

Can You See the Bootstraps?

Changing Social Work Students' Perceptions of Poverty

Peter A. Kindle, PhD, CPA, MSW, University of South Dakota, & Elena Delavega, PhD, MSW, University of Memphis

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	241	11.9
Male	212	91.1
Race		
African American	57	24.3
Caucasian	71	30.3
Latino/Latina	4	1.7
Native American	3	1.3
Minority	72	31
Non-Minority	63	27
Level		
Not Rural	85	36.4
BSW students	208	89.1
MSW students	28	12.0
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	43	21.1
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	57	27.9
Some college	50	24.5
College degree	58	28.4
Graduate degree	16	7.8
Received Free or Reduced Lunch as a Child		
Yes	89	43.6
No	79	38.8

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	234	2.6239	.79194	2.4284	.8094	3.213	.002**
Structural Attribution Score	234	3.8478	.73885	3.2885	.8924	-3.836	.000***
Blaming Index Score	234	4.8234	1.21075	4.3932	1.20739	4.813	.000***
Support for Governmental Programs Score	234	4.6882	0.8582	4.2886	0.8872	-3.808	.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 .001 level
**Significant at the .01 level
*Significant at the .05 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.

Boylton, M. L., O'Rourke, R. (2013). Second-degree Bachelor of Science in nursing students' preconceived attitudes towards homelessness and the poor: A pilot study. *Journal of Professional Nursing, 29*(3), 209-217. doi:10.1016/j.profnurs.2012.05.009

Clark, S. (2007). Social work students' perceptions of poverty. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 14*(1/2), 149-166. doi:10.1300/J137V14N01_10

Patterson, M., & Mattan, L. J. (2011). Enhancing nursing students' understanding of poverty through simulation. *Acute Health Nursing, 29*(2), 143-151. doi:10.1111/j.1525-1446.2011.00999.x

Smith-Campbell, S. (2005). Health professional students' cultural competence and attitudes toward the poor: The influence of a clinical practicum supported by the National Health Service Corps. *Journal of Allied Health, 34*(1), 56-62.

Wear, D., Kuczewski, M. G. (2008). Medical students' perceptions of the poor: What impact can medical education have? *Academic Medicine, 83*(7), 639-645.

Weaver, R. D., Yun, S. H. (2011). Analyzing the attitudes of undergraduate students toward poverty and impoverished persons: Does social work education make a difference? *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 21*, 2-20. doi:10.18808/JTSW.2011.03.015

Weiss, I. (2005). Is there a global common core to social work? A cross-national comparative study of BSW graduate students. *Social Work, 50*(2), 101-110.

Weiss, I. (2006). Factors associated with interest in working with the poor. *Families in Society, 87*(3), 385-394.