

## **Taking Responsibility to Create a Trauma and Social Justice-Informed Workforce**

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*This conceptual paper describes the efforts to address curriculum deficits related to the preparation of graduates across multiple service fields for their work in high-poverty communities. Faculty members from various programs jointly facilitated a high-impact simulation designed to ascertain its impact on students' perceptions and personal biases toward disadvantaged community members. This mixed methods study used Yun and Weaver's (2010) Short Form of the Attitude Toward Poverty Scale, as well as focus groups. Quantitative data indicated that participants held more positive attitudes towards individuals struggling with poverty after completing the simulation. The overarching themes concerning college students' attitudes about poverty indicated paradigm shifts in their personal thinking and professional behavior in the workforce, as well as empathy regarding the cycle of poverty and the extremely hard decisions that are necessary when experiencing poverty. These findings are important for facilitating learning about the social injustices that can ensue from poverty. The study comes at a time of a pandemic when online learning is at its height and poverty is intensifying.*

*Keywords: experiential learning, poverty simulation, college students, social learning, high-impact practice*

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study was to provide students with a high-impact experience which would allow both faculty and students to analyze their perceptions about poverty. The Missouri Community Action Network Poverty Simulation© model has proven effective for facilitating learning and engagement through participants' roleplaying the lives of a variety of low-income families, such as that of a single parent, senior citizens on a fixed income raising grandchildren, and families with children who have disabilities (Keeney, Hohman, & Bergman, 2019). The simulation allows participants to first experience issues related to poverty and then provides time for a debriefing to discuss resources available and also the potential for change within local communities. It is designed to create an awareness of poverty in hopes of inspiring positive change. The findings allowed for a larger discussion among faculty members related to program improvement and addressing issues of social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusiveness throughout the university.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The world is more interconnected than ever before, creating challenges and opportunities for colleges and universities to develop a workforce which is cognizant of personal and cultural biases. The lack of perspective and understanding of cultural differences can lead to ethnocentric ideologies/ biases regarding the experiences of others, which can possibly increase the likelihood of personal and professional conflicts. To impact a conscious change, it is imperative for colleges and universities to develop a workforce of students who are socio-economically and culturally aware through increased knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of others. Research has shown that an individual's attitude towards poverty is often a result of what they perceive as the causes of poverty (Tagler & Corzzarelli, 2013). These negative views and attitudes will have the potential to affect their personal and professional practices. While personal attitudes are derived from the moral or social view of others, professional attitude also includes how a person relates to the issues they are required to address in their work (Lorenc, Blair, & Robinson, 2014). The transforming practice of this type of reflection provides the opportunity to develop knowledge about self, beliefs, and attitudes toward culturally diverse backgrounds.

King and Ladson-Billings (1990) described their attempts to help students consider cultural competence and critical perspectives as "a continuum that begins with self-awareness and knowledge that extends to thinking critically about society and making a commitment to transformative teaching" (p.26). It is evident that trends in teaching and learning forecast that changes are needed for the changing societal climate. However, it is less obvious how colleges and universities might go about acquiring new knowledge about diversity and fostering changes in practices based on those trends in teaching and learning.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Before the pandemic, faculty met to discuss issues with content of both online and face to face courses, which were limited in providing our students with the sufficient knowledge and skills to identify and address poverty. Faculty were concerned students would graduate unprepared to work in service-oriented jobs which would require knowledge of trauma-informed strategies to work successfully in their fields and provide all clients with equitable service. Examination of current course content revealed a lack of direct experience that Bandura (1971) found critical to establish the acquisition of patterns of behavior that are needed in order to provide students opportunities for growth. Using Bandura's (1971) Social Learning Theory (SLT), the simulation would provide a high-impact practice that allowed for the construct of observational learning. By providing multiple ways to change behavior (i.e., knowledge and attitudes) through the simulated environment, reciprocal determination, a construct of Bandura's SLT, is emphasized. This posits the importance of the interaction amongst people, the environment, and their behaviors (Bandura, 1971).

After the simulation, the focus groups allowed for discussion about community resources available to graduates upon entering the workforce, which, according to Bandura (1971), would provide students with the self-efficacy to perform in the workforce in their service-related jobs. Students were made aware of resources, which provided them with tools needed to perform their work while considering clients' level of economic stability. Bandura (1971) posited that providing this type of training allows for a level of behavioral capability that educates students to be aware of possible interventions for clients.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Providing students with experiential learning experiences enables students to have new educational experiences where they can shift paradigms, challenge assumptions and beliefs, and cultural biases to enhance the learning process. On a broad sense, researchers have described culture as "...values, traditions, worldview, and social and political relationships created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, religion or other identity" (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 63). Culture influences every aspect of life and because it evolves from shared knowledge and experiences, it can affect how people relate to each other.

Bennis (2004) argued that individuals and groups view the world through their unique cultural lens. The cultural lens is formed through experiences and information learned from families, communities, religious institutions, schools and media. Bennis suggested everyone's cultural lens reflects their cultural beliefs and values that guide their communication and interactions with the world. When beliefs and values are tainted by bias, prejudice, and even stereotyping it creates barriers making it difficult to appreciate and understand different cultural and racial groups. As students address their underlying perceptions of differences and diversity, they can move toward new ways of thinking.

Colleges and universities have become more and more diverse, with various ethnic and racial groups comprising a significant percentage of the overall enrollment. According to the National Center for Education Statistics ([NCES], 2009), the diversity of our schools in the US will continue to change and become even more diverse over the next decade. An influx of more minority students into schools and university systems may very well exacerbate the existing educational issues and inequalities. Cultural competency is a term used to define a set of competencies that form "congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or amongst professionals and enables that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situation" (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989, p.7). Barriers to cultural competence affect educational equity and contribute to the challenges facing students and their families. As professional educators, it is important to take note the ethnic and cultural shift in our school systems is occurring in every corner of the nation.

The demand for interculturally competent graduates has initiated departments in higher education to create opportunities to develop students, knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to work and communicate with others from a diversity of background (Paige & Goode, 2009). It is imperative to recognize the value

of different methods of inquiry, models, theories, and practices, and encourage learning from other cultures. Intentional learning experiences such as the poverty simulation are essential to start moving from ethnocentrism to understanding the issues of diversity. Higher education educators have found it critical to create opportunities that guide the learning process to promote cultural competence in their students. Experiential methods have been increasingly used to support cultural competence development due to the impact on identifying self-awareness, enhancing cultural awareness, and developing cultural empathy.

For many universities, the use of poverty simulations as an experiential learning opportunity has fostered changes in attitudes, behaviors, and developed empathy in their college students (Meaux, Ashcraft, & Gillis, 2019; Reid & Evanson, 2016; Turk & Colbert, 2018). The Missouri Community Action Network Poverty Simulation© is considered to be an experiential learning activity. The simulation allows participants to first experience issues related to poverty and then provides time to discuss the potential for change within local communities. The debriefing component lets the participants discuss what happened, reflect on how they felt personally, and what reactions they saw in others and themselves in order to learn from the experience. This design creates an awareness of poverty in hopes of inspiring positive change.

Higher education institutions have implemented the use of the simulation in various programs, particularly in social work and nursing. A number of research studies have shown when students participate in the poverty simulation decreases in personal bias and negative stereotyping of individuals living in poverty (Menzel, Willson, & Doolen, 2014; Moore, Struhsaker, & Gutschow, 2018; Yang, Woomer, Agbemenu, & Williams, 2014). Other positive outcomes have been improved attitudes towards and understanding those living in poverty as well as increased empathy for those experiencing poverty (Clarke, 2015; Goelman Rice, McCall, & Ogden, 2017). In one study, Todd, de Guzman, and Zhang (2011) stated they found not only were there changes in attitudes and beliefs of the participants but a deeper understanding of the complexities that exist in poverty. Additionally, there was a decrease in biases and stereotypes about living in poverty. Nickols and Nielson (2011) pointed out that students participating in a poverty simulation experienced feeling, such as being “overwhelmed, frustrated, and despondent” (Nickols & Nielsen, 2011, p.27). They suggested these feelings would be beneficial to trigger the desire to advocate for change. A qualitative study with BSN students attending the University of Arkansas showed a statistically significant change in how sensitive and understanding of the circumstances surrounding poverty and the challenges faced by people living in (Meaux, Ashcraft, & Gillis, 2019). Three interesting themes emerged from their work which suggested there were many challenges and issues living in poverty. Other themes of stress and worry as well as awareness and understanding surfaced as key factors related to poverty. These students also stated the simulation created a sense of understanding in the need for knowledge of community resources. In two similar quantitative studies completed with nursing students, More, Struhsaker, and Gutschow (2018) report there was no significant change in attitudes towards children living in poverty. However, Turk and Colbert’s (2018) research revealed there was improvement in student understanding and empathy for those living in poverty but did not reflect a significant improvement in the “Do More” subscale. The “Do More” subscale of the survey indicates students do not hold the belief that organizations and individuals should do more to help the poor.

## **METHODS/MEASURES**

The design of the mixed methods study was quasi-experimental with participation in the poverty simulation being the independent variable. The dependent variable was captured using the Short Form of the Attitude Toward Poverty Scale developed by Yun and Weaver (2010). The 36-item survey was based on Yun and Weaver (2010) Short Form of the Attitude Toward Poverty Scale and developed by the research team to determine college students’ attitudes toward poverty. It consisted of 11 demographic questions, three poverty experience questions, 21 Likert-type scale responses, and one open ended question. The Likert-type scale questions were assessed with four options provided to indicate statement agreement (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree). The survey questions included statements about beliefs about poor people (e.g., “I believe poor people have a different set of values than do other people”) and behaviors of poor people (e.g., “Poor people act differently”). Three questions were included that asked

about participants' personal experiences with poverty and another open-ended item asked participants to define poverty in their own words. Higher scores indicate attitudes which are either more or less favorable towards poverty. The simulation served as the intervention. No control group or random assignment was used. Participants were recruited by faculty members across disciplines at the university. After registering for the simulation, the Yun and Weaver (2010) survey was administered as a pre-test via an anonymous electronic survey before the poverty simulation. Participants were asked to provide sociodemographic information including name, gender, race, major, and personal experience with poverty. A posttest was administered electronically to participants after the simulation to complete the first wave of data collection (See Table 1). However, approximately one month after the simulation, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted university students and populations around the world. The team decided it was important to collect a second wave of data and distributed the same survey post-COVID-19 to determine if participants experienced any changes in their attitudes towards poverty (See Table 2). The number of responses was lower due to time since the previous post-test, but still provides meaningful insight.

Since this study was to explore paradigm shifts in attitudes of college students concerning poverty, a quantitative approach was necessary to gather and correlate the data; however, quantitative data alone would not provide enough information to fully conceptualize the phenomenon. Therefore, qualitative data was collected through ten recorded focus groups where facilitators engaged a script and interview guide. Each group size consisted of 10 participants. Open-ended questions were asked regarding perceptions of poverty before and after the poverty simulation, the impact of the simulation on personal and professional identity, and resources within the campus community.

### **Participants**

A total of 99 undergraduate- and graduate-level student participated in the first wave of data collection. There were 78 males and 22 females who volunteered to participate in the study held at a regional comprehensive university in the Southeast. In terms of degree programs, the majority of participants were students in the Nursing Program (34%), yet programs spanned Social Work (32%), Biomedical (10%), Criminal Justice (7%), General Studies (5%), with the remaining 2% coming from Communications, Physician Assistants, Public Health, Health Promotion, and Psychology. The majority of students were in the 21-25 age range. Caucasian students made up 79% of the participants, 14% were African American, 2% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 2% who identified as "other."

### **Analysis**

#### *Quantitative*

The survey data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics were used to identify the percentage of participants who had been directly impacted by poverty and the nature of their relationship with poverty. Paired-sample t-tests were used to compare the 21 Likert-type scale items on pre- and post-surveys. Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25.

#### *Qualitative*

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed within the Otter.ai application and subsequently reviewed thoroughly against the original recordings and sanitized prior to analysis. Transcription files were then stored and analyzed within MAXQDA2020 using content analysis with a thematic focus. Specifically, analysis focused on reactions to and changes in perceptions of poverty. In the initial coding of data, 428 codes were established. The researchers worked in two teams including two researchers each to analyze the 10 focus group responses and determine key statements directly related to each question set. The coding began with aggregating the text from the transcripts into small categories of information and then assigning a label to each code. The numerical majority was used as an emergent defining boundary for the selected codes. Many codes were reduced and combined to become part of the thematic analysis. Key points in the study were the facts that paradigm shifts in personal thinking and professional behavior of our students changed in the categories of jobs, empathy development, compounding circumstances, issues with task prioritizing, rationale for theft, hard choices and decisions, limited knowledge of resource processes, stress

from simulation, effects of poverty, and stigma in poverty. After the initial analysis, additional researchers reviewed the first set of coded items and identified three emergent themes to understand phenomena in the context-specific data. These emergent themes were (a) Process, (b) Responses, and (c) Resources. Additionally, there were several key statements and codes that were classified as intersecting and cross-sectional themes.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Quantitative**

While a total of 99 individuals participated in the poverty simulation, only 43 individuals completed both the pre and post adapted attitude toward poverty scale. Results of the paired samples t tests showed a significant difference in five attitudes that changed after participating in the poverty simulation. These were: Some “poor” people live better than I do, considering all the benefits which changed the mean disagreement of 3.19 to 3.52; Welfare mothers have babies to get more money, 3.12 to an increased disagreement to 3.33; An able-bodied person collecting welfare is ripping off the system which went from 2.81 to 3.12; benefits for poor people consume a major part of the federal budget, with a mean disagreement of 2.74 pre simulation and a 3.17 post simulation, and finally people who are poor should not be blamed for their misfortune which had a mean agreement of 2.12 and increased toward strong agreement at 1.93. Significance was set at point zero five.

### **Qualitative**

The purpose of the focus groups was to evaluate the effects the poverty simulation had on the participating college students. The researchers utilized a set of predetermined questions to explore the impact of the real-life experiences had on the participants and identify the areas of change in paradigms that directly impact the effects that poverty has on individuals, families, and communities. Each member of the research team served as a moderator in one of the focus groups. Each moderator was instructed to use verbatim the script and question sets based on the research question and research purpose. Each group size consisted of 10 participants. These groups delivered adequate information and raw data to draw effective findings.

The three categories used to sort responses were: Process (students’ experiences with understanding poverty), Responses (students’ responses to initiate community change), and Resources (students’ personal knowledge about community and university resources or lack thereof). When analyzing the data, we found that there were many comments made about the stress and frustration of the simulation. Some key examples from the students related to their perceptions included: (1) “I have a newfound perspective of how stressful poverty is” and (2) “Even though it's a simulation, you have that experience and on a very small level it brings poverty to a new awareness and understanding”. These responses demonstrated the strong impact the simulation had on students from all fields of study.

Several other candidate statements in the focus group discussion highlighted the notion of the cycle of poverty and lack of resources: (1) “I feel like once you're in poverty, like there's no way out.” Another noted the powerful impact of the poverty simulation, (2) “I didn't know what to expect, what this was going to be like or what I envisioned. A lot of you guys are just talking to some of us, but I really liked that we were able to participate, and I think just overall the biggest thing it did for me was just open my eyes.” Additionally, the simulation exposed the weakness of a system to provide or clearly advertise help by providing resources. Students often stated how difficult it was to obtain the various resources and realizing it may not be the sole fault of the individual. Several students noted this in these comments: (1) “They're probably not doing good and they're being lazy, they're not working, but I think it's important to kind of distance yourself from the biases and just kind look at the individual and they're presenting problems, whether it's healthcare related or not, and then try to treat them in the best way possible and not regarding their financial status or what's happening outside of the hospital or whatever the situation is.” and (2) “It made me understand what my clients are going through”. So, the simulation provided the modeling needed

for these students to not only live, albeit briefly, in poverty but to reflect on these changes in their perspectives.

The most surprising (yet promising) findings were the number of comments made in the Responses category – totaling 205, which was approximately half of all responses. Key examples included: (1) “...understanding is the first step in bettering our system” and (2) “It seems we need to create a document of resources in our community to pass on to people that I come in contact within my job. What can I do? I only know the resources from my profession. This needs to be a team effort.” When reflecting on the data, we found a profound epiphany among our students of the fragility of the interconnectedness of our students entering the workforce on a variety of jobs. The realization that each of their disciplines could make a difference in providing a more comprehensive support system for those living in poverty was magical to witness, and quite honestly, one we had not considered. Being teacher educators, our focus was strictly on what we can provide for our students. Never could we imagine a group of ninety-nine students would see how this lack of interconnectedness was creating issues for those in poverty, and then also talk about ways they can come together to better provide support for those living in poverty.

**TABLE 1**  
**PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY BEFORE THE PANDEMIC**

<b>Poverty Perceptions (N = 43)</b> <i>(1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = disagree; 4 = strongly disagree)</i>	<b>Pre</b>	<b>Post</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p-value</b>
Poor people are different from society.	3.24	3.29	-0.467	0.643
Poor people are dishonest.	3.52	3.33	1.747	0.088
Most poor people are dirty.	3.33	3.43	-1.667	0.103
Poor people act differently.	2.88	2.83	0.422	0.675
Children raised on welfare will never amount to an anything.	3.79	3.69	1.432	0.160
I believe poor people have a different set of values than do other people.	3.05	2.98	0.503	0.618
Poor people generally have lower intelligence than non-poor people.	3.24	3.19	0.388	0.700
There is a lot of fraud among welfare recipients.	2.90	3.10	-1.667	0.103
Some “poor” people live better than I do, considering all the benefits.	3.19	3.52	-3.146	0.003
Poor people think they deserve to be supported.	3.00	3.05	-0.422	0.675

Welfare mothers have babies to get more money.	3.12	3.33	-2.152	0.037
An able-bodied person collecting welfare is ripping off the system.	2.81	3.12	-2.112	0.041
Unemployed poor people could find jobs if they tried harder.	2.83	2.98	-1.030	0.309
Welfare makes people lazy.	3.10	3.10	0.000	1.000
Benefits for poor people consume a major part of the federal budget.	2.74	3.17	-3.232	0.002
People are poor due to circumstances beyond their control.	2.29	2.19	0.550	0.585
I would support a program that resulted in higher taxes to support social programs for poor people.	2.52	2.52	0.000	1.000
If I were poor, I would accept welfare benefits.	2.05	2.05	0.000	1.000
People who are poor should not be blamed for their misfortune.	2.12	1.93	2.077	0.044
Society has the responsibility to help poor people.	2.21	2.19	0.216	0.830
Poor people are discriminated against.	1.62	1.64	-0.227	0.822

**TABLE 2**  
**PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY AFTER THE PANDEMIC**

<b>Poverty Perceptions (N = 15)</b> <i>(1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = disagree; 4 = strongly disagree)</i>	<b>Pre</b>	<b>Post</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p-value</b>
Poor people are different from society.	3.27	3.33	-0.367	0.719
Poor people are dishonest.	3.53	3.40	1.000	0.334
Most poor people are dirty.	3.40	3.53	-1.468	0.164
Poor people act differently.	2.87	2.80	0.435	0.670



Children raised on welfare will never amount to anything.	3.73	3.73	0.000	1.000
I believe poor people have a different set of values than do other people.	3.07	2.93	0.619	0.546
Poor people generally have lower intelligence than non-poor people.	2.93	2.93	0.000	1.000
There is a lot of fraud among welfare recipients.	2.80	3.07	-1.468	0.164
Some “poor” people live better than I do, considering all the benefits.	3.20	3.67	-2.824	0.014
Poor people think they deserve to be supported.	3.00	3.00	0.000	1.000
Welfare mothers have babies to get more money.	3.00	3.33	-1.581	0.136
An able-bodied person collecting welfare is ripping off the system.	2.53	3.20	-3.162	0.007
Unemployed poor people could find jobs if they tried harder.	2.80	2.93	-0.564	0.582
Welfare makes people lazy.	3.13	3.00	0.695	0.499
Benefits for poor people consume a major part of the federal budget.	2.73	3.47	-3.556	0.003
People are poor due to circumstances beyond their control.	2.27	2.07	0.716	0.486
I would support a program that resulted in higher taxes to support social programs for poor people.	2.67	2.80	-0.695	0.499
If I were poor, I would accept welfare benefits.	2.27	2.07	1.382	0.189
People who are poor should not be blamed for their misfortune.	2.13	1.87	1.871	0.082
Society has the responsibility to help poor people.	2.00	2.13	0.619	0.546
Poor people are discriminated against.	1.73	1.80	-0.367	0.719

## SCHOLARLY SIGNIFICANCE

As professors in higher education, we must seek to advocate for the best interests of our students and place the issues of poverty and associated trauma at the forefront of our educational discussions as opposed to placing these issues on the periphery. We have always known service professionals are uniquely positioned to support students who are impacted emotionally and physically by the exposure to poverty. We do not have all the answers, but the results of our study motivate us to reframe educational paradigms which influence how we view community members in poverty. These reasons and responses from our first simulation suggest that not just students but teachers need context-specific training in poverty. Providing this training for more than one discipline allows for not only the first step in a paradigm shift related to the understanding of how poverty and related trauma impacts our students, but it allows for a community “think tank” consisting of empathetic, diverse individuals in the workforce.

By experiencing and having the opportunity to respond to situations in a poverty simulation, this modeling that Bandura (1974) claimed led to change did indeed occur. This change is conducive to encouraging the community to come together to impact change. As usually is the case, what we, the teachers, often learn is far more powerful than what our students learn from us. We learned that this issue of poverty is one that cannot be viewed from one disciplinary lens, but instead should be considered through the lens of interprofessional. These findings will truly shape how we teach our future students about poverty. Future simulations we will allow us to continue providing them with opportunities to connect with others in different fields to truly understand and work towards a transformed perspective which will inspire community change. With the looming destruction to our economy from the pandemic that is imminent, this first step has been critical, as our graduates will be leading the way to collaboratively work to solve a poverty issue unlike most of us have ever seen.

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