

Bridging the Gap Together

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Abstract

Over the past fifty years, America has been experiencing an increase in residential segregation by income, leading to both physical and social distance between households of different socioeconomic backgrounds (Putnam, 2000). Because people from different economic backgrounds may have fewer opportunities to interact with one another, this disconnection can lead to misunderstanding. The result may include a lack of social empathy toward those perceived as “different” (Segal, 2007). To acknowledge and combat this situation, it is necessary to facilitate the development of social empathy in social work students. Through an experiential learning activity called Bridging the Gap Together, first semester social work students are introduced to local members of the community who are experiencing rural poverty. A meal is cooked and shared together, and is followed by an open dialogue, where both students and participants from the community formulate questions to ask each other about their lived experiences. Data regarding worries, judgments and expectations of the students and participants are gathered before and after the event. It was evident that experiential learning provides an opportunity for students to articulate and address any preconceived notions and that face-to-face social interaction is useful in reevaluating bias and creating a firm foundation for the development of social empathy.

Introduction

Social workers are held to a professional standard, as outlined in their Code of Ethics. This includes being competent, respectful, and working as partners with clients (NASW, 2018). Due to the increase in residential segregation and the resulting lack of experience across socioeconomic lines, incoming social work students may need targeted experiences to develop the skills necessary to fulfill the expectations set forth by the Code of Ethics, namely, social empathy. Segal (2007, 2011) holds that social empathy is necessary to

understand poverty. Frank and Rice (2016) further insist that social empathy is a valuable skill for social work students because it allows them to recognize all of the implications of unique, individual experiences and appreciate them. It also benefits the students because it helps combat compassion fatigue, distinguish and value helping, and advocate for social justice.

Bridging the Gap Together introduces two groups: first semester social work students enrolled in Dr. Frank’s Perceptions of Poverty in America class and members of the community experiencing

poverty who are participants at a nonprofit, faith based social service agency located in the predominantly rural area. The purpose of this experiential event is to examine and work towards closing the social distance between these groups. The crossing of social barriers within the event serves to broaden students' understanding of poverty and teach social empathy (Segal 2007, 2011).

Methodology

A number of data points are used before, during, and after the Bridging the Gap Together event. Prior to the event, students are asked to complete a written pre-test that collects concerns, attitudes or expectations they may have. Additionally, students are asked to formulate questions to ask the participants, and participants are asked to formulate questions for the students. Both sets of data are analyzed for themes and most reoccurring questions. Questions are selected by researchers to facilitate the discussion portion of the event.

The first experience is a tour of the rural area. Students listen to a narration given live by an employee at the agency. This individual provides "insider" information, such as unreasonable rent prices for substandard living conditions. Students are also asked to keep track of what local resources they can find, like the nearest public transportation stop or grocery store or post office. This assists in expanding the students' understanding of the scarcity of resources in a rural area and the challenges this may pose.

The main event is dinner. Students help to prepare the meal. This is followed by an "ice breaker," where the initial interaction between the students and participants occurs as they sit down together to share the meal in smaller groups and

engage in either structured or unstructured conversation. After dinner, all students, participants and a researcher form a large circle with chairs. The researcher asks the questions previously indicated by students and participants to guide an open dialogue between them. Questions are asked anonymously with no requirement for anyone to answer; this creates a comfortable atmosphere. Other researchers engage in observation, recording the entire conversation, as well as body language, expressions, and the overall nature of interactions. Having multiple researchers take notes improves the reliability of the data.

Immediately following the event, participants are asked to fill out a questionnaire, urging them to reflect on the experience. During the drive back to the university, the students also immediately reflect on the experience. One researcher, assigned to be a passenger in the van, asks the students the same questions that are asked of the participants. These responses are documented and then analyzed for themes. A week later in class, after the students have had time to personally reflect upon the event, they are given a post-test asking if their perceptions on poverty have been challenged and what about the event stood out or influenced their mindset the most.

Data and Discussion

When asked, "What are you worried about?" students reported that they did not want to seem like they were "a bratty college student," or "taking their [the participant's] experience for granted," elaborating, "I'm there for three hours for my education but this is their life." Another common answer was, "I may be worried that if I or a fellow classmate asks a question, the

people might get offended.” The next question asked for any assumptions. Students thought participants would be “white farmers,” “thankful,” “understanding and open,” and finally assumed that they have “tried to rise up but it is hard.” Participants, in their pretest, indicated that the event might generate “beneficial conversation,” hoped the students would be “nice,” and assumed they would have “preconceptions about poverty.” Both parties stated being concerned about what the other would think about them.

It appears that there was an increased understanding that poverty is not necessarily attributed to personal flaw, but that it can happen to anyone at anytime; poverty might be circumstantial and uncontrollable. During the event, students appeared emotionally moved by the stories shared by the participants. Several shared their own stories of economic hardship. Students, in both post-tests, stated that they felt inspired, connected, and thought that the experience was eye opening. Participants reflected that it was encouraging to them, especially in hearing the students’ stories. The participants indicated that they truly felt like the students cared and were kind, which gave them a positive view on the future of social work.

Students had a higher rate of indicating uncomfortable moments than participants. Most described feeling nervous or awkward at first, not knowing what to say, but gradually felt welcomed and at ease. Participants responded, for the most part, feeling comfortable.

Limitations

The overall generalizability of these results to other populations or areas is limited. Further, without formal assessment,

the baseline level of social empathy among the students is unknown and is slated for further research. A higher level of social empathy may have existed due to the fact that the students chose to enter the field of social work in the first place, or because they were exposed to six weeks of course material relating to poverty prior to the event. Additional research is necessary to understand the relationship of social empathy to social distance. Other limitations include those typical to qualitative research, such as misreporting information or interpreting with biases, although having multiple researchers lessens these potential effects.

Conclusion

While both students and participants held preconceived notions about poverty and those experiencing it, Bridging the Gap Together proved to be a useful pedagogical tool of experiential learning to help explore and challenge those notions, as well as develop social empathy. Social empathy has been noted as an intrinsic trait; however, this project demonstrates that it can be taught (Segal, 2007). Experiential learning events, such as Bridging the Gap Together, seem to have beneficial outcomes. It is important to study social empathy and implement pedagogical programs to enhance that skill in working with those in need.

References

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Recommended Citation

VanBuskirk, A. (2018). Bridging the Gap Together. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com>.