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PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY: Exploring the attitudes of Sheffield Hallam University Social Work students to service-user poverty

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Abstract

An understanding of poverty and its impact on service-users is essential for social workers to be able to act in an empowering, anti-oppressive way. Our actions are often influenced by our attitudes. This qualitative study aims to identify the attitudes and causal attributions of poverty amongst social work students to provide a baseline indicator that might inform poverty education within SHU's social work courses. To date, no UK investigations of this nature have been undertaken recently, leaving us with a profound lack of understanding of the knowledge and attitudes of student social workers toward poverty and its impact on people in the UK. The study design is multi-method, incorporating two data sources: an on-line questionnaire (43 responses) and individual telephone interviews (6). Findings revealed that students enrolled on a BA Social Work degree were generally compassionate towards those experiencing poverty. They preferred structural causal explanations rather than individual; students also strongly held the government responsible and saw poverty as something impacted by political choices. However, poverty was understood to be absolute rather than relatively defined and a trend towards dissociating from and 'othering' those in poverty was discerned. The study recommends the inclusion of poverty-awareness in the values and ethics element of social work courses, to enable it to be incorporated into students' anti-oppressive practice.

Keywords: Discrimination, Poverty, Work-shadowing, Othering, Strivers, Constructivist

Context of study

Wherever social workers practice, poverty is a consistent feature. People living in poverty are significantly more likely to be diagnosed with psychosis (Centre for Social Justice, 2011). Children living in poverty are disproportionately the focus of child welfare interventions (Featherstone et al., 2017); there is a strong adverse association between child abuse, neglect and a family's socio-economic circumstances (Bywaters et al., 2016a). Commenting on the 'record high' levels of child poverty in the UK (Marsh, 2019), Sir Philip Alston, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, recognised "not just a disgrace, but a social calamity" (Alston, 2019).

Both the Adult and the Child and Family Knowledge and Skills Statements (Department of Health, 2015; Department for Education, 2018) require social workers to recognise the impact of poverty on service-users. The British Association of Social Workers' (BASW) Code of Ethics (2012) requires us to challenge discrimination on the grounds of socio-economic status. But in practice, research based on work-shadowing a child protection team found that poverty was almost never mentioned, that to comment on it was felt to be stigmatising; it was seen by some practitioners as part of an underclass culture (Morris et al., 2018).

Many commentators (Cummins, 2018; Jones 2016; Turbett, 2014) have noted an increased stigmatisation of poverty recently, associating it with personal failings. Valentine & Harris (2014) point to the social acceptability of 'classism', with judgements being based on people's economic worth and ability to work – a clear distinction between us ('the deserving poor' or 'strivers') and them ('the undeserving poor' or 'skivers').

This process of distancing oneself from poverty, or ‘othering’ was also illustrated clearly by Shildrick and MacDonald’s research with 60 people in a ‘low-pay, no-pay cycle’ in Middlesborough. Whilst describing severe material deprivation, they denied experiencing poverty (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013).

This research starts to examine how social work education might help students recognise poverty and its impact, enabling them to meet the requirements of the KSS. It investigates the attitudes toward and causal attributions of poverty amongst social work students to provide a baseline indicator that might inform poverty education within SHU’s social work courses.

Literature review

A literature search focused on terms including and equivalent to ‘poverty’, ‘social work education’ and ‘attitudes’ produced 21 directly relevant articles. Of these, 14 originated in the United States; the only British study meeting the criteria (Gilligan, 2007) investigated the relative willingness of social work applicants to advocate structural over individual solutions to challenges and was not directly related to poverty.

There was a remarkable homogeneity of approach and findings within the literature. Seventeen studies used self-administered forced-response surveys, both paper-based and online, to gain a numerical score with which to measure attitudes. These studies were heavily influenced by Feagin (noted in Yun and Weaver (2010)) and Atherton (Atherton, Gemmel, Haagenstad, Holt, Jensen, O’Hara, & Rehner, 1993). They both argue that attitudes toward poverty can be assessed along a spectrum of structural attribution to individual responsibility, with a more structural understanding being more empathetic.

Feagin introduces a third attribution of ‘fatalism’ or luck; other authors (notably Cozzarelli, Wilkinson & Tagler (2001)) discern a ‘culture of poverty’. If the term ‘class’ is substituted for ‘culture’, the societal and economic forces, the structural factors, involved in perpetuating the status quo become immediately more apparent. Weiss’ influential studies, (2003, 2005) both in Israel and internationally, include a psychological attribution. This appears to emerge from the work clinical social workers undertake rather than their understanding of poverty and there does not appear to be a published exploration of how it was arrived at.

The validity of these forced-answer surveys is challenged by a cross-European critical review of the evidence, arguing that they fail to take account of human ambiguity and inconsistency and that respondents are asked questions about the poor as an ‘undifferentiated mass’, ignoring the “many different faces of poverty” (Lepianka, Van Oorschoot & Gelissen, 2009). More constructivist-based studies can provide a more nuanced insight, as in Wood, Hostetter & Sullenberger’s (2014) scenario-based investigation which fully exposed the stereo-types on which student attitudes were based.

Methodology

An attitude is defined as a “settled way of thinking or feeling about someone or something, typically one that is reflected in a person’s behaviour” (Pearsall, 1998, p. 108). A perception is “the way in which something is regarded, understood, or interpreted” (Mcarthur, Lam-Mcarthur, & Fontaine, 2018). Zanna and Rempel (1988) suggest that attitudes are made up of (i) our cognitive response, based on beliefs and understandings, (ii) an affective, emotional response and (iii) our past experiences. They provide us with quick evaluations that guide our responses. By exploring how social work students perceive poverty and what they understand about it, an insight might be gained into their attitudes and their responses to it.

To pilot the research, I adapted the Undergraduate Perceptions of Poverty Tracking Survey (UPPTS) (Blair, Brown, Schoepflin & Taylor, 2014) for the British context. This survey is based on Atherton’s scale, adapted to assess empathy and has been used in several studies in the US and Canada. I changed the wording of some questions and omitted a question about the right to health care – current universal provision in the UK makes it far less contentious here than in the US. An analysis of the results of the survey, completed by 21 1st year MSW students, demonstrated a relatively narrow range of views, with no discernible differences based on demographics, including socio-economic background. Perhaps students were attempting to give a ‘correct’ answer or perhaps the cohort was simply too small. A Focus Group indicated that qualitative research might enable a more nuanced, richer picture of student attitudes to emerge. The research design was changed to accommodate this.

The multi-method research design involved an on-line questionnaire allowing free responses to three key questions, designed to correspond to Zanna & Rempel’s (1988) three aspects of attitude. By asking ‘what is poverty?’ we assess cognitive understanding; ‘who is poor?’ provides us with an emotional insight; asking for explanations of poverty might show us the experiential basis of the respondent’s opinion. The qualitative approach also allowed for a complexity of responses, for respondents to have inconsistent views, rather than reducing them to a numerical score. The survey was sent to all 1st and 3rd year BA Social Work students, with 43 responses received (almost exactly half 1st and half 3rd year students). The same questions were asked in telephone interviews with 31st year and 3 3rd year BA students.

The data gathered was analysed from a social pedagogy perspective, using grounded theory techniques to allow themes and factors to emerge from the students' voices. The analysis was also undertaken with a commitment to anti-oppressive practice, maintaining an awareness of power dynamics, intersectionality and with a reflexive awareness of the researcher's own values and experiences.

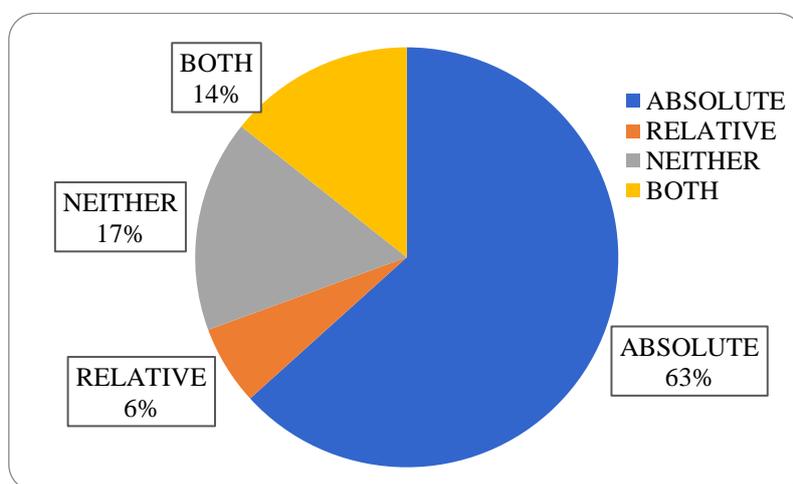
Initial In Vivo coding of the questionnaire and interviews was done separately, with the two data sources being brought together for advanced thematic coding.

Findings

What is poverty?

Thirty-one of the definitions given referred to fundamental needs, for example: "Not having enough to meet your basic needs"; "Poverty is being unable to afford basics and necessities to live". These definitions of poverty matched far more closely the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's definition of destitution (2018). Other definitions acknowledged a relational, contextual understanding of poverty: "Can be where someone is living below the national average - can afford basic necessities but struggle to keep up with "social necessities".

Thematic coding of this question revealed that most respondents gave definitions of poverty as either absolute (destitution) or relative, with some acknowledging both.



Who is poor?

Mindful of Lepianka et al's (2009) criticism of attitudinal studies asking questions about the 'undifferentiated mass' of the poor, this question was an attempt to discover the stereotypes on which respondents' attitudes were based. Initially over 34 different types of people were named; it was possible to group these into people defined by their household (single parents), their immigration status (asylum seekers), by their protected characteristics. By far the most frequently named group (21 times) were homeless people – perhaps the most visibly destitute group in our society at present.

It was interesting to note also the language used when describing people in poverty. An analysis of the pronouns used identified that 14 out of 19 were about someone else (someone / people / an individual); only 5 were more personally identifying (oneself / we / yourself). This might indicate a degree of 'othering' of those in poverty.

Why are people poor?

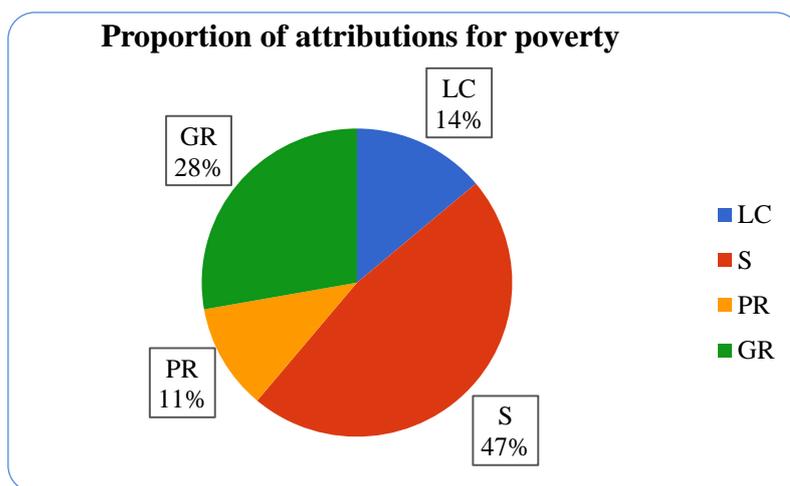
A total of over 50 In Vivo codes clustered into four clear themes: the expected contrasting structural and individual attributions emerged. There was a clear grouping around Life Circumstances, events like redundancy or family breakdown: poverty "due to circumstances beyond our control", possibly connecting with Feagin's 'fate' attribution. It might be possible to argue that Life Circumstances is a sub-category of structural attribution; it is barriers within society that mean a sudden illness can bring about poverty. However, the frequency of occurrence and distinctions made from other more clearly structural causes warranted the retention of it as a theme.

Inter-generational poverty was also mentioned in multiple responses. "Especially in my area where I live, it's just generation after generation just living in poverty and it's kind of the norm". It might have been possible to

theme this response, as Cozarelli (2001) does, as ‘culture of poverty’. However, the perpetuation of poverty also indicates structural barriers to moving beyond it – lack of education, lack of social capital.

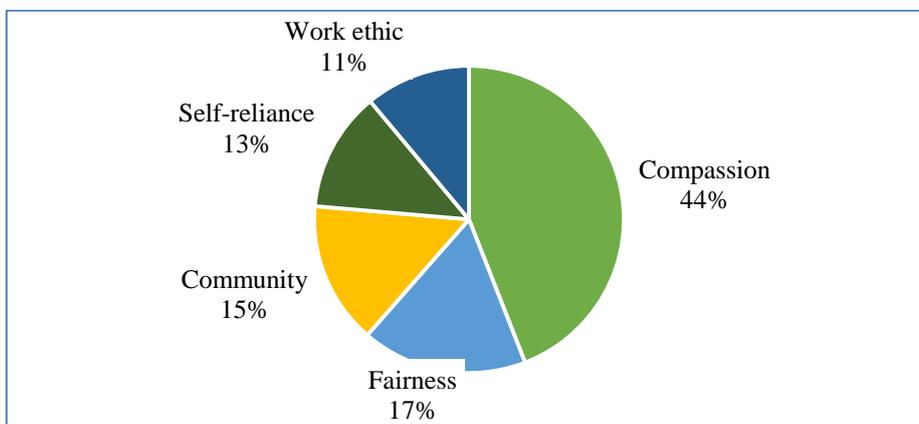
Coding demonstrated a fourth causal attribution of poverty: Government Responsibility. Because government actions and policies were mentioned thirty-eight times, it warranted a stand-alone category. It was clearly distinguishable from structural causation because of the element of choice ascribed to the government: “Austerity, lack of help from government”; “Government cuts and funding, the disgusting universal credit scheme and political attitudes”. Government is clearly being given the responsibility by some participants for at least in part causing poverty in the UK and it is seen to have the ability to solve it.

Only 16 respondents gave a single cause response to the questions, demonstrating that generally there is a recognition of the complexity of people’s circumstances.



Values

By coding the values expressed by students it was possible to explore the affective aspect of students’ perceptions of poverty. Emergent categories were compassion, self-reliance, work ethic, community and fairness.



There was no apparent correlation between an absolute definition and a more individual or more structural attribution. The values of self-reliance and work ethic appeared more frequently amongst those expressing the Personal Responsibility attribution; community and fairness values were more closely associated with Structural and Government Responsibility attributions. However, by far the dominant value, appearing across all responses, was compassion.

Discussion

This study assumes that our attitudes toward poverty have a significant impact on the way we respond to it and that as social workers we need to work holistically with service-users, considering social, environmental and personal factors. It assumes that our understanding of poverty and its impacts is crucial to this approach.

Around two-thirds of respondents gave definitions of poverty that were actually describing destitution; whilst the telephone interviewees discussed relative poverty more fully, there was repeatedly a distancing of the self from it, as illustrated by this exchange:

“I don’t consider myself to be living or to actually have lived in poverty, but I know that I have and that sometimes I am very close to it. I grew up in a single parent family with a Mum who worked three jobs to keep a roof over our head and a Dad who was out of work and lived in a canal boat and we went dipping in the skips behind Morrisons for food.

Interviewer: But you don’t consider yourself to have lived in poverty.

“I don’t, no, because I never went without and as a child, I wasn’t aware of it”.

Across social work practice, our assessments require us to look at social and emotional needs – the ability of service-users to participate in community. A starting point for the Social Metrics Commission’s work on ‘A New Measure of Poverty in the UK’ is that our measurement of “poverty should be related to the extent to which people have the resources to engage adequately in a life regarded as the “norm” in society” (2018, p12.).

If for social workers poverty is always elsewhere, if we are culturally ashamed of naming it, there is a danger of us not identifying it in our service users or of stigmatising their experience. If social workers only name poverty when they observe destitution, they cannot effectively assess and respond to the needs of service-users experiencing it.

Students responses demonstrated an understanding of the complexity of the causes of poverty: few students named a single cause. As predicted by Lepianka et al (2009), several respondents expressed contradictory views at the same time, for example equating poverty with unemployment whilst simultaneously recognising that work does not guarantee a route out of poverty.

The responses also demonstrated the importance of the political and cultural context: the emergence of the attribution category of Government Responsibility was striking, specific to the UK context of a cultural expectation of welfare provision alongside a decade of punitive cuts to provision. This provided a dramatic contrast to similar studies undertaken in the US.

My expectation was that a Relative definition of poverty might be associated with a Structural attribution and community-oriented values, giving an overall frame of a societal view of poverty. Absolute poverty definitions might come from a more individually-oriented perspective. This was not upheld: around two-thirds of those giving a Structural attribution also held an Absolute definition. There was no clear association between a Structural attribution and a Relative definition or between a Personal Responsibility attribution and either Absolute or Relative definitions.

This has led me to consider whether a definition of poverty tells us about someone’s attitude toward it at all - perhaps the definition of poverty is one of knowledge: a necessary starting point for the clarity of discussion but not indicative of an attitudinal position.

However, a general orientation toward a societal or an individual view of poverty was suggested by the relationships between values and attributions. The strong association between the value of Self-reliance and the Personal Responsibility attribution, and Fairness and Community with Government Responsibility would suggest this general orientation. A larger study would be needed to investigate this further.

Given the requirement that as social workers we act with empathy and integrity (BASW, 2012), it is heartening that Compassion was by far the most common value expressed.

Limitations

The scale of the study was too small to make the results transferable, but they might still be seen as indicative. The demographics of the respondents were not representative of the cohort of students at Sheffield Hallam University, with BME students and men under-represented and analysis on the basis of demographics. The socio-economic background of the on-line questionnaire respondents was not known – as attitudes are based on experience, this was a significant omission.

The study did not explicitly explore how the cultural backgrounds and experiences of social workers in the UK might impact on their perceptions of poverty. Given the socially constructed and comparative nature of poverty, how do social work students and practitioners from overseas perceive and respond to poverty in the UK context?

Recommendations

Little research has been carried out into social workers’ or student social workers’ attitudes toward poverty in the UK. Further, larger scale research would be helpful. Social workers’ attitudes toward and understanding of poverty may be a partial explanation of the ‘Inverse Intervention Law’ evidenced by Bywaters’ ‘Coventry Study’. This

research found that children in similar circumstances were treated differently according to the level of deprivation within their neighbourhood relative to the affluence of the local authority they were in, with deprived children in more affluent areas being far more likely to be subject to child welfare interventions (Bywaters, Brady, Sparks & Bos, 2016b).

Poverty-awareness might be included in the values and ethics element of the social work curriculum. Anti-oppressive practice requires us to be reflective practitioners, aware of the power imbalance between ourselves and our service-users both through our professional role and based on our personal characteristics: gender, ethnicity, age, (dis)ability (Thompson, 2016) and, I would argue, our relative income status. The frequent intersectionality between marginalised groups and poverty amplifies the barriers experienced.

Thompson's PCS model (2016) of identifying the different layers of oppression provides a helpful frame for looking at the impact of poverty: as well as looking at the personal impact (stigmatising), we can identify the deprivation of the local community and the structural barriers to social mobility and improving life chances. And we can examine our own values and responses, including 'othering'.

Conclusion

BA Social Work students at Sheffield Hallam University are generally compassionate in their response to people experiencing poverty. They expressed a complex understanding of its causal attributions, recognising its structural origins as well as holding government responsible. Alongside this, there is evidence of the stigmatising and 'othering' that is associated with blaming poverty on personal failings. Students predominantly had a narrow understanding of poverty with little understanding was of the relative, contextualised experience of deprivation and of the impact of social inequalities on individuals.

To act fairly and effectively, social workers need to take account of poverty in their assessments and work plans, to avoid stigmatising service-users and to maximise the possibilities for support, empowerment and enabling change. An exploration of the impact of deprivation and the consideration of our own values and responses needs to be included more prominently in the social work curriculum at all levels, including within CPD, within the context of anti-oppressive practice.

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