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Translation That Transforms: Leadership and The Working Poor

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Translation that Transforms: Leadership and the Working Poor

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Abstract

Translational science, at its core, is about knowledge making a positive difference in the well-being of others (Evans, 2012). This article explores how student attitudes, beliefs, and actions toward impoverished and working poor Americans were influenced by a data- and experience-driven understanding of this population. The context is an undergraduate course called ADE 4930: Leadership and the Working Poor, a three-credit, service-learning course requiring students to become Internal Revenue Service–certified tax preparers and provide 40 hours of free tax preparation assistance to the working poor. Students translated empirical evidence and data offered by ADE4930 through three primary applications: (a) behavioral guidance related to tax preparation and the Earned Income Tax Credit, (b) attitudinal shifts about poverty related to structural disadvantages and the psychological impact of scarcity, and (c) social policy sophistication related to political compromise and the complexity of personal experience.

Key Words: economic distress, low income, pedagogical and curriculum issues, poverty and welfare, racial and ethnic (minority) issues, social change, translational science

> *Rarely before have I had an experience where I jumped into learning about a topic as deeply and as intently as we did in this class. It was difficult because we live in a society that ignores many of the facts that we studied and the struggles that these cause everyday Americans. Doing so, however, allowed me an opportunity to realize a passion for understanding these facts, particularly in how they intersect with other social problems—the school-to-prison pipeline, for one example.*
>
> —ADE 4930 student

This article employs the concept of translational science in its most expansive sense—as a consistent practice in social science education with a helping focus. Family and consumer sciences, as well as other social services, were born from the desire and need to translate knowledge to human well-being (American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences, 2001; Reisch & Andrews, 2002). Students in these fields are saturated with information targeted for translation into beliefs, attitudes, and actions helpful to the well-being of those they will serve. Further, in our experience, professors in these fields often want to both educate and influence students, especially regarding their grasp of behavioral context and its often-unrealized implications.

The field of translational science is straining at the boundaries of its current, limited conception. Woolf (2008) described "T1" translational research as mining results from basic scientific research to create practical and effective methods (primarily in the context of medicine) and "T2" translational research as a focus on how T1 methods become everyday clinical practice among practitioners. He further suggested that a narrow focus on health care is inadequate, given that science informs choices around a host of human concerns, from environmental policy to parenting. In this vein, Roediger (2013) wrote convincingly of a need for translational educational science in which all that is known about cognition and learning is commonly reflected in teacher's choices. This article follows that progression, examining the translation of nonmedical social welfare information to student practitioner attitudes and actions in the services they provide for the working poor.

Social work researchers have examined student attitudes toward the poor and how those attitudes translate into strategies used in the field (Clark, 2007; Hill, Toft, Garrett, Ferguson, & Kuechler, 2016). Other authors have touted the role of training for "rekindling the reformist spirit" (Aldarondo, 2007, p. 3) and emphasizing the pivotal nature of a helper's attitude and beliefs concerning the oppressed. Increasingly, training programs in service-oriented fields challenge students to "examine these beliefs in relation to empirical evidence, theories, and values of social justice" (Hill et al., 2016, p. 397).

It is in this vein that I offer a case study of my experience as an educator who witnessed students regularly translating course material into a focused and tangible commitment to antipoverty reform. Teaching the undergraduate course ADE4930: Leadership and the Working Poor had a profound impact on me as an educator. This elective course was closely aligned with many service-oriented programs (e.g., Human Development and Family Science, Social Work) given its emphasis on poverty, social structures, diversity, economic justice, and structured experiences in the community. In 2 decades of teaching, I had never been part of a learning community so intent to translate empirical knowledge disseminated through course readings into self-understanding and action. The goal of this case study is to elucidate the motivation, processes, and conditions that promote an environment of educational translation in a community of students preparing to become social servants.

The Course

I developed ADE4930: Leadership and the Working Poor and offered it for the first time through the College of Education at Florida State University in the Spring 2016 semester. The three-credit course met in the Dunlap Building, which houses Florida State University's Center for Leadership and Social Change (CLSC). ADE 4930 was taken as a stand-alone elective by the majority of the students, but it also served as a designated elective for the institution's Leadership Certificate Program. The Leadership Certificate Program is a series of six academic courses taught through Educational Leadership in collaboration with the CLSC, and it is a popular program on campus for highly engaged students.

The course description featured in the syllabus was as follows:

> Leadership and the Working Poor is an interactive, dynamic course focused on the physical, social, and psychological reality of Americans living in circumstances of extreme economic scarcity even while employed in the American economic system. Beyond a thorough exploration of this population, we will consider the systems that contribute to their economic reality, as well as the past, current, and proposed leadership efforts on behalf of the working poor. The course will be highly interactive with student participation and outside class involvement as critical components to the learning process. Most notably, students in this class will spend a minimum of 50 hours in training and service to the working poor as tax preparers.

The objectives of the course, also featured in the syllabus, were as follows:

- Students will learn about the antipoverty safety net currently operating in our country and consider its advantages and disadvantages relative to our national goals and values.

This will include an emphasis on the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which is the United States' most significant bipartisan, antipoverty initiative after Social Security.

- Students will learn the history of our national leadership in regard to the issue of poverty and consider the complexity of our evolving national discourse around poverty, its causes, and the most promising solutions.
- Students will learn basic tax principles, including how to prepare taxes for individuals, couples, and families. Students will practice this skill on behalf of our local citizenry.
- Students will explore the data related to poverty as a function of education and race, along with policies that perpetuate or address this national dynamic.
- Students will explore the new science related to scarcity and its psychological impact on the poor. They will consider the policy implications of this new behavioral frame.
- Students will consider current antipoverty policy proposals, and how these proposals are framed in hopes of bipartisan support within a politically contentious national leadership.

The Service

As a service-learning course, ADE 4930 required students to commit to 8 hours of Internal Revenue Service (IRS) training, 2 hours for a certification test, and 40 hours of income tax preparation service at two local Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites. The service sites were developed and supervised by Impact America, a nonprofit organization that develops service-learning opportunities in tax preparation, vision screening, and similar areas where students can make an immediate, discernable difference in their communities. In partnership with the IRS and local agencies such as the United Way, Impact America provides IRS-approved training for two levels of student certification: tax site development and supervisory oversight for a student-led tax preparation service to community members. Marketing efforts include post cards sent through local agencies, signs, telephone calls, and word of mouth, and are directed toward low-income families and individuals.

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) was at the heart of the tax preparation service provided by my students. Because a working poor family may be eligible for more than $5,000 in EITC refunds alone, they are often willing to pay substantial fees to tax preparers, a sector that is not heavily-regulated. Impact America staff have a clear mission to protect individuals and families from what they frame as predatory tax services, and to make sure working families and individuals keep as much of their tax return as possible. Students provided free tax preparation assistance to primarily EITC-eligible individuals and families.

The Students

Final course enrollment was 13 students, a modest enrollment perhaps reflecting the additional 50-hour service-learning component. This small class size allowed for the conversational environment typical of a graduate seminar, with students and professor seated around a conference table in discussion focused on the class material and community service experience. I elected to receive the tax prep training and certification alongside the students in the course and join them at their service sites as a volunteer tax preparer, which led to rich conversations in both the classroom and the field.

The class roster comprised six males and seven females, ranging from freshman to senior. The most noteworthy demographic aspect of the classroom community was the diversity of backgrounds related to race and socioeconomic status. Eight students identified as Black, two Hispanic, two White, and one as mixed race. Eight reported living under the poverty line for most, if not all, of their youth, and the five remaining were spread along the middle-class spectrum. Each racial or ethnic group represented in the class had at least one member with direct experience living under the poverty line. Rounding out the classroom community, the instructor of record was a middle-aged White male with a middle-class background. Class introductions revealed as much interest in the course due to personal experience with the subject matter as to more typical intellectual or practical purposes.

Knowledge Sources

The primary aim of this course was to provide data-based insight into the lived experience of America's working poor, including the scope, nature, and history of American poverty, and the role and effectiveness of the EITC and other antipoverty strategies. Research results delivered through the course came from three domains:

1. Results from a large-scale qualitative research study of EITC recipients, focusing on their attitudes toward this antipoverty program and their patterns of EITC spending (Halpern-Meekin, Edin, Tach, & Sykes, 2015).
2. Sociological sources framing the development and attributions of poverty in the United States, showing trends in income and social mobility related to race, education, location, and behavior. The primary texts in this arena were *Under the Affluence* (Wise, 2015) and *Scarcity: The New Science of Having Less and How It Defines Our Lives* (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013).
3. A 2015 bipartisan public policy collaboration by the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research and the Brookings Institute titled *Opportunity, Responsibility, and Security: A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream* (Abner et al., 2015).

Class Artifacts

Twelve of the thirteen students from the course gave full permission to use any and all of their written materials generated throughout the course (personal journals, book review, exam material, and weekly reading critiques) as evidence of class impact on their actions, attitudes, and beliefs. I did not seek this permission until several weeks after grades had been awarded for the course, and students were assured that their identities would be protected. This use of the data elements was approved by the Florida State University Institutional Review Board application.

The data for this case study are derived primarily from students' course writing. All of the illustrative quotes were taken from open, reflective assignments with length requirements and occasional light prompting. Grading was based on completion and clarity, without emphasis on content accuracy. These sources included written critiques due with every course reading, periodic field journal entries, and their final reflections on the overall course experience.

I discuss each of the three preceding knowledge source areas listed in turn, examining the translation by student leaders in their developing role as tax preparers, antipoverty scholars, and advocates. Direct quotes from the students' written work are featured throughout to elucidate my description. To protect student identity but allow readers to differentiate between students, I have assigned each of the 12 featured students an identifying number that will follow their quoted work. The 12 numbers correspond to these intentionally general descriptions: (1) (racial) minority male, (2) minority female, (3) minority female, (4) minority female, (5) White male, (6) minority female, (7) minority female, (8) minority male, (9) minority male, (10) minority male, (11) White male, and (12) minority female.

Qualitative Data Translates to Client Affinity and Professionalism

Ispa (2012) touted qualitative research efforts as particularly accessible to translation; in-depth interviewing allows the experiences of others to be understood in context, and the narrative style of qualitative outcomes makes applicable lessons easier for laypeople to glean. These observations rang true in students' reactions to *It's Not Like I'm Poor: How Working Families Make Ends Meet in a Post-Welfare World* (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2015), which is based on in-depth interviews of 115 Boston families chosen from a larger survey of EITC recipients. Halpern-Meekin and colleagues' study focused on the 2006 tax year, and the inclusion criterion was adults with at least one child who received an EITC refund of at least $1,000. The mean refund of families in the study was $4,686. The study focused on the impact of the EITC on these families, their attitude toward the program, and their patterns of spending related to this refund. In addition, the volume provided students with an in-depth overview of the EITC program and how it evolved to become the largest antipoverty program in the United States for families with children.

Perhaps the central insight of Halpern-Meekin and colleagues' results was the psychological response the recipient families had to the benefit. Across the board, the interviewed families did not see EITC funds as a form of welfare. Because it was a work-based benefit, families rarely acknowledged, or in many cases even recognized, that they might be receiving a larger refund than they had paid in taxes. On the contrary, this "tax return" was perceived as their just due for their work history and circumstances. Because it was not considered welfare, these funds did not encroach on recipients' dignity or contribute to an impoverished or dependent identity. This reality was in stark contrast to the identity associated with receipt of other programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, that sometimes carry connotations of undeserved dependence on American charity. This is a primary reason the EITC has received unprecedented support across the political aisle as an antipoverty measure: It helps working families without dealing a disincentivizing blow to the dignity and identity of American workers. The authors of the study took this logic one step further, citing Zelizer's (1997) work on how the "social meaning" of money is important enough to determine how it is spent and suggesting that EITC funds may be spent more wisely than other forms of windfall (Epley & Gneezy, 2007).

Halpern-Meekin and colleagues' results directly translated into a sense of pride for the students as they facilitated the EITC procurement process for families. In a sense, they saw themselves as guardians of the EITC's dignity-preserving nature. One reflected in a reading critique:

> One aspect that stuck with me throughout this reading is the structure and meaning of the EITC. The difference between the EITC and welfare both structurally and psychologically impacting is something I had not considered. The "pro work" component of the EITC both invigorates the family and allows for bipartisan support. The reading discusses how the refund from the EITC is about the same amount as the annual total from welfare, yet the difference in how the families plan to use and feel about that money is incredible. (5)

Another wrote:

> What stood out the most to me in this reading is how the people who receive a tax refund view themselves differently than the people who receive welfare. At times it almost sounds like they view themselves as being superior to those who get what they consider "handouts" from the government. This also ties into how the EITC provides psychological advances to those who receive it. (12)

Halpern-Meekin and colleagues' portrayal of study families' feelings about the tax preparation experience itself took students' knowledge translation to another level. Specifically, the researchers reported that H&R Block, a for-profit tax company, was a major source of tax preparation for their study families. It was shocking to students to read actual accounts of EITC recipients comparing their experiences at H&R Block to their experiences at volunteer VITA sites like those hosting the students. It was especially disconcerting for the students to learn that working-poor families strongly preferred H&R Block if the alternative was a poorly appointed free volunteer tax site or preparer. The families were clear: A free service is not free if it costs anxiety over incompetently prepared forms or if the conditions of the site itself—long lines, drab buildings, unfriendly preparers—are reminiscent of past interactions they may have had with welfare offices. A crisp, professional, seemingly competent experience at a comfortable tax site was worth the preparation fee to these families. The idea that environmental cues at a tax preparation site might reduce the psychological advantages of a free tax service had an impact on the students and translated into action on their part. One wrote:

> Seeing this perspective really opened my eyes, especially after reading that if families felt that they could afford the luxury of filing taxes with a company like H&R, they would. They felt that paying was a lesser of a fee compared to the tolls on their time and self-esteem. That, I believe, is the biggest concern volunteers should have. Making sure that our clients feel confident in our ability, in their return and in themselves. (6)

Another wrote:

> To allow the psychological advantages of the EITC within the tax clients to remain strong, I think that we as tax preparers can conduct ourselves in various ways to avoid the same negative experiences that clients within the reading had faced. Through developing positive space for clients, greeting them with a professional approach,

dressing in a professional manner, and being conscious of the client's time, we could help clients feel comfortable about their taxes being filed through the VITA program. (9)

Although Impact America is not particularly strict concerning their dress code, another student pledged, "I want all clients to truly trust in me to get the job done and believe that I will do what is best for their family. Business casual attire and a friendly smile would be a perfect dress code for the occasion" (2). Another offered, "Maybe I'll cut my hair!" (5).

One final aspect of the classroom experience related to Halpern-Meekin and colleagues' research bears noting. Many students found themselves and their own childhood experiences in the study findings. Students' reflections on this reading, and particularly when they shared their own experiences of receiving EITC funds in a family struggling to make ends meet, helped me understand the degree to which members of the class had lived the material. One wrote:

> I found this reading to be both familiar and thought provoking, but nothing out of the ordinary for a low income family. Coming from a single-family home with three siblings, income taxes enabled my mother to buy necessary supplies not only for my siblings and I but the household and herself. Income tax season also helped my secondary family and my immediate family to come together and enjoy precious family time. We would all go to a big dinner or meet up at the bowling alley for some friendly competition. (10)

Another reflected, "Being from a low income family, tax time too was like a holiday for me. I myself would get a few hundred dollars from my parents" (1). Still another student shared, in her reading critique:

> To be honest, a lot of the things that were discussed in this article were not at all surprising to me. For example, the article stated that tax time was considered a holiday

> for them. I can back up that fact because coming from a very low income family, tax time was definitely a holiday for us. For us, some years we did not receive anything for Christmas and we were told that we would receive something around tax time. So it was something we waited for and it was a relief for the entire family when it came to things like bills, car payments, etc. (4)

The degree to which students raised in poverty found their own experiences reflected in the course material became a theme that resonated throughout the semester. This firsthand knowledge was empowering to them in class conversations and allowed the text to come alive for the students without firsthand experience with poverty.

Framing Poverty: Translating Theory to Attitudes and Beliefs

One central question driving the national approach to poverty is the question of cause. There are two prevailing views: one holding that poverty is structural and economic in nature, rooted in economic and often oppressive systems; the other that poverty is primarily caused by cultural or behavioral forces, rooted in impoverished individuals and their collective choices (Jordan, 2004). Researchers have posited that where social workers and social work students fall on this continuum of attribution translates directly to their clinical attitude and intervention strategies. More specifically, individualistic, behavioral explanations for poverty are associated with more negative attitudes toward the poor and with psychological strategies. Conversely, structural explanations are associated with structural responses, such as advocacy for greater, more targeted governmental assistance (Hill et al., 2016; Weiss & Gal, 2007a).

Much of the ADE 4930 class material was aimed at understanding the face of poverty in the United States and its primary attributions. Research indicates that students in the helping professions such as social work and family science tend to hold both structural and individualistic attributions for poverty, but their preference for more structural responses to poverty increases as their attitudes about people in poverty become more positive (Hill et al., 2016). This certainly held true with ADE 4930 students. Because students were actively serving in an antipoverty initiative based on a structural response to poverty (economic assistance), their enthusiasm and dedication to this service was bolstered by the structural and systemic explanations for poverty in their readings and their positive encounters with working-poor families at the tax site.

The uneven distribution of poverty by race took center stage in many class discussions given the racial awareness of the students and the readings' vivid portrayal of the disproportionate burden of poverty borne by Blacks and other racial minorities in America. The evidence of structural and systemic oppression of racial minorities throughout U.S. history was so well documented that all students, regardless of race or ethnicity, increased their understanding of race-based, structural causes for poverty. One student wrote:

> The one thing that continues to captivate me is these notions of how "income does not erase place-based racial inequality." The article discussed how even affluent Blacks typically live in poorer neighborhoods than the average lower-income White. Our statistics sheet distributed last week addressed the fact that Blacks and Latinos respectively are 7 and 6 times more likely than Whites to live in high poverty neighborhoods. What is the explanation for this? (5)

Another student, considering historic access to power and representation, reflected:

> The example of African American railroad workers really struck home because, just yesterday, I was doing taxes for an elderly Black man who worked in the railroad industry all his life. He had four surgeries, two of which were on his back, and overall

> was real beat up from years on years of hard labor. If he was in bad shape, I can't imagine all the folks who had it worse than him in the very early 1900s. Had these workers been allowed to form a union they would've been held at a higher regard and would've had more manageable working conditions. (8)

Reflecting on her own dreams and mobility, another student shared:

> Something that stood out to me in not only this reading but also every reading thus far is how poverty is so much more than just poverty. It's a lack of resources, it's judgment and ridicule, it's an uneven distribution of wealth that allows the rich to continue getting richer, and nearly impossible for a minority or someone from a lower bracket move up. Ultimately poverty has the potential to become its own paradigm. It's difficult not to think about where among these statistics and groups you align with and stay positive that perhaps you are part of the 3% who does make it. (7)

Another student, after reading about and discussing a clear timeline of federally sanctioned housing policies that gave rise to racially segregated communities expressed:

> A lot of the things that are done by the more powerful are not known to the people of target. We live in a very sneaky government system that knows how to cover up things to look different than what they really are. They are not going to come out and tell us that they are grouping us together. If the government was to say, "Hey, we are placing these houses here because that is all you Blacks can afford and we want you stay in your place," many blacks would be working hard to get out of there. They know that these things are unethical and that is why they have to stay quiet when it comes to these concepts and laws that they enforce. If we knew what really went on when it came to these topics there would be another movement. Of course, they do not want that because

> if we all came together we would be powerful. Instead they do it all right under our nose and make it appear as if they are helping us. (4)

Regarding the American history of housing discrimination, one student surmised:

> Growing up in Miami, I've always seen specifically Black neighborhoods scattered throughout the city like Allapatah, Little Haiti, Overtown, so on and so forth and it's obvious to me now that these neighborhoods were a result of de jure segregation and not de facto. Growing up, I thought these neighborhoods were predominantly Black because of cultural and socioeconomic reasons but it's now apparent to me that these folks were basically forced to live there. All this makes me very disappointed with my city and country as a whole. (8)

And another student commented:

> The statement that hit me the hardest was, "Seeing slum conditions invariably associated with African Americans, White homeowners had a reasonable fear that if African Americans moved into their neighborhoods, these refugees from urban slums would bring the slum conditions with them." This broke me down because immediately parallels to the Holocaust came to my head. Germans would often use the unpleasant behavior and appearance of Jewish citizens in the ghettos as an absurd example of why they put them there in the first place. This is the exact same phenomenon. After all the examples of de jure segregation, it hurt, but was not surprising to see that even DURING the time period of the policies people blamed Blacks for their conditions. (5)

One compelling aspect of the more individualistic, behavioral-cultural frame for poverty is its accounting for observably "poor" choices consistently made by citizens living in impoverished conditions. Those in poverty are believed to consistently make self-defeating choices in important areas such as medical compliance, punctuality, parenting, work productivity, and financial management that bring judgment and argument against economic interventions like the EITC (Mani, Mullainathan, Shafir, & Zhao, 2013). This idea that there is a self-sustaining and entitled "culture of poverty" is influential in the United States. However, a more logical and popular synthesis of the structural versus cultural debate suggests that structural forces create conditions in which psychological, cognitive, and cultural adaptations develop (Jordan, 1994). Data supporting the idea that a "culture of poverty" follows from structural forces acting on groups of individuals was discussed in *Scarcity: The New Science of Having Less and How It Defines Our Lives* (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013).

Scarcity had a major influence on the students' thinking in that it allowed them to understand self-defeating behaviors (observed in their own lives and communities) as a *by-product* of economic scarcity. Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) introduced simple, accessible studies that demonstrated the devastating effect of scarcity on cognitive function. Students were introduced to several conditions in which resource scarcity leveled the cognitive, emotional, and even moral playing field between the "haves" and "have-nots" in a variety of laboratory and real-life settings. This text was influential, allowing, once again, a frame on poverty that preserves dignity and suggests that structural, economic solutions have the power to affect change. In their reading critique, one student noted:

> Scarcity is so prevalent in these individuals' mind that they even have a greater propensity to forget things, as a result of the overtaxed bandwidth. This results in the poor forgetting to take medications, pay for a doctor bill, or even calling the doctor in the first place. Likewise, there are studies that show that when the poor move up the socioeconomic status or even move into a different neighborhood these behavioral

> patterns begin to change. The fact that there are statistics that support these trends further proves to me that bad decisions are a state of poverty. (12)

Another observed:

> Last semester, I ran into a problem with tunneling. I started skipping class to go to work because I needed to make sure I paid rent. I completely focused on getting to work and neglected my studies. The benefits of one did not match the benefits to the other. The trade-off was not equal. I did not see that until after my grades had fallen. (3)

Another speculated about the need for this knowledge to be translated into even smarter practice by those in the micro-loan movement:

> One can only hope that with these studies out in the open, the psychology of scarcity will begin to work its way into our policies and programs. My understanding of micro-loans in the world of social entrepreneurship was that sizable loans were made to invest in the clients' future, to give the funding for a small business and escape from their current economic conditions. These initiatives always go for the home-run. Perhaps just lending very small amounts of money in times of need is a more effective way of helping to put out the immediate everyday fire and reduce daily bandwidth tax. The book stresses the importance of giving cash "at the right time" in order to be most beneficial, and I am left wondering how we can learn when the right time would be? (5)

Public Policy: Translation as a Balancing Act Between Data, Beliefs, and Experience

There is an increasing call for the effective translation of social science research into the realm of public policy (Evans, 2012). However, policies addressing poverty are challenging to create in the current partisan political climate in the United States, where notions of individual responsibility square off with ideas about structural inequity and social injustice (Fuchs, 2008). The final segment of ADE 4930 featured a class analysis of a recent bipartisan, antipoverty policy proposal. This work was a collaboration by the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research and the Brookings Institute. Billing themselves as a Working Group on Poverty and Opportunity, this collaboration of 15 researchers chosen from both sides of the political spectrum produced *Opportunity, Responsibility, and Security: A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream* (Abner et al., 2015). This document interpreted current understanding of economic and social trends to propose antipoverty policy related to the domains of family, work, and education.

This was an opportunity for the students to see how the data they had been digesting over the semester was translated into an official, political change strategy. It was also a chance to see the political tension between data interpreted from a more liberal, structural/economic frame and a more conservative frame that emphasizes personal responsibility. Students divided into groups and tore into each section of the proposal, and some of the most rigorous and frustrating conversation of the course ensued. Although students were highly appreciative of this bipartisan effort overall, there was some cynicism regarding the political nature of the document. One wrote, “The bipartisan plan for reducing poverty looks like a fairytale. We have taken the dragons of our beloved nation and slain them with a big hug and joining hands around a campfire” (3). Another wrote, “I am impressed that a bipartisan commission was able to assemble and actually agree on commonsense facts. What I found most interesting, however, was what the report *did not* mention” (11). Another student raved, “I am so excited that this piece exists as it seems to weave and synthesize so many of the components of poverty that we have discussed so far into one comprehensive web of facts, problems, and solutions” (5).

It was the family components of the policy document that captured the students' attention the most. It was also the place where the students' ability to separate policy analysis from their own cherished memories was most challenged. One student made the connection between family functioning and prosperity, seeing that family health was a cornerstone of bipartisan policy efforts: "It seems as if all of the scholarly articles, news publications, online journals, and magazines have already understood that a major solution to fighting poverty is by making sure the family dynamic of children is secure" (9).

Another interpreted the soundness of policy through the lens of the *Scarcity* material:

> From the Family Composition section, "Some of the measures of child development that have been linked with single-parent families are higher school dropout rates, lower academic achievement, higher rates of teen pregnancy." I don't find this hard to believe because of the time scarcity of the single mother. (1)

One student reflected, "Coming from a single parent home and the different types of obstacles that come with living in that household makes me believe that marriage is the saving grace for children" (3), and another observed, "I feel like the idea of extending the time that we begin to have the children could actually be a good step in improving the overall quality of life" (4).

Although students were open, in part, to the bipartisan solutions reflected in these policies, there were also very tense moments of the type that plague much translation of knowledge to practice—the privileging of personal experience over research findings. People often trust their own experience and intuition, despite the data, and this is particularly true if those experiences have a high emotional charge (Haidt, 2012). Beyond this, minority populations are historically suspicious of research findings related to health or well-being, due to their underrepresentation as either researchers or subjects in much of the scientific enterprise (Corbie-Smith, Thomas, & St. George, 2002). Of the family policy findings related to single mothers, one student wrote:

> I strongly believe that the family composition plays a very vital role, however I also strongly feel that it shouldn't be an excuse as well. I grew up in a single parent household, and I strongly attribute all my successes because of that. While a single parent home may lack a lot of resources that a traditional household may have, there are a lot of other things that can be learned. And you can take it upon yourself to make sure your household won't be like that. (7)

The uproar over political denigration of the single-parent home was strong in the classroom, even as students struggled to balance personal pride in their backgrounds with the potential economic advantages of the two-parent home. A couple of students had strong reactions to policy which would funnel EITC funds to noncustodial parents, suggesting this money would simply go to morally suspect "deadbeat dads." Other students had a heartfelt argument over the preeminence of racial integration as the solution to the Black–White achievement gap in our nation's schools, despite strong evidence that integration has been an effective solution. Several students in the classroom worked hard during these discussions to balance the knowledge they had gained over the semester, the understanding that any successful national policy would have to reflect a compromise of perspective, and loyalty to the dignity and utility of their own communities.

These conversations suggested that the class had developed a strong identity as advocates for the poor, willing to work hard toward the best solutions, and that their convictions were signposts for current and future action. The students, although heated in their discussions, were ultimately willing to stretch their perspectives and seemed appreciative of the hard work of compromise that had clearly served the consensus policy plan. For me, this underscores the imperative of continuously linking policy and practice in the professional preparation of future human and social service personnel (Hill et al., 2016). It was powerful to see the students grow in their ability to face and hold the complexity of the change process as they wrestled with antipoverty policy development. One summarized:

> I feel like I was able to see two very different sides of literature that is currently being used to address the issue of poverty in America. Although we read many pieces, these two extremes, in my head, are represented by *Under the Affluence* and the policy report by the Brookings Institute. Tim Wise is my inner self—angry, unforgiving, and passionate about forcing people to realize the systems of injustices they indirectly or directly perpetuate. However, the report by the Brookings Institute is careful, political, and calculated. It is a compromise between two very different groups of people, an agreement that we have a problem, and a modest suggestion of what baby steps to take.
>
> I don't want to be the Brookings Institute. I want to be Tim Wise. I want marginalized populations to gain the rights they deserve today and I want populations of power to realize the detrimental impact they have immediately. But that doesn't get us anywhere as a society. That doesn't cure our social ills. The Brookings Institute does. Reaching across the aisle, engaging in difficult but civil conversations begins the process. The literature taught me this—what I want to be is not what I need to be if I am going to engage in the radical process of changing the foundational operations of the world. (11)

Elements Contributing to Course Success

Student performance, engagement, and formal course evaluation all indicate that this course was a success. I expected the topic to be engaging and highly relevant, but I was not prepared for the degree to which this course seemed to affect the identity of each of us as antipoverty workers and advocates. Krumer-Nevo, Weiss-Gal, and Monnickendam (2009) offered four essential pedagogical domains for effective poverty education in the field of social work. To briefly summarize, these include the following: (a) deep theoretical and empirical knowledge of poverty and its expression; (b) self-reflection regarding student's own personal and cultural values surrounding poverty; (c) knowledge of evidence-based, antipoverty practices; and (d) actual experience working with people living in poverty. ADE 4930 featured each of these domains, and indeed, each seemed pivotal to the success of the course. Beyond these basic building blocks, however, I credit three primary features of this course that seemed instrumental in its transformative nature, with some backing from the literature on student development.

Service Learning

Because this was a service-learning course, students experienced a direct, real-world connection to the classroom material. Kuh (2008) identified service learning as a high-impact collegiate practice, associated with greater retention, engagement, and personal development for undergraduates. Kuh characterized high-impact practices, such as service learning, study abroad, and internships, as "deep approaches" to learning because they often feature the application of theories in practice, discussion of ideas with both faculty and students out of class, analyzing ideas, and reconciling diverse perspectives. He added that high-impact practices have not typically been as accessible to Black and first-generation students—demographics that made up the majority of students in this course. One student demonstrated the impact of service and the resulting layers of course application when he shared:

> The course work just makes the [service] experience even better! It makes it better because it prepares me and helps me to understand the impact. That is important because it is one thing to just do something for the fun of it but it's service when you know why you are doing something. (11)

The clear, skill-based, measureable difference students were making in client lives made an obvious impact on their overall interest in the course experience. Student commitment to antipoverty work was demonstrated and felt deeply as they overcame their nervousness at their tax sites. One shared the following:

> And I think that it would be okay for me to be nervous to do taxes again, because my dad always used to tell me that when people get nervous about something, it just means that they care a lot about an outcome. And that's primarily it. I want to produce quality results for people within the working poor community to say that they are satisfied and confident that they will receive the money that they earned throughout the year. (9)

Still another was satisfied and enthused to realize that the goal was worth the risk. She wrote:

> I can already feel rewards in what we are doing. The way I saw Ms. Kyndra working to get a client more money to help support her children made my heart warm. It almost completely took away my anxiety about just having been certified. I'm excited to see what the tax season brings and pray that we touch as many lives as possible. (3)

A final added benefit, once again, was the opportunity for some students to see themselves in our tax clients, which increased their commitment to tax preparation, their larger role as antipoverty advocates, and their interest in our class community. One student wrote the following in his journal:

> My first day on the job last week, I saw a mother with 3 little kids walk in ready to get her taxes prepared. Her energy, optimism, and small tribe of people reminded me so much of my own mom during this time of year. Not only was this experience reassuring to me so I have motivation to continue helping in the community, but I was also a little overwhelmed to figure there are literally children in the same predicament as I was. The question really is, why does the shocking majority of these people who really just need a little support from someone other than themselves get merely tossed and left behind by our great nation? This is something I'm looking forward to discuss in class. (10)

Diverse Peer Voices

It was clear that students were influenced by one another's stories and resulting perspectives on poverty. Astin (1993) emphasized the central importance of student interaction as a chief source of educational influence in the classroom. In this case, it was the diversity of perspectives, both within and between class groups, and the fact that so many in the class had experienced poverty, that made student interaction unusually potent. In journals and final reflections, students came back to this again and again. One credited his classmates' voices as an important source of information:

> It's safe to say that through this class I have become more aware of what it means to be poor in America. . . . The discussions we had during our class time also gave me a lot of insight into different upbringings. The contrast in lifestyle among my classmates is something I'll always remember. (8)

Another student recognized her role as an educator to her peers, when she wrote:

> Being a representative of one of the minorities gives me the opportunity to help make aware our concerns and also it put me in position to see that sometimes our Caucasian

> counterparts genuinely do not know. The discussions make it easier to facilitate a learning environment amongst all of us. (3)

Another student shared how his classmates' experiences helped him drill deeper in his understanding of the many manifestations of poverty:

> Growing up in poverty and finding my way out of it through education, I felt I knew all that came to the "bad" part of the projects and deprived schools. I mean, I attended 8 different middle and high schools prior to graduating so I was diversified regarding neighborhoods. However, when listening to my peers discuss their experiences that reflected mine, and expanded beyond my knowledge, I found myself often getting in passionate discussions trying to find an understanding between experiences. It felt good educating, relating, and bonding with my classmates regarding the conversations we had based on controversial topics. (10)

And in the same vein, still another wrote:

> One of the first shocking realizations that I remember from this class is the realization of the way that different groups of people experienced poverty. Many of my Black classmates mentioned that they did not realize that they were poor until much later in life . . . everyone was enduring the same struggle so everything was essentially normalized. I, meanwhile, had an understanding of the disadvantages my family faced from a young age, but also an idea of what I could achieve. (11)

More than one student mentioned how encouraging their classmates' voices were to them. One shared the following:

> Even when I walked out of class frustrated from heated discussion, this class had some of the best conversations I've had in my life. It gives me hope for the future to find and come in contact with people who share a passion to better the world. (3)

Peer voices were encouraged by our intimate setting and the intentional structuring of conversational reflection in the large group, small groups, and even pairs. I did my best as instructor to model active curiosity and tried to weave the narratives from outside and inside the classroom into one coherent tapestry as best I could. Of course, consistent with Kuh's "deep-learning" practices mentioned earlier, there was abundant conversation among students, between students and me, and between students and our Impact site coordinator in the Center hallways, my office, and the tax sites.

National Salience

One final boon to this course was the salience of the national poverty conversation during the time of its offering. Students were frequently receiving poverty-related bulletins, political opinions, and even research summaries in their social media feeds during the time of the course. Ninety percent of our readings were published in the three preceding years, and presidential candidates were passionately debating the issues we studied throughout the semester. Beyond this, as has been mentioned several times, it was the *personal* salience of poverty to so many of the students in the course that resonated with the national emphasis and added the urgency that made this learning environment rare. Harking back to the importance of class diversity discussed earlier, the relevancy of the academy and our problem-solving capacity depends on voices at the table like these students who understand the issue firsthand. This gave our material a real-time significance that was stimulating for us all. It drove home the importance of grounding our coursework, whenever and however possible, in the historical and experiential present.

Conclusion

Future research into the pedagogy of effective translation may explore further the relationship between academic integrity and social application. Service-learning courses with a strong practice element can be a tremendous strain on student schedules, and a burden to administrate, in a university environment that is increasingly pressed for time and resources. How do we best weave theory, research, and practice as complementary elements so that the required resources are justifiable? Meaningful community experience, intimate class size, student diversity, and adequate attention to student processing are all elements that are difficult to deliver in the present climate of higher education.

Going forward, challenges like these will surely be confronted, forcing decisions about which elements are essential to effective translation. Pedagogically, perhaps the most obvious direction for future inquiry is to operationalize a framework for antipoverty education such as that proposed by Krumer-Nevo and colleagues (2009) and to formally assess its effectiveness related to varied realms of specific professional belief and practice. Lee and Priester (2016) have begun this work, specifically examining the impact of theoretical knowledge acquisition and self-reflection on the attitudes and beliefs of social work students, and this research direction seems promising for creation of an antipoverty curriculum that is translation tested. Another challenge worthy of pursuit is developing best practices to fully engage students who are less vested in this topic because of their limited personal experience with poverty, and conversely, how to respectfully challenge students who have lived the course material to fully consider a broad range of frames and solutions.

These issues are a tribute to the complexity of any highly applied classroom, and the educators who strive to make it work. Social science bent to the well-being of others reflects the heart of the translation movement, and educators from various fields devoted to human well-being and positive social change frame knowledge as a tool to these ends. When it works, the translation becomes transformative, and for many of my students, this class was a glimpse into how an uninformed past—impoverished or privileged—might translate into an informed, socially conscious future.

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