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“So Many People are Struggling”: Developing Social Empathy Through a Poverty Simulation

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This article reports on the use of a poverty simulation with a sample of students from a large public university in the Southeast. To better understand whether participation in a poverty simulation influences attitudes and fosters social empathy for people in poverty, a pre- and postquestionnaire and a reflection paper were used. Quantitative analysis suggests that the simulation fostered more understanding of the conditions contributing to poverty. Qualitative analysis indicates that students gained greater depth of understanding and empathy about the lived experience of poverty. Together, the results suggest the poverty simulation develops a more nuanced understanding of poverty.

KEYWORDS poverty simulation, social empathy, opinions about poverty, teaching about poverty

The topic of poverty is included in courses in a variety of disciplines, including economics, consumer economics, social work, and sociology. Typically, the study of poverty uses an analytical/didactic approach covering topics such as the measurement of poverty, the incidence of poverty, factors contributing to poverty, and the characteristics of persons living in poverty. Courses may focus on individual or household (microlevel), systemic (macrolevel), or historical analysis, combinations of two approaches,

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Address correspondence to Sharon Y. Nickols, Department of Housing and Consumer Economics, 203 Housing Research Center, 407 Sanford Dr., University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, USA. E-mail: snickols@fcs.uga.edu
or all three. Regardless of the approach, courses on poverty typically cover what for most students are abstract concepts and esoteric data. As Segal (2007) pointed out, the growing divide between those who are at the top economically and those at the bottom has greatly widened to the point where “those at the top are at best vaguely aware, and at worst completely oblivious, to the circumstances of the poorest people” (p. 66).

Educators have introduced experiential learning as a method for helping students gain insight into the lived experience of people who are poor. Liberal arts students began to get a sense of what it might be like to live with little or no food at Oxfam Hunger Banquets (Krain & Shadle, 2006). A graduate seminar in family and consumer sciences combined a service-learning experience in a soup kitchen and food bank with a reflection paper about the experience (Alexander, 2006). Nursing students who participated in a multimethod study of attitudes toward poverty indicated in focus groups that having personal experiences with poverty or impoverished individuals enhanced their awareness and understanding of the multifaceted aspects of poverty (Reutter, Sword, Meagher-Stewart, & Rideout, 2004; Sword, Reutter, Meagher-Stewart, & Rideout, 2004). Toward the goal of humanizing the study of poverty for college students, this article reports on the use of a poverty simulation at a large state-supported southern university.

Why attempt to put a human face on poverty? Kilty and Segal (2003) emphasized that in the early 21st century, it is necessary to rediscover poverty. Furthermore, Segal (2007) argued for the need to teach social empathy as a strategy for eventually creating social policies and programs that would be effective in attenuating the conditions that contribute to poverty, and public support for such policies. Michael Harrington’s book, The Other America, published in 1962, educated the public and policy makers about the conditions of poverty; however, equally important, it contributed to a sense of urgency that poverty must be addressed (Harrington, 1962; Kilty & Segal, 2003). Nearly a half-century later, the problems associated with poverty, and poverty itself, are still present in the United States. In the intervening years the War on Poverty alleviated some income inadequacies, especially among the older population. However, gains in reducing poverty rates made in the 1970s were largely eroded in subsequent years. By the 1990s public attention had turned toward the perceived runaway expenditures for public assistance and dependence on public funds by families below the poverty threshold. The slogan “ending welfare as we know it” was partly responsible for sweeping Bill Clinton into office as president of the United States (DeParle, 2004). Subsequently, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was passed in 1996 (Bryner & Martin, 2008; Seccombe, 2007a). This welfare reform reduced the number of people receiving public assistance and limited the time they could receive it, but it did not alleviate poverty.

Today’s traditionally-aged college students were in elementary school when PRWORA was enacted. Consequently, many have little to no historical
context for understanding the household or systemic aspects of poverty, and many have little personal experience with poverty. A poverty simulation, Welcome to the State of Poverty, was selected to provide students in a family resource management class an opportunity to gain more insight into life circumstances of people who live below the poverty threshold.

The purpose of this article is to report a sample of college students’ quantitative and qualitative responses from two measures administered before and after experiencing the poverty simulation. A pre- and postquestionnaire and a reflection paper were used to obtain the students’ opinions about the conditions, causes, and experiences of people in poverty. Specifically, we investigated the following questions:

1. Does participation in a simulation of poverty influence students’ attitudes about the circumstances related to poverty?
2. Does the experience of a poverty simulation cultivate students’ ability to gain insights that foster social empathy for individuals and families caught in poverty?

The next section reviews the literature on attitudes about poverty and support programs. Then, the following section describes the methods used during the poverty simulation and subsequent analyses of the resulting data. These results are then presented. The final section includes a summary and discussion of the findings and suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public opinion about the causes of poverty has been a prevalent research theme for many years. During the past three decades there has been remarkable consistency in the public’s perceptions about the causes of poverty. Peck (2007) summarized these classifications as individualistic, structural, and fatalistic. Individualistic causes identify people’s own characteristics and behavior (i.e., lack of ability, lack of effort, moral deficiency) as the primary determinants of poverty. The structural conditions explanation encompasses the characteristics of the labor market; economic change; job location, quality, and availability; the nature of capitalism itself; inadequate schools; and discrimination. Fatalistic explanations for being poor include luck, fate, and divine will. The culture of poverty framework posits that poor individuals and households have developed a unique subculture that perpetuates poverty. This explanation combines features of the individualistic and structural explanations (Seccombe, 2007b).

Several quantitative studies, mostly conducted in the 1980s, assessed public perceptions of social inequality and the explanation of the responsibility for impoverished status (Wilson, 1996). The most prevalent beliefs were individualistic, a viewpoint that the poor are personally responsible
for their circumstances, and structural, a perspective that the plight of the poor is largely beyond their control. The individualist ideology dominated the public’s beliefs about the poor during the decade of the 1980s (Wilson, 1996). Structural beliefs were relatively weak, were secondary, and were present simultaneously with individualistic conceptions. Wilson (1996) also found distinctive beliefs for different types of poverty (e.g., welfare dependency, homelessness, and impoverished migrant laborers). Individualistic beliefs were dominant with regard to welfare dependency; structural beliefs were dominant with regard to homelessness; and a causal middle ground characterized the beliefs about impoverished migrant laborers. Furthermore, racial prejudice influenced causal beliefs about the plight of the poor such that poor African Americans were perceived to have individual deficiencies whereas poor Whites were largely perceived to be facing structural barriers.

Smith and Stone (1989) sought to conceptualize explanations for poverty by studying beliefs about poverty and wealth at the metatheoretical level. They identified four coexisting metatheories: individualism, structuralism/situationalism, culturalism, and fatalism. The same factors explained poverty and wealth with characteristics associated with individualism being most prevalent. To test their classifications they surveyed 200 adults in a southeastern Texas city. In that study, individualism was the best fit explaining wealth; however, a pluralism of thought was expressed about the causes of poverty, indicating an awareness of the complexity of factors contributing to poverty.

A 1993 study of opinions about poverty held by Californians found consensus across race and ethnic groups on the importance of structuralist reasons for poverty with Black and Latino respondents being slightly more structuralist oriented than White respondents (Hunt, 1996). Black and Latino respondents were more likely to endorse individual and structural reasons compared to White respondents. Women were more likely than men to cite structuralist reasons. In summarizing the 2001 Poverty in America poll, Peck (2007) observed that about equal proportions of respondents attributed poverty to individualistic causes (48%) and to circumstantial causes beyond the control of people who are poor (45%). However, there were significant differences between poor and higher income groups when asked about specific reasons for poverty (Peck, 2007). A significantly larger proportion of poor respondents attributed poverty to medical bills; part-time, low-income jobs; shortages of jobs; too many single-parent families; too many immigrants; and circumstances beyond someone’s control. Seccombe (2007b) found that African American and White recipients of (Aid to Families with Dependent Children [AFDC] or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF]) overwhelmingly perceived their own need for public assistance was due to structural factors or fate while attributing welfare use by others as due to their individual shortcomings.
Some researchers have sought out nuances in beliefs about being poor by specifying the circumstances of being in poverty and appropriate types of assistance. Using a vignette methodology, Lennon, Appelbaum, Aber, and McCaskie (2003, p. 4) found strong support for forms of assistance provided for “the most vulnerable of the poor” who faced barriers such as physical disability, mental illness, limited job skills, and who lived in areas of high unemployment. Strong support for health insurance and educational assistance was expressed. Cash assistance was supported by fewer than one half the respondents except for the circumstance of living in an area of high unemployment. Providing food stamps and housing assistance was supported by over three fourths of the respondents, whereas support for transportation assistance was expressed by more than one half. A previous study in Detroit examined support for contributory programs (i.e., Social Security and Unemployment Compensation) and means-tested programs (i.e., food stamps and AFDC) (Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989). Substantial support was expressed for welfare programs; however, contributory programs had stronger support than means-tested programs. Education level was negatively correlated with support for welfare programs.

Seccombe’s (2000) decade review of research on families in poverty in the 1990s identified a shift in focus from individualistic explanations (e.g., levels of human capital, motivation) toward examining poverty within the broader social milieu (e.g., capitalism, racism, sexism). Other studies added depth to the understanding of poverty as a lived experience (Bane & Elwood, 1994; Scarbrough, 2001; Seccombe, 2007b). Journalists, sometimes in collaboration with poverty research centers, have also put a face on living in poverty (DeParle, 2004; Ehrenreich, 2001; Shirk, Bennett, & Aber, 1999). Research reflecting the experiences of the poor themselves may contribute to more successful policies and programs to alleviate poverty (Latimer, 2008; Seccombe, 2000).

Various disciplines, primarily those associated with professions where graduates are expected to work with low-income individuals, are concerned that students develop an understanding of poverty and empathy for the poor individuals who likely will be among their clients. Thus, questionnaires to measure attitudes toward the poor have been developed and used with students (Atherton & Gemmel, 1993), whereas Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, and Tagler (2001) extended their investigation to include students’ attributions for the causes of poverty. Using the Atherton and Gemmel (1993) questionnaire, Reutter et al. (2004) found that baccalaureate nursing students at three Canadian universities who held more positive attitudes toward the poor expressed stronger support for the structural explanation of poverty, but so did students whose main source of information about poverty was academic courses. Nursing students who had more frequent contact with people who are poor were more likely to have more positive attitudes toward the poor (Sword et al., 2004).
Social work students who had completed a social policy course placed less importance on individualistic explanations of poverty (Schwartz & Robinson, 1991). Structural factors were ranked by undergraduates as the most important contributor to poverty followed by fatalistic and then individualistic interpretations. Graduate social work students overwhelmingly rejected the belief that individuals cause their own poverty and expressed willingness to associate with poor people (Rosenthal, 1993).

The poverty simulation featured in the current study has been used widely by public service and Cooperative Extension personnel working with communities to increase awareness of poverty. Anecdotal reports from participants, who often include teachers, school district administrators, community organization personnel, and interested citizens, indicated that participants increased their understanding of the circumstances of low-income people (Clark & Gibson, 2008). However, feelings of being overwhelmed, frustrated, and even despondent were also reported due to the simulated experience of poverty.

Most of the empirical research has been on understanding people’s views about the causes of poverty. An objective for the family resource management class was to use experiential learning as a strategy for understanding poverty. The next section reports on the methods used to investigate the use of the poverty simulation to assess students’ views of poverty before and after the simulation.

**METHOD**

Procedures of the Poverty Simulation

Welcome to the State of Poverty is a poverty simulation developed by the Reform Organization of Welfare (ROWEL) in 1995, then later revised and copyrighted by the Missouri Association for Community Action in 2002 (Chapman & Gibson, 2006). It simulates 4 weeks’ events for a wide variety of household types that live in the simulated low-income area. The simulation was incorporated into a family resource management class, an upper division elective course at a large public university.

In the simulation reported here, 136 students constituted the members of the low-income households. Students were assigned one of several household member roles, such as mother, father, child, and so forth. The groups to which students were assigned were provided scenarios that represented varying degrees of difficult life circumstances. The various configurations included households with two parents (or grandparents) and children, single parents and children, children left without parental support, a cohabiting couple and their child, and two single elderly individuals. The physical arrangement of the poverty simulation was such that households’ residences were symbolized by clusters of chairs in the center of a very large conference
room. The agencies and businesses were located at tables and chairs around the perimeter of the space.

Faculty and other volunteers served as workers in the community, such as business operators, caseworkers, teachers, utility fee and rent collectors, police officer, and an illegal activities person. As the simulation unfolded the households received instructions that caused them to experience a variety of situations, including inadequate income, loss of employment, health and behavioral emergencies, transportation problems, and various other circumstances that stretched their coping abilities.

The simulation included four 15-minute segments, representing the weeks of one month, during which household members strived to fulfill their responsibilities of providing shelter, food, utilities, and other expenses, as well as maintaining their family and appropriately caring for their children. Between the 15-minute segments, families were allowed 5 minutes to regroup and attempt to plan for the future. New situations were randomly interjected, some revealing helpful events and some new challenges. Upon completion of the simulated 4 weeks a debriefing provided participants with an opportunity to explore their insights.

Participants

Data were obtained from 136 university juniors and seniors enrolled in the family resource management courses taught Spring and Fall 2008. Most of the students (102) were from the Colleges of Business and Family and Consumer Sciences. The remaining students represented a variety of other colleges. Eighty of the students were male, whereas 56 were female, reflective of the composition of the majors in which the students were enrolled. Other demographic characteristics of the students enrolled in the course were not collected due to investigators’ concerns that students might view the experience as a research project rather than an educational experience.

Although demographic information was not collected from the participants, a report about the incoming 2006 freshman class characterizes the university (Edwards & Atchley, 2007). Forty-one percent were age 19 years. Nearly two thirds of students (63%) grew up in mostly white neighborhoods. Whites accounted for 86% of incoming freshmen, students of Asian American/Pacific Islander descent were 7%, and African Americans were 6%. Students’ estimates of parental income reflected primarily affluent family backgrounds, with 14% reporting annual income in excess of $250,000.

The poverty simulation included a presimulation questionnaire administered several days prior to the event and an identical postsimulation questionnaire completed approximately 2 weeks later. Students who were absent from class on the days when either the pretest or posttest questionnaires were completed were not included in the quantitative analysis.
Thus, the quantitative analysis includes only data from those who completed the pre- and postquestionnaire \((N = 71)\). Students also completed reflection papers within one week after the experience. Three alternative topics were offered: only those who selected the option of reflecting on how their knowledge, opinions, and/or feelings about poverty had, or had not, changed are included in the qualitative analysis \((N = 75)\). Reflection papers were assigned numbers and the gender of the student was noted.

**Quantitative Procedures**

A 30-statement questionnaire developed at the university by public policy and social work faculty was used in the current study (Kang, King, & Risler, 2007). The questionnaire queried respondents' level of agreement with statements about individual, structural, and factual information pertaining to causes and conditions of poverty. Table 1 presents the 30 questionnaire items as administered before and after the poverty simulation. Likert-type response categories of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) were used. Paired (non-independent sample) \(t\) tests measured change from pre- to postexperience responses. The same analyses were conducted with mean replacement for those who completed only one questionnaire, and there was no substantive difference in the results.

**Qualitative Procedures**

Students' beliefs and attitudes were identified from reflection papers written within one week of the poverty simulation. The reflections were prompted by the following question: As a result of the Poverty Simulation my perspective has/has not changed. Explain how your knowledge, opinions, and/or feelings about the topic(s) you identified have changed, (or explain your opinions and how they have not changed).

The qualitative analyses adhered to interpretive research practices that rely on the skill of the researcher to find patterns of coherence within texts (Babbie, 2009; Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Perakyla, 2005). This multistage, inductive process involves identifying patterns by reading and rereading the source materials. Patterns are considered meaningful to the extent they are congruent with existing literature and the investigators' knowledge of the subject matter, as well as being homogeneous within categories and differentiating among categories (Chenail, 2008; Firmin, 2008). This method was chosen as the most efficacious approach for identifying students' interpretations of poverty.

Two readers (the first author and a trained student who had previously experienced the simulation) independently read the reflection papers and classified phrases or passages in the papers, thus identifying attitudes,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prequestionnaire</th>
<th>Postquestionnaire</th>
<th>Difference (SD)</th>
<th>t value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$ ($SD$)</td>
<td>$M$ ($SD$)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. People who are poor benefit from job training programs$^c$</td>
<td>4.070 (0.724)</td>
<td>4.141 (0.761)</td>
<td>0.070 (0.781)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. People who are poor would rather work than be on welfare$^b$</td>
<td>3.113 (0.919)</td>
<td>3.732 (0.910)</td>
<td>0.620** (1.035)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. People who are poor often have a substance abuse problem$^b$</td>
<td>3.254 (0.952)</td>
<td>3.056 (0.860)</td>
<td>-0.197 (1.129)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Poor children are treated the same as other children in school$^c$</td>
<td>2.239 (0.948)</td>
<td>2.268 (0.861)</td>
<td>0.028 (0.941)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. People are poor because of things that happen to them$^c$</td>
<td>3.329 (0.902)</td>
<td>3.451 (0.842)</td>
<td>0.12 (1.094)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. People who are poor have equal access to health care$^c$</td>
<td>1.972 (0.755)</td>
<td>2.155 (0.822)</td>
<td>0.183* (0.639)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Politicians care about people who are poor$^c$</td>
<td>3.070 (0.946)</td>
<td>3.042 (0.836)</td>
<td>-0.028 (0.861)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Many people who are poor have a mental illness$^c$</td>
<td>2.648 (1.043)</td>
<td>2.690 (0.872)</td>
<td>0.042 (0.948)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. People who are poor earn what they deserve$^b$</td>
<td>2.338 (0.844)</td>
<td>2.338 (0.755)</td>
<td>0.000 (0.775)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. People who are poor attempt to get out of poverty$^b$</td>
<td>3.155 (0.822)</td>
<td>3.732 (0.675)</td>
<td>0.578** (0.873)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. People who are poor have a problem with learning$^b$</td>
<td>2.479 (0.843)</td>
<td>2.535 (0.753)</td>
<td>0.056 (0.860)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. People who are poor are more likely to be children$^d$</td>
<td>2.704 (0.852)</td>
<td>3.042 (0.977)</td>
<td>0.338** (0.970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. The business sector is concerned about people who are poor$^c$</td>
<td>2.380 (0.900)</td>
<td>2.535 (0.908)</td>
<td>0.155 (0.951)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. People who are poor will fake illness rather than work$^b$</td>
<td>2.549 (0.789)</td>
<td>2.268 (0.654)</td>
<td>-0.282* (0.831)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. People who are poor are often ignored by everyone else$^c$</td>
<td>3.197 (1.023)</td>
<td>3.366 (0.945)</td>
<td>0.169 (1.082)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. The government provides enough free substance abuse programs for people who are poor$^c$</td>
<td>2.944 (0.860)</td>
<td>2.789 (1.013)</td>
<td>-0.155 (0.905)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. People who are poor save money$^b$</td>
<td>2.127 (0.792)</td>
<td>2.366 (0.832)</td>
<td>0.239* (0.948)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Poor children have behavior problems in school$^b$</td>
<td>3.169 (0.810)</td>
<td>3.225 (0.741)</td>
<td>0.056 (0.909)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. The government does enough to help people who are poor$^c$</td>
<td>2.662 (0.999)</td>
<td>2.451 (0.875)</td>
<td>-0.211* (0.893)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Many people who are poor lack social skills$^b$</td>
<td>2.986 (0.902)</td>
<td>2.817 (0.899)</td>
<td>-0.169 (1.048)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. People who are poor benefit from substance treatment programs$^b$</td>
<td>3.282 (0.721)</td>
<td>3.451 (0.771)</td>
<td>0.169 (0.926)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. People are poor because they dropped out of school$^b$</td>
<td>3.197 (0.888)</td>
<td>2.958 (0.933)</td>
<td>-0.239* (1.062)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. People who are poor are a drain on health care$^c$</td>
<td>3.211 (0.955)</td>
<td>2.986 (0.918)</td>
<td>-0.225* (0.885)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. People are poor because of the choices they make$^b$</td>
<td>3.565 (0.823)</td>
<td>3.254 (0.921)</td>
<td>-0.310* (1.116)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>People who are poor get out of poverty by selling drugs&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2.563 (0.841)</td>
<td>2.718 (0.814)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Poor people have the same opportunities to succeed as other Americans&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2.873 (1.120)</td>
<td>2.648 (1.084)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Most people who are poor are adults&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3.183 (0.850)</td>
<td>2.930 (0.816)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>People who are poor spend their money on drugs or alcohol&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3.028 (0.925)</td>
<td>2.915 (0.824)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>People get out of poverty by succeeding in school&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3.662 (0.774)</td>
<td>3.577 (0.905)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>People who are poor do not work because they are lazy&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2.620 (0.976)</td>
<td>2.254 (0.731)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. <sup>a</sup>5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = no opinion, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree.
<sup>b</sup>Item assesses an individualistic perception of cause of poverty.
<sup>c</sup>Item assesses a structural perception of cause of poverty.
<sup>d</sup>Item assesses a fact about the demographics of poverty.
<sup>p</sup><i>p</i> ≤ 0.10, <sup>*</sup><i>p</i> ≤ 0.05, <sup>**</sup><i>p</i> ≤ 0.01.
beliefs, and interpretations regarding poverty and students’ responses to its conditions, as well as the insights gained by the students. There was no predetermined nomenclature for classification of the opinions expressed in the reflection papers, although familiarity with previous literature about attitudes toward poverty facilitated the coding process. Following the independent coding of the phrases and passages, the readers compared their interpretations and developed an inventory. When 50% or more of the students explained the characteristics of poverty with similar words and phrases, a theme was deemed to be present. The identification and coding of phrases was then jointly rereviewed. A very high level of agreement between investigators was evident at both stages of review. Representative passages from the reflection papers were selected to illustrate the poverty perception themes.

RESULTS
Quantitative Results
As shown in Table 1, paired (nonindependent sample) $t$ tests were calculated for the group means of each of the 30 statements on the questionnaires. Nineteen statements exhibited no significant change in the level of agreement or disagreement expressed prior to, and after, the simulation. Eleven statements indicated statistically significant changes in mean values of the pre- and postexperience questionnaires.

Six of the statements about individual-related conditions associated with poverty were significant at a 95% confidence level indicating higher levels of empathy after the simulation. Specifically, students were more likely to agree that people who are poor would rather work than be on welfare (Q. 2), more likely to agree that people who are poor attempt to get out of poverty (Q. 10), more likely to disagree that people who are poor will fake illness rather than work (Q. 14), less likely to disagree that people who are poor attempt to save money (Q. 17), less likely to agree that people are poor because of the choices they make (Q. 24), and more likely to disagree that people who are poor do not work because they are lazy (Q. 30).

Statistically significant changes in the mean values of three items pertaining to structural conditions also occurred. Specifically, prior to the simulation students’ expressed disagreement with a statement that “people who are poor have equal access to health care” (Q. 6). That disagreement lessened after the simulation. A similar softening of opinion about the structural characteristics of health care for people who are poor was demonstrated by greater disagreement with the statement that “people who are poor are a drain on health care” (Q. 23). In addition, there was greater disagreement after the simulation that “the government does enough to help people who are poor” (Q. 19). Together, the three statements suggest
that the simulation may have helped students understand structural barriers faced by people in poverty and their challenges of interacting with complex social and economic systems. Eight other structural statements showed no statistically significant change in the pre- postsimulation means.

As an indication that the simulation may have affected the students’ understanding about the demographics of poverty, both statements about the composition of the poor showed statistically significant changes. Statements 12 and 27 assessed students’ agreement about factual statements regarding the likelihood of children and adults living in poverty. Statement 12, which addressed the proportion of children and adults in poverty, indicated less disagreement with the statement that “people who are poor are more likely to be children.” This movement is consistent with a more accurate understanding of the demographics of poverty. Statement 27 addressed the number of children and adults in poverty with the statement “most people who are poor are adults.” There was greater disagreement with this statement on the postsimulation questionnaire indicating a misunderstanding about the number of adults and children who live in poverty.

Although informative, the quantitative results lead one to speculate if the changes observed—though statistically significant—were substantive. As one student noted, “When completing the presimulation poverty quiz, I laughed at some of the questions asked. However, after completing the simulation, I realized that many of the assumptions and stereotypes surrounding families/individuals in poverty included on the quiz were legitimate issues” (Student 13, female). To provide a more robust picture of the students’ experiences, attention is now turned to the students’ qualitative responses.

Qualitative Results

Of the 75 students whose reflection papers responded to the topic of whether and how the poverty simulation changed their understanding of poverty, 65 described change in the direction of greater insight, whereas 7 reported no change, and the responses of 3 students were unclear. Students who reported no change were as likely to convey the continuation of their previous positive attitudes as they were to indicate unchanged negative perceptions. The following section reports the overarching themes with examples from selected papers. The results are organized by the two main constructs reported in the literature (individual and structural), and a third construct that emerged as students’ described the poverty simulation as a “lived experience” of poverty.

INDIVIDUALISTIC

Included in the individualistic construct are references to laziness, poor decision making, and inadequate human capital development. The most frequent
statement in the reflection papers was that poor people are lazy and put forth little effort. This perspective was sometimes affirmed but more often refuted.

Little effort, poor decisions. Forty-seven students (62%) stated that they had entered the poverty simulation with the assumption that poor people are lazy; however, as a result of enacting the life of a poor person they realized that most poor people work very hard to meet their families’ needs. Lacking a sense of responsibility and making poor decisions were traits some students associated with people who are poor. The following excerpts are illustrative of students’ insights.

So many people are struggling to make ends meet and it’s not for the reasons that I had initially thought. I learned that not all poor people are lazy. (Student 72, female)

Many people who have never experienced poverty believe that simply hard work and determination is enough to get out of poverty. I have learned through this poverty simulation that many poorer people do work extremely hard, and there is little they can do to escape the strong arm of poverty. (Student 3, male)

My role chose all of the wrong paths to have a successful life. I have no sympathy for people like this because it was their choice. Even if they came from a family in poverty, they still had the choice not to use drugs or have sex. (Student 45, female)

Inadequate education and human capital development. It is not surprising to find college students mentioned the lack of education. Some problems the simulation families encountered were related to not meeting educational criteria for jobs, difficulties children had in school attendance, circumstances that interrupted postsecondary education, and undervaluing education. Also, concern about a lack of investment in children so that they would have a chance at a better future was apparent.

Most people will say that education is the most important thing to eliminate poverty but I feel like teens having children are keeping more people out of school than the lack of desire to be educated. People drop out of school because they feel like they have to and not because they want to live below the poverty line. (Student 63, male)

Parents cannot provide as much education and enrichment that children need to be successful and [the children] often end up dropping out of school. I think it is important for those of us that are well educated to reach out to these communities and try to stop the cycle from repeating. (Student 28, female)
When we were surveyed before the simulation on why we thought people were living in poverty my opinions were that most people have simply accepted their lifestyles and either made a choice of dropping out of school and trying to work minimum wage. . . . My thoughts and opinions after completing the simulation have slightly differed. I am [still a] firm believer that being born into this great country gives each and every individual an equal opportunity to succeed. (Student 33, male)

**STRUCTURAL**

Included in the structural interpretation of causes of poverty were harsh life circumstances, employment and income issues, external barriers to effective family functioning, and barriers that impede use of government agencies and community services.

Harsh life circumstances. The harsh life circumstances theme encompasses aspects of the social and economic environments that contribute to being in poverty. This explanation of poverty was mentioned almost as frequently (60% of students) as the individualistic causes of poverty. Elements in this category include being vulnerable due to health, social, or economic factors; victimization by crime and neighborhood pathologies; and fatalistic attitudes about one’s inability to control life events (fatalism is a separate category in Peck’s (2007) typology). The following passages illustrate students’ understanding of this aspect of poverty.

While I feel that some of the circumstances [of poverty] are self-inflicted . . . most poverty situations are caused by tragic circumstances. Before this simulation, I never realized how much of a struggle it could be to provide for a family that is extremely poor. (Student 9, male)

I began to understand and realize that it’s not always a person’s fault for being in a poverty-stricken lifestyle. Just sitting in an environment of failure makes your own drive to succeed that much harder. (Student 61, male)

Employment and income issues. This theme reflects students’ observations about employment difficulties, low wages, and money problems. Students gained an understanding of the meaning of the working poor, and they also experienced the challenges faced by those with low skill levels and erratic employment histories. The inability of poor households to save money, either from poor money management decisions or simply not having enough money to cover basic life expenses, was observed as one of the chronic income problems.

Although I had a job during the simulation my income did not come close to covering the bills . . . a local ministry was able to provide us
with food vouchers. Next time I hear about a family that collects welfare I will not judge them or assume they are too lazy. Instead, I will have a deep amount of respect for the fact that they are doing whatever they can to take care of the people they love. (Student 74, female)

Most people in poverty are living paycheck to paycheck. This is one of the main problems because when an emergency arises they must forfeit cash immediately to solve the issue. (Student 67, female)

Taking part in the poverty simulation was not much of an eye opener for me. I am paying my own way through college. I work two jobs part-time, I am a full-time student, and just like the families in this poverty simulation, I live paycheck to paycheck. (Student 35, female)

Barriers impeding use of agencies and services. The inadequacy and unavailability of services for low-income families were identified as problematic in the reflection papers. Discourteous treatment and rigidity of agency policies and procedures concerned the students. Lack of awareness about services, lack of access due to transportation problems, or eligibility hurdles were recognized as barriers to families receiving support.

What I did not realize was how complex it was to get help. I knew very little about TANF. I cannot imagine that everyone that is in need of help knows all about the programs available to them. Also the lines for social services were lengthy . . . then processing your paperwork. (Student 43, female)

The simulation opened my eyes to the problems we have in our society and how hard and time consuming it is to get help from the government. (Student 71, male)

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

Whereas the preceding categories originated in previous literature, the complexity of issues surrounding poverty was a prevalent theme in the reflection papers. Thus, the lived experience made up a third construct. Notably, the stressful nature of poverty and expressions of empathy toward people in poverty characterize the following excerpts.

Lives full of stress. Stress may be brought about by a variety of factors, but the fast-paced experience of the poverty simulation allowed little time to analyze these sources. Students clearly felt stress as they enacted their roles.

In reflecting on the flurry of emotions I experienced, stress stands out most. The stress . . . was brought on entirely by my family's financial insecurity. . . . I had little time to do anything other than go to work,
run errands, and pay the bills; I barely saw my children or husband and never had the chance to relax. (Student 46, female)

I had no idea about how difficult it is to deal with the stress of having the responsibility of a family, but not being able to provide for them. . . . I was the head of the household with a college degree, with solid previous job experience, that had just been laid off because of downsizing. . . . These stresses have really made me have a lot of respect for the people who are dealing with these issues. (Student 5, male)

Feeling overwhelmed. Although many of the descriptions in the reflection papers identified somewhat discrete problems faced by the families, several students observed that the compounding effect of multiple issues inhibited their ability to solve problems. An added dimension on the part of the students was the insight that time scarcity contributes to short-term thinking rather than a long-term perspective.

I once thought that the people who lived in poverty were only like that because they were lazy. I have learned now that living in poverty is almost like a cycle that you can’t get out of. Everything kept piling up. So I have changed my view because I know now how difficult daily life can be. (Student 12, male)

Getting groceries, applying for TANF and food stamps, and going to the QuickCash all took so long to get accomplished. The “week” was almost over many times before I had even been able to make a dent. I think that many people in poverty would feel like they are on a treadmill, not really getting anywhere. (Student 24, female)

The quantitative and qualitative analyses provided compelling insights into the development of empathy among college students toward people who are poor. As nearly all students reported, these insights were transformative. These insights, and the limitations of the current study, are discussed in the next section.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The focus of the current study was to explore the effectiveness of an experiential learning approach to developing a more empathetic view of poverty. Welcome to the State of Poverty, a simulation of life in a low-income community, is regularly included in an undergraduate course. Students were given a pre- and postpoverty simulation questionnaire about various aspects of poverty, and they wrote reflection papers following the simulation.
These measures constituted the data to answer the questions of whether participation in a poverty simulation influenced students’ attitudes and if the simulation enabled students to gain insights that fostered empathy.

As measured by a pre- and post-poverty simulation questionnaire, we found little statistically significant change in students’ opinions about people who experience poverty. About two thirds of the items on the questionnaire showed no change in the mean group responses. However, the limited amount of change should not necessarily be of concern because many items on which there was no change indicate that the students already understood the problems poor people face and many of the reasons for low-income status.

Based on a careful reading of students’ responses we interpret the questionnaire items that show statistically significant changes in the group means as indicating greater empathy after the simulation. Specifically, there was a more favorable opinion about the desire of poor people to work rather than be on welfare and agreement that poor people attempt to get out of poverty. Furthermore, students evidenced less blame of the poor for their circumstances and life choices, and more strongly disagreed that poor people do not work because they are lazy and would fake illness. What we describe as a softening of opinions regarding structural aspects related to poverty was also observed. There was less agreement that poor people have equal access to health care and are a drain on health care. We interpreted the stronger group disagreement with the statement “the government does enough to help people who are poor” as an indication that the simulation helped students understand some structural barriers and increased their empathy for people needing services. As Cozzarelli et al. (2001) suggested, it is likely that attitudes toward the poor and attributions of poverty are related to positions on public policy. Perhaps students who experience the poverty simulation will be more empathetic toward people they encounter as professionals, and more supportive of poverty reduction efforts.

Whereas the questionnaire items addressed the most frequent conceptualizations of poverty (i.e., individual and structural), students showed a much more nuanced response to the poverty simulation in their reflection papers. The “lived experience” of the poverty simulation, a term several students used, provided students an opportunity to struggle with challenges of daily life such as paying bills, inadequate transportation, poor health, parenting and elder caregiving, crime within the community, and in some cases personal shortcomings. In the reflection papers we saw a deeper understanding of poverty as students identified its multidimensional aspects. As others have shown in surveys of the general public (Hunt, 1996; Peck, 2007; Seccombe, 2000, 2007b; Smith & Stone, 1989; Wilson, 1996), the students identified individualistic and structural causes of poverty. Their responses were similar to previous studies with social work and nursing students (Rosenthal, 1993; Schwartz & Robinson, 1991), but the reflection papers allowed students
to achieve greater depth of understanding as they unraveled the circumstances of poverty, similar to those described by Seccombe (2007b) and DeParle (2004).

Consistent with evidence from a low-income, rural sample that found removal of multiple barriers is the most effective strategy for improving the lives of people who are poor (Fletcher, Garasky, Jensen, & Nielsen, 2010), students recognized that the barriers faced by people in poverty are multifaceted, and include education, transportation, and health. As the passages in the results section reveal, the students also felt what it was like to be poor, a precursor to developing empathy (Segal, 2007). One student’s summary of his experience captured the fine line between cognitive understanding and empathy: “I think a big part of this event is to take away the myths people have about poor people because these myths are just used to justify indifference” (Student 27, male).

Expressions of compassion for those who live below the poverty line were present throughout the reflection papers, but more importantly for the development of empathy, students identified that they began to understand how difficult poor people’s lives are. An experience such as this may help today’s students rediscover poverty and develop social empathy as called for by Kilty and Segal (2003). Of course, one should not expect a one-time poverty simulation to foster empathy in all who participate. One student’s frank critique of the experience illustrated the limitations: “Even though this simulation has opened my eyes more to the difficulties poor people face it didn’t change my opinion too much because this was a simulation and not a true account of poverty” (Student 15, male).

The authors acknowledge several limitations that should be considered when drawing conclusions about developing social empathy through a poverty simulation. The analysis is based on a convenience sample of students who were predominantly White, traditional college age, and relatively economically secure. In addition, the procedures did not allow the authors to determine whether student demographic characteristics and previous experience with poverty influenced their responses to the simulation or to cross-reference the questionnaires with the reflection statements. Finally, because the experience was a component of a graded course, the likelihood of socially desirable responses is recognized. The statements in the reflection papers were taken at face value, and no attempt was made to ascertain a measure of social desirability in the responses.

Future research using the poverty simulation with more diverse participants is recommended by the authors for the goal of achieving a broader understanding of its effectiveness in developing empathy toward people who are poor. Such work would benefit from more detailed analysis of gender, race, social class, experience with poverty, and other correlates of attitudes toward people who are poor. The development of empathy is needed across all social strata, including among people who are poor
themselves (Seccombe, 2007b). Using a poverty simulation in a variety of
educational institutions may help educators identify how best to enable
students to move toward a more nuanced understanding of poverty and
empathy. There is little research linking one-time educational experiences
with long-term attitudinal and behavioral changes. Future research on de-
veloping empathy would benefit from designs that assess outcomes over
time.

Our experience with the poverty simulations leads us to concur with
Segal’s (2007) assertion that teaching social empathy throughout society can
expand understanding among all citizens. In this case the experience seemed
to develop a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be poor
than can be achieved through standard didactic teaching alone. Surely, this
more nuanced understanding is a precursor, if not the companion, of social
empathy.

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