

Shifting Perspective Through Art

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Abstract:

Socioeconomic disparities have existed within societies throughout history and will likely continue to exist unless fundamental elements of society are changed. Ostensibly, the majority of citizens in the United States understand that changes are needed to address economic disparity; however, most citizens do not have the time, energy, or inclination to advocate for these changes. Due to the overwhelming nature of discussing disparities on a national scale, for my final project and paper, I will be focusing on the socioeconomic disparities within Burlington, Vermont. I hope to illustrate the stark disparities that exist in Burlington through a portfolio of photographs that capture the different worlds that those with socioeconomic opportunities, and those without, live in. To achieve my goal successfully, I plan on underscoring two major barriers keeping people from accessing social and economic opportunities; in the case of Burlington, I believe this to be housing and substance use services. I hope that the juxtaposition of those with housing, and those without, will highlight the critical need to address affordable housing in the City of Burlington. The design of my portfolio will play a key role in achieving the goal of my final project. I will present my photographs in a minimalistic, but purposeful manner. I intend to communicate my message without words and instead execute the placement and sequencing of my photographs in a manner that will convey my message. Of course, the portfolio needs to be aesthetically pleasing for the viewer, as well; to achieve this I will leverage technology. With the powerful camera in the iPhone 15, and my confidence in web-based design programs, I hope to achieve my goal with this project of highlighting the socioeconomic disparities that exist among Burlington residents.

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Introduction

The level of socioeconomic opportunities that people are afforded can often be determined by the zip code in which one is born. Said differently, an individual's ability to obtain economic and social advancement comes down to where they were born, and the family into which they were born. Subscribing to this ideology helps form an empathetic and charitable perspective when observing those who are disadvantaged. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the cohort of society who hold the ideology that those who are disadvantaged simply need to work harder. The differences between these two ideologies, and therefore two perspectives, are especially stark when the topic of homelessness and substance use is part of the conversation.

As with most economic and cultural issues in contemporary society, the country is divided and seemingly becoming more divided as time passes. How then, do we come together as a society to fix the socioeconomic disparities that exist in communities of all sizes? Recently, I had the privilege of attending a Capitol Hill Report where I heard how Senator Welch believes we can answer this question. Senator Welch spoke at great lengths about the division that our country is facing and the need for collaboration. He stressed that progress will not be made by telling those who disagree with our views how they are wrong. Instead, Senator Welch passionately spoke about the need for all of us to find commonalities among one another, and the community we all share. Senator Welch's vision is complementary to the objective of my artistic creation. The issue of homelessness and substance use affects the Burlington community we all live in. Turning a blind eye to these issues is not an option; the artistic creation presented intends to do the opposite through the juxtaposition of socioeconomic disparities in Burlington, Vermont .

Background

Memories flooded them as the air grew colder, darkness crouched on the western horizon, streetlights flickered." ("Eclipse," Trafton, April 8, 2024)

There is the age-old, at times terrifying phenomenon of the end of a day. The coming of darkness is accompanied by the breathless fear that the sun might not return. "Night. To Renaissance humanists Night and Day were destructive powers since they ceaselessly marked the passage of time that led inexorably to decay and death. Hence, they were sometimes represented as a pair of rodents, generally rats, one black and one white. The figure of Night personified floats in the sky, sometimes under a blue canopy studded with stars. She may hold a child in each arm, a white one who is Sleep, a black one, Death. Her usual attributes are an owl, masks (which may be worn by putti) and poppies, sometimes worn as a crown. She may be accompanied by the sleeping Morpheus, the god of dreams, who may likewise be crowned with poppies (Giordano, Palazzo Riccardi, Florence). Or she sits in the lamplight with folded wings, her head in her hands, the two children asleep nearby." (Hall, Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art, pg. 224)

"There are many forms of darkness. There is darkness when we close our eyes, darkness that climbs up our back, darkness that grabs, that we fear when our eyes are closed in the shower. The darkness of the mind. There is the darkness of primordial fear, deeply rooted in the human psyche. The fears of death, isolation, and darkness." ("The Darkness of the Mind," Trafton, 2023)

The thick gloom of Stygian night: "of or relating to the river Styx. The literal sense began to be used in the early 16th century, and by the beginning of the 17th had taken on its figurative sense." ("Stygian,' 'Umbra,' and Other Words for Darkness: Words borne from the dying of the light," merriam-webster.com) There is the mythology of darkness as it relates to the Underworld, to

Hades. Darkness that holds a mystery and strikes to the core.

I approached my artistic creation by asking myself how I could obtain the strongest possible juxtaposition of socioeconomic disparities without conveying an overbearing message. I wanted to highlight disparities in the Burlington community that citizens observe day-to-day, similar to Senator Welch's comments on finding commonalities with those who disagree with us. However, the observations in the context of this topic typically have a level of dissonance; observations of homelessness downtown are met with comments about someone needing to fix the problem, and when observations of neighborhoods off of Spear Street are made comments about how amazing the view the owners have are made.

Beyond the gradual shift that can be observed traveling from downtown Burlington to Spear Street, the unharmonious nature of dismissing or suggesting that homelessness is a problem without discussing the root causes is problematic. Moreover, complementing the view that owners of million-dollar homes have while having just made observations downtown highlights the cognitive dissonance surrounding this topic. I concede that I am generalizing, however, the narrative outlined is a sentiment that I believe residents of Burlington can relate to. After reflecting, I decided to approach my artistic creation by bringing the different worlds in Burlington together and displaying the stark juxtaposition with contrasting photographs.

I started the photography stage of the artistic process by walking downtown and observing the people, places, objects, and realities that Burlington residents experience. It was cloudy and dark, but the warm air and slight breeze made me grateful that summer was near. As I started making observations and photos, I experienced a more profound sense of gratefulness. Gratefulness for my family, my housing, and the fact that I was fortunate enough to afford the treatment I received for

my alcoholism. Much of what I observed hit extremely close to home, as I fully believe that I was a few months away from being homeless had I not received the help I did. Then sadness set in as I witnessed a man take a needle to a vein in his hand while sitting on a stone bench in front of the Unitarian Church at the North End of Church Street. An orange cap lay on the ground underneath his right foot, while a wound on his left leg bled. I turned my attention to the left and I saw the storefront signs for Lululemon and Chase Bank. Chase Bank, the largest bank in America with over \$100 billion in revenue yearly, and Lululemon, a clothing brand that charges over 100 dollars for a pair of leggings. I immediately thought about a moral and philosophical question, what level of responsibility should corporations have in supporting the communities in which they operate? This question continued to resonate the more I walked around downtown.

Placing morality and philosophy aside, the unfortunate reality is the answer to the question posed is none. Consequently, this reality reinforced the theme of my project. Here I found myself, walking down Church Street with national brands, boutique shops, and fine restaurants while individuals sleep and use drugs under the canopies that hang over their entrances. The stark contrast was jarring and despite Church Street being relatively quiet, I reminded myself that thousands walk up and down this street without looking at those who are disadvantaged. The disadvantaged, those individuals without homes, without sobriety and resources to achieve economic and social advancement; all walked around and ignored as consumers head to a building to spend money.

The more time I spent walking around downtown Burlington the more I felt I had chosen the right topic for my project. Although this project will not change anything externally, in reality, it certainly changed my views internally; it underscored how desensitized we can become to the environment around us, and how that

influences our moral and philosophical perspectives.

Perspectives are Fluid and Always Changing

There is perhaps no political and cultural topic in today's society that requires as much of an understanding of perspective as the topic of socioeconomic disparity. As previously alluded to, perspectives on this topic will differ according to your political and social ideology. Additionally, lived experiences, observations, and the ability to understand the world around you will influence an individual's perception. This is called the visual process and it is a primary framework for describing how perspectives are formed. As Professor Tomasi outlined in the class six presentation through sensing, selecting, and perceiving the environment around us we gain a better understanding of the world and increase our knowledge. The visual process is analogous to the idea that we are a product of the environment that we were and are in.

The Association of American Medical Colleges published a peer-reviewed study by a group of doctors highlighting how someone's environment impacts perspective. More specifically, the study sought to solve an observation of medical students and their empathy levels decreasing while training. The study involved offering an art education elective to medical students to shift empathy levels, as outlined by Rezaei et al. (2023) in the publication:

We developed and implemented an art education elective for medical students focusing on observation and reflective practice and measured its impact on empathy. Between 2017 and 2022, first-year medical students were offered an annual, 4-week elective led by art educators that featured visualization exercises and discussions on the role of bias and perspective in art interpretation. (p. 1) Beyond the fact that this study showcases how an environment can impact perception, it caught my eye for two additional reasons. Firstly, the results of the study reaffirmed

my historical bias toward dismissing art education, before taking Intro to Visual Communication. Based on my personal experience taking this course and the results of this study, it is clear that there are substantial benefits to the exposure of art education. Secondly, after reviewing the appendices in the article I discovered the session PowerPoint presentations used throughout the elective. What was most striking, was the session one presentation where Rezaei et al. (2023) outlined the visual process:

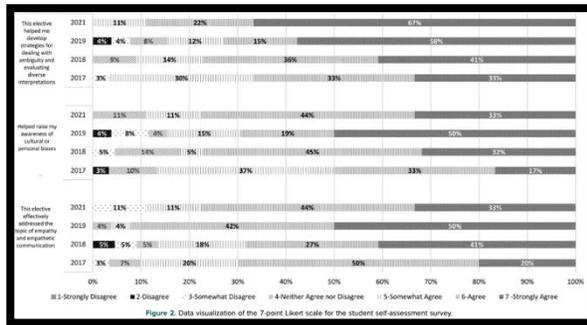
- Active Looking: Take an inventory of what you see (using the elements of art and principles of design)
- Choices: What could the artist have done differently?
- Connections: What connections can you make with this work of art? Do you have outside knowledge that could contribute to an interpretation?
- Possibilities: What might the artist be trying to communicate through this work of art?

Consider the range of possible interpretations. There is not one, grand, unifying meaning for a work of art. (Rezaei et al., 2023, Appendix D)

I acknowledge that some people may not find the visual process striking, but it struck a chord for me; in the context of my artistic creation involving empathy, and the message I hope to convey, seeing the visual process described in the manner above resonated.

The most important aspect of the study is ultimately the outcome. In the case of medical students taking an art education elective, in 2021 67% of students reported strongly agreeing that the elective helped develop strategies for dealing with ambiguity and evaluating diverse interpretations, 33% strongly agreed that the elective raised awareness of cultural or personal biases, and 33% strongly agreed that the elective effectively addressed the topic of empathy and empathetic communication (Rezaei et al., 2023, p. 4).

The results of the study for the year 2021, and subsequent years, can be seen in Student Self-assessment Survey of Art Education Elective



Note. From Rezaei S, Childress A, Kaul B, Rosales KM, Newell A, Rose S. (2023). Using Visual Arts Education and Reflective Practice to Increase Empathy and Perspective Taking in Medical Students. *MedEdPORTAL*, 4, 11346. https://doi.org/10.15766/mep_2374-8265.11346

Perspective is the result of the visual process, and the study conducted on medical students shows the powerful influence that art, and certainly art education, can have on an individual as it relates to interpretations, biases, empathy, and empathetic communication. I hope that my artistic creation can challenge predetermined perspectives through the visual process, however, this is only a start. Once an individual has successfully shifted their perspective, there is still the task of solving the underlying issue, relative to the socioeconomic disparities in Burlington.

The Ongoing Housing Crisis in Vermont

There is evidence that the City of Burlington and the State of Vermont are attempting to solve, at least temporarily, the housing crisis facing the greater Burlington area. As I walked around downtown Burlington taking photographs I did not observe as many unhoused individuals as I was expecting. I immediately thought about how ridiculous a statement this was and reflected on coworkers and acquaintances stating that they avoid downtown altogether due to the crime, drug, and homelessness problems. Although my perception on the day I took photographs did not align with anecdotal comments I had previously heard, I understand how someone could have this perception. Housing remains a crucial issue for Vermonters, and one reason there

appeared to be fewer people unhoused than in the past is because of a program that houses homeless individuals in vacant hotel rooms. However, affordable housing remains a crisis as Bernie Sanders stated in a press release:

At a time when we are experiencing nothing short of a crisis of affordable housing in Vermont and across the country, we must make sure that federal funding to address this crisis is put to work quickly and efficiently to serve working families, seniors, and all those lacking stable housing. (“Tax Credits Combine With”, 2022)

To capture the crisis that Bernie stressed in his statement I took photographs capturing a homeless man and someone’s shopping cart, which was full of personal belongings. Then, I took photographs I had captured Near Swift Street of an idyllic neighborhood with trees, parks, ponds, and playgrounds. I then placed these two extremely different worlds I had captured directly next to each other in my portfolio. The contrast between those without housing and those with unaffordable housing for individuals such as myself, and those far more disadvantaged, is troubling. As I crafted my portfolio of photographs I continuously thought philosophically about housing. The reflection I had done earlier in the semester regarding Marxist theory and the commoditization of housing came to mind. I asked myself, will we ever have enough affordable housing in such a capitalistic developed society? Regardless of the answer to this question, Bernie Sanders summarized the essence of the housing conversation a year ago at a press conference, “Simply put, a decent, safe, and affordable place to live is a fundamental human right, not a privilege” (“Sanders Announces More”, 2023). I cannot express enough how much I agree with Bernie on this point. Safe and affordable housing is the foundation that supports socioeconomic advancement from occurring. Despite Vermont’s population being relatively small, our outlook on homelessness is bleak, “Vermont has the second-highest per-capita rate of homelessness in the country, trailing

California, according to figures published in December 2022 from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development” (Kaptein, 2023). If we as a society solved the housing crisis, many other cultural and economic issues facing our communities could be mitigated. Unfortunately, fixing the problem will require financial resources. Often, the people in power to deploy said resources can be shortsighted and as we are about to discuss, forget about the longtail effect of solving these larger socioeconomic issues.

Addiction in Vermont

Substance use is widespread among homeless populations and I was reminded of this fact while completing my artistic creation. Seeing a man use a hypodermic needle out in the open while walking Church Street certainly reminded me of this fact. Speaking from personal experience, those with active addictions simply cannot recover on their own. Governor Phil Scott summarized the ongoing realities of addiction in a press release in 2019, The unfortunate reality is addiction continues to derail far too many lives, families and, in some cases, communities. It impacts every corner of our state and society, from our schools to the workforce to our healthcare system. Its social and human impacts are significant and heartbreaking. It is also driving up the costs of healthcare, education, social safety net programs, corrections and public safety. (“Statement From Governor”, 2019) Scott made this statement while announcing that Vermont received a \$6.6 million award from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, underscoring the expense of addressing these larger socioeconomic issues. However, as Scott points out, ignoring these issues will exacerbate the financial drag on the services and programs we all pay for.

Conclusion

The socioeconomic disparities facing the Burlington community and communities across the country may never be solved.

However, we must continue to discuss these disparities to find commonalities, and hopefully solutions. Reflecting on the lessons learned throughout this course I believe that art, and the corresponding expression that comes with it, is a valuable tool in having larger conversations about disparity. We are selfish beings and are often so caught up with our day-to-day lives that we do not stop to look around us. During my walk downtown, I wondered whether others had the same perception that I did. Do others understand the root cause of these disparities? Does anyone care enough to solve them or will there forever be socioeconomic disparities? Although I am unable to answer these questions, I hope that my artistic creation is effective at highlighting the socioeconomic disparities that exist in Burlington.

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