia, Cuba, Honduras, Bolivia, and Venezuela. Although politically independent, Witness for Peace provides programming that reflects a decidedly critical view of the U.S. government and its role in promoting neoliberal economic policies in the region. Flowing from this analysis, the itinerary with WFP included conversations with community organizers, feminist organizations, economists, and labor groups in and around Managua. Students then traveled to Santa Rosa, a rural community near Matagalpa that has worked with WFP for over 2 decades. Students completed a 4-day 3-night rural homestay in Santa Rosa.

Foundation for Sustainable Development. This organization (FSD) was founded in 1995 as a way to link students and professionals with grassroots development initiatives around the world with the goal of addressing local health, social, environmental, and economic concerns. FSD engages students and professionals through training programs geared toward students pursuing a gap year, international internships, extended volunteer opportunities, and global service trips. In contrast to WFP, FSD focuses on strengthening community capacity and providing technical assistance and material support (through, for example, grant-making opportunities). FSD staff, which includes native Nicaraguans, also serve as consultants and educators for effective approaches to sustainable community development.

The University of Portland partnered with FSD through the global service trip program, which serves sites in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In preparation for this delegation, FSD worked with community leaders in Pacamba, a semirural community, to identify projects for student participation. FSD also coordinated a 7-day homestay in the city of La Masía, a 20-minute bus ride from Pacamba.

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted 26 interviews with a total of 29 people (including two interviews with mother-daughter and husband-wife pairs). All but three individuals were native Nicaraguans who hosted students (homestay families) or worked directly with students to complete service projects (community leaders and two Nicaraguan staff of FSD). We also interviewed three U.S. American staff members from the two host organizations, WFP and FSD. Participants in our study ranged from 19 to 68 years old. The majority of inter-viewees ($n = 24$) were women (see Table 1). Most interviews lasted 25 to 30 minutes (range: 5–48 minutes). To protect the identities of research participants, the names of all respondents and locations have been changed.

The research team included both faculty and students. Leading the data collection team was a faculty member who was bilingual (English-Spanish) and brought more than 15 years of cross-cultural experience with Spanish-speaking communities in the United States and Central America. Student members of the research team were selected based on their Spanish language skills and included three students who were native Spanish speakers (all of Mexican descent) and four students who had achieved fluency through study and immersion experiences. In preparing student researchers, faculty members reviewed the interview protocol, trained students in interviewing techniques, and observed and critiqued students' interviewing skills in role plays.

Research team members invited individuals to participate by explaining the purpose of the study: to learn more about the experiences and views of host families and host communities. All interviews were conducted in the native language of the participant (Spanish or, in the case of the three U.S. staff members, English). Interviewees chose the location for the interview. For homestay families, the interviews took place in the homes and for community members in Pacamba, the interviews took place in a public setting—outside the clinic or the elementary school or on the bus.

Student interviewers conducted interviews in pairs. All interviews were audiotaped.

We used a semistructured interviewing technique (*Weiss, 1994*) and began with five demographic questions to establish participants' age and experience with outside groups. Depending on the population (homestay families or community leaders), we asked five to seven open-ended questions asking them to describe their experiences. Sample homestay questions included: "Why did you decide to host students?", "What did you need to do to prepare to host?", and "What have you most enjoyed about this experience of hosting students, now or in the past?" For community leaders, we asked: "What is the focus of your organization?" and "What do you hope student groups take away from conversations with you or your organization?" Both groups of participants were asked at the end of each interview, "Is there anything you would like to ask us?"

All interviews were transcribed by the third author, who is a native Spanish speaker and fully bilingual, as well as being an experienced translator. All participants were assigned pseudonyms. We began with open (line-by-line) coding of a subset of interview transcripts. From there, we collapsed these into a set of focused codes (e.g., "difference," "shared humanity," "community struggle," "cariño"), which were then used to code the remaining transcripts. For each interview, case summary notes—consisting of a brief summary and highlights from the interview—were written. Integrative memos and ongoing conversations across the research team were used to link codes and construct themes and categories across the interviews.

Table 1. Characteristics of Interview Sample by Subgroup

Organizational affiliation	Subgroup *Location*	Gender Total individuals	Age range (years)	Average years hosting/ working with students
Witness for Peace	Rural home-stay families *Santa Rosa*	Women: 8 Men: 2 Total: 10	19–54	Range: 1–23 years Most families had hosted U.S. delegations over the last 10–20 years.

Foundation for Sustainable Development	Urban home-stay families *La Masía*	Women: 6 Men: 0 Total: 6	36–68	Range: 5–10 years Average number of years hosting was approximately 8.
	Rural community leaders *Pacamba*	Women: 7 Men: 1 Total: 8	22–52	This was the first time community leaders in Pacamba had ever hosted a foreign delegation.
	FSD Nicaraguan staff *Pacamba/ LaMasia*	Women: 1 Men: 1 Total: 2	24–45	2–4 years
WFP and FSD	U.S. American staff of these organizations	Women: 2 Men: 1 Total: 3	(Early 20s)	1-2 years
TOTAL		Women: 24 Men: 5 TOTAL: 29	19–68	1–23 years

Limitations

We acknowledge the multiple limitations of this study. Our research design as well as the nature and size of our sample prevent us from drawing any generalizable conclusions from our results. Our goal, however, was to illuminate the perspectives of a group that has rarely been asked (in a systematic way) about their experiences, despite their integral role in international service-learning.

The short timeframe of the study posed obvious limitations and likely affected the responses we received. We interviewed host families and community members only days after our arrival in

each location, so we did not have the luxury of prolonged contact. More extensive contact could have enhanced our data.

A central limitation relates to the positionality of researchers and their relationship to research participants. As U.S. students and faculty—members of a privileged group and guests—asking homestay families and community members about their experiences with U.S. American student groups, we were sure to elicit a highly curated response. We assume that Nicaraguan participants would likely exaggerate the benefits and downplay the negative aspects of their experiences as hosts—that is, they would edit their responses to avoid offending interviewers. Although participants in the study frequently commented on the benefits they received from hosting and what they enjoyed about these exchanges, we observed that interviewees had no trouble recalling and sharing past experiences that had been difficult. They were forthcoming about what students should and should not do as guests—what has worked well and what has not. This suggests to us that participants were not simply providing answers that would be pleasing to interviewers but were interested in giving honest feedback. Although we do not doubt that another set of interviewers would be able to probe more deeply into the concerns of Nicaraguan hosts, we maintain that the responses we received contain important insights from a population that has been largely ignored in conversations about global service-learning. In our discussion, we suggest ways to mitigate these limitations—specifically, by incorporating more participatory elements into future research on these questions.

Results and Analysis

In this section, we present findings that emerged in response to our overarching question to Nicaraguan hosts: What is your experience of hosting and interacting with U.S. American students? The results and analysis are organized into two parts. The first section addresses how hosts and community organizers expressed how they learned to navigate and cope with difference in cross-cultural spaces, a prominent theme in our data. In the second section, we draw on solidarity as a conceptual framework to analyze findings on difference and action. Specifically, we attend to how difference and the dynamics of global inequality shape relationships and possibilities for joint action across geographic and community boundaries. Through targeted examples rooted in participants' experiences, we propose a typology that includes symbolic, instrumental, and pragmatic performances of solidarity.

Navigating Difference

This section explores how Nicaraguan participants described the experience and meaning of crossing cultural boundaries with visiting U.S. American students. Navigating difference was sometimes a source of difficulty, but respondents indicated that there is value in exposure to and critical reflection on differences. Some respondents displayed instances of "universalizing"—minimizing difference and emphasizing a common human connection—and others theorized that difference is the essential ingredient for learning and transformation. In essence, difference is a constant, but the meanings attached to it and their implications are far from obvious. Below we outline and contextualize three main themes in our data that highlight how difference was both a source of inspiration/connection and tension/struggle: (1) "It's not like in your country", (2) "in spite of the boundaries", and (3) learning and transformation through reflection on difference. Together these narratives help answer our guiding research question by teasing out the nuance in this type of exchange.

"No es como en su país" ("It's not like in your country").
In asking homestay families to describe their experience of hosting U.S. American students, the subject of difference arose in discussing concerns about how students would navigate the dramatically different social and economic conditions in Nicaragua. This concern was especially prominent in Santa Rosa, the rural community where families live at or below a subsistence level. Doña Dalia, who has been hosting delegations for 20 years, explained:

> It's not like in your country because—well, here, at least,
> we don't have a bathroom, we don't have potable water,
> a lot of things.

Other families openly lamented not having amenities and basic conveniences such as running water and indoor plumbing. Some described past experiences with students who had difficulty using the outdoor latrines and who, despite every effort, developed stomach illness during their stay.

Host families drew their own conclusions about how students dealt with these vastly different conditions. One host father said, "You won't be as comfortable as in your home country, but—como pobre—like a poor person, you have a room and a bed" (Don Marcos). Another host mother, during the interview, turned to

the student interviewer and asked directly: "I imagine that it's a struggle for you to be in our community because of the lack of conveniences—bathrooms, running water, other things. I imagine that you feel—well, bad. Is that right?" (Doña Amalia). One recommendation that surfaced in our conversations was a desire by host families for students to be "psychologically prepared" (Doña Dalia) for the kinds of conditions they would experience.

"A pesar de las fronteras" ("In spite of the boundaries"). While negotiating perceived and real difficulties of difference was a common theme, host families did not view socioeconomic or cultural difference as a barrier to strong affective connections. In both urban and rural homestay settings, families described familial ties that formed between themselves and students:

> "I think of them as my own daughters." (Doña Alicia)

> "I see them as my children." (Doña Leticia)

> "When we are waiting for them to arrive, it's like waiting for a member of our family." (Don Marcos)

Nicaraguans are, of course, known for their tremendous hospitality and for going out of their way to make guests feel welcome. Yet what they described in terms of these emotional connections and the "cariño" (affection) they felt was not simply a function of hospitality. Host families stated that they appreciated students' warmth and willingness to immerse themselves in the daily lives of the community, however difficult it might feel for them. Families also described the sadness they felt upon students' departure. One respondent began crying during the interview when remembering and describing connections she felt with past students who had stayed with her.

We observed a universalizing impulse among respondents— that is, an emphasis on a common human experience and shared expectations for basic human dignity. In these conversations, the universalizing trope demands a response to inequality. Doña Consuelo, who has hosted students for over 20 years, explained that

> in one form or another, we're all children of the same God. And a God that doesn't want there to be differences between us, [God] wants us all to be equal. So…

> we can know that . . . perhaps we're not going to have the same conditions, but yes, we're part of creating those ideals—humanistic ideals. And of sharing, of seeing things from another point of view.

Doña Dalia offered a complementary perspective on the role of connections across boundaries:

> It's a positive experience because, in spite of the language, and in spite of the boundaries, you can feel . . . that love and unity . . . for both students and families . . . so it's really beautiful because, in spite of their seeing how much poverty we are living in, they—there's a real sincerity in sharing our lives, in trying to achieve that closeness.

Here, difference and inequality are both a source of connection/ inspiration and tension/struggle.

Learning and transformation through reflection on difference. Respondents believed that international exchange offered a context for learning and the potential for transformation. Although they recognized that it is not always easy, crossing cultural boundaries was viewed as a net positive, as typified in this host mother's comment:

> We want to . . . know about students' lives over there, with the ones here. At least that way, we realize, well— the lifestyle there, and you [students] too realize what the lifestyle is here. (Doña Berta)

Although this comment highlights the potential for mutual learning, most respondents emphasized the unique benefits to students. In Pacamba, one community leader explained:

> There is a continuous relationship, the experience of a North American young person from a developed country with a country that is in the process of developing . . . you [U.S. Americans] benefit from that experience too. . . . You learn how we do things here. (Don Adolfo)

Don Adolfo went on to describe an experience from the previous day in which the foreman used a translucent tube and water

to construct a makeshift level. Students were amazed at this process, what Don Adolfo referred to as "rudimentary technology." He concluded by saying, "You take that lesson with you—that it's not necessary to have a sophisticated apparatus."

Some respondents suggested that exposing students to this new setting was valuable precisely because it challenged the students to think more critically about difference and examine their own position and privilege. One rural host father explained that "Here you can [learn] a lot—at the very least, it's not how people live in [your] country. Here you see a lot of poverty" (Don Marcos). Another host mother explained, "It's beneficial for them—for students to see what maybe seems like another world, but it's a world that is all around them" (Doña Consuelo).

A few interviewees theorized that learning about these differences and, specifically, the dynamics of inequality "de cerca" ("up close") was the key to "conscientización" ("consciousness transformation"). In the words of Doña Dalia:

> This is one way of sharing our lived experience because we understand that the world students live in is very different. It's—it's very different from ours. And so, it's also a way of—so that young people . . . would have an awareness that—how should I say it?—that the comforts of their lives are based on the difficult lives of others.

Doña Dalia's comment stood out for its pointed analysis, but she was not alone among our respondents in hoping that students would begin to ask questions about their privileged position in a global society. Doña Consuelo, who has hosted U.S. delegations for over 20 years, explained her belief that this experience created the conditions for transformation:

> We are helping in the process of transformation of—of their experience, their lives—and . . . it benefits them as much as us. For them—students—that they might see another world, and then—in coming here, they learn so much. They see how things are here, and then later they start to understand the relationship between their country and here, and so I think it benefits them a lot.

Over the years, she reports that the experience changes "how [students] think about things and—their way of being." Again, the potential for transformation is located in the lived experience:

> Once they realize the reality—in which, others are living, well, many families. And other countries like ours. . . . There are so many poor people and so maybe they haven't ever seen that . . . you come from another culture, and so all of those things that—well, I know that this is a transformative experience for many young people. They've been changed and they've started to see the realities of others.

Like her neighbors, Doña Amalia encouraged students to share these experiences more widely, urging students to "take what you have learned here with us in our homes and go—share it in your country." Implicit in these claims is the argument that insight necessarily leads to transformation and action. Although that is the case for some students, we do not assume a simple causal relationship between insight and transformation. In the next section, we explore more fully the question of action.

Performances of Solidarity: A Typology

As underscored in the previous section, host communities actively interpreted the experience of boundary crossing. They believed that students are learning not only about differences but also about inequality and global dynamics of privilege and oppression. In this section, we build on participants' theories of difference and add our own analysis, using solidarity as our conceptual framework. We seek to add to the existing understandings of solidarity models of engagement in international programs by analyzing targeted examples of action from the perspectives of three subgroups: rural homestay families, urban homestay families, and community leaders in the semirural community of Pacamba. Our analysis reveals a new way to think about performances of solidarity—and more broadly, how a solidarity model might provide an effective platform for students and hosts to connect across vast boundaries related to social, political, and cultural difference. To demonstrate some of these various expressions, we offer a typology of symbolic, instrumental, and pragmatic performances of solidarity.

Rural homestays: Symbolic solidarity. During students' 3 days in Santa Rosa, most of the time was spent visiting with families, playing with children, and hearing from community leaders in

the different sectors. One of the few structured activities occurred on the second morning when students were invited to take part in a community project. A bridge at the entrance to the community was being built, and—although there was no construction happening due to lack of materials—community members decided that students could help by picking up rocks from a nearby field and carrying them to the construction site several hundred feet away, where they could be used as fill. This task would also clear the field for cultivation.

Students carried rocks of varying sizes in their arms or in woven plastic bags provided by the community. Despite the heat, they made many trips and took breaks as needed. Some students expressed frustration at the tediousness of the task. Community members who had joined the effort encouraged students to go slowly and to lift only what they could easily carry. After a couple of hours, community leaders decided that the project was over. Some students were left wondering what progress had been made and whether their contributions amounted to much. Others viewed the project as a community-building activity.

This experience (which is not atypical in the context of international service-learning) constitutes a performance of solidarity that is largely symbolic: Students' substantive contributions were small, but the act of carrying rocks demonstrated students' willingness to support a collective effort and respect for community leadership. Note that in our analysis, students' feelings are secondary—since solidarity is beyond "sentiment" *(Kolers, 2012, p. 367)*, we are more interested in examples of action.

We identified other examples of symbolic action and solidarity between students and host families in Santa Rosa. As described in the previous section, community members hoped that students would be transformed by the experience of bearing witness to poverty and "limitations" (Doña Consuelo). Some of these hopes were expressed in abstract terms: "[Students] start to realize that—in the world, we have to make a change because . . . we all have the right to live with dignity . . . we are fighting so that there would be equality among us, as humans" (Doña Consuelo). Doña Dalia described wanting students to influence policy change:

> We want students to internalize this experience so that—that would raise their consciousness so that they might apply pressure to change U.S. policies, so that, well, [these policies] might take into consideration a little more the situation of poor countries like ours.

A young couple, Fredy and Herminia, who were hosting students for the first time, expressed a similar hope:

> We would like them to share their experiences and, so that they might find a way to [pressure] the government to help our communities . . . so that the U.S. government might support Nicaraguan communities a little more. Taking some kind of action in support of Nicaraguan communities, by the U.S. government. (Don Fredy)

When asked for more details ("What kind of support?"), Fredy discussed various needs in the community—education, malnutrition, and health care. Although these needs call for concrete assistance, the request for students "to change U.S. policies" remains largely abstract.

These comments reflect, in part, the orientation of the host organization (WFP) and its long-term mission, as described by one organizer, to reveal "the impact of U.S. foreign policy and corporate practice in Latin America and [see] out where it is leading to poverty and oppression and working to change that" (Colin). But we were left wondering—in what policies and practices were students being asked to intervene? Given the difficulty students experienced in articulating the insights gained from these experiences to peers and family, how realistic is it to think that students will engage in policy advocacy, as requested by community members? These obstacles aside, we argue that this expressed focus on policy change is another example of symbolic solidarity.

Community leaders: Instrumental solidarity. In Pacamba, the focus of students' daily visits to the community was to engage in service projects. During that week, students would arrive in the community by 8:30 a.m. and begin work on one of three projects: (a) a dengue prevention campaign that involved going door-to-door in a particular neighborhood distributing information and larvicide (Abate) provided by the Ministry of Health, (b) an environmental education program and tree-planting with students at the elementary and middle school, and (c) a construction project building an outdoor waiting area for the health clinic. Students would break at noon for lunch and then return in the afternoon, on most days working until 4:30 p.m. Over the course of the week, students, with community health promoters, distributed information and materials to one fifth of the whole community; designed and painted a mural with local elementary and middle school students to promote environmental stewardship; planted more than

50 trees; and, against all odds, completed most of the health center construction project.

These projects are paradigmatic examples of the kinds of service in which students often engage as part of service immersion trips. On the surface, the action here seems self-evident. Students built relationships and participated in community-led activities that resulted in measurable changes. Our data, however, reveal another layer to this story. Although students' involvement in these service activities was much appreciated by community leaders, the action (and performance of solidarity) preceded students' arrival in Pacamba. We learned from our interviews with community leaders in Pacamba and with one of the Nicaraguan FSD organizers that the plan to host a delegation in Pacamba set in motion a process that facilitated the community's achieving its goals. Specifically, Pacamba community leaders were able to leverage the planned arrival of a U.S. delegation to organize both internal and external support.

1. Increasing collective efficacy. For community leaders, the delegation's arrival provided leaders with a resource to organize the broader community, and specifically the youth. One member of the host organization explained the community's response to learning that the U.S. student group would be coming:

> When people realize, "There's a group of gringos, a group of foreigners coming," [they say], "Oh, that's great! We'll get to know them, we'll talk," so they get excited . . . when they see foreigners, it's like—they get excited and they come out to participate. (Karla)

2. Securing government support for community projects. Another stated benefit was that FSD was able to use the U.S. group's visit as a way to secure support from the Ministry of Health (MINSA) for the dengue prevention project.

Earlier that year, the community health promoters had organized a group of youth to assist in conducting a dengue prevention campaign. MINSA had agreed to provide the needed supplies (including the larvicide Abate used to kill dengue-carrying mosquitoes). When it came time to launch the campaign, the supplies were never delivered. Disheartened, the community abandoned their efforts and concluded that MINSA was not a reliable source of help. Later that year, when FSD established a partnership with the community, FSD representatives went to MINSA to explain that a U.S. delegation would be coming to the community to participate

in the public health campaign. This time, MINSA promised to provide the materials and delivered on its promise. We cannot know all of the factors that influenced this outcome, but, significantly, community leaders perceived that the arrival of U.S. students played a role in holding MINSA accountable.

We call this a case of instrumental action and solidarity. Community members capitalized on the privileged social position of the U.S. group to mobilize their community and secure needed support from their government. This part of the experience was largely concealed from students (prior to our interviews with community members) and yet was a crucial contributor to the success of the service projects.

Urban homestays: Pragmatic solidarity. The relationships between students and urban host families do not conform to standard definitions of solidarity. As middle-class, urban professionals, these families tended to downplay differences between themselves and U.S. students. Their homes had running water, a bed for each student, Internet connectivity, and washing machines. Some had traveled to or had family members living in the United States. In the words of one host mother, "I've traveled outside of [Nicaragua], so more or less I know your customs" (Doña Yolanda). In an absolute sense, there was less social distance between U.S. students and urban host families.

The urban host families cast themselves as providing a service that facilitated students' involvement in rural community development. Their task, as they described it, was to provide meals and a safe, comfortable place for students to return every night after their day of community service. One host mother described her work as an extension of the work of students by proclaiming that host families are part of "un común servicio social"—a common social service or intervention. She went on to explain that "what we do, what I do is contribute—I collaborate so that you can come and do good in any one of our communities" (Doña Alicia). Another host mother explained that she loves being part of this effort. "They [students] come to help. I love [hosting] because Nicaragua needs help, especially in the rural zones" (Doña Leticia). In these statements, families demonstrate awareness of the global dynamics of privilege and oppression while also differentiating themselves from "poor communities" (Doña Leticia).

Although there was a great degree of mutual affection between students and urban host families, this relationship also resembled a business partnership. That these families receive substantial pay-

ments for hosting students further cements the consumer/service-provider dynamic. It is fair to ask whether this setting and the nature of these relationships preclude expressions of solidarity. We propose that what occurs between students and urban host families constitutes a pragmatic performance of solidarity. Students and families approach the relationship and their respective roles focused on practical dimensions of the exchange. Students are grateful for the comforts provided to them by host families, and families benefit from the material assistance provided to them in exchange for hosting. The relationship is, of course, more complicated than a simple exchange. Families also described the experience of hosting as a type of vicarious participation in service—"un común servicio social." Together, students and families provide one another with the opportunity to fulfill a shared goal—serving rural communities—that neither party, working alone, could accomplish in quite the same way. In this sense, we see an expression (albeit in nontraditional form) of solidarity, defined as joint action across groups with "incompletely shared interests" *(Kolers, 2012, p. 367).*

These three cases suggest new ways of looking at solidarity. Symbolic performances of solidarity that occurred between rural homestay families and U.S. students were characterized by profound differences in social location and abstract and intangible expressions of support. Instrumental performances of solidarity in Pacamba revealed that the main activity (community-based work) may mask even more important processes that facilitate joint action and advance community goals. Instrumental solidarity draws on the global dynamics of difference and inequality. Internally, community members were activated by the knowledge that U.S. students would be coming; externally, the Ministry of Health was more motivated to follow through on its promises to avoid looking bad in front of international guests. Finally, pragmatic performances of solidarity—that is, those driven by practical concerns—occurred between students and their middle-class, urban host families. Although this example stretches the traditional understanding of solidarity, we argue that the elements of shared action across difference are present.

Discussion

Our analysis provides a new way to think about solidarity in the context of international service-learning, especially as it relates to our broader research question: What is your experience of hosting and interacting with U.S. American students? In asking this question, our goal is not to substantively evaluate these shared performances of solidarity but to explore how solidarity is enacted in multiple contexts by students and host communities. Our theoretical contribution is in documenting the complexity of this seemingly straightforward concept while continuing to interrogate the existing models of international exchange often practiced uncritically in higher education. Our analysis affirms the critique by political philosophers that solidarity is often abbreviated as "unity" without sufficient attention to "incompletely shared interests" *(Kolers, 2012, p. 367)*. In fact, our typology suggests that the nature and extent of differences between students and host families—which necessarily involve inequality—crucially shape the possibilities for collective action. Although we have described these as analytically distinct types, we acknowledge that the reality is likely much messier and may be better represented as points on a continuum. Still, the preliminary results of this case study tell us something new about international exchanges and their related implications. We offer a few key examples below.

1. **Model Clarification**

    For universities and colleges engaged in international service-learning, our analysis reinforces the need to clarify the motivations and terms of the model being used. Institutional leaders should proceed with extreme care when planning international exchanges involving U.S. students traveling abroad to foreign countries and contexts. The intended goals (and their conceptual foundations) must be made as transparent and community-centered as possible—a process that may require outside training and consultation. In short, given the differentials of privilege and power in these cross-cultural contexts, a tradition of service and expressions of good intentions are not sufficient (*Illich, 1968*). We urge administrators to deconstruct the motivations for these programs with a critical perspective on both the promises and pitfalls of international service-learning.

    There are inherent challenges to many exchange models, but the solidarity model may offer greater opportunities for wider participation in decision-making and conscious-

ness-raising. If this is the chosen model, a program must closely examine how it will address issues of difference and inequality. How, for example, are students being educated about the global dynamics of neoliberal political economic forces? As expressed by one of the interviewees (Doña Dalia), to what extent are students "psychologically prepared" to experience conditions of economic deprivation and interpret the meaning of these disparities? Additionally, how do programs establish authentic partnerships with host communities? And how do they decide (together) what constitutes meaningful action?

2. **Greater Preparation and Follow-up With Students**

    For students, we encourage greater commitment to reflexivity. To that end, we argue for even greater pretrip preparation for students. Students should be engaged in deeper conversations about the potential problems of service-based models of international exchange. In learning about globalization and global poverty, in particular, students should be asked to examine their own social location—that is, their positionality, lifestyle choices, and cultural values—before experiencing the Other. This reflection can provide students with a more balanced and critical perspective on what it means to traverse these boundaries and how to develop authentic relationships with host communities.

3. **Deeper Engagement with Host Communities Around These Dilemmas**

    As illustrated through our study, host community members are eager to share their experiences and opinions about service-learning. In line with recent calls to engage in more community-based participatory research, we argue that community members should be involved in this type of investigation. A truly participatory project would involve community members at every stage of the research process—from designing the research question to collecting and analyzing data and disseminating findings *(Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998)*. By spanning the boundaries of traditional research roles, a participatory project would begin to address the limitations of existing research by placing host communities' perspectives at the center of inquiry. The results of such a study could provide crucial insights for deciding whether and how international service-learning should take place.

Conclusion

Solidarity is a useful but underexamined concept in international service-learning. This article introduced issues that deserve far more attention than space here allows. Does solidarity, as suggested by Weiley *(2008),* help students "mov[e] away from *othering and judging*" (*p. 337*, emphasis in original) in the context of global service-learning? And are certain types of performance of solidarity more desirable than others? We encourage more discussion on this topic but remain concerned with issues of how power and privilege operate (implicitly or explicitly) to shape these global interactions between U.S. students and their hosts. A broader issue is whether the stated goals of these programs to develop "globally competent citizens" (*Plater, 2011, p. 37*) may have unexpected negative consequences. That is, can these programs effectively reinforce (rather than dismantle) the dominant–subordinate dynamic between students and hosts that is reflective of global political dynamics? Although we are not the first to highlight these issues in global exchange, we hope to stimulate further conversation on methods for crossing boundaries in the spirit of ethical human relationships and recognition of global interdependence.

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