Bridging the Gap Together: Utilizing Experiential Pedagogy to Teach Poverty and Empathy

Jennifer M. Frank, Laura Brierton Granruth, Heather Girvin & Anna VanBuskirk

Published online: 23 Sep 2019.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Bridging the Gap Together: Utilizing Experiential Pedagogy to Teach Poverty and Empathy

Jennifer M. Frank, Laura Brierton Granruth, Heather Girvin, and Anna VanBuskirk

ABSTRACT

In light of community changes and curricular deficits, it is essential for social work educators to find ways to teach social empathy and poverty content to students who may or may not have had much direct contact with economically diverse households in their formative years. Our framework and research pick up where well-intended policy efforts leave off. Because social empathy may serve as a pathway to close the gap between lived realities, we work toward bridging the divide of socioeconomic difference through social connection. In our experiential learning event, Bridging the Gap Together (BTGT), we partner with a local agency to have a dinner and an interactive question and answer session aimed at humanizing both groups' lived realities. Experiential learning through intentional social connection may provide an opportunity for social work educators to bridge both sociocultural and curricular gaps.

Over the past 50 years, community life has changed. For example, participation in civic organizations has declined (Putnam, 2001), and there has been an increasing level of neighborhood stratification by income (Reardon & Bischoff, 2011). More specifically, taken-for-granted residential patterns are starkly segregated along class lines. While efforts have been made to disperse concentrated poverty and its effects through mixed-use communities and portable Section 8 vouchers, there is much work left undone (Anderson et al., 2003). As a result of these changes, individuals may be less likely to interact regularly with individuals from diverse economic backgrounds.

One practical effect of residential class segregation may be that incoming first-year Social Work majors have scant daily experience in relating to individuals from disparate socioeconomic statuses negatively affecting students' ability to make therapeutic connections across class lines (Segal, 2007). As social work students come to the university to obtain an education in how to help those in need, this is an important context of which social work educators must be keenly aware. If students are coming to us with limited experience with economic diversity, and as a result may not have appropriate social empathy by way of those experiences, it will be essential to ensure that they cultivate social empathy while they are students in our programs. One consequence of decreased social connection may be a lack of social empathy from those in higher income strata toward those in poverty. This outcome may also affect some social work students meaning they may approach people living in poverty with decreased empathy, or worse, with enduring negative attitudes that they have absorbed from larger society (Atherton & Gemmel, 1993).

The effect of social distance on social work students on their social work practice is not well studied. Additionally, some social work educators may assume that students have a strong baseline level of empathy coming into the major. As a result, empathy is mentioned only in passing or not directly taught as a tangible skill (Gerdes, Segal, Jackson, & Mullins, 2011).

Some social work curricula have failed to address this empathy deficit and may have also drifted away from a poverty focus (Frank & Rice, 2017; Krumer-Nevo, Weiss-Gal, & Monnickendam, 2009).

CONTACT Jennifer M. Frank ✉ Jennifer.Frank@millersville.edu 📧 School of Social Work, Millersville University of Pennsylvania, P.O. Box 1002, Millersville, PA, 17551

Content on poverty is cursory or "superficial" in nature (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2009, p. 226). For example, poverty may receive attention as only a contributing variable impacting a mental health diagnosis or other identified need, as opposed to the central issue at hand. Curricula have treated the skill of empathy in similar fashion.

In light of these community changes and curricular deficits, it is essential, as social work educators, to find ways to teach social empathy and poverty content to students who may or may not have had much direct contact with economically diverse households in their formative years. Creating a foundation for the development of social empathy is necessary component of social work education, specifically in light of the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) competencies (e.g., Competency 6, for engagement with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities) but also as a foundation for all other competencies (CSWE, 2015). Experiential learning may be one key to addressing these noted deficits in our communities, curricula, and student skill sets.

Our framework and research pick up where well-intended policy efforts leave off. Similar to Adelman, Rosenburg, and Hobart (2016) focus on social empathy as a pathway for closing the gap "between cultural perceptions and lived realities" (p. 1452), we start to bridge the divide of socioeconomic difference through social connection. In our experiential learning event, Bridging the Gap Together (BTGT), we partner with a local agency to have a dinner and an interactive question and answer session aimed at humanizing both groups' lived realities. During our experiential learning event, we examine the questions: What happens when students are faced with the social reality of negotiating relationships in the field? Is social empathy necessary first or might it be the result of such interaction? What are the responses of first-year students to decreasing the social distance between classes? Further, during the experience, we are able to examine such things as: What are the preliminary reactions, concerns, questions, and issues that students and community participants have in preparation for an activity in which they will interact with each other? What preconceptions are evident? Our research seeks to explore one way that gaps in skill and curriculum might be bridged.

Literature review

Poverty attitudes and empathy

Like any profession, social work education aims to inculcate values in students that are consistent with social work's professional values. Of note for this study is the value of social justice and the call to help the most vulnerable, especially those in poverty (NASW, 2017). Unfortunately, many social work students may hold negative attitudes about poverty, meaning that they blame the person who is poor for being poor more than they blame societal barriers, such as underresourced schools and communities. Social work education has been found to affect students' perceptions of poverty. Over 25 years ago, Schwartz and Robinson (1991) found that the social work curriculum had an effect on students shifting from assigning individualistic causes of poverty to a more nuanced understanding of structural causes of poverty. Two years later, Atherton and Gemmel (1993) published their *Attitude Toward Poverty Scale*. Since then, their scale has been used repeatedly in its original or a modified form with various populations to assess poverty attribution. Similarly, Frank and Rice (2017) utilized Blair, Brown, Schoepflin, and Taylor's (2014) scale to assess undergraduate attitudes on poverty, discovering that a targeted course shifted students' view of "equal opportunity" and poverty programs. Weaver and Yun (2011) found a shift to the structural causes of poverty after one social work class with an emphasis on poverty.

Empathy is defined differently by different scholars (e.g., de Waal, 2009). We prefer the definition by Gerdes (2011) for our study. Gerdes (2011) in her comprehensive review of the development of pity, sympathy, and empathy provided several definitions of empathy.

> Empathy is the physiological experience of feeling what another person is feeling and the cognitive processing of the experience (Batson, 1987; Hoffman, 2000 [as cited in Gerdes 2011]). The ability to perceive and feel the

world from the subjective experience of another person. (Misch & Peloquin, 2005, p. 42 [as cited in Gerdes, 2011, p. 233])

The connection between empathy and poverty attitudes seems tautological but certain. For example, is empathy a buffer that prevents us from assuming the negative stereotypes of larger society? Segal (2011, 2007) found that the development of social empathy is an essential component in understanding poverty, suggesting that social empathy, contextual understanding, and social responsibility are three essential components of what we consider to be a fully reflexive practice (Freire, 1970). As Gerdes et al. (2011) note, "social work can almost be seen as an organized manifestation of empathy" (p.109). Frank and Rice (2017) expressed concern that if students are left without academic instruction on social empathy, they could leave the social work profession due to a persistent disconnect between the social worker and her/his clients.

Gaps in social work curricula

While social workers agree that empathy is a necessary component of social work practice, much coursework fails to deal directly with the issue and instead deals with it superficially. For example, Gerdes et al. (2011) conducted a content analysis of social work textbooks and found that very few mentioned "empathy" and those that did, did so indirectly. That is, empathy was noted with an assumption that the student already understood the term. Additionally, half of those texts that mentioned empathy failed to define the construct (Gerdes et al., 2011). Thus, social work educators have no agreed-upon context for measuring or improving levels of empathy.

Like empathy, poverty – and the attitudes that surround it – are overlooked in social work curricula. Despite the "long-term commitment" toward alleviating poverty that resonates back to the start of the profession (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2009, p. 125), many programs lack a specific focus on poverty. Few programs offer coursework that targets poverty; instead, they address the issue superficially (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2009). One potential consequence of dealing with poverty as a context and not a practice focus may reflect social work's mission drift (Specht & Courtney, 1994). Further, it might also pose as a barrier to social work students recognizing poverty as a distinct and intransigent social problem. It is possible that pressure to "professionalize" and "medicalize" has moved social workers to pursue clinical practice careers for which licensure and insurance reimbursement are available (Specht & Courtney, 1994). A lack of poverty awareness in social work curricula may lead to attitudes about poverty that do not reflect compassionate views of those experiencing poverty, as well as adherence to social ideals of meritocracy and equal opportunity (Frank & Rice, 2017). Davis and Wainwright's use the term "poverty aware" to describe this critical feature of social work curricula (p. 229).

Filling curricular gaps

A literature review on the teaching of poverty in social work found very few articles that offered guidelines and general recommendations regarding specific content of curriculum. Krumer-Nevo et al. (2009) explained that while social work is inherently committed to those who endure poverty, current efforts to develop research and pedagogy are weak. They outline four areas of understanding poverty to attend to: (1) theoretical and empirical knowledge, (2) personal and cultural values, (3) social work practice, and (4) experience with this population. These recommendations focus on transformations in professional practice. However, there is no discussion of the means by which to integrate these changes into social work curricula. One exception was Frank and Rice (2017) who examined student perceptions of poverty in first-year social work students, after a course dedicated to directly exploring poverty. While their results did not show a dramatic difference overall in poverty attitudes (they were fairly positive at the outset), students had more positive attitudes toward welfare assistance and had a decreased belief in equal opportunity after taking the course (Frank & Rice, 2017) demonstrating the potential that a poverty curriculum can have in fostering an attitudinal adjustment.

Available studies on empathy tend to involve medical or health-care professions (Gönüllü, Erden, & Gökmen, 2017; Hunt, 2007; Mofidi, Strauss, Pitner, & Sandler, 2003). The development of empathy is an understudied area, in general. Neuroscience research has uncovered that humans unconsciously and automatically respond to outside stimulus as if it were occurring to themselves (Gerdes et al., 2011). In this sense, empathy is an intrinsic reaction that works in combination with voluntary cognitive processes, such as self-awareness and emotion regulation (Gerdes et al., 2011). Utilizing attachment theory and research on the neuroplasticity of the brain, Gerdes et al. (2011) put forth a strategy to assist educators in teaching social empathy to students. They hold that the neuroplasticity of the brain allows for social empathy to be developed throughout the lifespan (Gerdes et al., 2011). Further, these connections can be facilitated through the utilization of a three-step process: "affective response, cognitive processing, and conscious decision making" (Gerdes et al., 2011, p. 117).

Frank and Rice (2017) asserted that a social empathy framework is valuable to social work pedagogy because it helps students learn to "appreciate the unique perspectives and experiences of individuals" (p. 4). Teaching empathy, in the context of poverty and as a skill, may minimize compassion fatigue and provide a basis for facilitating social change (Frank & Rice, 2017). This is especially true, in regard to how empathy can be learned through actively participating in service learning (Everhart, 2016).

Experiential learning

Experiential learning has long been valued in education and is frequently associated with renowned educator John Dewey. Kolb (1984) identified experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). He cited the praxis work of Freire and experiential learning with the need to reflect and act on the world to change it.

Experiential learning is an active learning process that involves classroom teaching and application external to the classroom setting (Timm, Birkenmaier, & Tebb, 2011).[1] Kolb (1984) identified concepts of experiential learning: (a) Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes; (b) Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience; (c) The process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world (i.e., concrete experience and abstract concepts); (d) Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world; (e) Learning involves the transaction between the person and the environment. Experiential learning is usually associated with higher retention of academic knowledge (Dale, 1969). Experiential learning experiences should be meaningful and transferable to new situations (Brail, 2016; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993). Bonnycastle and Bonnycastle (2015) noted that experiential learning also should challenge "beliefs, assumptions, and preconceptions" and increase motivation to learn (p. 234).

For social work education in particular, Timm et al. (2011) found that the use of experiential learning in social work promoted personal growth and greater self-awareness through the use of an experiential community assessment project for undergraduate social work education that better-connected micro and macro social work practice. Students' evaluations of these experiences reflect that they appreciated being challenged to experience communities they have never visited and often have been raised to fear.

Experiential learning may be a pathway to the development of social empathy. Segal (2007) developed a three-tiered model to teach social empathy. Her model includes basic exposure, explanation, and authentic experience. Exposure allows students to gain awareness of new information. Explanation involves reflecting on the information presented during the exposure and exploring it for oneself. Experience requires putting oneself in a situation that allows them to live as others do and see things from their perspective.

---

[1]Seaman, Brown, and Quay (2017) noted that experiential learning theory developed out of human relations theory in the late 1940s and early 1950s when it was applied to workplace training.

Service-learning experiences seem to increase student levels of empathy (Markus et al., 1993) and to develop an understanding of complex social issues (Timm et al., 2011). Bernacki and Jaeger (2008) sampled 46 students. Twenty-five students were enrolled in a class with a service-learning component, while 21 were in a class without. Students whose coursework included a service-learning component were more likely to demonstrate positive changes (Bernacki & Jaeger). Those who completed service learning reported a better understanding of a social problem and increased compassion and sensitivity.

Research questions

This study examines the effects of decreasing the social distance between students and program participants enrolled in a rural poverty program. We are interested in understanding the barriers and responses to such an experience and the utility of experiential learning as a strategy for increasing empathy and teaching about poverty. To observe this, we are interested in knowing more about the barriers to such interaction and the responses elicited from the event. Our pedagogy-focused research questions included:

- What are the preliminary reactions, concerns, questions, and issues that students have in preparation for an activity in which they will interact with families and individuals who are clients in a rural poverty program? What preconceptions do students have about rural poverty?
- What are the preliminary reactions, concerns, questions, and issues participants in the rural poverty program have in preparation for an activity in which they will interact with first semester freshman Social Work majors? What preconceptions do individuals living in an area of high rural poverty have about college students/college life?
- What observations can be made about the unfolding of natural interactions during the BTGT event?
- What is the nature of the questions that each group poses to the other? What topics appear to be unknown between the groups? How is social empathy evident (or not) and what seems to facilitate this? How do groups react after the event? What types of issues come up as a result of this imposed cross-class interaction?

Method

Study site

The site for our ongoing study is a local, faith-based, nonprofit social service agency, called the Community Center,* located in a predominantly rural area. The Community Center utilizes an empowerment model of community building with a strengths-based orientation. Utilizing a tag line that "everyone's journey matters," community members embrace the vision vigorously in concert with the program organizers. This "buy-in" of the community members is evidenced by their expression, relationship with the agency employees, and the ways in which they interacted with the facility and about the program. The rural area in which the program is situated appears at first glance to be predominantly farmland. A large population of Amish in the area serves to stimulate the economy through tourism. Services in the area are very limited, with only a single bus with intermittent public transportation into a larger community located about 40 minutes to the west.

Research event

BTGT is a recurrent experiential learning event situated inside of a poverty curriculum designed for first-year social work students called *Perspectives on Poverty in America*. This course takes an exploratory approach at understanding poverty through the lens of individuals experiencing it.

Students consider stories that individuals in poverty have shared about their experience as a starting point for observing the cultural messages about poverty from a variety of sources (e.g., media, news, literature). As part of this course, students engage in both service learning and the BTGT experiential event.

During the BTGT event, students from this course travel to The Community Center. First, students complete a "tour" of the rural area along with staff from the organization. During this tour, students are asked to identify and visually locate resources necessary to meet daily needs using a prepared checklist (e.g., public transportation, social services, employment opportunities). Students check off what resources they are able to identify and work together in vans to accomplish this. This exercise helps students visualize the disparate access that individuals in this area might face. Generally, students cannot locate a welfare office, a doctor's office, a variety of grocery stores, and many employment options. Staff from the agency assist with pointing out resources that exist in addition to "pockets of poverty" that may be somewhat hidden from normal view of a disengaged passerby. An example of this is a run-down trailer park partially obscured from view behind a business establishment. During the event, one student remarked that while she grew up in this area and graduated from the local high school, she personally had no idea that poverty was an issue in her community. She had not considered this issue before nor considered the challenges associated with the experiences of her neighbors.

After taking a tour of the area to explore the unavailability of taken-for-granted resources, students help to prepare and then share a hot meal with the members of the community who receive services from the Community Center. To initially facilitate communication between the groups, an icebreaker is conducted. In 2016, students and community members played a bingo game where they had to find individuals who have unique abilities or attributes (e.g., standing on one's head, has a bird for a pet, likes the color orange). In 2017, this was accomplished by students and community members sitting at tables and rolling conversation dice to produce unique questions that they took turns answering together (e.g., if you traveled to the moon, what would you take along?) While ice breakers can sometimes feel awkward or uncomfortable, playing these games serves to facilitate simple communication. More importantly and in this context, beginning conversation in this manner provides a baseline for finding commonalities between individuals. Utilizing the strength perspective in this opening activity does more than simply "break this ice." Indeed, it shifts the focus of this experience onto our shared human nature and our shared ideas; it sets the tone for the evening by equalizing power.

The main component of the BTGT evening is a structured question and answer session between the groups. In advance of our gathering, both students and community members prepare questions to be asked of the other group regarding their life experiences. In general, students ask questions about the lived experience of rural poverty and community members ask questions pertaining to college life and studying social work. Students often ask questions related to what living in rural poverty is like, what challenges they face, or how they came into a situation where they needed to access services. Community members tend to ask students about what college life is like and more so why they have chosen social work as a career path. The questions themselves provide insight into the types of issues that are unknown by each group as well as the extent to which students or community members are able to accurately articulate their inquiry.

During the main question and answer session, questions are posed anonymously to the full group. Anyone who wishes to answer the question is free to answer; no one is compelled to answer. The questions alternate between questions for the community members and questions for the students. Between two and four researchers are situated in the room to document the responses to the questions as well as the verbal and nonverbal responses, including body language and the climate of the discussion. These data are collected and compiled for analysis.

Fall 2017 event and data collection

In the fall of 2017, a cohort of 28 students attended the BTGT event at the Community Center. There were approximately 10 participants from the agency actively engaged in the BTGT event. Three faculty researchers and one student researcher were present.

Pre-event data

Prior to participating in the BTGT event, students and community members were given the opportunity to share and document any concerns, apprehensions, and expectations they had about the event. These data were collected and stored for future review and analysis. Students and community members were also given the opportunity to create questions that they wanted to ask about the other group's lived experience. Using class time, students generated questions approximately 1 week ahead of the event. Students considered personal concerns, apprehensions, and expectations and wrote these on note cards (anonymously) and submit them to the instructor. The course instructor used the note cards to shape questions that would be posed to Community Center members on the day of the event. Community Center members arrived at the event early and were asked to participate in a similar process. On the day of the event, while students were on the tour of the surrounding area, community members were encouraged to document concerns, apprehensions, and expectations and to then write questions that they might ask of the students.

Event data

Following the meal at the Community Center, community members and students sat in a circle and, with faculty facilitation, asked and responded to pre-prepared questions. As questions were posed anonymously to the group (i.e., read by a faculty member), volunteers answered the questions as they wished. Several researchers were situated in the room and took field notes of the content and tone of the discussion, as well as affective responses such as apparent emotion and body language, using paper and pencil or laptop computers.

Post-event data

After the event, students and community members were given the opportunity to immediately reflect on the experience. For community members, these reflections were collected on papers after the event while the students are cleaning up. For students, data were collected at two intervals, once on the van drive back to campus, which is approximately 45–50 minutes in duration, and once later that week during class. In each van, the individual in the passenger seat was assigned the role of notetaker and the students in the van shared their reflections on the experience. Several days later in class, students had the second opportunity to reflect on their experiences.

Data analysis

All data sources were compiled using Excel to prepare it for analysis. Multiple researchers individually reviewed the compiled data and employed line-by-line coding. After collectively reviewing the first level codes, a thematic analysis was completed to articulate the overarching ideas generated. The trustworthiness of these data was enhanced by this interrater reliability which was followed by critical analysis as a group. Data from the intergroup dialog session were documented by multiple researchers (e.g., in 2017 there were four individual researchers collecting detailed field notes), further enhancing its trustworthiness and accuracy.

In the very few instances that data collected by separate researchers differed, these data were discarded. That is, if one researcher heard "X" and another heard "Y," and there were no other ways to verify data validity (e.g., a third account of what was said), the data were discarded. If *analysis* differed, critical small group discussion led to consensus and the meaning was accepted if verified by another source (typically observation).

Students' worries

A number of themes were extracted from pretest data, collected in response to the question: [Thinking about our trip to the Community Center…] What are you worried about? Though student responses varied somewhat in terms of word choice, several themes emerged consistently from the data. Students were nervous to meet new people, concerned about being judged by participants from the Community Center, and worried that they would be perceived as spoiled. One student remarked, "I don't want to seem like a bratty college student." Another shared, "I am a little nervous about the initial meet up with the folks that are going to be there." A third student echoed this concern: "I'm afraid of getting lost and meeting new people and giving my opinion to other people." Finally, one student elaborated, "… Seeming like I'm taking their experience for granted – I'm there for 3 hours for my education but this is their life." A number of students worried that their comments or questions would offend Community Center participants or cause them some discomfort. One student remarked, "I may be worried that if I or a fellow classmate asks a question, the people might get offended." Another student worried that participants at the Community Center might "… take the questions the wrong way." Some students were worried about their own emotional responses to the experience. One student explained, "I tend to worry quickly when I see people in need or strive to become better, so personally my emotions worry." Another student added, "Meeting the people. Hearing their stories. Emotionally I think I'll be a mess." The anticipation of strong emotional responses resonated with several other students who remarked that they were "nervous," concerned that their questions would be "taken the wrong way," or that it would be "intense" and "emotional" to hear people's stories.

Students' pretest assumptions

Before visiting the Community Center, students were asked to share any assumptions they may have related to the population and Center, which was described to them as a center that provides services to clients who live in this rural area. Students shared some common assumptions regarding the rural area and the Center's participants. For the most part, students expressed their expectation that the Center's population would consist primarily of "white farmers." Students also shared their assumptions that participants would be "friendly" and "welcoming." Students anticipated that the Center's participants would be grateful for the students' visit. One student commented that s/he thought participants would be "thankful" and aware that "social workers want to help." Another remarked, "They'll be understanding and open to us." At least two students assumed that the Center's participants were hard-working or living lives that had not always been defined by poverty. One student predicted that it was unlikely that all of the Center's participants were "born into poverty." Another predicted that participants had "tried to rise up, but it is hard." Finally, one student expressed an understanding of the complicated relationship between work and poverty. S/he expected participants would be "poor, but hard-working, blue collar families."

Participants' concerns and assumptions

Just as the students had, when community member participants arrived at the event they were provided with the opportunity to jot down any concerns, worries, or assumptions that they had prior to meeting the students. Overall, the community members did not articulate any significant initial thoughts or concerns, although one participant noted that s/he did not want to be photographed. While most of the participants did not have much to say about their assumptions for the evening, one participant noted anticipation of "some good, interesting, and maybe even beneficial conversation will take place." Participants shared that they hoped the students would be "nice people." One participant noted that the students "might have appropriate and/or inappropriate preconceptions about poverty overall." One participant noted that the real question is "what are the assumptions they will have about me?"

These data serve to support our thesis, and prior data, that both groups shared some level of self-consciousness and concern around what assumptions the other group might have of them. Further,

these data supported our proposition that there was a significant social distance between these groups, a gap to bridged.

Student questions

Students submitted questions for the community members a week prior to the event. They were given time in class to consider their questions and provided questions on note cards anonymously. The questions tended to revolve around issues of money, education, and daily life. Students asked about what daily life was like, what obstacles the participants had to overcome, and how they attended to financial issues. Inherently the development of such questions exposed the hidden assumptions that the students harbored about the construct of poverty. Some questions exposed such generalizations such as: "were you in rural poverty growing up?" or "what are a few of the hardships that you face on a daily basis?" On the other hand, some students asked questions that exposed their discomfort with this arrangement and the embedded hierarchy that such an event may impose: "what do you want people to know about rural poverty that they might not already know?" and "are you comfortable with people asking you these kinds of questions?"

Participant questions

Community members were likewise given the opportunity to articulate questions to be asked of the students about their life experiences as first-year college students. Questions tended to be around why students desired to take up social work as a profession and whether the students believed they had the characteristics of a good social worker.

Dialogue session

While the answers to the questions are outside of the scope of this article on the pedagogical aspects of this project and will be the subject for a different article that explores the perceptions of individuals experiencing rural poverty and its implications for policy and program development, the questions themselves assist us in understanding the initial disconnect between the students and participants' life experiences.

The interaction between the groups during the question and answer session was emotionally intense. Several of the participants shared their personal stories about difficulties with housing and employment. One participant explained that there is only a single bus that serves the area and she must wake up at 4 am daily to get to work on time. Participants talked about physical disabilities and medical issues that have precluded them from gainful employment and how certain policies of area homeless shelters do not allow their family to be housed together. Students likewise shared their own personal experiences, with foster care, and financial struggle. One student shared how after the passing away of a parent her siblings were split up when the family experienced homelessness. Another student noted that she and her family spent several months without heat due to a lack of financial resources. These student stories appeared to resonate deeply with the community participants. One student recognized and noted how the community participants and students shared stories and shared support for each other during the session.

Posttest data

We collected posttest data to gather an understanding the reflections of the students and participants after the event. Had their assumptions been challenged? What stood out to them or influenced their understanding of rural poverty or college students? Students noted that the conversation flowed naturally and "we talked to them for the way they are, as human beings." In some cases, they felt overwhelmed in hearing their experiences and stories, but as some students noted this made them feel "connected" even to their classmates. One student noted that the experience changed her/his assumptions, as s/he assumed that they would all be farmers and found that not to be true. One student noted that hearing others' stories was "inspiring" noting that after speaking at length with one participant directly s/he found "her joy and happiness was so interesting and inspiring."

Students felt uncomfortable by silence. When a question was posed to the group and no one immediately answered, several students found that silence uncomfortable. However, another student noted that s/he believed that the participants "felt comfortable with us."

These data resonated with the second posttest data collection where students had a longer time to personally reflect on the prompts. Students tended to note a deeper understanding of the structural barriers that pose as challenges to families in the rural area. Students noted concern about the challenges regarding transportation and healthcare in ways that they had not before. Students shared that they felt inspired and moved by hearing the stories of individuals from the Community Center. One boy, age 13, shared his personal experience with homelessness and the struggles associated with poverty and the health of his parents. Students were moved to tears by his story. Students seemed to be engaged with the idea of simply listening to the stories of others and hearing what they have to say. They also seemed to grasp the notion that poverty can happen to anyone. One participant shared that he was third in his high school class and had a successful career as a truck driver. Due to medical issues, he is unable to partake in that type of work anymore and his family has experienced ongoing financial struggles and homelessness. Students were moved by this story and it challenged their assumptions regarding who experiences poverty.

Likewise, community participants were given the opportunity to reflect on the experience. Unlike the students who shared that the experience at times was uncomfortable, the participants noted that they were comfortable and that the experience was encouraging and interesting. Participants were equally encouraged by hearing the students' stories and particularly encouraged by their reasons for getting into social work. Participants noted that they were surprised by: "how deeply they (the students) care" and how "some of the students talked from the heart," "how kind the students were," and "that I enjoyed the experience."

Discussion

Changes in the shape and function of the community have created social gaps that are particularly wide across socioeconomic groups. First-semester college students, many of whom have not experienced economic diversity (Segal, 2007), may lack the capacity and skills to connect with clients. Social work programs have failed to respond to the growing socioeconomic divide and the challenges it has created. Curricula lack courses that interrogate poverty, and courses have done little to facilitate the development of students' ability to form authentic alliances with clients from whom they differ. Worse yet, lacking curricular programming to the contrary, social work students may remain naive to the existence and effects of poverty; absorb dominant messages regarding the "undeserving poor;" or hew to social ideals (e.g., meritocracy) that remain relevant for an ever-decreasing portion of the population.

This article summarizes BTGT's utilization of experiential learning strategies designed to close social distance, foster interaction across perceived socioeconomic differences, and facilitate sharing in the forms of both cultural activity (a meal) and personal stories. At this early stage of inquiry, our goals were twofold: (1) the implementation of experiential learning as a pedagogical innovation and (2) exploration of the extent to which our early data validate the literature regarding social "disconnect," trepidation regarding "others," and lack of empathy. Given our observation that our first-semester college students may lack experience and accurate knowledge related to poverty, the implementation of experiential strategies, which challenge beliefs and assumptions (Bonnycastle & Bonnycastle, 2015), seemed fitting.

Data obtained prior to the class trip to the Community Center verified our expectation that students were experiencing some anticipatory discomfort. Moreover, students expected a social gap or difference, perhaps even a hierarchical one. For example, students shared that they expected Community Center participants to be "grateful" for their "visit." This expectation may reflect some of the patriarchal ideology that has haunted the profession historically – there was a sense of those "on high" extending their hand "down to the poor in assistance" (Freire, 1970).

This is not to suggest, however, that students were completely comfortable with the hierarchy that structured their social interactions. Several worried that questions from them (the students) would make Community Center participants uncomfortable and they worried that Center participants would see them as "bratty college students." Other student data contradicted our expectations that students' perceptions would reflect widely held beliefs regarding the "undeserving" nature of "the poor." In contrast, students shared that they expected Community Center participants to be "kind" or "nice," or they offered superficial descriptions: "white," "farmer," etc. Some students shared assumptions that ran directly counter to the "bootstraps" ideology that results in victim blaming, sharing that they expected Community Center participants to be "hardworking" and "blue collar." These descriptions—generally positive or benign—suggest that students were either more open-minded than we anticipated or that they were responding in socially desirable ways (see Limitations).

Preliminary data gathered during the BTGT project also suggest that experiential learning may indeed be a powerful and innovative learning approach in addressing these curricular gaps related to poverty and empathy. Participating students completed 6 weeks of classroom instruction, culminating in the BTGT trip to the Community Center. In that short time, these data suggest that students better understood that pejorative constructions of "other" or exaggeration of the differences across socioeconomic groups do not align with social work values. Taken together, this could suggest the development of a more empathic view of rural poverty. While this may have been present at baseline, our study suggests that the potential exists for students to further develop these skills and viewpoints through social connection.

When asked to discuss the feelings they had during the experience, students noted that they felt "inspired," "pity," "frustration," and "sadness." Through this, we could assess that the students appeared to be attempting to tap into their honest feelings, but such feelings stopped short of a truly empathic response. Rather, students' responses were obstructed by a negative or even pejorative view of the situation and came out as such. If empathy indicates an ability to experience the feeling of another as noted earlier in Gerdes et al.'s (2011) description, these students' well-intended responses did not necessarily hit the empathy mark. However, the students were able to translate their initial emotions into cognitive responses that we are calling "empathy-promise." It seems to us that this experiential learning experience provided the necessary foundation to begin the empathy-building process. To be sure, though we did not carefully measure the construct of empathy, our working hypothesis is that the reduction of stigma, the eradication of stereotypes, and the closing of social distance may provide a foundation for developing of empathy. In short, empathy is more likely to happen if we do these things first.

Though students were not asked about experiential learning as pedagogy per se, data suggest that this lived learning experience was powerful. Responses to posttest questions referenced the *experience* of the conversations in which students participated. Some students noted the significant effect of "living in poverty," which seems to draw a contrast between experiential learning and traditional, classroom learning. Students described the experience as "intense," and one student noted that "conversation flowed naturally." Another student observed that the experience was humanizing: "We talked to them for the way they are, as human beings." Other student comments suggest that the experience was very intense, even "overwhelming," but in the end the experience "made them feel connected."

As we analyzed data, we quickly reached a consensus that a theme reflected by much of the student data was *transformation*. The richness of the BTGT data suggests that learning that occurred at the Community Center surpasses the depth of learning that typically occurs in the classroom. Though our perceptions of this learning experience and our interpretations of data related to pedagogy must be viewed cautiously, they do suggest that experiential learning is promising, validating the growing literature on innovative educational practices.

Limitations

By the date of the event, students had already completed 6–8 weeks of coursework regarding perceptions of poverty in America. In the context of this course, students explored and worked to disentangle some thoughts and assumptions about poverty from the media and their own close associates. There is the potential that this prior instruction could have influenced the results in some way. For instance, a social desirability bias may have prompted some students to develop an internal sense that they "should" feel empathic, eliminate negative perceptions about the participants, or not share that they had them in the first place. It could be that these biases contributed to the formulation of the reflections on the experience.

As mentioned earlier, because students who choose to enroll in the Social Work program might have naturally had higher levels of empathy, any empathy evident at the end of this event might have previously existed. Without a baseline measure of empathy in the students entering our program, this effect remains unknown. While the measurement of empathy in students entering the Social Work program is slated for future research, it is outside of the scope of this particular study and discussion.

While the students had the option to participate in this activity as a part of this course, they were not mandated to do so. However, all students enrolled in the course did participate in this project. Several incentives were provided to the students who participated (e.g., credit for service learning requirement), and students who did not choose to participate would have had to create another experience. Therefore, it might be that students who chose to participate were the kinds of students who already were interested in the event and had empathy for the participants and the process.

The generalizability of the findings here is limited by our setting, our school, and our program as well. Other limitations include the sort of limitations that are associated with qualitative research in general. For example, while we had multiple notetakers which served to enhance the trustworthiness of our data, and these data were analyzed through a process of triangulation and interrater reliability, it is possible that we as researchers held pre-existing assumptions about our students' perceptions and ideas, the site, participants, and the process itself. Had our own biases been left unchecked, they also could have been reflected in our interpretation of the data.

Implications

These data suggest a number of ways that experiential learning may be useful in better preparing students with an awareness of poverty and the development of real-world empathy skills. Experiential learning may help social workers move beyond compliance and push students toward a real reckoning with their biases and a more authentic internalization of social work values. When experiential learning provides direct social contact between groups, the potential for a transformation of personal assumptions seems to exist. The utilization of experiential learning may be an effective way to stimulate comprehensive learning in line with our mandate of social justice. In addition to more opportunities for experiential learning inside of the curriculum, more research is necessary to better understand the effectiveness of such strategies on student learning. Additional work in the context of this project is slated for measuring both experiential learning and the development of social empathy in students who participate in this course.

The revised NASW Code of Ethics' (2017) assertion that we move away from the idea of cultural competency and move toward embracing cultural humility has relevance here. The updated Code acknowledges the usefulness and risks associated with technology. An increased reliance on technology in social services could potentially represent an additional barrier to accessing services for individuals in rural poverty without such access. Further, to the extent that such an increase in the use of technology represents a diminished focus on face to face contact with clients, students without such experiences may further lack necessary skills especially in the area of empathy. In an environment of increasing technological approaches to social work practice, being deliberate about providing opportunities for face to face experiential contact for social work students may be in order.

Next, it will be necessary to further investigate the extent to which students' empathy and understanding of poverty are enhanced by experiential learning. Our future research will include the implementation of a scaled measure of empathy. Measures of empathy level before and after this experience may be useful in gathering a better understanding about how a short-term experiential learning opportunity may directly affect levels of empathy in our students.

Finally, themes that occurred in our study have prompted other issues for future research and exploration as well as policy and program development. For example, how is empathy related to the development of various program features for individuals in rural poverty. Additionally, hearing first the voices of individuals experiencing poverty has provided insight into the function of such programs and how empowerment in such programs is necessary.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Jennifer M. Frank is an assistant professor, *Laura Brierton Granruth* is an assistant professor and DSW program director, and *Heather Girvin* is an associate professor at Millersville University of Pennsylvania. *Anna VanBuskirk* is a recent BASW graduate from Millersville University of Pennsylvania.

References

Adelman, M., Rosenburg, K., & Hobart, M. (2016). Simulations and social empathy: Domestic violence education in the new millennium. *Violence against Women*, 22(12), 1451–1462. doi:10.1177/1077801215625850

Anderson, L., St. Charles, J., Fullilove, M., Scrimshaw, S., Fielding, J., & Normand, J. (2003). Providing affordable family housing and reducing residential segregation by income. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 24(3), 47–67.

Atherton, C., & Gemmel, R. (1993). Measuring attitudes toward poverty: A new scale. *Social Work Research and Abstracts*, 29(4), 28–30. doi:10.1093/swra/29.4.28

Bernacki, M., & Jaeger, E. (2008). Exploring the impact of service-learning on moral development and moral orientation. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 14(2), 5–15.

Blair, K., Brown, M., Schoepflin, T., & Taylor, D. (2014). Validation of a tool to assess and track undergraduate attitudes toward those living in poverty. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 24(4), 448–461. doi:10.1177/1049731513497404

Bonnycastle, M., & Bonnycastle, C. (2015). Photographs generate knowledge: Reflections on experiential learning in/outside the social work classroom. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 35(3), 233–250. doi:10.1080/08841233.2015.1027031

Brail, S. (2016). Quantifying the value of service learning: A comparison of grade achievement service learning and non-service learning students. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 28(2), 148–157.

Council on Social Work Education. (2015). *Educational policy and accreditation standards for baccalaureate and masters in social work programs*. Alexandria, VA: Author.

Dale, E. (1969). *Audiovisual methods in teaching*. New York, NY: Dryden Press.

de Waal, F. (2009). *The age of empathy: Nature's lessons for a kinder society*. New York: Harmony Books.

Everhart, R. S. (2016). Teaching tools to improve the development of empathy in service-learning students. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach & Engagement*, 20(2), 129–154.

Frank, J. M., & Rice, K. (2017). Perceptions of poverty in America: Using social empathy to reframe students' attitudes. *Social Work Education*, 36(4), 391–402. doi:10.1080/02615479.2017.1287261

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Herder and Herder.

Gerdes, K., Segal, E., Jackson, K., & Mullins, J. (2011). Teaching empathy: A framework rooted in social cognitive neuroscience and social justice. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 47(1), 109–131. doi:10.5175/JSWE.2011.200900085

Gerdes, K.E. (2011). Empathy, sympathy, and pity: 21st century definitions and implications for practice an research. *Social Service Research*, 37, 230–241. doi:10.1080/01488376.2011.564027

Gönüllü, İ., Erden, Ş., & Gökmen, D. (2017). Evaluation of student empathy level during the first five years of medical education at Ankara University. *Journal of Higher Education & Science*, 7(3), 651–656. doi:10.5961/jhes.2017.241

Hunt, R. (2007). Service-learning: An eye-opening experience that provokes emotion and challenges stereotypes. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 46(6), 277–281.

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Krumer-Nevo, M., Weiss-Gal, I., & Monnickendam, M. (2009). Poverty-aware social work practice: A conceptual framework for social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *45*(2), 225–243. doi:10.5175/JSWE.2009.200600144

Markus, G., Howard, J., & King, D. (1993). Integrating community service and classroom instruction enhances learning: Results from an experiment. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *15*(4), 410–419. doi: 10.1.1.496.538&rep=rep1

Mofidi, M., Strauss, R., Pitner, L., & Sandler, E. (2003). Dental students' reflections on their community-based experiences: The use of critical incidents. *Journal of Dental Education*, *67*(5), 515–523. doi: 10.1.1.508.8022

NASW. (2017). *Code of ethics of the national association of social workers*. Retrieved from https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=ms_ArtLqzeI%3d&portalid=0

Putnam, R. (2001). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Reardon, S., & Bischoff, K. (2011). *Growth in the residential segregation of families by income, 1970-2009*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation and Brown University.

Schwartz, S., & Robinson, M. (1991). Attitudes toward poverty during undergraduate education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *27*(3), 290–296. doi:10.1080/10437797.1991.10672201

Seaman, J., Brown, M., & Quay, J. (2017). The evolution of experiential learning theory: Tracing lines of research in the JEE. *Journal of Experiential Education*, *40*(4), NP1–NP21. doi:10.1177/1053825916689268

Segal, E. (2007). Social empathy: A new paradigm to address poverty. *Journal of Poverty*, *11*(3), 65–81. doi:10.1300/J134v11n03.06

Segal, E. (2011). Social empathy: A model built on empathy, contextual understanding, and social responsibility that promotes social justice. *Journal of Social Service Research*, *37*(3), 266–277. doi:10.1080/01488376.2011.564040

Specht, H., & Courtney, M. (1994). *Unfaithful angels: How social work has abandoned its mission*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Timm, T., Birkenmaier, J., & Tebb, S. (2011). The experiential community assessment project: Integrating social work practice skills. *Journal of Community Practice*, *19*(2), 175–188. doi:10.1080/10705422.2011.569649

Weaver, R., & Yun, S. (2011). Analyzing the attitude of undergraduate students toward poverty and impoverished persons: Does social work education make a difference? *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *31*(1), 3–20. doi:10.1080/08841233.2011.539125