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# Residual Spiritual Shifts Regarding the Homeless Resulting From a College Poverty Immersion Experience

Elizabeth Garland  
*Cedarville University*, Egarland@cedarville.edu

Heidi J. Johnson  
*Cedarville University*, HeidiJohnson@cedarville.edu

Michael W. Firmin  
*Cedarville University*, firmin@cedarville.edu

Ruth Lowrie Markham  
*Cedarville University*, rlowrie@cedarville.edu

Kurt J. Stultz  
*Cedarville University*, kjstultz@cedarville.edu

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Michael W. Firmin, Ph.D.

Ruth E. Lowrie Markham, Ed.D.

Kurt J. Stultz

Heidi J. Johnson

Elizabeth P. Garland

## Literature Review:

There are an estimated 47,000 to 58,000 independent Faith Based Organizations (FBO) in America (Scheitle, 2010) and many of these exist to work with people in poverty. However, according to the *National Alliance to End Homelessness* (2013), extreme poverty is steadily on the rise. Since a large number of FBOs exist in America, the question of the church's resourcefulness and effectiveness is posed; at the macro level, the phenomenon prompted the larger, conceptual purpose of the present study. Who is responsible for the presence of the impoverished and who is responsible for caring for people living in poverty? What is the church doing that is effective and what is the church doing that is not effective, in relation to the homeless?

At a more micro and direct level, we are specifically interested in the responses of students who completed a poverty immersion weekend 1.5 years ago, in order to gauge their perception of the church's response to homelessness and poverty. Like any organization, the church is limited in its ability to care for the poor. As such, the church often fails to address the structural causes of homelessness and poverty, while sometimes reinforcing assumptions about poverty that keep church members from effectively addressing the causes of homelessness in the first place (Glennon, 2013). While many churches and Christian individuals are involved in charitable approaches that address the issue of poverty (and some have taken action), Stivers (2011) argues that the overt responses have been insufficient and that the church ought to help end homelessness rather than just treat the symptoms.

Fuder (1999) explains the logical state of compassion, following a transition from seeing to engaging, as *being-action*. Immersion experiences exist, not only to impart knowledge, but to increase compassion and empathy, as well as make students more aware of reality. Therefore, the professor of an urban ministry course decided to require students to participate and engage in a poverty immersion simulation so that they could, not only better relate to individuals living in homelessness, but also view the church's action (or inaction) to combat homelessness.

## Research Focus:

In a previously published research study, Tse, Firmin, Johnson, Vorobyov, and McKeon (2010) studied how a weekend poverty immersion experience impacted students' perceptions of persons living in homelessness. In the present study, we report the students' residual cognitive shifts regarding spiritual perceptions from their respective weekend poverty immersion experiences (1.5 years after the weekend experience). Particularly, we report how students spiritually came to frame their understandings of the church's responsibility to the poor/homeless and how they believed Christians in general were doing toward helping such individuals.

## Participants:

For the purpose of selecting participants we utilized the qualitative research strategy of purposeful sampling (Suri, 2011), in that we enlisted particular students who met the condition of interest to the study. Our interviewees consisted of 20 American students from a comprehensive, Midwestern university who had each experienced a poverty immersion weekend as part of an urban ministry elective course. This sample of students who had taken the course had a relatively even gender split (11 males and 9 females), (1) graduate, (12) seniors, and (7) juniors. A wide range of states and majors was represented by these students. Each participant had participated in the immersion experience 18 months prior to their interview, and was a current student of the university at the time of data collection. For confidentiality, no names were published.

## Method:

In order to obtain rich descriptions of the participants' thoughts, beliefs and perceptions our research team utilized *semi-structured interviews* (Alvesson, 2011). We generated the questions around general constructs, but allowed each participant to share their relevant insights, perspectives and experiences in the way that he or she felt most important. Interviews with each participant were tape recorded and then later transcribed for the purpose of analysis.

Our team analyzed the interview data with an *open coding* procedure (Maxwell, 2012). This enabled us to inductively code *line by line* for the *most commonly* used words, Phrases, and concepts (Chenail, 2012a). Throughout the collection process we utilized a *constant-comparison* method of comparing the new transcript's data with the previously obtained data (Berg, 2012). Each of the three data collectors completed this process with our own respective interviews, and then we compared our independently garnered codes with those found by the other researchers. After the interviews were complete, each potential theme was evaluated regarding its consistency throughout all the interviews, and themes that lacked adequate support were removed from consideration. Other codes possessed sufficient general similarity in order to be combined, at points, into a single code as Creswell (2012b) describes. Additionally, we also considered *negative case samples*, organized *reviews*, asked *key questions* and utilized *concept mapping* (Gay, Mills & Airsian, 2011).

We employed several techniques in an effort to strengthen *internal validity*. In addition to the research team meeting throughout the coding and analysis processes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), we also followed Johnson and Christensen's (2010) direction, by consulting an *expert qualitative researcher* who did not participate in the data collection or analysis processes. We also utilized *member checking* (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Additionally, we drafted a *data-trail* to ensure that there was ample support for each theme, and allowed our consulting expert to scrutinize it. Finally, we reported the themes using *low inference descriptions* (Chenail, 2012b).

## Results:

College students' reflections residual spiritual effects of a poverty immersion experience 18 months prior:

### 1. Perception of Ignorance

The analysis of the interviews revealed that most students perceive that Christians do not understand homelessness or poverty well enough to be aptly involved or effective in ministering to impoverished communities.

*"Just the culture of suburbia you have this little bubble like that doesn't get disturbed.... And we just stay in the building and you know what I'm saying? I think that's just the way the culture of suburbia operates. And because of that, they don't go out as much, they don't bring people in as much."*

### 2. Perception of Ineffective Church Outreach

Second, most students in the present study also believed that the church is ineffective in the outreaches that do exist. Nearly every student expressed that most churches could be doing a better job in how they reach out to the needs of the homeless.

*"There's very little we are doing, at least--doing something is better than nothing, in many cases, and so, it's either like 'Oh, let's go work at a soup kitchen,' and they might do that with the youth group once or twice, and then we did, we did homeless ministry [implying that that is doing homeless ministry], that is how it's infused a lot."*

### 3. Need for Greater Church Involvement

With near unanimity, the participants expressed their perceptions that the church needed to be more involved in serving the homeless, and also that the church should be responsible for helping those in need. When we asked how the church should support the impoverished most expressed the basic physiological needs such as shelter, food, and water, but most also expressed that the church should address social and psychological needs.

*"I think the church many times emphasizes as, as a whole that 'we should, accept these people' but, at the end...it hasn't trained its individuals in how to accept these people and how to welcome them ... and so it really comes down to an individual level, on that one and...the way the church has to address it is by educating and having a plan for 'how do we address this?'"*