

Can You See the Bootstraps?

Changing Social Work Students' Perceptions of Poverty

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Introduction:

Social workers are certain to encounter poverty and its consequences in their practices, regardless of area of specialization. It is thus of great importance for social work education to teach about poverty. Student attitudes toward poverty have been associated with client access to services in nursing (Boylton, & O'Rourke, 2013; Patterson & Hulton, 2011), medicine (Wear & Kuczewski, 2008), and health professions (Smith-Campbell, 2005). Social work education has a moderately robust literature that concludes that social work education is effective in changing student attitudes related to poverty (Clark, 2007; Weaver & Yun, 2011; Weiss, 2005, 2006). Studies exploring attributions of poverty aim to investigate whether participants blame poverty on structural causes of individualistic causes such as low education or lack of work ethic regardless how these factors are framed (Aintablian, 2014; Blair et al., 2014; Feagin, 1972; Kreidl, 2000; Maseko et al., 2014). Clearly, a common theme in poverty research is whether people attribute poverty to external factors or whether the poor are blamed for their poverty based on their actions. We define "blaming" as the attribution of poverty more to individual factors and less to structural factors. The authors propose that reducing the level of blaming in social work students results in increased value for diversity and social justice. Simply put, a reduction in blaming should also be accompanied by a more positive attitude and increased support for governmental programs that help the poor – hence, an increase in an attitude that will promote social justice. Educating social work students on the issue of poverty should thus decrease blaming and increase support for government programs.

Method:

Email surveys utilizing Survey Monkey were sent to the students of three accredited programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Students had the opportunity to answer the survey in the first four weeks (pre-test) and the last two weeks (post-test) for the fall 2013 and spring 2014 semesters. The study was approved by IRB at each of the institutions involved. The sampling frame consisted of undergraduate social work students in an initial social welfare policy course and graduate social work students in a foundation year social welfare policy class during AY 2013-2014. A total 134 students answered the questionnaire fully at both pretest and posttest for a response rate of 57.5 percent. I'm not sure how many instructors there were. Sue may have had an adjunct teaching one class, and I know Gary had multiple sections with different instructors.

Findings:

Mean scores on the Attribution to the Individual measure, Structural Attribution, and the Blaming Index at pretest suggest that the social work students participating in this study already tended to view poverty as structural rather than attribute it to individual causes. Results of paired-samples t-test analysis between pretest and posttest show statistically significant differences on Attribution to the Individual ($t=3.213, p=.002$) on Structural Attribution ($t=-3.836, p=.000$) on the Blaming Index ($t=4.813, p=.000$) on. The results of the ANCOVA showed no differences between pretest and posttest scores on any of the variables: Program Level (BSW and MSW), Rural or Not Rural, Free or Reduced Lunch as a Child, Education Level of Father, and Education Level of Mother. ANOVA results were statistically significant only for Race on Blaming at pretest ($F(1,3)=2.996, p=.033$). Stepwise Regression analysis was significant ($R^2 = .513, F(2, 131) = 23.352, p = .000$) with both Blaming and being a Minority predicting increased support for government interventions and programs at posttest. No other variables were retained in the analysis, including having received free or reduced lunch as a child, the profession of father or mother, having lived abroad, participated in mission trip, living in a rural or urban area, the instructor, or program level (BSW or MSW).



Demographic Characteristics of Sample

	N	%
Total	234	100.0
Female	248	11.9
Female	212	90.1
African American	57	24.3
Caucasian	71	30.3
Latino/Hispanic	4	1.7
Native American	3	1.3
Minority	72	31
Non-Minority	162	69
Rural	90	38.5
Not Rural	144	61.5
BSW students	168	71.8
MSW students	66	28.2
Lived Abroad 9 Months or More		
Yes	6	2.6
No	228	97.4
Mission Trip		
Yes	3	1.3
No	231	98.7

Demographic Characteristics of Sample

	N	%
Total	204	100.0
Father's Education Level		
No High school degree	32	15.7
High school degree or equivalent	41	20.1
Some college	35	17.2
College degree	34	16.6
Graduate degree	22	10.7
Mother's Education Level		
No High school degree	13	6.4
High school degree or equivalent	17	8.3
Some college	30	14.7
College degree	38	18.6
Graduate degree	22	10.7
Received Free or Reduced Lunch as a Child		
Yes	99	48.5
No	105	51.5

Differences, Means, and Standard Deviations of Pretest and Posttest

	N	Pretest Mean	Pretest SD	Posttest Mean	Posttest SD	t	p
Attribution to the Individual Score	134	2.6239	.79194	2.4284	.8094	3.213	.002**
Structural Attribution Score	134	3.8478	.73885	3.2885	.8924	-3.836	.000***
Blaming Index Score	134	4.8234	1.21105	4.3522	1.20739	4.813	.000***
Support for Government Programs Score	134	4.6822	0.8282	4.2886	0.8872	-3.828	.001***

**Significant at the .01 level
***Significant at the .001 level

Regression Results:

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
(Constant)	30.094	0.634			47.459	.000***
Blaming Index Score Posttest	-1.778	0.281	-0.484		-6.333	.000***
Minority	2.532	0.68	0.285		3.724	.000***

**Significant at the .01 level
***Significant at the .001 level

Conclusion:

Social welfare policy courses are an important component of the social work curriculum. The results suggest that the social welfare policy instructors involved in this study effected change on student perceptions of poverty, both reducing the degree in which students perceive poverty as arising from individual causes, and in the degree in which students perceive poverty as arising from structural causes. This resulted in less "blaming" among social work students, and the corresponding increase in support for government intervention and programs. Social work education through the teaching of poverty and inequality have important roles in increasing justice and economic equality and promoting peace and harmony. The results of this study bring hope and suggest the value of teaching social welfare policy, particularly when poverty content is included.

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