Reflections on an Experiential Poverty Simulation filtered through the Mind's Eye of Three Faculty Members

Stephen Monroe Tomczak, Heather C. Pizzanello, and Dana A. Schneider

Abstract: Three social work faculty members, one macro-practice and two clinical, reflect on the process of developing and implementing a poverty simulation program on the campus of their urban university. The process by which the program was developed and implemented is examined, the experience of the simulation discussed, and some lessons learned offered.

Introduction

On May 9, 2012 we held our first poverty simulation at our urban public university. The poverty simulation is an experiential learning program that was developed first by the Reform Organization of Welfare (ROWEL), a welfare rights group in Missouri in the late 1970s, and then expanded in the early 2000s, by the Missouri Association for Community Action (MACA). The simulation itself is an hour-long exercise that allows participants to take on the roles of individuals and families living in poverty, and in so doing potentially develop a greater understanding of, and empathy for, the struggles that poor people endure. This hour of simulated poverty - divided into four 15 minute "weeks" to make up the "month" - is preceded by an orientation period and followed by a debriefing.

This paper will examine the process by which the poverty simulation program was developed at our university. Initially, the simulation was incorporated into our undergraduate program as part of their "common day" program, beginning in May of 2012. Eventually, it was also institutionalized as part of the graduate program, beginning in the fall of 2013. As of this writing, we have organized six simulations and are preparing for our seventh. The proceeding portions of this paper will present our reflections as key individuals who have participated in this event and offer an analysis that may be useful to others considering the implementation of similar educational programs. Our narratives will provide insight into our experiences of bringing the simulation to a public university and provide recommendations for implementation.

Faculty Member #1's Reflection - Bringing the simulation to campus

I could feel the tension as I waited in line to get to the Quick Cash station. I hadn't been in this position in 20 years, even though I had run many poverty simulations. Would I make it up to the front of the line in time to be served before the whistle blew? As it turned out, I was the last person to be served, and obtained my transportation passes, which enabled me to meet my needs for the simulated month in poverty. But if I had not made it, it might have been a different story.

This kind of experience, at a recent United Way poverty simulation, was what stuck with me over the years since I had first participated in what was then called the "welfare simulation" as a graduate student. This recent simulation conducted in our local community allowed me to have the experience of playing a member of a poor family for the first time since graduate school, an experience that was one of the most vivid experiences of my masters' education. And it was what motivated me to bring this program to the university where I was now employed as a full time faculty member. That re-introduction to the stress of participating in an actual simulation has sensitized me to the student experience in ways I think I had become removed from while running them at our university. In doing the facilitation role - orienting students to the simulation prior to the event and answering questions during the experience - I had become, I think, somewhat detached from what it was like to actually participate. Having the opportunity to participate as a member of a poor family in the United Way simulation changed that. While I was generally successful in surviving my most recent simulated month in poverty, I did become re-acquainted with the intense, and very real, stress that these simulations produce for participants. As the recollections of my colleagues show, this stress can manifest itself in unanticipated ways, both for those who play the roles of poor families, and those who play the roles of community service personnel.

The "welfare simulation" that I experienced first in the 1990s as a graduate student had since been expanded into the "poverty simulation" and was now packaged into a far more elaborate "kit" produced by the Missouri Association for Community Action (MACA). And these kits were costly. But, after I was

hired as a full-time faculty member in 2010, I was determined to bring this program to our campus and institutionalize it as part of our curriculum. Before I could even explore the purchase of one of these kits, I had to gain approval from our faculty and the support of the university. I researched and wrote a detailed justification that laid out the impact this program had at other universities. I saw it not only as an important enhancement to our curriculum but also as a way to pass along the kind of transformative learning experience I had benefitted from, because I felt compelled to bring this transformative learning experience to our students as it had been brought to me so many years ago. I was very relieved and pleased at the unanimous endorsement the simulation received from the faculty.

Having secured approval from our faculty, I brought this to the Dean of our school, who quickly endorsed the idea. Then, the struggle to put this program into place really began. For although I had gained approval of all the relevant academic and administrative authorities within our School, I had not reckoned with the obstacles I would face in dealing with the state government bureaucracy.

It seemed straightforward, at first. I had worked through our university system to obtain the funding necessary to purchase the poverty simulation kit. The School administration was very supportive of the endeavor and funds had been committed to the project. A date to run the simulation was secured for early May. All that was needed was to sign the contract and licensing agreement that the Missouri Association for Community Action (MACA) required for us to purchase and use the kit. Difficulties quickly emerged because the university demanded that, due to state government requirements, that MACA include a lengthy non-discrimination provision in its purchase agreement - a provision that representatives of MACA felt was not applicable to this agreement, and refused to include. Informed of this, the state official responsible for purchasing at our university informed me, "if they want us to sign their agreement, they will need to accept the State's terms and conditions." It felt as if a brick wall had been erected in our path, one which might prove insurmountable.

By early March, we were in a quandary, and the pressure was on. The organization that would provide the materials that we needed to run a poverty simulation would not budge, and neither would the state. Meanwhile, we had scheduled a date in early May for our first poverty simulation for 70 students and the planning group was meeting! To say that I felt pressured would be an understatement. I also was rather frustrated with the bureaucratic procedures of our State.

But, I had to persevere - after all, as I saw it, a key piece of the work that I wanted to do was on the line. I kept the issue in front of our Dean, and while he indicated that there might be alternative possibilities for funding - it was not clear at this time that the financing would be available. I did not think that it would be a good course of action to abandon the simulation and I was determined not to. Finally, with about a month to go, and no clear resolution of this situation in sight, I decided to put up my own money to purchase the kit. A year earlier, my elderly grandmother had passed away and left me a portion of her estate, most of which she had inherited from her grandfathers - 19th century local level "robber barons." As a political radical opposed to extreme economic inequality and injustice, I found it deliciously ironic to be using this money, generated during one of the most exploitative periods in U.S. history, to advance awareness of economic injustice, inequality and exploitation in the 21st century!

The struggle to get the simulation in place seemed to be reaching its end, then - but in some ways, it was just beginning. While the main problem, getting the kit, had been solved, there was still an event to plan - and we had never done this before. And, as the coordinator of this effort, I was particularly worried. Entering uncharted territory is always extremely nerve-wracking for me, and I had no sense of the level of commitment others might bring to this. Poverty simulations require a tremendous amount of effort to put together - many volunteers have to be recruited to play the various "community resource" roles, adequate facilities have to be obtained, and many other details tended to - and I was frankly not certain that we had the capacity to do this. Truthfully, I was frankly not certain I had the capacity to do this.

Thankfully, several key faculty, along with a group of interested students, assisted with putting on the simulation. I cannot convey in words the gratitude I feel for these individuals and all who have followed them. The final month of implementation also presented challenges, some of which proved to be, if not as disconcerting as the effort to secure the kit, perhaps equally frustrating. It is not a stretch to say that running these events is stressful on those responsible, and it certainly was for me - particularly

this first time. But we survived -and learned from the experience. And we continue to learn from each administration of the simulation.

Faculty Member #2's Reflections - The Day of the Poverty Simulation: My Descent into the World of Full Immersion

Feeling hurried and exhausted as the weight of the end of the semester pressed down upon me I made my way into the room where our first poverty simulation was held. Aware of the fact that I was running late I attempted to slip inconspicuously into the room, only to feel besieged by the swarm of activity surrounding me. I furtively scanned the room for my colleague who was running the event so that he could point me in the direction of what would be my designated post for the afternoon. He directed me to a nearby table which held an abundance of laminated materials and plastic containers. The plastic containers gleaned from afar, encasing what appeared to be the *props* needed to fulfill my designated role of the "Quick Cash" administrator. I quickly untangled and opened the various containers that lay spread out before me, searching for the laminated card that would provide me with the general context and backdrop of the "Quick Cash" office and my role as its administrator. After locating the card I scanned its contents quickly in an effort to glean from it what my *performance* would entail. I inferred from reading it that I would both embody and facilitate the simulation of some (bureaucratic and relational) of the barriers that are encountered by individuals living in poverty. I read that I was the despondent and at times disgruntled "Quick Cash" worker who would need to intermittently announce the unplanned closing of the office as a result of it being robbed and the impending issues of safety that ensued. I assumed that these announcements would work to further simulate our undergraduate students' immersion into the often unpredictable, oppressive and even ominously contextualized world of poverty. This realization, however, stood in striking juxtaposition to my own awareness of the proverbial line which clearly delineated fantasy (the simulation) from reality (my position as a volunteer actress and faculty member), an awareness that became further heightened as I felt the bright, crisp, paper bills that I was tasked with arranging slip through my fingers while images of board games and childhood play fleeted through my mind.

It was the blast of the whistle piercing through the air that pulled me out of this momentary reverie, it marked the commencement of the simulation and prompted me to search in haste for the plastic name tag that denoted my identity as the "quick cash worker." Finding my name tag, I quickly affixed it to my shirt as I saw the line of students gathering before me-signifying my full descent in to the world of the simulation.

As part of my full embarkment in to the role of the disgruntled and disengaged "quick cash" worker I moved (per my outlined protocol) to enact the fact that the center had been robbed and needed to be temporarily shut down. Inherent in this announcement was the fact that individuals and families (played by our students) would not be able to cash their checks, pay their rent or receive the tokens that were needed to provide their transportation to work and various other imperative destinations. My announcement was accompanied by audible grumbles of frustration and aggravation. The temporary closing not only stalled all activity but meant that the wait to obtain services would be even longer and exceedingly daunting.

Once I announced the reopening of the center and resumed my work as the "quick cash" administrator what seemed like an infinite mass of students grew in front of me. It was during this time that a graduate student (assisting with the simulation) informed me that an undergraduate student became quite upset when she discovered that her "family's car" was repossessed as part of the simulation. Feeling perplexed by this fact I wondered if this student was only acting/pretending to be upset as part of the simulation because, "we all knew this wasn't real?", "Right?" "Weren't we all aware of the artificiality of playing this simulation out as students, instructors and professionals from the community?" I voiced my questions out loud in a state of disbelief and the student assisting me said she was unsure of what was happening for this undergraduate student.

I pushed my questions and feelings of bewilderment aside and I continued in my role as the unpleasant and disenchanted worker who counted money and handed out tokens in a painstakingly slow manner. The next participant/student approached me in line. I continued to dismissively count and push the money out towards her and instantly felt jolted out of my mechanistic role play. The student standing before me started to yell and scream in what felt like a fit of pain, rage and most of all anguish. I felt jarred by her reactions, catching myself in a momentary haze of disbelief. I tried to reorient myself to the reality that lay before me. However, I felt as though I was trying to make my way through an impermeable bank of fog, a fog which

felt insurmountable and surreal as it rendered me into a state of disorientation and utter devastation.

I attempted to pull myself back to the present, only to see a flash of red (clothing) as she (the student) fleeted across the room and bolted out of the door way, in what felt like a split second in time. A colleague of mine who had witnessed everything informed me that what had just transpired was out of character for this student and went to search after her. As my colleague left in search of her (the student/participant) the graduate student who had been previously helping me with the simulation came over to inform me that she believed that was the same student who had become upset during an earlier portion of the simulation. "Oh no I thought!" feeling stunned "What just happened???!!!"

Faculty Member #3

I was pulled out of my time keeping, as I saw one of my former students from class, run across the ballroom in tears. Although she seemed to be talking, I could not hear her words clearly. I quickly followed the student out of the ballroom into the hallway. Through her angry tears she explained to me that she didn't need to experience a simulation about poverty; she was living it. She also shared that she was engaged in finals and this had merely added to her stress, rather than being a learning experience. This student's heartfelt response to the simulation made me realize that we had neglected several very important elements in the planning and implementation of this common day. We did not account for the fact that we were asking students to participate during one of the most stressful periods of the semester when they would be doing exams and papers.

We did not anticipate that mandating this event at such a time of the semester could have unattended consequences. Furthermore, we did not account for students who already were intimately familiar with living in poverty and that the simulation would only act to reinforce the very real and daily stress of some of our students' lived experience. I began to contemplate how the simulation might be potentially retraumatizing for some students, if we were careless in our introduction, or remained silent about the potential backgrounds of our students. From this vantage point, it also became clear that the poverty simulation was perhaps designed for students who perhaps came from more privileged backgrounds and who had not deeply considered the daily challenges of individuals living in poverty.

Faculty Member #2

My colleague returned after finding the student and told me that the student had felt triggered by her interaction with me and other portions of the simulation. "How could what felt like such a distinct form of artificiality and *play* to me have felt *so real* to this student?" I wondered, "How did the line which to me so glaringly delineated fantasy from reality become so blurred for her?" It was then that I learned that the student's life in many ways had at some point mirrored elements of the simulation, swallowing her into a full state of immersion. I also discovered that the stress of finals and the overall exhaustion that accompanied the closing of the semester caused the immersion in the simulation to feel all ***too real*** and engulfing. In addition, I mentally and verbally questioned out loud how the simulation was introduced. I also questioned how clearly the point was made that we were playing out roles to facilitate for the participants (students) the experiences of hardship and oppression that often contextualize poverty. I left the simulation feeling emotionally exhausted, disheartened and still perplexed as I continued to grapple with these questions which felt essential, yet daunting. I did not know the student who became upset but I also left the simulation feeling distressed about the disequilibrium of power that existed between us as instructor and student, further magnifying my concerns regarding the dynamics that had transpired between us.

This student's experience and reactions to the simulation were indeed heightened by some of the struggles that she had encountered in her life. However, upon entering the only undergraduate class that I was scheduled to teach the proceeding fall semester, I learned that she was not the only student who grappled with ***the felt*** obscurity of the proverbial line that delineated what I clearly experienced as the ***fantasy*** and ***play*** of the simulation from ***reality***. The fact that this line of delineation was quite opaque for other students as well became clear when a more outspoken undergraduate student stated (something to the effect of) that she did not know me outside of the poverty simulation but that in the simulation I was not the kindest person. I intuited that what lay behind this statement was concern and anxiety that there would be no differentiation between who I was in the simulation and who I would be as her/their course instructor. Although, I felt momentarily jolted by this statement, it also gave me the opportunity to provide more context around the simulation. I explained to the class that I was playing a role, like an actor/actress and that who I was in my role as the "Quick Cash" worker was quite different from the reality of who I felt I was as a

person and as an instructor. I also explained that how I interacted with participants during the simulation was taken from a composite of experiences that I had witnessed my impoverished clients encountering when they interacted with various systems to obtain necessary resources and services. My students appeared surprised by the fact that my role play had been informed by actual client experiences. They also appeared to experience visible feelings of relief from the clarification that my acting performance in the simulation did not represent the reality of who I actually was as a person and as an instructor.

After this class I sought out my colleague who had run the simulation and shared what had come up in my undergraduate course and the discussion that ensued. I expressed my belief that the concerns raised in this class indicated that the one student who had become very upset by the simulation did not appear to represent an entirely anomalous experience. I also informed him that based upon my experience and the feedback that I had just received from my students that I thought we really needed to make clear in the next simulation what is real, what is not real and the full purpose of the simulation. We also discussed the provision of an alternative assignment for students who might be triggered by the fact that the simulation mirrored all too closely the reality of their own lives.

Faculty Member #3

Unfortunately, the student's exit from the simulation seemed to contribute to some preexisting ambivalence about the value of the simulation. Often events, like the simulation, are coordinated by one or two faculty, with little resources or support. To institute another event, meant more volunteer time and more coordination of a large group of students, when many of the faculty were already committing to other events. Was it relevant for our undergraduate student population? In supporting a new and alternative learning opportunity, had we failed to do what we teach all our social work students "start where the client is"…."start where the student is"?

After several iterations of the simulation, it became clear that the simulation provided a much-needed bridge between practice and policy. If we could invite students into a situation that potentially deepened their empathy and widened their perspectives, we could create an internal motivation for how to make a difference in the lives of others.

Poverty would shift from being a word, to becoming a pictured experience. The affective connection of the stress of the simulation, just might carry over into interactions with clients and community partners.

In my own process, I initially underestimated the impact of the poverty simulation on my own transformation and learning. After all, I became involved primarily to support an eager colleague who clearly had a passion for the simulation. In a setting where everyone is stretched and resources are limited, sometimes the best we can do is simply be present for others. My involvement at first was for the undergraduate program and then, particularly after the student incident, became to support my colleague.

In retrospect, I think of the ways my own work has been shaped by my participation in the simulation. During the activity, I have the very safe role of being the keeper of the time and blowing the whistle. What I've noticed is that I can stay out of the fray, watch closely as students move through different systems, and appreciate the various roles my colleagues have taken on. I can serve as a sounding board to the facilitator of the event, and help move things along, yet I am not required to interact with others, and am cloaked by the confines of the timekeeper's role.

However, in retrospect, I realize the impact has gone far deeper for me. Around the time we started implementing the poverty simulation, I began to brainstorm a major research project with a colleague from a local community social service agency. We wanted to create a "Story Corps" experience for individuals in New Haven who are homeless and whose voices are not typically heard. While consciously I did not develop this project with the poverty simulation in mind, I believe that it was part of a larger process of moving beyond concepts and entering into the lives of others, through interviews and narratives. When we connect people to the concepts we teach and study, we are all much more touched and moved to make a difference.

The poverty simulation has acted as a bridge. It has opened up discussions about experiential activities that do not force a dichotomy between clinical practice and policy. It has enabled community activists and social workers to work side by side with students and faculty. It has also served as a bridge between the graduate and undergraduate programs, as we have developed committees made up of students from each program. We have also made an important bridge between explicit learning that takes place within the classroom, and the implicit learning that evolves through

activities and interactions beyond the classroom.

When we first started, we thought we were inviting students into a deeper understanding of poverty, as faculty supporting this endeavor; we had no idea of the number of connections we were inviting in ourselves. And so we have shaped the poverty simulation to account for the experiences of those in the room, we have developed discussion questions that enable participants to deconstruct their experiences, and we have continued to attempt to bridge the divide between practice and policy, client and worker, student and faculty.

Concluding Reflective Thoughts on the Poverty Simulation and its Lasting Impact on Faculty and Students

Faculty Member #3

The poverty simulation served as not only an experiential activity for our students, but also an important learning experience for the three faculty most closely involved. We learned the importance of *knowing your audience*, and clearly had underestimated the impact that the simulation might have on our students, some of whom who knew intimately the challenges of living in poverty. Additional time to process the experience, both immediately following the simulation and in class discussions, invited all students to share their experience, and to help reduce students' experiences of being overstimulated by the event. While all students were required to attend the simulation and roles were assigned, we learned that building in flexibility and choice enabled students to have a degree of flexibility in their level of involvement in the simulation. The simulation is broad enough in scope to allow for students to take on a role of a community member, or help administer the simulation. The scripted orientation to the simulation does not fully indicate the possibility of the type of impact the simulation may have. Preparing students for the feelings that may emerge in participating in the simulation, not unlike duty to warn, may normalize the myriad of reactions that might surface. In light of the second author's experience, we have also now underscored in the orientation that individuals performing in the simulation are tasked with playing out various roles to simulate the experience of poverty and that their performance in these roles are not indicative of who they were are in everyday life as faculty members, field liaisons and other people working in our community.

While time is granted to do some initial processing of the simulation experience, we recommend that poverty simulation facilitators encourage instructors in identified courses to allow for a follow up discussion on student experiences and how this simulation relates to the conditions in which they are living or working. This is an opportunity to stress that the artificial line drawn between ourselves and our clients is often nonexistent.

Our planning groups have run quite successfully with student involvement. Inviting student involvement to continue beyond the planning groups, and encouraging students to take on roles assisting the simulation, or as potential community workers, expands the impact on students and enhances the collaborative relationships between students and faculty. This allows students to have an extended exposure to the simulation over time and helps move them into important mentoring roles for other students. This has also assisted in our goal to increase contact between our graduate and undergraduate students. Often poverty can feel quite overwhelming and unsurmountable. Providing students with concrete opportunities to make a difference can encourage activism among the student body.

Faculty Member #1

Student involvement has been a central element of the simulation since its inception, and this has only deepened over time. While the first group of students who participated in the initial simulation were graduate students, the most enduring and indeed rewarding collaboration from my perspective has been with an undergraduate student who began even before she was accepted into the social work program. This student had expressed an interest in learning more about the macro aspect of social work, and the simulation seemed like a good place for her to gain some experience. After participating in several of them she was so inspired by her involvement in the simulation that she chose to do her undergraduate honors thesis on its impact on our graduate students' behavior in their practica. She has also, and will continue to be, the primary student assistant working on the simulation. And, having recently been accepted into our master's program, she has indicated that she hopes to make the issues and level of awareness that the simulation works to sensitize us to her life's work as she pursues further study in the field of social work. This student's response perhaps represents the most profoundly gratifying aspect of this work to me.

From my perspective, I see the involvement of

students in planning and implementing activities like the simulation an important part of our "implicit curriculum," and it is one which is most rewarding for me as an educator. Several of these students have returned as alumni to continue to assist with the simulation, so this is yet another way in which it enhances the program, and benefits students even after they have graduated. Overall, while there are still difficulties in planning and implementing this program, and it requires a phenomenal amount of work on my part, I find it to be one of the most satisfying aspects of my work. The feeling of watching an actual simulation develop is truly exhilarating for me.

While I was less immediately aware of, and involved in the situation of the student who experienced the intense reaction to the simulation noted by my colleagues, it opened up my eyes to something I had clearly overlooked - the ability of the simulation to cause very real and traumatic responses in some students. Personally, I found this quite disturbing, as my purpose in bringing the simulation was of course to enlighten and sensitize, not to cause harm of any sort to anyone. But it exposed, in some sense, a blind spot deriving from my own relatively privileged background, and also relative ignorance of the composition of our student population. Although a graduate of our university, I had attended many years ago, and the population was different, and perhaps somewhat more advantaged. It did not occur to me that there would be individuals who perhaps lived in, or had experienced, poverty, or if it did, that some of them might experience particular stress as a result.

While I experienced guilt at not having recognized in advance what seemed obvious to me in retrospect, I harnessed this guilt to make change in our administration of future simulations - and was well-advised by my more perceptive colleagues in this regard. Afterward, as we discussed this, we made the decision to respond in two main ways. One was to schedule the simulation earlier in the semester, so as to not compound finals-related stress,

and the second was to offer students an opt out "conscience clause." While it has been my experience that most students choose not to opt out, offering the option is critically important in running these events, something I had to learn, as I often do, the "hard way." The simulation has been, and does indeed continue to be, a learning experience for me as well.

Faculty Member #2

The experience that awaited me as I entered my first undergraduate class of the fall semester and the discussion it incited with my colleagues about adaptations we would need to make moving forward brought me back to the full palpability of that day. This palpability prompted my reflections on how my initial experience and understanding of the simulation drastically shifted within only a moment in time.

The jarring experiences that jolted such an instantaneous shift in how I viewed the simulation, now felt less charged, as everything coalesced into and ultimately abated within my mind's eye, yet, there was still one fact that remained quite clear. As I looked back on the day itself and the events that followed there was one reality that remained fully emblazoned within my mind, perhaps even more so now with the vantage point of distance. This reality was the remarkable irony that resided in the fact that what our students had taught us about that day was far more profound and further reaching in its indelibility than what we had taught them.

About the Authors: Stephen Monroe Tomczak, Ph.D., LMSW is Assistant Professor at Southern Connecticut State University, Department of Social Work (203-391-6560, tomczaks1@southernct.edu); Heather C. Pizzanello, Ph.D., LCSW is Assistant Professor, Southern Connecticut State University, Department of Social Work (203-392-6575, pizzanelloh1@southernct.edu); Dana A. Schneider, Ph.D., LCSW is Associate Professor, Southern Connecticut State University, Department of Social Work (203-392-6995, schneiderd1@southernct.edu).