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Professional socialization of social work students: addressing poverty perceptions with targeted curricula

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ABSTRACT

The professional socialization of social work students involves the communication of social work values. A trend in teaching about poverty as a context rather than direct content position poverty attitudes of particular concern in this socialization process. Social work educators must be cognizant about the diverse influences affecting student attitudes and work with them to develop both the requisite skills and the necessary values for social work practice. Building upon past research, this study seeks to provide additional insight into the ability of a targeted poverty curriculum to affect attitudes about poverty among first-semester college students. Here, we utilize four years of data to explore differences in poverty attitudes among social work students who completed a targeted poverty curriculum.

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Poverty; perceptions; social work pedagogy; socialization

Pervasive negative attitudes toward the poor and dispossessed are not a new phenomenon (Iceland, 2013; Katz, 1996; Wagner, 2005). Such attitudes reflect long-held assumptions and ideas about the nature of poverty, what it means to have unmet needs, and the complicated functions of a public welfare system (Piven & Cloward, 1971). Harsh treatment of the poor during colonial times in the United States reflected the adoption of cultural standards brought to the new world from Elizabethan Poor Law (Trattner, 1999; Wagner, 2005). Katz' (1989) used the worthy and unworthy dichotomy to describe the undergirding of such attitudes as well as the system built to act as a social safety net. While describing poverty in these terms today may seem troubling, the sentiment remains. Attitudes about the poor and the programs that serve them remain buried under the heavy weight of politically charged public opinion (Rogers, 2017; Wiese et al., 2019).

Public policy is informed by cultural values. Therefore, systemic changes in public social welfare policy hinge upon shared understanding about the nature of poverty and the appropriate response to it. Pejorative attitudes toward poverty and the poor are not conducive to the construction of an extensive social safety net and social support. Rather, individualistic attitudes of 'rugged individualism', pervasively embedded in the social institutions of the United States, produced a residual social welfare system with

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minimalistic support (Dubois & Miley, 2019; Trattner, 1999). Changing public attitudes about poverty is essential in changing policy, and the attitudes of beginning social workers are paramount, as empathy toward others is essential for our wellbeing (Segal, 2018) and reflective of social work values (NASW, 2021). Therefore, the centrality of poverty as a central topic in social work curricula is necessary (Stoeffler & Joseph, 2020).

Students entering the social work profession begin their academic programs along with their own assumptions about the poor and about poverty in general. Some assumptions have likely been handed down to them from family, others may stem from personal life experience, and even others, the heavy influence of the media (Baron et al., 2015). This research found family socialization was the primary mechanism that shaped deeply held values among young people with regard to welfare receipt. While the way in which we acquire our dispositions at the outset of social work programs about such issues remains somewhat of a mystery, the attitudes that our students hold as graduates of our programs should not.

Students in social work programs might not have been provided with enough opportunity to discuss and delve into topics, such as poverty and human rights directly and as central content. Instead, many programs lack a focus on poverty content or approach the topic of poverty as a context rather than a central issue (Frank et al., 2019, 2020; Davis & Wainwright, 2005; Krumer-Nevo et al., 2009). Curricula that only approach poverty as a context and not a primary issue fail to address the complexities that contribute to economic injustice—a required CSWE competency (Council of Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015)– and forsake social work's professional origins and its 'moral core' (Bisman, 2002, p. 109; Trattner, 1999). For example, students study mental health or substance use disorder and include content about poverty as an unfortunate contributor. In fact, CSWE lists specialized practice areas for social work programs, such as clinical/direct practice, military, trauma, and social policy. Poverty is not listed among these specialization options (CSWE, 2021). Further, curriculum content that is funded by external sources (e.g. Health Resources & Services Administration [HRSA], Opioid Workforce Expansion Program [OWEP] and Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training [BHWET]) require a deep dive on specific content in the social work curricula and tend to address poverty only as sub-context, if at all.

According to Jennings et al. (2009), undergraduate students tend to arrive at college with beliefs and attitudes that mirror those of their parents. As social work educators, we must be cognizant of these diverse starting points and not only work toward them with the requisite skills, but the necessary values for social work practice. Building upon past research, this study seeks to provide additional insight into the ability of a targeted poverty curriculum in changing baseline attitudes about poverty among first-semester college students (Frank & Rice, 2017). Here, we utilize four years of data with a robust sample size of 103 first-year undergraduate social work students using a pretest posttest design to explore the ability of a targeted poverty curriculum to cultivate poverty attitudes that reflect social work values.

Literature review

Professional socialization

Professional socialization has been a constant theme since the Flexner report in 1915 at the National Conference of Charities and Corrections (Flexner, 1915; see also e.g.

Lubove, 1968; Thyer, 2002). Page (2005) noted that 'socialization' and 'professional socialization' are used interchangeably, but that professional socialization is a subset of socialization. Socialization is defined by Henslin (as cited by Shahr et al., 2019) as the 'process through which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, norms, and appropriate actions of their community' (p. 2). More specifically, professional socialization is defined by Shahr et al. (2019) 'as a process through which a person becomes a legitimate member of a professional society' (p. 1). Tikhonova (2013) examined the professional socialization of college students in Russia describing it as a 'complex and continuous' process (p. 38). They proposed the following definition:

> Professional socialization is the process of the individual's internalization of the basic system of values and normatives of behavior of the professional community, factors that constitute the basis of social behavior in the professional sphere. (p. 40)

We will utilize Tikhonova's definition in this paper as we are exploring the professional socialization of undergraduate social work majors to the social work profession. Most undergraduate degrees are not professions; social work, as an applied profession, requires professional socialization.

Professionalization of undergraduate students can be challenging. Transition theory is useful in understanding the processes by which students adapt to the norms and values associated with a professional culture. According to Meleis et al. (2000), transition theory relates to one's experiences. This process involves the relationship between the acquisition of new experiences and the accommodation of those experiences into the person. McClure and Black (2013) studied this process in nursing students and found that it helped them move from classroom learning to clinical skill. Tikhonova (2013) found that in early college years students' attitudes toward their professional identity is influenced by 'precollegiate' (p.42) factors to include family and friends, and then in beginning interactions with instructors and their fellow students.

Professional socialization of social work students is important to the social work profession. Barretti (2004) noted that the professional socialization of social workers started with the Charity Organization Society movement in the second half of the 19th century, around 1877 and patterned after the London Charity Organization (Trattner, 1999). Early socialization focused on personal growth, self-awareness, and skill development. Barretti identified that social work was late to study its professional socialization game, noting that numerous other professions (especially medicine) began to study their professional socialization during the 1950s. In contrast, social work had only a few studies that began to appear in the 1980s and tended to focus on value acquisition. Miller (2013) noted that professional socialization in social work became a higher priority with the 2008 EPAS through the implicit and explicit curricula, and field placement, but remains under-researched.

Barretti's own study found support that professional socialization is a developmental process for undergraduate social work students, that teaching content and role modeling by instructors is important, and that the process is not necessarily linear as students react and adapt to content and experiences. Finally, but importantly, Barretti found (similar to Tikhonova, 2013) that the professional socialization to social work, for many undergraduate social work students, began before they started their social work education.

There are measures to assess students' commitment to social work values in general. For example, Abbott (as cited in Miller, 2013) utilized the Professional Opinion Scale (POS) to examine the 'degree of commitment to social work values' (p. 374). Of these social work values, a firm commitment to social justice is paramount in teaching about poverty and empathy. There have been periodic attempts to assess and understand the attitudes of social work students about issues related to poverty (e.g. Bullock et al., 2003; Clark, 2007; Delavega et al., 2017; Lavender-Bratcher et al., 2017; Perry, 2003). In their literature review, Delavega et al. (2017) noted that most students attribute poverty causation to individual issues. Their study of social work students, which included the development of a 'Blame Index' (which built upon the work of Castillo & Becerra, 2012 *Perceptions of Poverty Scale)*, found a reduction in blaming individuals for their own poverty and an increase in recognition of the structural causes of poverty after completing a policy course. While this study examined how a policy course adjusted social work student attitudes toward structural issues, it set the stage for further research to look specifically at undergraduate students and a standalone course on poverty. While a similar inquiry was completed in the early 2000's (Gasker & Vafeas, 2003), changes in the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), the economy and the political climate offer an opportunity to reexamine the issue.

Social work education/curricula response

According to the NASW Code of Ethics states that 'the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet basic and complex needs of all people, with a particular focus on those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty' (NASW, 2021, p. 1). However, at the same time, social work students have been moving away from interest in direct poverty work in the field (Castillo & Becerra, 2012) in favor of more clinical or micro foci despite an increased need for social workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U. S. Department of Labor, 2020). Unfortunately, poverty is often discussed in curricula as a context and not a direct content area (Frank et al., 2019, 2020; Davis & Wainwright, 2005; Krumer-Nevo et al., 2009). Krumer-Nevo (2016) wrote in this later work that despite calls for 'restructuring the relationships between social workers and people in poverty based on social justice agenda' (p.1794), the knowledge base has yet to develop.

There appears to be a dearth of US-based curricula where poverty is addressed as a central topic or a standalone course. Curricula work that has been done is concentrated in Commonwealth countries, and usually published in the *British Journal of Social Work*. Searches in SOCINDEX for scholarly research conducted and published in U.S.-based journals is lacking. The authors conducted searches using terms such as 'poverty curriculum(a)' 'structural poverty education', and limited to U.S.-based schools or journals. Results returned are limited and 'old' in terms of scholarly research. Research as part of the literature review reveals the majority of programs, which prioritize teaching poverty as content are outside of the United States. Social work practice is impacted by neoliberal globalization found in many countries, but policy responses and social work practices are not identical in all countries. A standalone course on poverty might provide more of an opportunity to focus on the unique social and political contexts in any given country.

Proactively attending to social work curricula may be useful in addressing these omissions and trends. Direct content on poverty would provide students with a larger frame to more fully contemplate the nuanced causes of poverty as well as the political and social contexts that perpetuate its durability. Curricula content would explore reasons for poverty, to include human capital, the 'culture of poverty', poverty as exploitation, and poverty as result of structural poverty (DiNitto & Johnson, 2016). A deep dive into causes of poverty is paramount as American political culture today tends to 'blame the victim' for their poverty and any attempts to address structural causes are vehemently opposed by conservative legislators as 'socialism'. Unfortunately, many in the American electorate have been socialized to equate socialism with communism, and emotionally reject many attempts to correct structural causes of poverty. Additionally, implementing a standalone course on poverty as a central topic would provide the opportunity to explore pertinent topics such as the growth or wealth and income inequality, neoliberalism, welfare reform, and race.

According to Page (2005) while valuable life experiences inform students' values prior to beginning social work programs they do not need to remain there. Experiential learning is useful in helping to teach students about human behavior and challenge preexisting assumptions in order to prepare them for the challenges of social work practice. Direct content on poverty, coupled with experiential learning, can act as a method of socialization to fill this curricular gap and influence attitudes experienced at the outset.

Perceptions of poverty in America course

Perceptions of Poverty in America is a seminar course for first-semester undergraduate social work students. While the course is not required, first-year social work majors are automatically enrolled in the course as a first-year experience course. First-year experience courses include concentrated content on a particular topic with the focus of also acclimating students to the university and the major. The focus of the course is on understanding poverty through analyzing various cultural and social messages about poverty and focusing on the stories told by people with first-hand lived experiences. These stories are told through the narratives in the textbook, through videos found and shared by students, and through a field trip to an agency that attends to rural poverty. The course uses multiple pedagogical modalities including interactive activities, service learning, and experiential learning, all with the focus of developing empathy. Students utilize a journal throughout the course to record their personal reflections.[1]

One core assignment in the course is called the *Economic Vulnerability Exercise* where groups of students need to negotiate a monthly budget and household plan for a family of three by locating housing, childcare, and other necessary resources in real-time. In another activity, which we call, *Bridging the Gap Together*, students have the opportunity to share a meal and conversation with individuals from an area marked by rural poverty (Frank et al.,).[2] This dinner event is held with the support of an agency in the rural community that attends to poverty. The agency utilizes an empowerment approach where they develop long-term relationships with many community residents, who are invited to share dinner with the students each fall. Students help provide and prepare the food along with agency staff and engage in both unstructured conversation (e.g. ice breaker questions and games) and

structured conversation, where students and community participants develop anonymous questions to learn about others' experiences. In a large group, these questions are asked and answered together.

Students take a deep dive into the literature on a particular subpopulation of interest (e.g. homeless veterans, migrant workers, single parents). Students work in groups to research this subpopulation to learn about the needs experienced by and resources made available to certain groups experiencing poverty. Together, students craft a research paper or a creative project to share their findings. Students also participate in a *Poverty Simulation* to help reinforce the emotional responses associated with negotiating, making decisions, and experiencing structural barriers. Relevant guest speakers join the class to share their unique perspectives on helping those in poverty in the community. These speakers range from micro approaches, such as case management, to macro approaches, such as large food distribution programs and grassroots community organizing. Students engage in questions and reflections on the various approaches of the organizations in the community. Finally, over the course of the semester, students engage in 20 hours of service learning in a local agency that attends to poverty. The professor of the course coordinates several service learning options with local agencies that deal specifically with poverty from which students choose to complete their hours.

Overall, the focus of the course is to attend to the issue of poverty as a direct issue for social work involvement rather than a context in which 'real' problems are situated. Such a focus will allow instructors to provide a nuanced approach to examine poverty through the lens of political rhetoric, trends of neoliberalism, and growing inequality. Throughout the semester, the conversation is focused on lived-experiences of individuals and families and how they tell their own stories. The socialization process here is embedded in the pedagogical method through critical analysis of disparate messages, where students are instructed on challenging their thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs with each topic area, what Mills (1959) refers to as using their 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959).

Methodology

A pre/posttest pre-experimental research design was employed to assess whether first-year undergraduate social work students' perceptions of poverty and of those in poverty changed after participating in *Perceptions of Poverty in America*. The authors' University Institutional Review Board granted permission to conduct the study.

Sample

Between 2016 and 2019, 103 first-year undergraduate social work students enrolled in a first-year experience course with a focus on perspectives of poverty in America, were invited to participate in the study. Ninety-nine freshmen (96.1%) chose to participate. The majority of the sample were women ($n = 90$, 90.9%), white ($n = 82$, 83.7%), non-Hispanic/Latino ($n = 85$, 85.9%), and 18 years old ($n = 71$, 73.2%).

Data collection

During weeks 1 and 15 of the fall semesters and upon obtaining informed consent from the participants of the study, the students were invited to complete the survey via Survey Monkey. The survey comprised the 39 question *Undergraduate Perceptions of Poverty Tracking Survey (UPPTS)* (Blair et al., 2014) and 13 demographic questions such as age, gender, race, and ethnicity. Six subscales compose the 39 question UPPTS (Blair et al., 2014) including, attitudes about welfare programs (WA); poor are different from non-poor (PD); do more (DM); belief in equal opportunity (EQ); belief in basic rights to food, clothing, shelter, and so forth (FR); and attitude about resources and their importance in whether or not someone lives in poverty (LR). Additionally, an overall scale score is calculated. There are 12 questions on the WA subscale, which assesses students' perception of welfare programs and those who receive them. Such as: *'There is a lot of fraud among welfare recipients'*, and *'Welfare makes people lazy'*. Eight questions on the PD subscale assess the degree to which the students perceive those in poverty as being different from them. Questions on this subscale include: *'I believe poor people have a different set of values from other people'*, and *'Most poor people are dirty'*. Six questions on the DM subscale, which assesses students' direct or indirect willingness to do more to support programs and/or services, include questions such as: *'I feel I could personally make a difference in the lives of the poor'*, and *'Businesses should do more to help the poor'*. Six questions on the EQ subscale, which assesses the belief in whether everyone has a good chance to succeed, asked students the degree to which *'The poor have the same opportunities for success as everyone else'*, and *'Any person can get ahead in this country'*.

Three questions on the FR subscale, and four questions on the LR subscale asked students whether access to food, clothing, and shelter is a fundamental right or based on concepts of deserving/undeserving, and what level of empathy the student has for those living in poverty, respectively. Examples of questions on the FR subscale include: *'Everyone regardless of circumstances should have health care'*, and *'Everyone regardless of circumstances should have enough food to eat'*. Questions on the LR subscale include: *'Lack of social support is a major challenge for the poor'*, and *'Lack of education is a major challenge for the poor'*.

Using a 5-point Likert scale, each statements' response options on the subscales range from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). The higher the individual's final total score for each subscale, the more positively they view welfare programs (WA), the more positively they view those living in poverty (PD), the more likely they are to support individuals living in poverty (DM), the more likely individuals believe those in poverty are not responsible for their situation (EQ), the more likely individuals believe that access to basics for survival are fundamental rights and not conditional on deserving or undeserving (FR), and the more positive their empathy toward individuals living in poverty (LR). See Table 1.

Table 1. Cronbach's alpha.

UPPTS	Original α	Current α
Welfare Programs (WA)	.84	.86
Poor Different (PD)	.77	.84
Do More (DM)	.82	.82
Equal Opportunity (EQ)	.72	.81
Fundamental Rights (FR)	.83	.95
Resources (LR)	.71	.84
Total	**.56**	**.93**

Data analysis

Paired sample *t*-tests were performed to determine if first-year social work students' overall perceptions of those in poverty changed following the completion of a course on poverty in America that employed a social empathy framework. Specifically, the analyses assessed if any changes in attitudes about welfare programs, attitudes about those in poverty, attitudes about a willingness to help, belief in equal opportunity, belief in basic rights, and attitudes about available resources positively changed upon completion of this first-year experiential course.

Results

Prior to computing t-tests to assess differences on outcome variables following completion of the course, ANOVAs were computed to assess if any differences exist between the cohorts (e.g. 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019) at the start of the course. There was no statistically significant difference between the cohorts on all subscales and the overall scale score at the start of the course. Upon completion of the course, students scored statistically significantly higher on each subscale and overall scale score, indicating more positive attitudes about welfare programs and those who accept welfare supports, more likely to help those living in poverty, willingness to do more via direct action or via support for programs and services, and a higher rate of empathy toward those living in poverty as well as an understanding of the challenges faced by those in poverty. The findings indicating statistical significance on all subscales at the $p < .05$ level are displayed in Table 2. Additionally, there was

Table 2. Students' perceptions of poverty.

	M		*SD*			
UPPTS Subscales	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	*t*	*p*
Welfare Programs (WA)	40.133	45.072	7.134	5.977	−8.269	.0005*
Poor Different (PD)	31.438	34.303	5.231	4.851	−5.762	.0005*
Do More (DM)	24.820	26.180	3.466	3.325	−4.910	.0005*
Equal Opportunity (EQ)	20.102	22.773	4.596	4.626	−5.732	.0005*
Fundamental Rights (FR)	13.787	14.112	1.560	1.584	−2.041	.044*
Resources (LR)	16.517	18.079	2.599	2.133	−5.516	.0005*
Overall	**146.908**	**160.237**	**18.683**	**18.836**	**−9.929**	**.0005***

*Statistically significant at $p < .05$.

a statistically significant difference on posttest on equal opportunity and belief in basic rights to food, clothing, and shelter as fundamental rights.

Discussion

Our study demonstrated the ability of a targeted course on poverty to affect changes in attitudes about poverty among undergraduate social work students. While any change in attitudes before and after a course is desired and expected—this is learning—this is still an important finding worth discussing. Because many programs approach poverty as a context and not a direct content, they are missing an opportunity for professional socialization consistent with social work values and ethics (see also Attribution Theory; Spitzberg & Manusov, 2021). As undergraduate social work educators, we desire students to have not only the skills needed for successful practice but values that align with social work. Without targeted professional socialization into social work values and ethics, the result might be the production of 'technicians' whose skill set does not differentiate them from other disciplines. Implementing curricula with dedicated poverty content is a useful way to ensure that students re-orient any pejorative attitudes toward empathetic ones. Situating poverty as the focus of the first course for freshman undergraduate social work majors sets the tone for their undergraduate experience and communicates the values to which they might contrast additional learning.

Further, our research demonstrated that addressing poverty attitudes is possible in the context of a targeted curriculum on poverty. In this course, poverty was situated as the main topic with an emphasis on understanding it through personal narratives. Such an approach has the potential to nudge student attitudes in a more empathetic and equitable direction. While baseline attitudes for social work students were already somewhat favorable (as one might expect), there were statistically significant findings on all six subscales. That is, even though our students came in with positive attitudes toward the poor, there was room for improvement and that improvement was made using a targeted approach. Social work curricula have the potential to shape attitudes and encourage empathy around the issue of poverty. Thus, treating poverty as the focal topic and not an unfortunate context is necessary. Experiential learning coupled with a social empathy focus may be useful conduits for the creation of appropriate poverty-focused curricula. It is important to consider the impact that a direct focus on poverty through undergraduate curricula might have. While we do not know the long-lasting effects of this emphasis, providing such an emphasis to undergraduate social work students as the first course to which they are exposed might matter. At a minimum it allows them to take this knowledge and experience throughout their undergraduate education by providing a baseline of empathy and a framework for understanding all types of social work issues through a poverty lens.

Implications

To fashion a society that pays attention to the voices and felt needs of the economically marginalized, we need to align our public policy appropriately. Negative perceptions about the nature of poverty, however, may stand as a barrier to efficacious policies that address these rifts in equality and resource access. The perceptions that we hold about an

issue can directly affect the policies that we craft, support, and implement in our society. In essence, policy reflects the deeply held values of a society (Dubois & Miley, 2019). Therefore, carefully addressing perceptions of poverty is the first step in the creation of policies that structure an equitable society. While undergraduate students might have a way to go before they change society, implementing a course focused on poverty, hands-on learning, reflection, and the development of empathy provides a useful starting place for undergraduate social work educators that just might bridge the divide between any pejorative poverty attitudes and empathetic ones. Changing long-standing beliefs is a sincere challenge and without a targeted and mindful approach systemic change is ultimately unlikely. Addressing poverty as an unfortunate context to 'real' social work practice does a disservice to both our undergraduate students and our society at large. It is our ethical imperative to address these issues head on (NASW, 2021). It is the recommendation of the authors to develop and implement a standalone course on poverty for first-year social work majors that stresses the importance of understanding the lived-experience of poverty as well as the structures in society that perpetuate it. However, we understand the pressure on curriculum content and scheduling may inhibit the creation of a standalone course. Thus, we believe the exercises discussed above would be worthwhile to infuse across the curriculum in practice, field, and human behavior courses to force the topic of poverty out of the notion of context and into the mainstream. Doing so will improve the competency of students to engage in, assess, intervene, and evaluate individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (i.e. CSWE competencies 6–9; CSWE, 2015).

Addressing poverty as an unfortunate context to 'real' social work practice does a disservice to both our undergraduate students and our society at large. It is our ethical imperative to address these issues head on (NASW, 2017). It is the recommendation of the authors to develop and implement a standalone course on poverty for first-year social work majors that stresses the importance of understanding the lived-experience of poverty as well as the structures in society that perpetuate it. However, we understand the pressure on curriculum content and scheduling may inhibit the creation of a standalone course. Thus, we believe the exercises discussed above would be worthwhile to infuse across the curriculum in practice, field, and human behavior courses to force the topic of poverty out of the notion of context and into the mainstream. Doing so will improve the competency of students to engage in, assess, intervene, and evaluate individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (i.e. CSWE competencies 6–9; CSWE, 2015).

The survey tool examined several important domains that could be expanded to other instances of marginalization in society. For example, the belief that society provides equal opportunities for members, a quintessential component of the American dream, is embedded in the culture of the United States. The course pushed back against this cultural-given in a targeted way, using social media and contemporary culture as a backdrop. Given what we know about the challenges faced by the current generation in terms of social media, news, and critical thinking this change is very significant. Further, the need for the infusion of a human rights framework in social work curricula is at hand. The survey tool that we used looked at students' orientation toward human rights in a small subscale. Students did increase in their awareness that certain needs (e.g. food, clothing, shelter) should be met.

Conclusion

This study was limited to a single semester for each of the cohorts at the beginning of a four-year undergraduate social work program. Although we used a cross-sectional design, data collection occurred consistently over a four-year period. In addition to increasing the sample size, the ANOVAs demonstrated that there were no differences between cohorts at the outset. Further, even though students entered the program with scores on these domains at the high end of each scale, the course was still able to propel these scores further in a desirable direction with all subscales finding statistical significance. Therefore, even students who begin a social work program with favorable attitudes toward the poor are able to increase their knowledge and awareness in an important way when poverty is addressed directly and through empathy. Because there was no control group in this study, we do not know if a targeted poverty course in another discipline (e.g. sociology) might have had similar (or better) improvements in attitudes. Further, because we simply post-tested the students immediately following the course, we are unable to assert that their attitude changes were sustained. What remains unknown is the extent to which knowledge and empathy gains procured in the context of this course persists through the social work program and beyond. That is, how is this knowledge and values orientation retained upon entrance into other institutions? Data seem to indicate that the opposite may be true with new social workers adopting the attitudes and orientation of their agency instead. Future research is slated to explore how the institutions to which students go after graduation impact their empathy and human rights paradigms.

Notes

1. Full credit is given for submission of earnest reflection, not the content of such reflections.
2. Details about this assignment are discussed at length in this article (Frank et al., 2019).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A

The Undergraduate Perceptions of Poverty Tracking Survey

Instructions: ***Circle the answer that best matches the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.***

SA=strongly agree
A=Agree
N=Neutral
D=Disagree
SD=Strongly Disagree

(1) There is a lot of fraud among welfare recipients	SA	A	N	D	SD
(2) Welfare makes people lazy	SA	A	N	D	SD
(3) Poor people use food stamps wisely	SA	A	N	D	SD
(4) The government spends too much money on poverty programs	SA	A	N	D	SD
(5) Benefits for poor people consume a major part of the federal budget	SA	A	N	D	SD
(6) Welfare mothers have babies to get more money	SA	A	N	D	SD
(7) Welfare recipients should be able to spend their money as they choose.	SA	A	N	D	SD
(8) I would support a program that would result in higher taxes to support programs for poor people	SA	A	N	D	SD
(9) People on welfare should be made to work for their benefits	SA	A	N	D	SD
(10) A person receiving welfare should not have a nicer car than I do	SA	A	N	D	SD
(11) Some poor people live better than I do considering all their benefits	SA	A	N	D	SD
(12) An abled-bodied person using food stamps is ripping off the system	SA	A	N	D	SD
(13) Poor people act differently	SA	A	N	D	SD
(14) I believe poor people have a different set of values than do other people	SA	A	N	D	SD
(15) Poor people are different from the rest of society	SA	A	N	D	SD
(16) Poor people generally have lower intelligence than nonpoor people	SA	A	N	D	SD
(17) Most poor people are dirty	SA	A	N	D	SD
(18) Most people who are poor waste a lot of their time	SA	A	N	D	SD
(19) Being poor is a choice	SA	A	N	D	SD
(20) I believe poor people create their own difficulties	SA	A	N	D	SD
(21) Individuals should do more to help the poor	SA	A	N	D	SD
(22) Businesses should do more to help the poor	SA	A	N	D	SD
(23) Society has the responsibility to help poor people	SA	A	N	D	SD
(24) Charities should do more to help the poor	SA	A	N	D	SD
(25) I feel that I could personally make a difference in the lives of the poor	SA	A	N	D	SD
(26) It upsets me to know that people are poor	SA	A	N	D	SD
(27) The poor have the same opportunities for success as everyone else	SA	A	N	D	SD
(28) If poor people worked harder they could escape poverty	SA	A	N	D	SD
(29) Any person can get ahead in this country	SA	A	N	D	SD
(30) The poor face challenges that are the same as everyone else	SA	A	N	D	SD
(31) Unemployed poor people could find jobs if they tried harder	SA	A	N	D	SD
(32) Poor people are satisfied receiving welfare	SA	A	N	D	SD
(33) Everyone regardless of circumstances should have a place to live	SA	A	N	D	SD
(34) Everyone regardless of circumstances should have health care	SA	A	N	D	SD
(35) Everyone regardless of circumstances should have enough food to eat	SA	A	N	D	SD
(36) Lack of social support is a major challenge for the poor	SA	A	N	D	SD
(37) Lack of childcare is a major challenge for the poor	SA	A	N	D	SD
(38) Lack of education is a major challenge for the poor	SA	A	N	D	SD
(39) Lack of transportation is a major challenge for the poor	SA	A	N	D	SD

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