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**Title: Using Poverty Simulation to Change Attitudes about Poverty: Implications for Policy Practice**

**Overview and duration**

A poverty simulation is an experiential learning activity in which participants take on the role of different types of families that may experience poverty. The overall aim is to challenge participants’ beliefs about poverty and prompt them to take action. The simulation was developed by Missouri Association for Community Action. It runs for two hours with the first hour dedicated to the actual simulation while the second hour is devoted to debriefing the activity.

**Learning objectives**

In the context of a policy class, there are 4 main learning objectives attached to this activity. By the end of the poverty simulation participants should be able to;

1. Describe different causes of poverty.
2. Articulate the difficulties that individuals who are living in poverty face in making ends

meet.

1. Articulate more positive attitudes and beliefs towards poverty.
2. Relate how beliefs and attitudes about poverty affect the types of policies crafted to

address poverty.

In addition to these learning objectives, the poverty simulation is connected to the following social work competencies.

1. Analyze and compare different social constructions of privilege, oppression, and empowerment and their implications. [EP 2.1.4(b)].
2. Recognize, analyze, and address the interconnections of oppression and discrimination and use social change and leadership skills to promote human and civil rights. [EP 2.1.5(a)].
3. Apply empowerment-based policy practice skills across systems to influence and facilitate effective social services that promote human rights and advance social and economic justice. (EP 2.1.8).

**Target social work course or courses**

The poverty simulation has appeal for all courses across the Social Work curriculum, however it is specifically targeted to the policy courses in both the BSW and MSW levels as well as macro practice courses.

**Detailed description of the activity or exercise, including debriefing points**

The poverty simulation is a teaching tool that highlights the experiences of families who live in poverty. There are two overarching goals associated with the simulation: (1) to help participants understand the nature of poverty and (2) encourage participants to take action to mitigate poverty and its effects.

The actual simulation activity is for one hour with each 15 minutes representing one week of living in poverty. During this activity participants take on the role of a family member in poverty. The participants are expected to make important decisions on how best to meet their family’s needs while living on a limited budget. For optimal teaching effectiveness the simulation requires between 20 and 85 participants. There are up to 26 different roles in the simulation. These roles include being a single mother, married, disabled, child, and senior citizen, among many others. Depending on the role, participants may have to interface with different community agencies or organizations such as the department of social service, food pantry, school, bank, jail, utility companies, among others. Social work students generally fill the role of the family members in poverty, while the service providers are drawn from the community and/or faculty members.

**Debriefing.** Immediately following the one-hour simulation, there is a one hour debriefing session. This session is critical to solidify the learning from the activity. There are several points that are highlighted during the session. First, the participants are asked to reflect and comment on their experiences during the simulation. Specifically, they are asked to focus on the difficulties they encountered while living in poverty. Secondly, they are asked to comment on their attitudes about the causes and reality of poverty before and after the simulation. Students often note that they have a greater awareness of the realities of poverty and therefore have a more positive attitude to those in poverty.

Third, a central discourse of the debriefing session is the role of attitudes and beliefs about a problem in shaping the types of policies to address this problem. Students are encouraged to think about the different attitudes people hold about poverty and how those different attitudes could lead to different policy approaches to address poverty. For example, students might be asked to think about how poverty as an individual vs structural issue leads to different TANF or SNAP features. This discussion is particularly useful in helping students to understand the steps of a social policy analysis, especially in identifying (1) the social problem and; (2) value premise that underlies a policy.

Fourth, students are asked to talk about the ways that poverty is not a foreign concept but something that can affect us all. This discussion is driven by the seminal work of Rank (2004) which reveals that almost two-thirds of Americans will find themselves in poverty for at least one year in their life time. This data dispels the idea of poverty being an issue of ‘us vs. them.” During the simulation some students get to experience the nearness of poverty when they are suddenly thrown into it because of an illness or loss of job. Discussion of how poverty can touch us all helps students to think differently about how policies geared to addressing poverty could be different.

**Companion student assignments (e.g., cases, readings, videos, visit to the capitol)**

The main text used for the policy analysis class is;

Popple, P., & Leighninger, L. (2015). *The Policy-based profession: An introduction to social welfare policy analysis for social workers* (6th edition). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

In addition to this text students are encouraged to read;

Rank, M. (2004). One Nation Underprivileged: Why American Poverty Affects Us All. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004

**Source, if known (if not self-created)**

Missouri Community Action Poverty Simulation Project. (2010). Retrieved from http://

www.communityaction.org/files/PovertySimulation/2010062410511802.pdf

**Bibliographic resources (optional)**

**Student assessment method (e.g., quiz)**

Students are asked to write a reflection paper based on their experience in the poverty simulation. This reflection generally accounts for 15% of the overall class grade. As part of the reflection, students have to respond to the following questions;

* What role did you play during the poverty simulation?
* How has the activity and the knowledge gained affect your attitudes towards people in poverty?
* How would policy responses to poverty be different depending on the attitudes towards poverty?
* What empowerment practice or policy to do recommend to address poverty