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“In someone else’s shoes.” Utilizing reflection to challenge poverty attitudes and develop critical consciousness

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Abstract

The development of a critical consciousness around issues of poverty is an essential goal of social work educators. Teaching students about poverty requires that they evaluate their preexisting attitudes to assess compatibility with professional social work ethics and values. Recognizing the meaning that students give to their prior attitudes, course experiences, and personal reflections can help social work educators better understand how shifts in poverty attitudes may occur. In this paper, the authors discuss the use of student journaling immediately following experiential learning activities as a useful process for developing empathetic understanding of issues of poverty.

Keywords: Poverty, pedagogy, journaling, critical consciousness, experiential learning

Critical theorists suggest that the perpetuation of cultural values and ideas socializes individuals in how to think about issues or problems (Ritzer, 2009). Modern technologies, coupled with social media, provide an infrastructure for the dissemination of mass culture. For example, cultural stereotypes about the poor as lazy, criminal, and uneducated are embedded in popular movies and contending narratives. If such attitudes are left unchecked, individuals risk the cooptation of their own agency to the stereotypes most readily accessible within mass culture. Our students are susceptible to these same influences.

Pejorative attitudes about the poor are not new. In the United States, a long-standing history of negative poverty narratives has influenced both culture and relief efforts (Trattner, 1999). The social work profession has the responsibility of combating these attitudes and preparing social work students with "poverty awareness" (Davis & Wainwright, 2005, p. 229) and empathy (Frank & Rice, 2017; Frank et al., 2019).

Teaching students about poverty requires that they evaluate their preexisting attitudes to assess compatibility with professional social work ethics and values. For example, Delavega and Reyes Cordero (2019) note that social work has an "ethical responsibility to assess and intervene in the larger economic contexts" (p. 81) and they recommend the development of an ethical financial framework for teaching social workers how to assess, engage in, and advocate for an economic system that is inclusive of all people, especially the vulnerable and marginalized. However, Castaneda and Salame, as cited in Delavega and Reyes-Cordero (2019) noted that current social work competencies are inadequate learning goals as regards our current political economy. The development of a critical consciousness in social work learners around issues of poverty must be an essential goal of social work educators and should be included in the updated 2022 Education Policies and Standards for the development of the social work competencies.

In order to address oppression, in the spirit of Freire (1971), we must acknowledge that the oppression of one implicates all. This paper describes the use of journaling and individual reflection in response to experiential learning activities inside and outside of the classroom as a means to help

students develop and to help teachers evaluate critical consciousness. A symbolic interactionist framework is useful for helping us to recognize the meaning students give to their prior attitudes, course experiences, and personal reflections, which can help us to better understand how shifts in attitudes about poverty may occur.

Literature Review

Perceptions of Poverty

Poverty remains pervasive in the United States (Iceland, 2013). In this context, poverty in the United States is defined in absolute terms by household income compared to a formal standard (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). In 1990, the poverty rate was 13.5%, while in 2018 it was 11.8% (Duffin, 2020). The highest rates of poverty were 15.1% in 1993 and 15.5% in 2010 (after economic recessions, with the latter often referred to as the Great Recession). The lowest poverty rate was 11.3% in 2000. Despite the 30-year time span from 1990 until now, the poverty rate has remained intractable. Perhaps this is so because poverty remains poorly understood. It is not uncommon in American society for poverty to be ascribed to individual failings, often referred to as the Culture of Poverty (Lewis, 1966). Often overlooked are structural causes such as low wages or limited availability of jobs. Similarly, many Americans believe that poverty is a static, chronic condition, despite data that suggests its fluidity across the lifespan (Karger & Stoesz, 2018; Rank, 2005).

Because poverty underscores social work practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, it is essential that social workers inform their work using a comprehensive, proactive, poverty-informed framework. Shaia’s (2019) development of the SHARP framework, suggests that social workers engaging in frontline practice attend to the following five components in order to properly attend to poverty:

- Structural oppression
- Historical context

- Analysis of role
- Reciprocity and mutuality
- Power

Facilitating such a practice approach begins in the classroom where students’ understanding of poverty may be attributable to preexisting attitudes, which may or may not reflect social work values and ethics. Phan and Collins (2018), in their review of the literature, identified social norms and personal ideologies that may impact support for redistributive policies. Phan and Collins (2018) also surveyed undergraduate students in introductory economics classes to test those students’ willingness to redistribute a hypothetical \$1,000 based on various poverty information. They found that priming the students with knowledge about poverty had limited influence on students’ plans. Like Hoffman (2015) and Parker and Troila (2015), they posit that new information might not have much influence on well-established ideologies and values. Granruth, et. al (2018) found support in the literature suggesting that young adults tend to follow parental cues in developing their political attitudes. However, exposure to new information as college students could provide opportunities for actively questioning prior opinions (Hoffman, 2015; Parker & Troila, 2015).

Postsecondary education should encourage students to think critically regarding poverty and its causes and responses. However, social work research on students’ attitudes about poverty is lacking (Delavega et al., 2017). Nursing and business appear to be more engaged in such research (Northrup et al., 2020; Patterson & Hulton, 2011). In particular, business programs are increasingly educating their students about poverty, both domestic poverty and global poverty (e.g., Lybert & Wydick, 2018; Neal, 2017; Paton et al., 2012; Phan & Collins, 2018).

Paton et al., (2012) used three approaches – experiential learning, whole person learning, and service learning – to transform business students from those of providers of goods and services to those of problem solvers who create markets that are based upon an understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty. Importantly, these scholars aimed to

teach their students that responding to poverty is a legitimate business opportunity and not just the responsibility of governments and nonprofit organizations.

In their study of white men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who were asked questions about the causes of poverty, Hershberg and Johnson (2019) found that answers could be characterized as *individual* (e.g., people were responsible for their own poverty), *fatalistic* (e.g., poverty due to chance, bad luck), or *structural* (e.g., society’s infrastructures are to blame). Their hypothesis was that, in spite of intersectionality, some experience of living in poverty might lend itself to what Freire (1971) called critical reflection, or a better awareness of systemic inequality; however, the researchers found that life experiences of poverty were not necessarily correlated with higher levels of critical reflection. Rather, the most influential experiences were those in-person connections with people in poverty (Hershberg & Johnson, 2019). This study suggests that, with appropriate time for personal reflection, human interaction might lend itself somewhat to the development of critical reflection. More research is warranted to understand the best way to challenge long-held erroneous beliefs. The values and ethics of the profession, as well as those of individual social workers, are paramount in regard to poverty practice.

Values and Ethics

In social work, the NASW Code of Ethics provides a framework for decision-making that is in accordance with our professional values and principles. The principle of social justice requires social workers to attend to the needs of “vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people,” which include those experiencing economic vulnerability (NASW, 2015, p. 1). Social work scholars have written for decades about the need for social workers to understand and engage in ethical decision making in practice (e.g., Barsky, 2019; Josephs, 1985; Reamer, 2018). Prescott (2019) shared challenges in teaching social work graduate students how to critically assess ethical risks and argued that social work education programs must do more than recite

values and ethics in our calls for social justice. Prescott offered education and training in “being forensic” (p.41) as one pedagogical method. “Being forensic” includes the collection of data, analysis, and clinical observations in ethical decision making.

Developing Empathy

In a previous article, the current authors reviewed the history of experiential learning and its application in social work education (Frank et al., 2019). Experiential learning is an active learning process that has been demonstrated to promote personal growth and greater self-awareness, both of which are likely to help students develop empathy. This study found that a lived experience through a shared dinner and discussion was transformational for students and might have led to increased empathy. Although it is evident that experiential learning can be an effective tool for developing empathy, it may be that a tangible shift in attitudes occurs for students within their personal reflection upon it.

Reflection and Journaling

Purposeful reflection upon experiences could serve as a vehicle for changing our interpretation and understanding of those experiences. If reflection is the process of delineating and examining our interpretation of certain experiences, formally doing so may provide the opportunity to replace prior assumptions with new insights. Using Freire’s (1971) construction of critical consciousness allows us to envision this process as one with the power to create a shared understanding, critical of the status quo, reconstructed with a lens of empathy.

Reflective journaling has been used in Social Work education for decades. Journaling has also been used in nursing programs to help students to connect their thoughts and feelings with their observations of poverty. One study examined nursing students’ perceptions of poverty while visiting an impoverished developing country by analyzing their use of reflective journaling (Taliaferro & Diesel, 2016). The researchers found that reflective

journaling was positively associated with increased insight and deeper meaning around the experiences and situations they had observed. Another study of nursing students echoed such effectiveness, noting that journaling can give form to thoughts and ideas (Schuessler et al., 2012). Nursing students were required to keep reflective journals which, through analysis, demonstrated ways that cultural humility developed for students as they reflected on their experiences (Schuessler et al., 2012).

Methods

The Course and Reflection Exercises

Perspectives on Poverty in America is an introductory first-year seminar for social work majors in their first semester of a Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited baccalaureate program. The focus of the course is to survey a variety of perspectives on poverty by examining media, movies, social welfare agencies, and the lived experiences of people in poverty. The textbook for the course focuses on the narratives of lived experiences, which the students then compare to these first-hand stories. Students participate in a variety of experiential learning activities in the course, including a class trip to a social service agency. On a weekly basis, students examine narratives from the text, social media interpretations of poverty, historical and current information about poverty, and hear from local social service agencies about their approaches to work with people in poverty. During the course, students also work in groups to research a subpopulation of interest and do several interactive and reflective activities that are briefly discussed below.

The premise of the course is that experiential learning, coupled with targeted individual and group reflection, will help students develop perspectives on poverty that are congruent with social work ethics and values, including empathy and seeing the clients as the experts. Because these exercises require students to feel some of the stresses that may be associated with making decisions, instigating relationships, finding resources, or

challenging assumptions, it is necessary that students take time to reflect upon their initial assumptions and how their experiences in the activities might have challenged them. Reflective journaling provides students with an opportunity to write their thoughts and ideas down as a way of articulating them and processing what meaning they might find in them. Individual written reflections and large group discussion reflections provide an atmosphere conducive to challenging ideas and creating a critical consciousness (Freire, 1971).

- **Economic Vulnerability Project (EVP).** In this exercise, students work in small groups to create a life plan for a family of four. They must locate employment, childcare, transportation, and housing using only local resources and in real time. Students use Craigslist, newspaper ads, and other local resources to put together a monthly budget and plan for their family. After completing the exercise, which almost always ends up in an unbalanced budget with significant needs not met, students complete an individual reflection sheet to document their feelings and analysis of this experience.
- **The Food Stamp Challenge (FSC).** Students work in groups to create a specific and ideal food plan for one week for a family of four. Weekly meal plans must include all of the breakfasts, lunches, dinners, and snacks that the family will need. From this meal plan, students create a grocery list of foods in the appropriate quantities. Students are encouraged to create a healthy menu and to be creative by using Pinterest or other websites to obtain meal ideas. On foot or using public transportation only, student groups must visit (as a group) the grocery store of their choice and shop for the items on their list, keeping a running tab of all their expenses. During this visit, they are informed that their actual budget will be based upon the maximum allotment of food stamps (SNAP) available, which is roughly \$4/per person/per day, or \$112 total for a family of four for one week. Students cannot exceed this amount. Additionally, students are not permitted to purchase any items that are not covered

by SNAP benefits (e.g., non-food items, prepared foods, etc.). If the total amount would exceed \$112, students must change their items and menu accordingly. After the completion of this assignment, students complete an individual reflection of the experience. Group discussion and large group reflection also occur as we review the various meal plans and experiences of the groups in class.

- **Course Reflection Journal (CRJ).** Throughout the semester, students are required to keep an informal journal, making notes of insights inside and outside of class that occur to them about topics related to poverty. Specifically, students are asked to articulate their own personal assumptions about poverty and to critically analyze various influencing parts of their life that have informed these messages (e.g., their family, the news, popular movies, social media). At the end of the course, students are required to synthesize the contents of their journal using targeted prompts around their assumptions, scenarios that have challenged their assumptions, and the messages that they have internalized from various circles of influence.

Study Design and Participants

The design for this study was a secondary data analysis of assignment and course reflections from two cohorts of students who had previously completed the course *Perspectives on Poverty in America*. Over a period of two years, 2018 and 2019, students’ reflections on experiential learning activities were collected from the course. In accordance with the university’s IRB, approval was granted to conduct a secondary data analysis of these reflections and journaling activities. This approach is in line with research ethics utilized in ethnographic studies and participant observation. Further, this approach allowed us to control for bias and threats to the internal validity of the study (e.g. participant reactivity, Hawthorne effect, social desirability bias).

During the course, students' reflections on two assignments (Economic Vulnerability Project and the Food Stamp Challenge) were collected along with their Reflection Journal at the close of the course. The research was conducted after the course was over and had no bearing on students' participation in the course or grade for the course. While the study design was a secondary data analysis of student reflections, and as such the students were not directly research participants, a breakdown of the total students and general demographic information might be helpful. Generally, the course was populated by predominantly Caucasian female students. Specifically, in 2018, there were 25 students enrolled in the course which included two male students and four students of color. In 2019, there were 26 students enrolled in the course which included four male students and six students of color.

Data Collection

Twenty student reflections were collected in 2018 for the Economic Vulnerability Project. Eighteen student reflections were collected for the Food Stamp Challenge. In 2019, nineteen student reflections were collected for the Economic Vulnerability Project and 16 reflections on the Food Stamp Challenge. Twenty-three students' Course Reflection Journals were collected for analysis in 2018 and 21 Course Reflection Journals were collected in 2019. Only a single assignment reflection for each exercise and a single reflection journal were collected from each individual student.

Data Analysis

All identifying information was replaced by an alphanumeric code and the data were compiled, organized, and analyzed in bulk. Data were organized using NVivo 12 Plus (2018) into folders by year and by assignment. A chart of

respondents was created to document the source of any quotes that were used.³

Multiple researchers (3) participated in the data analysis, only one of whom was the course instructor. The research team used an inductive approach to pattern and thematic analyses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Data analysis began with open coding for each of the assignments to generate the initial codes, or Nodes, as indicated by NVivo 12 Plus (2018). These nodes were then collapsed into overarching themes. Associated nodes were tucked back underneath these overarching themes to craft an exploratory framework that addressed the way the course structure guided students through new reflective learning. Researchers then analyzed the overarching themes by assignment and created a third level of codes that were associated with overall findings for the reflections of the class in general. No major differences were noted across the yearly cohorts. To guard against bias, the three researchers independently analyzed the data. Any discrepancies in codes or analysis, which were rare, were discussed between researchers.

Limitations

This study was affected by the types of limitations inherent in qualitative research, such as the limits to external generalizability and challenges in demonstrating rigor. The volume of data provided a challenge as well; however, Nvivo 12 was helpful in mitigating this. Because the instructor of the course was a researcher on this project, it was necessary to attend to potential bias, which was accomplished using triangulation between the other researchers, which enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings.

The use of secondary data represented a convenience sample of students, which also provided an additional limitation. Because the students were all social work majors, they might have already had a particular orientation toward values conducive to social work; however, because they were

³ Alphanumeric markers, unique to each individual student, are provided below with in-text quotations.

first-semester students, they had not had any formal social work education prior to their participation in this course. Therefore, it is difficult to assess that change over time had occurred in the absence of students making that observation of themselves through their own reflections.

Although the assignments upon which the students reflected were intended to expose the harsh realities associated with the complex decision-making processes that economically challenged families face, one cannot assume that all of our students lacked personal first-hand experience. To the contrary, some students expressed the realization of how hard it probably was for their own parents/caregivers while they (the students) were growing up, suggesting that even students with their own lived experiences could gain insight through the course activities. The qualitative methodology, combined with the small sample, could only offer an exploration into these themes. In order to craft a more explanatory framework, additional research with different methods would be warranted.

Findings/Results

Students noted that their experiences within the course provided new ways for them to learn the material, through experiential activities that required them to solve problems, by meeting new people, and by trying new things outside of the classroom. In the context of their reflections, students shared emotionally-oriented responses as a result of these experiences. For both the Economic Vulnerability Project (EVP) and the Food Stamp Challenge (FSC), the thematic analysis revealed that the emotional responses experienced by students included: frustration, stress, mental fatigue, and anger.

Emotional Responses

Frustration. In regard to the EVP, one student noted that "this exercise was very challenging and frustrating. Our group had a hard time getting everything together. It is impossible to live off the amount of money that we made without government or local assistance. The whole exercise was difficult" (5B). Another noted that while it "was frustrating to figure out, it also opens my eyes to how hard it must be for people in situations like these that

don't receive no aid or help at all" (6B). With the FSC, the responses were quite similar. One student noted that "I know for me personally I couldn't imagine choosing between food and housing but for some people that is a constant struggle" (18B). Frustration also resulted when students were faced with information that challenged what they previously assumed to be true. "It was frustrating because I thought SNAP recipients received much more assistance when they actually do not and options are very limited" (1A). It appears that an emotional response was the precursor to the student then translating that experience into empathy. Additionally, it was evident that the act of making difficult choices within the assignment pushed the student into an area of reflection where they could consider what this scenario might be like for an individual experiencing it in their life.

Stress. Sometimes students called the emotions that they were feeling "stress." Regarding the EVP, one student noted that "[t]his was very stressful and definitely showed me how hard it is to live on minimum wage" (1B). Another student explained that "I was very stressed about this project. The most stressful part was figuring out how to pay for everything that we needed, and that we were not allowed to use an assistance program" (19B). The same held true for the FSC. One student said, "This exercise was stressful. It took trial and error to create our list of purchases. It really showed how challenging it can be for a family to live off of food stamps" (3A). Another said, "It was very stressful, we had to keep making adjustments to fit our budget and we found that extremely difficult to do. I now have a better understanding of how difficult this must be to do for someone living on food stamps, especially with children to provide for" (8A). For some students, this stress took them by surprise. "It was a lot more stressful than I thought it would be. Having to search an entire store to look for deals. I can't imagine how much that stress would multiply with children along for the ride" (12B). They then related that to an empathic response toward someone having these types of struggles in their real lives.

Mental Fatigue. Students experienced mental fatigue from these exercises. One student stated that "[t]he exercise was way more difficult than I expected. I never thought that it would be so hard to actually find

everything with next to no money. It greatly expanded my understanding and the struggle that impoverished people go through” (3B).

Another student shared that:

“This exercise was very difficult. It felt like every time we figured one thing out, another problem came from that. We learned that childcare is very expensive and that it is impossible to live off two minimum wage workers without assistance of any kind. We were in debt by almost \$1,000 a month. It made me very frustrated and made me question a lot. I don’t understand how someone thinks a family can live off one minimum wage worker. It was hard to do this exercise and we felt like just giving up and not trying to get out of debt because it felt impossible” (4B).

The sense that they had “tried everything” seemed to inform these emotions. After pushing forward through a decision-making process, students appear to arrive at the realization that there were issues (e.g., structures in society) that they could not overcome even after individual and group contemplation.

“Another thing that shocked me was how expensive childcare is. That took up almost half of our budget. However, this was a necessity because we needed someone to look after the one child. In conclusion, this exercise changed my outlook on prices, how hard life can be just getting by, and how much people must pay to try and live a life outside of poverty. Also, it made me realize even more how hard it is to not go into debt from working a minimum wage job” (13B).

Anger. Students became upset as a result of their frustration, stress, and mental fatigue. One student clearly identified this cumulative feeling as “anger.”

“It made me very upset because how can the government or any one for that matter expect anyone to make a living while getting paid minimum wage. It just is not right. I felt myself getting angry while doing this” (11B).

While it is difficult to know why students were angry, one hypothesis might be that students experienced emotional responses as a result of dissonance

between any preexisting poverty assumptions and the structural realities with which they were faced.

Putting Self in Someone Else’s Shoes

Analysis suggested that, via their own reflections, students took their emotions and translated them into empathy. This meant that students seemed to drive their frustration, stress, mental fatigue, and anger into the energies required to put themselves figuratively into the struggles that they would imagine individuals in poverty likely faced. One student explained that:

“To be completely honest, this was one of the most stressful assignments I’ve had in a while, just because of the fact I told my brain that this could be me, this happens every day to different people in poverty in different ways and I couldn’t even put a penny into an absolute emergency savings. It really puts you in the shoes of your created family and gets you involved in the survival and wellbeing of an innocent family of four and it was quite stressful” (16A).

One student noted that the FSC “put the situation of poverty into perspective because it was stressful to walk there (to the store) and figure out what we were able to get with our funds when normally we can just drive to the store and get what we want. I couldn’t imagine managing children while doing this” (22A). Another student added that “I know for me personally I couldn’t imagine choosing between food and housing but for some people that is a constant struggle” (18B).

Seeing Their Own Families’ Struggle Anew

While one student noted that they “really like activities like this where we get to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes. It is very creative and certainly helped us see from a new perspective” (16A) for others, that perspective hit much closer to home. Many students shared how they saw themselves, their parents, or their families in a new way because of their experiences during the assignment.

“This exercise was honestly super stressful. I do not feel like this is acceptable and nobody should have to live in these conditions. I can

understand how somebody like this may feel though, I feel like this is how a lot of my family lives” (12A).

“This exercise really opened my mind up to how difficult it must have been for my mom to do this on her own with 2 children” (14B).

“This was the most stressful project I ever worked on. It felt like I was wearing the shoes of the family that we were describing. It felt like my group was the family going through it and we were trying to figure out how to survive. Two questions that came up a lot in the group was whether shelter or food was more important and how in the world were we going to feed our children” (9B).

“I now understand a lot more and why my mom used to say you can’t get that at the store. I thought she just didn’t want me to get it but now I know like SHE COULDN’T AFFORD IT. I have so much respect for what my mother went through and did for her children” (14B).

Changing Perspectives

In their reflections, students noted that their experiences during the assignments, and sometimes the course in general, forced them to challenge perspectives that they held (either knowingly or unknowingly) prior to the course or the assignment. They tended to call this process out as being “eye opening.” Students noted that the EVP:

“...was a real eye opener for me personally” (18B)

“...open [ed] my eyes to how hard it must be for people in situations like these that don’t receive [any] aid or help at all” (6B)

“...I think this exercise was super helpful for the class especially, because it probably opened up a lot of people’s eyes like it did to mine” (3B)

Overall, many students shared these sentiments in their reflections as to how the exercises and course served to challenge and change long-held perspectives:

“Through this class though, many of my assumptions were challenged and my way of thinking has changed. Prior to the start of class, I had thought that most welfare recipients were lazy people who didn’t want to work. I also would get angry when I would be in line at Walmart and

saw someone using food stamps to purchase food that is of a better quality than what I could actually afford. A frequent question that came to mind in these times was 'Why is my hard-earned money that I worked for being given to these people for free? They aren't the only ones struggling.' This view was based primarily on the fact that I was uneducated; however, it wasn't the only reason. Growing up my family struggled a lot due to the fact that my dad lost his well-paying job when he got sick. As I sit here and reflect, I realize that the prior assumptions that I just listed above are false. Through this class I realized that people on welfare work hard and aren't lazy. Don't get me wrong, there are some people who are lazy and on welfare but that doesn't accurately represent the majority of welfare recipients" (11A).

One student noted that "In the end, I have a completely different outlook for those in poverty and understand more why people are in that place" (13B).

Reflections appeared to have provided students with the opportunity to experience these assignments and offered them the opportunity to articulate the changes in their attitudes and how such changes came about. As evidenced by their responses, students seemed to come to the collective realizations that poverty is a multi-faceted experience, that poverty could happen to anyone, and that the structures in society had a lot more to do with instances of poverty and general misfortune than they had previously thought. This collective consciousness was marked by a change toward viewing the structures in society as having a greater influence on poverty than individual failures. Excerpts from students' Course Reflection Journals (CRJ) reinforced these themes:

"The things that I have learned that have challenged my prior assumptions are that being in poverty does not mean you are lazy, or abuse alcohol and drugs. Poverty is not a simple thing and it is not easy to get out of" (4B).

"The content discussed in this class gave me a different understanding of what poverty is really like. When people think of poverty some of the first things that pop into their heads are negative. For example, many judge others in harsh ways when they see them using food stamps, or

they think they aren’t doing anything to help themselves when in reality, maybe they can’t get a job because of a medical issue. The group projects like the food stamp challenge and the economic vulnerability project was a good experience to have. This class served as an eye opener and gave a deeper understanding of what the word poverty really means” (21A).

“It [poverty] is not always a cause of wrongdoing in a person’s life. It can often be due to circumstance and ‘luck of the draw’ for some. Prior to taking this course, I assumed that if you were in poverty, it had to mean that you have chosen a path in life that was the cause of your life going down this particular direction. I never would have imagined that it could be due to factors such as lack of adequate paying jobs, not being able to afford transportation or not even being able to access the sources needed in order to get a job” (8A).

“I always assumed that poverty was people being lazy, not wanting to work, or caring about themselves when that is not the case. This class did change my perspective on poverty and challenged me to see it differently” (7A).

Discussion

The intentional examination of large issues, in this case poverty and the lived experiences of those in it, may actually leave individuals more uneasy than if they chose to leave their bias unexamined (Ritzer, 2009). For that reason, it is essential for educators to provide opportunities for this type of exploration in an experiential and relatively “safe” environment. Given the proper context, the reexamination of bias can be reflected upon instead of leaving mass culture to determine. Symbolic interactionists may offer some insight into the dynamic nature of the reflection process. Because individuals are not simply participants to be acted upon by mass culture, but instead are dynamic beings who have the ability to reflect upon and change culture, these reflections themselves may offer insight into how attitudes and perceptions are not only formed but augmented. The consciousness of human beings provides them with the ability to shape interactions and ideas (Ritzer, 2009). In this case, the utilization of experiential learning activities

and the active reflection that occurred afterward, provided an opportunity to work out their emotional responses into the adoption of new ideas and the construction of personal empathy. Reflection provided the framework for shaping and sculpting ideas.

Critical consciousness develops in response to experiences (Roy et al., 2019), but perhaps it is more specifically shaped by the internalized meanings that individuals attribute to objects and experiences. Through this meaning-making process, it is possible that prior biases are questioned and replaced with new understandings about social phenomena. In effect, crafting experiences that create cognitive dissonance between pejorative assumptions and actual lived experiences encourage the actor to challenge prior knowledge and replace it with more empathic understanding. Journaling and reflection provide a formal opportunity for this meaning-changing process.

Freire's (1971) construct of "critical consciousness" can be used to describe the ways in which individuals reconstruct their own personal realities in communion with others. The development of a deeper collective understanding may result from the active reconstruction of ideas after shared experiences. Hershberg and Johnson (2019) describe the complexities of such a process and how the intersectionalities of one's identity might complicate the process through multifaceted group membership in both oppressed and privileged groups. In this study, the researchers found that students were able to participate in this process through reflection and journaling on the activities that they participated in together. In many cases, these shared experiences and decision-making processes caused them to have emotional responses that needed to be worked out and processed. Thus, students reflected upon themselves and their own lived-experiences as requisite building blocks of building a "critical consciousness."

Students in this course seemed to realize, in the context of their journal and reflection, that a challenge to pre-existing assumptions was warranted and perhaps overdue. They realized, especially when looking for local housing for the Economic Vulnerability Project or food in the grocery store for the Food Stamp Challenge, that necessities are very expensive. They noted

that a lack of resources overall would make a challenge in one area expand to other areas of one's life. This seemed to help students develop a form of a collective consciousness around the general notion that poverty could happen to anyone, that it was more of a transitory experience and less a type of person. And that given the reality of societal structures, which included the costs of housing and the inability of the minimum wage to make ends meet, the limits and challenges with the social safety net, that individuals were likely not taking advantage of government programs and that such programs likely did not do enough to help those in need.

Many aspects of the learning experience provide barriers or opportunities to develop awareness, new understanding, and critical consciousness. Taylor (2019) suggests that aspects of the interpersonal relationships between students may assist in learning such as the development of dialogue and helping peers see a broader concept. In some ways learning as a cohort and among other learners can facilitate this process of developing critical consciousness. But attitude shifts at the individual level may require individual level personal reflection, consideration of new evidence, and a decision-making process to select a new perspective as a result of these shared experiences.

As social work instructors, it is our responsibility to intervene here. We must create exercises both inside and outside of the classroom that challenge students' prior assumptions and provide them with the opportunity and framework to reflect upon these experiences. It is in the active individual and collective reflection upon our experience and attitudinal changes may occur. Further, as these experiences occur in tandem with other parallel learning, students are able to develop a critical consciousness around social justices alongside their peers. Pedagogical interventions that intend to challenge pre-existing assumptions about any social issue should therefore work to embed appropriate reflection opportunities for students to work out their ideas in a reflexive way. In doing such, the potential for new learning to occur may increase and the development of critical consciousness might become a true possibility for students as part of their learning process.

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