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## Grounding International Service-Learning in Sociology: Homelessness in Russia

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### Cover Page Footnote

Footnotes 1) The first author was the official instructor of the course. However, the second author (and Program Director) is originally from Russia, and helped with the course design, field trips, Russian translations, and an understanding of Russian history. Therefore, the term 'we' is used when discussing course instruction. 2) Students' names have been changed to protect their identities. Acknowledgements We would like to thank the editors, reviewers, and Drs. Lorna Alvarez-Rivera and Kathleen Lowney for their feedback and encouragement.

## Introduction

Research indicates that there are numerous educational benefits associated with study abroad in higher education. Global learning, intercultural understanding, an appreciation for cultural differences, and self-reflection are among these benefits (e.g., Crabtree 2008; Forster and Prinz 1988; Hanson 2010; Hovland 2009; Stearns 2009; Tarrant et al. 2014; Wagenaar and Subedi 1996). Perhaps most importantly, study abroad students get the opportunity to apply substantive course content in a foreign setting.

Study abroad programs with service-learning courses can be especially effective in helping students develop a deep understanding of a foreign country. Service-learning courses integrate classroom instruction, community service, and student reflection for an enhanced educational experience. Unlike traditional classroom instruction, international service-learning (ISL) transforms students into active change agents as they work for the betterment of their host country. Combined with appropriate in-class instruction and guided reflection, students experience personal growth as they internalize the importance of global civic responsibility.

Another benefit of ISL courses is that students gain a more thorough understanding of a new country. While many study abroad programs focus on the more splendid aspects of a locale such as historical sites, museums, palaces, parks, cathedrals, monuments, and natural wonders, ISL enables students to see the more socially afflicted and disregarded aspects of a society. Whether students are feeding the homeless in a metropolitan area or building homes in an impoverished village, they are confronted with the harsh realities faced by many people around the world. Study abroad programs that ignore or downplay these social problems create a touristic veneer that prevents students from developing a more thorough comprehension of the society. Indeed, many study abroad students' only exposure to social problems occurs when they are being chauffeured past impoverished neighborhoods on their way to the next museum.

An especially effective means to strip away at this touristic veneer is to broach contemporary social problems during study abroad classes. Sociology has developed a reputation as a global leader in the study of social problems with numerous courses, peer-reviewed journals, and vast amounts of research in the area. Even introductory sociology courses focus largely on social problems (Lowney et al. 2017). Many disciplinary offshoots draw on sociological ways of thinking, research methods, and data to understand global issues such as social inequality, poverty, substance abuse, violence, illness, food insecurity, crime, and environmental degradation. With its academically integrative approach, numerous theoretical perspectives and concepts, and focus on qualitative and quantitative data, sociology provides students with the historical, cultural, political, economic,

demographic, and geographic contexts necessary to understand global social problems. Anthropological ISL educators and researchers Sutton (2011) and Kahn (2011) have argued for this type of integrative pedagogy as a way to transcend cultural and political boundaries.

A sociological foundation is especially important for ISL courses because students are either directly or indirectly coming into contact with marginalized populations with whom they have little or no familiarity. As Hochschild and colleagues (2014) point out, students who perform community service without a foundation in sociology are less likely to understand the social structural explanations for the plight of these populations. By individualizing these explanations, students are more likely to 'blame the victim' (Hollis 2002). This problem is exacerbated when students are in a foreign country because they are even less likely to understand the social forces affecting the marginalized populations with whom they are working. An additional problem is that students without sociological training may revert to erroneous stereotypes when interpreting their experiences with these populations (Moblely 2007). Hochschild and colleagues (2014) suggest that these beliefs may reduce student interest in working with certain populations, may create social tension while providing service, and may make students less effective in providing service. The present research addresses these empirical questions.

Although most peer-reviewed journal articles and books pertaining to ISL courses do not include syllabi or reading lists, an in-depth examination of the literature, as well as online searches for ISL syllabi, suggests that many ISL instructors incorporate little or no sociological material in their curricula. This dearth of sociological instruction is problematic if study abroad students are to understand the interrelationships between social problems and culture, social institutions, social structures, social policy, social change, social networks, social identity, and life chances. As our data will show, the strong sociological emphasis in our ISL course resulted in a variety of positive outcomes.

## **Methods**

We designed a course titled *Urban Social Problems in the U.S. and Russia* for students to compare homelessness in the U.S. and Russia using sociological theories, concepts, and data.<sup>1</sup> Although homelessness was the primary topic, we also discussed social issues associated with homelessness such as alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, and HIV/AIDS.

The participants in this study consisted of seven students who signed up for the course. Three students came from a mid-sized public university in Georgia, one student came from a small public university in Georgia, and three

came from a small private university in North Carolina. All seven students were White and in their late teens or early twenties. Two of our students were sociology majors, two were art majors, one was a psychology major, one was a business major, and one was a creative writing major. Like many students who self-select to study abroad, ours were inquisitive, thoughtful, and intellectual.

Our study abroad student orientation meeting occurred six weeks before we embarked. This orientation also served as our first day of class, as we discussed the syllabus, assignments, and sociological ways of thinking about homelessness. In the beginning of the first class, our students completed a pretest for this study, which we will discuss later. After introductions and an overview of the course, we assigned homework to be completed before our first class in Russia. Assigning some of the homework beforehand allowed students to spend more time exploring their new country. For the homework, we required students to read and provide critical analyses of Mitchell Duneier's (1999) *Sidewalk*, an ethnographic account of homeless book vendors in New York City's Greenwich Village. Duneier provides an insightful analysis of how these vendors create an informal social structure as they go about their day-to-day struggles for the necessities of life and personal dignity. With homework questions and a grading rubric in hand, our students completed the seven critical analysis assignments and turned them in before our first class in Russia.

We arrived in St. Petersburg, Russia at the end of June in 2014. Students and faculty stayed in a dorm at St. Petersburg State Polytechnic University, one of the oldest and most prestigious institutions of higher learning in Russia. Classroom instruction occurred two days a week in a building adjacent to the dorms. Altogether, the course consisted of seven two-and-a-half hour classes and four class field trips.

Approximately 20 percent of our course materials and class time focused on homelessness in the U.S., while 80 percent focused on homelessness in Russia. Using this comparative approach helped students understand how different social forces in the two countries contribute to the unique experiences of homeless individuals. We used the first day of class in St. Petersburg to discuss Duneier's *Sidewalk*. We also watched an insightful film about the ethnography (Brown and Duneier 2010).

From the second class forward we shifted our focus to homelessness in Russia, although we often referred back to Duneier's findings for comparison. The second primary teaching tool for the course was Tova Höjdestrand's (1999) ethnography titled *Needed by Nobody: Homelessness and Humaneness in Russia*. This study offers an in-depth understanding of homeless Russians (called 'bomzhi') in the 1990's after the transition from socialism to capitalism. In explaining the larger structural factors affecting homelessness, Höjdestrand points to the criminalization of vagrancy without an address registration (called a

‘propiska’), a bureaucracy that does not effectively assist many Russians with propiska problems, hyperinflation, real estate fraud, gentrification, and criminal justice practices targeting the homeless. Højdestrand does an outstanding job putting human faces to this problem, and helped our students understand the tumultuousness of everyday life for homeless Russians.

In addition to Højdestrand’s book we utilized news stories and statistical data addressing drug problems in Russia (Mirovalev 2012, Shuster 2013), and had our students read articles about the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Russia (Feshbach 2006, Heimer et al. 2006). We also watched a video about child homelessness in Russia called *The Children of Leningradsky* (Bernstein et al. 2005), which details the lives of homeless children trying to survive in a busy train station in Moscow.

### *Guest Speakers*

We heeded Halsey’s (1990) advice about teaching abroad and invited guest speakers to share their insights about homelessness with our students. Our first guest speaker was a House Supervisor at a homeless shelter in Georgia, USA. Through Skype technology, the representative talked with our students about his passion for community service, various social problems associated with homelessness, and larger social forces that contribute to homelessness in Georgia.

Our second speaker was a Project Coordinator for St. Petersburg’s only homeless shelter called Nochlezkha. This representative discussed the origins of the shelter, funding difficulties faced by the shelter, physical and mental health needs of the homeless, and factors that affect homelessness in St. Petersburg.

Students also had the privilege of talking with Tova Højdestrand, the author of *Needed by Nobody: Homelessness and Humaneness in Russia*, via Skype. Dr. Højdestrand discussed her research methodology, ethical considerations while studying the homeless, social factors associated with homelessness, and personal reflections regarding her study. Our students were excited to meet and talk with the author of the book they were reading.

### *Field Trips*

Our students participated in four mandatory field trips. The first was a tour of the Nochlezkha homeless shelter (visit [www.homeless.ru](http://www.homeless.ru)). Started in 1997, the shelter typically houses 52 individuals at any given time, making it the largest homeless shelter in St. Petersburg. Nochlezkha also erects several heated tents from November until December in an effort to curb high mortality rates and frostbite during the harsh Russian winters. Additionally, the shelter takes on political and public relations issues on behalf of the homeless, such as the decriminalization of vagrancy and begging.

The second field trip was to a brand new Nochlezkha merchandise kiosk set up in a busy St. Petersburg shopping district. We arrived on the first day the kiosk opened, and were able to help set up the kiosk and run errands throughout the day. We returned to help at the kiosk several days later. The shelter sold t-shirts, mugs, trinkets, and paper hand-made by homeless Russians. All of the proceeds went to assist Nochlezkha in their various efforts. Throughout our four weeks in St. Petersburg, students and faculty spent many rubles on Nochlezkha merchandise to take home as souvenirs.

The third field trip was to the St. Petersburg State Institute of Psychology and Social Work. We toured the facility, and talked (through an interpreter) with an International Relations Specialist about the origins of the school, pedagogical techniques, various types of interventions, problems facing the homeless in St. Petersburg, and the process by which Russian students become therapists and social workers.

The final field trip was an evening delivering food throughout St. Petersburg in Nochlezkha's meal van. During class, we reinforced the fact that we were not 'American heroes' saving homeless Russians by delivering food. Rather, we were privileged to have the opportunity to learn from Nochlezkha and the homeless community. All seven of our students behaved in a humble, respectful, and thankful manner during this experiential learning opportunity.

Due to limited space in the van, we accompanied Nochlezkha volunteers on three separate evenings to ensure that each student performed service at least one time. Two of our students were able to go on the meal van twice. On these nights, we arrived at the pick-up location at 5:00 p.m., and delivered food to four different locations throughout the city until approximately 10:00 p.m..

The meal van delivers food to the homeless every night of the week at four pre-designated locations in St. Petersburg. As we pulled up to each location, homeless individuals eagerly congregated toward the parking spot. Although some of the individuals fit the common homeless stereotype with dirty tattered clothing, strong body odor, and scars, many did not. Approximately 80 percent of the food recipients were men. Despite their eagerness, a code of chivalry and respect permeated at each stop. Some semblance of a line formed and elderly women, often referred to as 'babushkas' because of their cloth headdresses, were permitted to cut to the front of the line out of respect. Once individuals received a meal, they typically congregated to eat in groups of two or three. After everyone received food, Russian volunteers allowed those who were still hungry to have a second serving. Some of the homeless Russians made the case that they needed extra soup, bread, or desserts for a family member who could not make it to the location. Acting as judges, Russian volunteers typically granted these requests.

Many recipients were perplexed that U.S. students were serving them food. Once the Russian volunteers explained that the U.S. volunteers were

students wanting to help, the homeless Russians were pleasant, gregarious, and generous with 'Spasiba's' ('Thank you's'), to which our students replied 'Pazhalsta' ('You're welcome'). If the Russian volunteers were not busy at the moment, they would translate a few sentences between the homeless Russians and the American volunteers.

### *Course Assessment*

We used class discussions, homework assignments, journal reflections, a comprehensive exam, a research pre-test/post-test, and emailed follow-up questions to assess student learning. We required students to answer one set of journal reflection questions after visiting the Nochlezkha homeless shelter (see Appendix A). These questions pertained to student expectations about working with the homeless, facts about the Nochlezkha shelter, and feelings that students were having about their upcoming meal van service. We also required students to answer a set of reflection questions after they volunteered with the meal van (see Appendix B). These questions pertained to interactions with the Nochlezkha volunteers and homeless individuals, feelings while serving food, previously held stereotypes about the homeless, and how the meal van experience corresponded with the ethnographies they were reading. The homework assignments during our stay in Russia were similar to the one's for *Sidewalk* (Duneier 1999), with students reading chapters of *Needed by Nobody* (Höjdestrand 1999) and providing critical analyses while using a grading rubric as a guide.

The comprehensive exam required students to discuss social structural factors affecting homelessness like the economy, criminal justice system, and housing fraud (see Appendix C). We asked students to apply Michel Foucault's (1995) theory of panopticism, as well as Wilson and Kelling's (1982) 'broken windows' theory to homelessness in New York and Russia. We also asked students comparative questions about homelessness in New York and Russia regarding police treatment, alcoholism, sleeping conditions, sense of community, problems maintaining personal hygiene, and street interactions with passersby. Of our seven students, four earned an 'A' on the final exam and three earned a 'B.' For the course as a whole, six students earned an 'A' and one earned a 'B.'

### *Pretest/Post-test*

Because we were primarily concerned with students' ability to understand the broad social forces affecting homelessness, as well as the overall effectiveness of the course, our close-ended Likert questions centered on two primary dimensions: 1) 'victim-blaming' and 2) 'understanding of homelessness' (see Appendix D). We derived the 'victim-blaming' questions from Mobley's (2007)



previous research on service-learning. We developed the ‘understanding of homelessness’ questions as a learning self-assessment for students, and as a way to discern the most effective aspects of the course.

For the ‘victim-blaming’ dimension, we assessed our students’ ability to understand the broad social forces that affect who becomes homeless, why certain people remain homeless, and the quality of life for homeless individuals. As others have noted (e.g., Mobley 2007) it is common for people to discount macro-level social factors and attribute social problems to individual shortcomings such as laziness, ineptitude, or moral deficiency. The first question we asked students was, ‘Most misfortunes that occur to people are often the result of circumstances beyond their control.’ The second question was, ‘Homeless people do not work.’ The final question was, ‘Money earned from panhandling is usually spent on alcohol or drugs.’

The second dimension we assessed is ‘understanding of homelessness.’ The first question was, ‘I have a thorough understanding of homelessness in the United States.’ The second question was, ‘I have a thorough understanding of homelessness in Russia.’ The possible responses for all of the close-ended questions were ‘strongly disagree,’ ‘moderately disagree,’ ‘slightly disagree,’ ‘slightly agree,’ ‘moderately agree,’ and ‘strongly agree.’ We coded ‘strongly disagree’ as 1 and ‘strongly agree’ as 6, with one point intervals in between.

We supplemented the quantitative data with qualitative data from Nochlezkha homeless shelter visit journal reflection questions (Appendix A), Nochlezkha meal van journal reflection questions (Appendix B), exam questions (Appendix C), and follow-up questions via email once we arrived home. We also assessed students’ reflections after performing community service in the food truck, and included an additional dimension called ‘Impact of Meal Van Service.’

For the emailed follow-up questions, we asked students whose pre-test and post-test responses changed by more than one point why they changed their responses. We sent individualized email follow-up questions to each student two weeks after we returned. If a student’s response changed significantly, the question was formatted in the following way: ‘For the statement ‘Homeless people do not work’ your response before the course was ‘slightly agree’ and your response after the course was ‘moderately disagree.’ What was it about the course or your experience in Russia that caused you to change your response?’ We include student responses that shed light on the more impactful aspects of students’ course experiences.

## **Data**

After presenting the mean pre-test and post-test scores for each question, we provide qualitative data from students’ post-test follow-up questions and

reflection journals. Because students' self-assessments of learning are empirically questionable, we primarily include student statements that either demonstrate the ability to understand how social forces affect individual outcomes, or that make the link between the sociological research we discussed in class and personal experiences with homeless Russians.

### *Victim-blaming*

For the question, 'Most misfortunes that occur to people are often the result of circumstances beyond their control,' the pre-test mean was 3.57 and post-test mean was 4.85 (see Table 1). Again, '1' equates to 'strongly disagree' on our Likert scale, while '6' equates to 'strongly agree.' By the end of the course, students were more likely to recognize how social forces influence who becomes and remains homeless.

Rachel (psychology major) changed from 'slightly disagree' to 'moderately agree' for this question.<sup>2</sup> When asked why her response changed by the end of the course she said:

Before I took this class or read both of the books, my opinion was that almost everything that happens to a person is because of choices they have made. But, after this class, I have seen that there are many outside influences that can change an individual's circumstances. I know now that environmental and social factors can have a big impact on a person's life and can create more chances of having misfortunes in people's lives.

Gordon (business major) changed from 'slightly disagree' to 'slightly agree' and pointed to the significance of the propiska home registration and government incompetence as the reason for the change in his response:

A lot of the people who were missing their propiska were missing it because of government incompetence. In the case of many of the Russians, it often was out of their control whether their propiska was taken. In the US, we are taught that enough effort will get you out of any financial situation. From this course, I learned that sometimes this is true, but sometimes it is not.

**Table 1. Victim-Blaming and Understanding of Homelessness Pre-Test and Post-Test Means**

Pre-Test/Post-Test Questions	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean
<b>Victim-Blaming</b>		
‘Most misfortunes that occur to people are often the result of circumstances beyond their control.’	3.57	4.85
‘Homeless people do not work.’	3.28	1.85
‘Money earned from panhandling is usually spent on alcohol or drugs.’	3.42	2.71
<b>Understanding of Homelessness</b>		
‘I have a thorough understanding of homelessness in the United States.’	4.00	5.14
‘I have a thorough understanding of homelessness in Russia.’	1.71	4.85

**Note:** 1=‘strongly disagree,’ 2=‘moderately disagree,’ 3=‘slightly disagree,’ 4=‘slightly agree,’ 5=‘moderately agree,’ 6=‘strongly agree.’ N=7.

When asked why she changed from ‘slightly disagree’ to ‘moderately agree’ by the end of the course Heather (sociology major) stated:

This class has made me more knowledgeable about the issue of homelessness and how hard it is to get out of it. When visiting the Nochlezkha homeless shelter, (the Project Coordinator) stressed how easy it is for a homeless person to lose their passport and the necessary stamp inside. Without this stamp, they can’t find a place to live and often work. I also learned that prisoners who get out of jail often don’t get back their passport. This leaves them with few options, and if their family doesn’t welcome them home they most likely will become homeless. It’s also hard to move out of homelessness in Russia with the lack of shelters and government assistance given. These shelters often don’t have enough money or space to help a lot of people. The government doesn’t provide

assistance like we have in America. The homeless population of St. Petersburg hardly has any help and the help they get is very limited, which makes it almost impossible to come out of homelessness.

Wes (creative writing major) pointed to violence and the lack of homeless shelters as the reason he changed from 'slightly disagree' to 'slightly agree.':

I was sad to read about the way homeless Russians were beat up by police and vigilantes. If the homeless sleep in public spaces, the police harass and hurt them. If they sleep in abandoned buildings, they take the risk of being beaten up or killed by vigilantes. Without more homeless shelters in St. Petersburg, I don't see any safe options for them.

For the second victim-blaming question, 'Homeless people do not work,' the pre-test mean was 3.28 and the post-test mean was 1.85. In other words, students were less likely to agree with this statement by the end of the course. From the readings, our class discussions, movie clips, and personal observations, students developed a broader understanding of 'work' that includes the informal economy. For example, Ben (sociology major) changed his response from 'slightly agree' to 'moderately disagree.':

A lot of the homeless people that I saw downtown were doing anything to make money, from selling flowers to newspapers. Surviving in a city like St. Petersburg can almost be considered a job.

Wes (creative writing major) had the most significant change in response from 'moderately agree' to 'strongly disagree':

I had read about the hard-working street vendors in *Sidewalk*, and I had seen similar vendors, who I assumed were homeless, selling flowers and other products outside of the Akademicheskaya Metro Station every day. By the end of the trip, I had adjusted my definition of what it means to work. My new perspective is that the homeless often engage in an informal economy or at least have to work in some way in order to get by.

For the third victim-blaming question, 'Money earned from panhandling is usually spent on alcohol or drugs,' the pre-test mean was 3.42 and the post-test mean was 2.71. Although Højdestrand focused the serious problem of alcohol

addiction common among homeless Russians in *Needed by Nobody*, Duneier's *Sidewalk* shed light on how many homeless vendors in Greenwich Village tried to save money so that they could afford a place to live during the winter. When asked why she changed from 'slightly agree' to 'moderately disagree' for this question, Rachel (psychology major) stated:

Before this trip I believed the stereotype that most money that is given to panhandlers was used to buy drugs and alcohol. My opinion was changed slightly because of the book *Sidewalk*, because it showed that even though there are some people who do use their money for getting drugs or alcohol, they also use it to get food and sometimes shelter. Specifically, in *Sidewalk* there were people who would try to save the money they had earned or received from panhandling in order to get shelter during the colder months in New York. This helped me to change my views and get rid of some of the stereotypes I had.

#### *Understanding of Homelessness*

Our second area of inquiry for this analysis pertains to student self-assessments regarding their understanding of homelessness in the United States and Russia. As stated earlier, all of our students earned an 'A' or 'B' on the comprehensive exam, and all but one earned an 'A' for the course. Overall, our students displayed competence explaining the various social forces affecting who becomes homeless, why people remain homeless, how the homeless survive, relationships among the homeless, treatment of the homeless by legal authorities, and the psychological effects of homelessness. We included these questions to gain additional insight as to the most impactful aspects of the course.

For the first question 'I have a thorough understanding of homelessness in the United States,' the pre-test mean was 4.00 and the post-test mean was 5.14. Because some of our students were either sociology majors or had taken sociology classes addressing homelessness, the pre-test mean was fairly high. However, there was still a slight increase in students' self-assessments. Denise (art major) explained why she changed from 'moderately disagree' to 'slightly agree':

I have never taken a sociology class, so reading *Sidewalk* and being in this class taught me about how and why homelessness is an issue in the U.S. and what is being done about it, both to help alleviate the homeless and to restrict or condemn them. *Sidewalk* reminded me

how much homeless people and people like me have in common in our humanness.

Gordon (business major) changed from 'slightly agree' to 'moderately agree.':

Mitchell Duneier's book helped me to understand that many of these people have a more complex life and that many do make money and have jobs but that there are many external factors that affect their ability to change their situation.

The second question addressing students' understanding of homelessness is 'I have a thorough understanding of homelessness in Russia.' The pre-test mean was 1.71 and the post-test mean was 4.85. In other words, students acknowledged that they knew very little about Russian homelessness before the course, and believed that their knowledge had increased considerably by the end of the course. Denise's (art major) response changed from 'strongly disagree' to 'slightly agree' by the end of the semester.:

The work we did in class and *Needed by Nobody* taught me about homelessness in Russia. I also learned a great deal more about homeless people themselves, like their thoughts and personal experiences, in my interactions and in the stories from the books. This class forced me to think critically about homelessness and homeless people and look closer than I ever have which greatly increased my understanding. (...) Tova's book really helped me to understand how many barriers people have in Russia and how complicated it can be to even get a place to live and how easy it is to become homeless. Her book also prepared me for the physical injuries I saw and how they might have gotten them. Additionally, I learned how people can have somewhere to live but because they don't have a propiska, they are technically homeless, and have a difficult time getting a job without it.

Ben (sociology major) said he 'slightly disagreed' with this statement before the course, but 'moderately agreed' by the end of the course.:

Both books helped me to get rid of some of the stereotypes I had for the homeless people and to understand so many of them have reasons why they became homeless. This made it easier for me to relate to them.

### *Impact of the Meal Van Community Service*

While a sociological foundation in our course increased student understanding of the causes and consequences of homelessness, the face-to-face community service made the course material come to life. Students had read about and seen homeless Russians throughout St. Petersburg and in video clips we watched in class, but volunteering with the meal van helped humanize the homeless. Many students reported that the ethnographies, articles, guest speakers, and video clips helped prepare and motivate them for our meal van service. Denise (art major) stated the following:

I really enjoyed my experience and had several positive interactions. At the first stop, an older man was trying to speak to me. He talked and laughed with me for about ten minutes. Unfortunately, I couldn't understand anything he said (he didn't speak English), but he seemed like he was trying to make me smile and laugh. I enjoyed struggling to have a conversation, and he seemed to as well. (...) Studying or reading about homelessness can teach you a lot, but putting a human face and connection to the issue hit me harder. After hearing about these men and women from themselves and the Nochlezkha volunteers, I think I have a better understanding of where they come from and the challenges they face.

Heather (sociology major) discussed how her experience dispelled some of the stereotypes she held about the homeless:

I think the best part of the trip in Russia was feeding the homeless, and seeing how grateful they are to be given that meal. All homeless people are grateful, no matter what country you're in, so that made me really happy to see that it never changes. I also realized that not all homeless people dress badly or smell badly. A few people at the stops were actually dressed fairly nice. (...) Nothing made me smile harder than seeing the faces of those who were in need at the spots when we pulled up. They were so eager and excited to help us when we first set up, like putting the trash bag up and helping open the back doors of the van. It felt so good to know that I was going to help them get through another night in St. Petersburg. I didn't expect these homeless individuals to be as friendly as they were, maybe because of the stereotype that Russians don't smile. But, most of them were eager to give me a smile and thank me for the food.

The face-to-face interaction also had a significant impact on Wes (creative writing major):

Despite my tiny role in feeding the people there I was surprised by how appreciative some of them were. After I gave some bread to a man at the second stop, he said several sentences to me in Russian and I heard 'Spasiba' ('Thank you') twice, so I replied 'Pazhalsta' ('You're welcome'). I would definitely say that the majority of the people were very appreciative and gave out lots of 'spasibas' and happy expressions. I was definitely not expecting so many people to be so polite, friendly, and cheerful. Of the people that I personally interacted with, I felt that they all seemed like good people.

Students were quiet and reflective on the way back from their meal van service. We discussed some of the privileges that we often take for granted back home. A few students said that they planned on getting more involved in helping the homeless when we returned to the U.S.. As a way to show appreciation to Nochlezkha and the Russian homeless community for our service-learning opportunities, our students donated two large bags of clothing to the homeless shelter before we departed for the U.S..

### *Thirty-Three Months Later*

Thirty-three months after arriving back in the U.S., we decided to try to contact our seven students to ascertain whether they continued helping others once they arrived home. We were unable to contact three students, but were elated to discover that the other four continue to work on housing issues. Heather (sociology major) is now a graduate student who conducts and presents research at academic conferences about the struggles of homeless people and their pets. Ben (sociology major) works as a social work intern who helps recent immigrants in unstable housing situations. Rachel (psychology major) student is now a professional social worker who helps the homeless find long-term housing. She also works with a housing coalition in her community to raise funds for the homeless. Gordon (business major) has volunteered with a local homeless shelter, and helps collect food for the homeless through his church's food drives. While we cannot say for certain that our students' ISL experience is the only reason that they continue to work on housing issues, they all indicated that service-learning in Russia had a profound effect on them, and that community service would continue to be a significant part of their lives.



## Conclusion

The present research demonstrates a variety of positive outcomes which resulted from our ISL students' exposure to sociological ways of thinking and research. Students were better able to empathize with the homeless Russians, less likely to victim-blame, and more enthusiastic and comfortable while performing community service. This enthusiasm and comfort translated into enhanced community service, as students were pleasant and diligent while performing their tasks.

Sociological theories and concepts provided our students with analytical tools to compare homelessness in the U.S. and Russia. 'Conflict theory,' 'symbolic interactionism,' 'structural functionalism,' 'panopticism,' 'broken windows,' 'contested space,' 'social network,' 'social control,' 'public character,' 'stigma management,' 'social capital,' 'eyes on the street,' 'informal economy,' and 'the privatization of public space' were some of the key concepts and theories that aided our analyses.

Our findings also suggest that a combination of quantitative and qualitative social data can help ISL students develop a more comprehensive understanding of the social problem they are addressing. Quantitative data can help students develop a broader picture of social problems and statistical trends. Without these data, students may get an incorrect impression about the populations they are working with due to the limited duration and geographic scope of the service. For example, because our students only observed a small fraction of the homeless population during our meal van visits, they could have underestimated the number of homeless people in St. Petersburg had they not examined the data beforehand. Conversely, the significant visual impact of homeless people at the sites could have caused some students to overestimate the number of homeless Russians. It is imperative that ISL students return home with an accurate account of the social problem they addressed.

While quantitative data can offer a broader picture of social problems and statistical trends, qualitative data provides a more nuanced understanding of the day-to-day experiences of marginalized individuals. As many sociology and social anthropology teachers can attest, students generally appreciate learning about the lives of the marginalized groups through ethnographic or interview data. We were fortunate to have access to two outstanding ethnographic studies about homelessness in the United States and Russia. Of course, such studies do not exist for every social problem at every study abroad destination. If no qualitative social science data exists, we suggest that ISL instructors search for objective non-fiction books and news stories relevant to the location. Additionally, arranging for guest speakers can shed qualitative light on the day-to-day realities of marginalized individuals. Our guest speakers from homeless shelters and the St.

Petersburg State Institute of Psychology and Social Work provided valuable supplemental insight.

Many study abroad program directors and instructors feel pressure to increase the popularity of their programs by highlighting the splendorous aspects of their destinations. However, we do our students a disservice by shielding them from the harsh realities of their host country. Broaching contemporary social problems in study abroad courses strips away at the touristic veneer that impedes student learning. Indeed, while our students enjoyed educational trips to Russian palaces, museums, cathedrals and parks, they also expressed appreciation that we did not infantilize or shelter them in this way. This uncomfortable juxtaposition of tourist destinations and social problems fosters an enhanced learning environment whereby students experience academic and personal growth while cognitively and emotionally grappling with global inequalities, cultural contradictions, and human suffering.

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### **Appendix A. Nochlezkha Homeless Shelter Visit Journal Reflection Questions**

- 1) What were your expectations of the Russian homeless shelter before we arrived?
- 2) How did your visit to the Nochlezkha homeless shelter correspond or diverge from your expectations?
- 3) Were you nervous about the possibility of interacting with a homeless individual at the shelter? Why or why not?
- 4) Describe an interesting fact you learned about homelessness in St. Petersburg.
- 5) Describe an interesting policy or practice of the Nochlezkha homeless shelter.
- 6) Describe any feelings you may be having about delivering food on Nochlezkha's meal van.

### **Appendix B. Nochlezkha Meal Van Journal Reflection Questions**

- 1) Describe your interaction with the Nochlezkha volunteers.
  - a) Did you learn anything interesting about homelessness from them? If yes, please explain.
  - b) Did you learn anything interesting about Russia from them? If yes, please explain.
- 2) Describe the reaction of the homeless individuals when they saw the meal truck pulling up to the spot?
- 3) What was your role in feeding homeless people?
  - a) Did the homeless people seem to appreciate the work you were doing? Explain your response.
- 4) In what ways did the homeless individuals correspond to your previous stereotypes of homeless people?
- 5) In what ways did the homeless individuals differ from your previous stereotypes of homeless people?
- 6) Did you have any pleasant interactions with any of the homeless individuals at the stops? If yes, describe your experience.
- 7) Describe any other interesting people or interactions you observed while performing service?
- 8) In what ways did Mitchell Duneier's *Sidewalk* or Tova Höjdestrand's *Needed by Nobody* affect the way you perceived the homeless people you served?

### **Appendix C. Exam Questions**

- 1) Describe how the following three social structural factors contribute to homelessness in Russia:
  - a) Criminal justice system
  - b) Real estate fraud
  - c) Economic turmoil
- 2) Explain Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism. How does it apply to modern metropolises such as New York and St. Petersburg?
- 3) How is police treatment of the homeless in the U.S. and Russia similar? How is police treatment of the homeless in the U.S. and Russia different?
- 4) Compare the effects of alcoholism on the homeless in New York and Russia. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different?

- 5) How are the sleeping conditions different for homeless individuals in New York and Russia?
- 6) How are the interactions of homeless people with non-homeless people (passersby) different in New York and St. Petersburg?
- 7) What are some of the problems homeless individuals have in maintaining personal hygiene and a presentable appearance in the U.S. and Russia?
- 8) What is 'broken windows theory,' and how has it been applied in U.S. and Russian cities?
  - a) What are potential shortcomings of the theory?
- 9) Was there a greater sense of community among homeless individuals in New York or St. Petersburg? What may be some reasons for these differences?
- 10) In your estimation, is life more difficult for the homeless individuals we read about in New York, or those in Russia? Provide examples to justify your response.

#### **Appendix D. Pre-Test/Post-Test Questions**

##### *Victim-Blaming*

- 1) Most misfortunes that occur to people are often the result of circumstances beyond their control.
- 2) Homeless people do not work.
- 3) Money earned from panhandling is usually spent on alcohol or drugs.

##### *Understanding of Homelessness*

- 1) I have a thorough understanding of homelessness in the United States.
- 2) I have a thorough understanding of homelessness in Russia.