

## **Hooked on a Feeling: Civic Engagement, Emotion, and Service-Learning**

Dane Emmerling, Service-Learning Coordinator, Delgado Community College

Melanie Deffendall, Service-Learning Faculty Mentor, Delgado Community College

Jenny Louis, Service-Learning Faculty Mentor, Delgado Community College

The majority of research in service learning evaluates the effects of service learning, such as likelihood of future civic engagement, but does not investigate the cause of these effects. While evaluation is important to increasing the quality of service-learning, the lack of strong theoretical underpinnings limits the capacity of research to be applied widely to different service-learning programs (Billig, 2004).

Current research in social psychology promotes the idea that emotions play a key role in motivating civic engagement. By examining the role emotions play in creating civic engagement, the theoretical underpinnings of service learning can be examined and implementation can be refined based on research findings. The objectives of this presentation are to: provide some background linking emotions to civic engagement; identify specific emotions that correlate with increased civic engagement; offer a theory for the mechanism of emotions reinforce and create civic engagement; practice close reading of reflections for pro-social emotions; and design reflection questions in order to elucidate pro-social emotional data. Civic engagement and the psychological term *pro-social behavior* are both defined as "voluntary actions that are intended to help or benefit another individual or group of individuals (Leffel, 2008)." These terms will be used interchangeably throughout this article.

### **What do emotions have to do with civic engagement?**

Dr. Jonathan Haidt, a leading researcher in the field of moral psychology, recently proposed a Social Intuitive Model for moral decision making, which states that moral decisions are made intuitively and facilitated by emotions (Haidt, 2003b). A growing

body of evidence supports this intuitive-emotional model of moral decision making such as findings that: (Leffel, 2008):

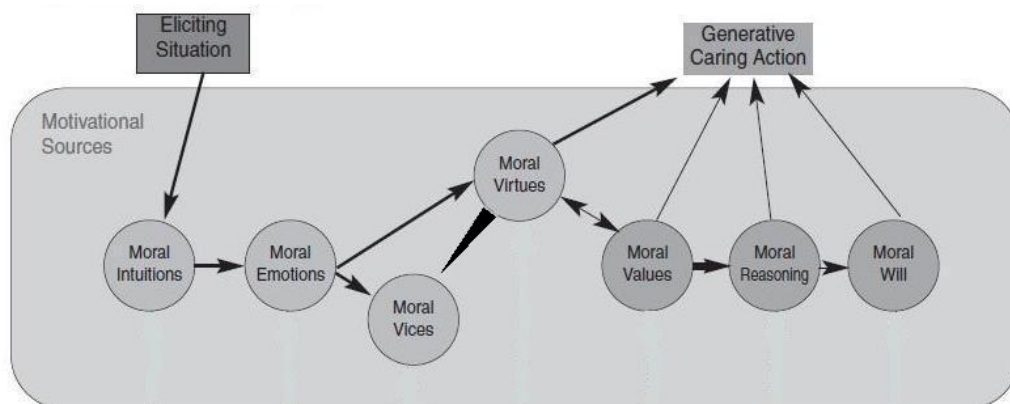
1. Preference often does not depend on conscious thought.
2. People have nearly immediate reactions to moral violations.
3. Moral dumbfounding is common when explaining moral decisions.
4. Manipulating emotions, through such things as hypnosis, can alter moral judgments.
5. There exists a class of cells (Van Economo Neurons) and a region of the brain (Right Front Insula) that have been found to make fast, intuitive decisions.

The Social Intuitive Model does not eliminate rational thinking from the moral process, but rather changes its role from motivating the decisions to attributing post-hoc reasoning. Intuition is not unthinking because it bypasses rational thought; rather it is a distinct form of cognition.

The Social Intuitive Model suggests that pro-social action arises from a three step process: first, an intuition occurs from an eliciting situation; second, an emotion amplifies the intensity of the motivation; and third, the emotions either motivate a moral action or is inhibited by a moral vice. Individuals understand the action or inaction as a moral value or precedent which mediates further action. Current and subsequent action is rationalized by moral reasoning which contributes to understanding and enforcement by moral will. The interplay of values, reasoning, will, and vices all affect future pro-social actions. Figure 1 illustrates the Social Intuitive Model as Leffel conceptualizes it (2008).

The Social Intuitive Model states that intuition, moral emotions, and moral virtues

Figure 1: Social Intuitive Model (Leffel, 2008)



are  
not

static but can be developed, learned, and imitated. As a result, pro-social skills can be strengthened and expanded through cultivation. Leffel emphasizes that the “Social Intuitive Model emphasizes the development of procedural expertise that results from practice, imitation, and internalization of moral exemplars, not through rote learning of declarative knowledge and the exercise of propositional reasoning (2008, 188).” The emotions that lead to pro-social behavior are often called moral capacities rather than moral emotions to denote their ability to be strengthened and their procedural nature.

Civic engagement is not comprised of traits or qualities that people have or possess, but rather skills that people do or perform. Just as current education provides opportunities for students to increase critical thinking skills, class objectives could one day contain specific moral capacities that are targeted and strengthened. This approach avoids political controversy by emphasizing the development of intuitive capacities leading to pro-social behaviors through the activities of service learning and avoiding forms of indoctrination (Leffel et al, 2008). Service learning provides a forum for strengthening moral capacities through developing moral intuitions, moral emotions, and social skills. Moral emotions provide the critical link between intuition and pro-social action.

### **Which emotions lead to civic engagement?**

The Social Intuitive Model illustrates how emotions motivate pro-social behavior but not which emotions are responsible for that behavior. Emotions found to be fundamental to pro-social behavior are: trust, love, elevation, empathy, compassion, gratitude, positive pride, guilt, moral outrage, self-directed anger, forgiveness, and humility (Leffel, 2008; Thomas et al, 2009). Research has shown some emotions lead to

increased intensity of pro-social behavior and so are more interesting in the context of service-learning.

Elevation is an emotion caused by witnessing moral beauty or altruistic behavior (Haidt, 2003a). Research has shown that people who experience elevation are more likely to help other people, to give money to charity, and to list pro-social actions when asked to write about their life goals. Elevation is a powerful candidate for a sustainable pro-social emotion that could be enhanced through participation in service-learning.

Gratitude is a multifaceted emotion that detects benefits derived from others, reinforces behaviors, and motivates pro-social behavior (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). People who wrote daily about things they were grateful for reported offering more emotional support and tangible help to others. Participants who had to write about a time in their past when they felt grateful toward someone reported higher levels of trust for a third party than participants who were asked to describe a time they felt guilty, angry, or proud. Gratitude caused participants to help someone even when the help cost the participant (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006).

Research on other pro-social emotions can aid in understanding the effects of other emotions during service-learning experiences. None of the identified moral emotions works in isolation but rather exists in conjunction with other emotions allowing for further reinforcement or dampening of potential actions. For example, initial pro-social action motivated by moral outrage through time could transition to being emotionally rooted in feelings of love, hope, or pride.

**How do emotions increase pro-social behavior?**

Fredrickson's Broaden and Build Theory explains how continual activities that engage moral capacities can amplify and expand one's motivation and capacity for pro-social behavior (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). The Broaden aspect of the theory conjectures that negative emotions narrow thought-action repertoires, such as flight or fight, while positive emotions encourage people to discover novel and creative ways of thinking and acting. The large number of positive emotions that are linked to pro-social behaviors can result in people considering new behaviors. The Build aspect states that as people discover new ideas and actions; physical, intellectual, and social psychological resources will be built. The Broaden and Build theory reinforces the concept that to foster civically engaged people there must be opportunity to practice pro-social behavior (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005).

### **Reflection, service learning, and pro-social emotions**

Reflection is the process through which the service experience informs and enriches academic content. Reflection can also be employed to identify and catalogue the pro-social emotions and potentially strengthen moral capacities through self-reflective questions. In this presentation actual examples of student reflection will be distributed and participants will practice close readings of reflections for pro-social emotions. Participants will also design reflection questions pertaining to their discipline-specific service experiences. Research that links pro-social emotions to increased civic engagement can enhance the analysis and creations of reflection and service-learning experiences that strengthen students' moral capacities. Better designed reflection and service-learning will lead to increased student civic engagement; an identified goal in all service-learning experiences.

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