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Examining College Students' Attitudes Toward Poverty During the Adult Role of the Community Action Poverty Simulation

Jessica M. Parks

Nevada State College at Henderson, jessica.parks@nevadastate.edu

Portia Johnson

plj0009@auburn.edu

DIANN C. MOORMAN DR.

University of Georgia, dmoorman@uga.edu

Sheri Worthy

University of Georgia, sworthy@uga.edu

Leigh Anne Aaron

University of Georgia Cooperative Extension, laa@uga.edu

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Jessica M. Parks

Nevada State University

Portia L. Johnson

Auburn University

Diann C. Moorman

Sheri L. Worthy

Leigh Anne Aaron

University of Georgia

Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) and Extension professionals need to understand the lived experience of poverty because it affects every aspect of an individual's life. Poverty is related to inadequate nutrition and food insecurity, lack of access to health care, insufficient child care, unsafe neighborhoods, lack of affordable housing, under-resourced schools, and a lower quality of life. Attitudes toward poverty vary widely among Americans and can be categorized as either internal/individual attributions (e.g., laziness, welfare dependency, etc.) or systemic/structural attributions (e.g., unemployment, inflation, etc.). Individuals holding internal attributions toward poverty are more likely to have negative feelings toward impoverished individuals. As such, efforts to educate FCS college students, Extension agents, and all Americans on the day-to-day reality of those in poverty are important. Extension-sponsored Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) programs are effective in changing participants' attitudes toward poverty. This research used Reflexive Thematic Analysis to analyze 56 reflection papers written by college students enrolled in a family resource management course. Three themes emerged from the research: (a) empathy, (b) a turn from internal attributions, and (c) systematic attributions. This research has implications for Extension and FCS professionals offering CAPS programming in higher education settings.

Keywords: attitudes toward poverty, poverty simulation, Community Action Poverty Simulation, experiential learning, Extension, teaching about poverty

Introduction

Poverty spans all Extension, human services, and Family and Consumer Science (FCS) areas. Poverty can sometimes leave individuals without sufficient housing, malnourished, lacking health care, and with a lower quality of life. As of March 2023, an estimated 10.7% of U.S.

households were living in poverty (Columbia University's Center on Poverty and Social Policy, 2023). Additionally, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that the national poverty rate in 2021 was 12.8% (Benson, 2022). While Americans are generally sympathetic to those living in poverty, beliefs and attitudes toward poverty vary widely (Coryn, 2002; Ekins, 2019). Research shows that both internal factors (e.g., laziness, welfare dependency) and external factors (e.g., unemployment, inflation) contribute to poverty. However, many people believe that internal factors (particularly laziness) are the sole causes of poverty (Hunt, 2002, 2004). Research shows that individuals holding internal attributions toward those living in poverty are more likely to have negative feelings toward those individuals (Zosky & Thompson, 2012). As such, efforts to educate college students, Extension agents, and Americans alike on the lived reality of those in poverty are worthy of undertaking (Parks, 2023).

Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS)

The Missouri Community Action Network (MCAN) created the Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) in 2003. The purpose of CAPS is to expose individuals to the realities of poverty in the United States. This live-action role-play program enables policymakers, teachers, business owners, and students to experience the realities those living in poverty may encounter. CAPS features several family types, including single parents, grandparents raising grandchildren, and homeless adults. The objectives of the simulation are to (a) promote poverty awareness, (b) increase understanding of poverty, (c) inspire local change, and (d) transform perspectives about poverty (MCAN, n.d.). Participants assume a role as either a community worker, an impoverished adult, or an impoverished child. Over 2,000 organizations have used CAPS (MCAN, n.d.), including Extension programs at land-grant institutions. Examples extend to North Dakota State University Extension (Pankow, 2006), University of Georgia Extension (Chapman & Gibson, 2006; Nickols & Nielsen, 2011), and University of Tennessee Extension (Franck et al., 2016).

The CAPS program is used by Extension programs in several ways. First, CAPS is used to teach Extension professionals about the lived experiences of poverty (Pankow, 2006). Oftentimes, Extension agents serve low-income families through their various programming. Therefore, teaching them about the lived realities of poverty will be advantageous. Additionally, CAPS has been used to teach Family and Consumer Science (FCS) students (Nickols & Nielsen, 2011) about the lived realities of poverty. Some of these students may work as FCS or Extension professionals, necessitating the need to use CAPS in higher education. Lastly, CAPS has been used to teach teachers, business leaders, and community members about poverty (Chapman & Gibson, 2006; Franck et al., 2016).

This research explored whether students' attitudes toward poverty were different before and after participating in CAPS. The sampled students were enrolled in a family resource management course at a large public land-grant institution in the South. The program was offered by a local

state Extension agent, making it both a Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) and an Extension program. This research contributed to the literature by adding to the body of Extension and FCS studies that have used CAPS with a specific focus on family resource management.

Literature Review

Use of CAPS in Extension Programs

CAPS has been used among university Cooperative Extension programs to educate their agents about poverty (Chapman & Gibson, 2006; Franck et al., 2016; Pankow, 2006). North Dakota State University Extension, which has been offering CAPS programming since 1996, conducted a study of 420 participants from 2001 through 2003 (Pankow, 2006). Post-simulation surveys revealed that 80% of the participants had changed perceptions of those living in poverty. Open-ended responses from follow-up phone interviews ($n = 14$) revealed that participants completed some form of action and gained a better understanding of poverty. Further, Chapman and Gibson (2006) showed that CAPS is effective in changing participants' attitudes and increasing the participants' level of confidence in helping the poor. Franck et al. (2016) offered CAPS to teachers in a local school. Of the 102 participants, 56 reported increased awareness of poverty and empathy for impoverished and homeless children.

Additionally, many Extension professionals have hosted CAPS programs for FCS post-secondary education courses. Most studies, with the exception of Nnakwe (2021), showed significant changes in attitudes toward poverty when FCS students participated in CAPS. Research by both Arnett-Hartwick and Davis (2019) and Arnett-Hartwick and Harpel (2020) used Yun and Weaver's (2010) scale and determined there were marginal changes in attitudes toward poverty among their sampled participants. Yun and Weaver's (2010) 21-item Attitude Toward Poverty (ATP) scale is widely used in CAPS literature and assesses undergraduate ATP pre and post-CAPS. Kihm and Knapp (2015) used the scale embedded with the CAPS simulation and saw general changes in participants' understanding of poverty.

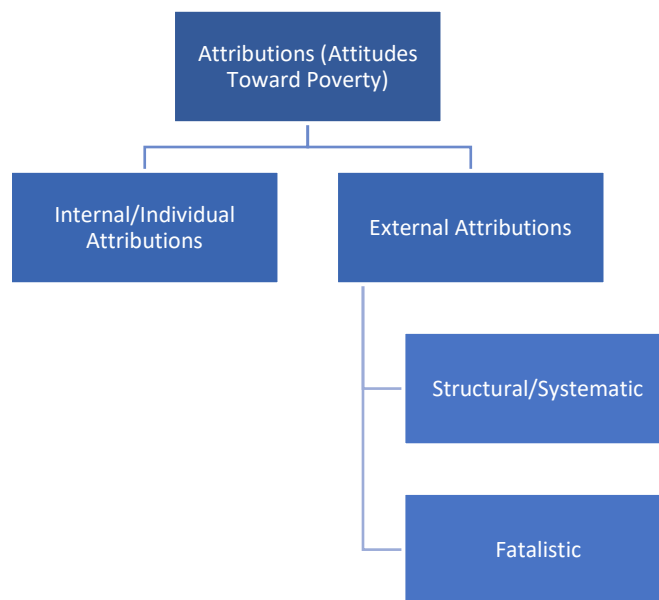
Theoretical Framework

This research used Attribution Theory to develop a theoretical framework for attitudes toward poverty. Attributions toward poverty are specific attitudes about the causes of poverty. According to Attribution Theory, observers (i.e., the student-participants) make judgments about actors' (i.e., those living in poverty) economic status and financial decisions (Heider, 1958). Attribution Theory might explain why affluent households attribute poverty to an actor's individual deficits (i.e., welfare dependency, laziness, and drug addiction) and those living in poverty attribute their economic status to external factors (Feagin, 1972; Hunt, 2004). Attribution Theory has been used in higher education to assess students' change in attributions for poverty. Further, observers distinguish between internal/individualism and systematic/structuralism.

Internal attributions are the most widely held attributions for poverty among American adults and college students alike (Feagin, 1972; Hunt, 2004). Internal attributions suggest that the person is living in poverty due to their own “individual failing” (Rank et al., 2003). Examples of individual failings include laziness, poor morals, welfare dependency, lack of human capital, sexual immorality, poor decision-making, and substance abuse (Bradshaw, 2007; Zosky & Thompson, 2012). Those who ascribe to the internal attribution may hold that if low-income individuals would maintain full-time employment, then they would escape poverty. A systemic/structural attribution suggests that a person is poor due to the ongoing “structural failings” (Rank et al., 2003) present in American society. Examples include the lack of a living wage, inflation, discrimination, unemployment, and other inefficiencies in the market (Brady, 2019; Mutikani, 2022).

See Figure 1 for a visual representation of this study’s theoretical framework. As depicted in the model, internal attributions refer to laziness, poor morals, welfare dependency, lack of human capital, sexual immorality, poor decision-making, and substance abuse. The external attributions consist of structural attributions (e.g., lack of a living wage) and fatalistic attributions (e.g., luck).

Figure 1. Attitudes and Attributions of Poverty Based on Heider (1958)



Methodology

This research used deductive coding analysis to examine a sample of 56 student reflection papers. These students simulated adults as a part of their enrollment in either a Fall 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, or 2019 family resource management class. These CAPS simulations were hosted by University of Georgia Extension Program by a local FCS Extension agent, thus rendering it both an FCS and Extension program. This research was approved by the University of Georgia’s Institutional Review Board. For confidentiality, the authors renamed the student papers

according to their simulated character's name and the year they were enrolled in the course (e.g., Yuri Yarrow in 2019) instead of using the students' names.

Description of the Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS)

CAPS is set in the fictitious Realville, USA, where 26 low-income families neighbor each other. Each participant is assigned a role: adult, child, or community worker. Up to 88 participants can simulate a family role (i.e., an adult or child), and at least 15 people can simulate the community worker role. The participants simulating a family role arrange themselves into a group of chairs corresponding to their family. These families are given a Family Profile printed handout explaining their household structure, income level, and assets. Household structures can vary from recently unemployed breadwinners to single mothers and even grandparents raising grandchildren. For instance, the Aber family features a 42-year-old recently unemployed husband, a 39-year-old stay-at-home wife, two minor sons, and a 16-year-old pregnant daughter. See Figure 2 for a sample Family Profile of the Abers.

Figure 2. Aber Family Profile

FAMILY PROFILE		MISSOURI'S Community Action Poverty Simulation
ABER 731 Windermere		
Category Recently unemployed		
FAMILY MEMBERS		
FATHER: Albert, age 42, computer programmer, with a college education, has been employed at the same company for 20 years. He was laid off four months ago and has been unable to find work. He was receiving unemployment compensation of \$350/week, but this has now run out.		
MOTHER: Ann, age 39, with some college education. Employed full-time as a receptionist at General Hospital.		
DAUGHTER: Alice, age 16, in good health. She is a motivated high school sophomore looking forward to going to college, but is pregnant and due in 2 months. The father is Dan Duntley and Alice likes spending time with him.		
SON: Al, Jr., age 10. He ends up watching his younger brother even if he is too young because his sister takes off with her boyfriend.		
SON: Andy, age 8. In grade school and gives his brother a hard time when he has to watch him.		
SETTING You live in a middle-class suburb in a three-bedroom home, which you are paying a mortgage. The house needs several repairs and insulation to help reduce your monthly utilities and make it more comfortable. You have student loans. You have two used vehicles. One is unreliable but paid for, and you are paying off a loan on the other. You have been using your credit cards as a means of survival while the father continues to look for employment, but now your cards have reached their maximum limit. Mother has health insurance through her work but it is too expensive to cover her husband and children. They have no insurance at this time. During the third week of the simulation the Realville Public School will be closed for holiday.		
INCOME Mother makes \$9.00/hour and works 40 hours/week, for a total of \$1,440/month (\$1,324 after taxes). You have \$200 in savings.		
BUDGET These are the bills you must pay during each month:		

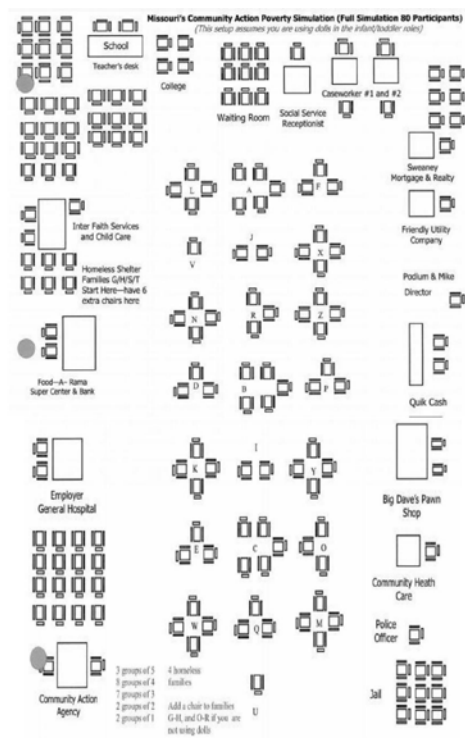
The 56 sampled personal reflections were only authored by students who simulated the adults from the following families: Aber, Boiling, Chen, Duntley, Epperman, Fuentes, Smith, Tiskit, Ussar, Vimmer Wiscott, Xanthos, Yarrow, and Zuppot. These families were selected since they were the ones that appeared the most often across the five semesters:

- The **Aber, Boiling, and Chen** families feature recently unemployed husbands with three minor children. Their teenage daughters are dating and have been impregnated by the 17-year-old sons from Duntley, Epperman, and Fuentes families.

- The **Duntley, Epperman, and Fuentes** families are each headed by a 34-year-old recently separated single mother. They have 14-year-old daughters and 17-year-old sons who have impregnated the Aber, Boiling, and Chen families.
- **Smith, Tiskit, Ussar, and Vimmers** are 85-year-old widows. Although they live in poverty, they are in relatively good health and rely on Social Security. Unfortunately, they do not have any children or anyone to help care for them.
- **The Wiscotts, Xantos, Yarrow, and Zuppots** families are grandparents raising grandchildren. The grandsons in the family have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). The mothers of the grandchildren were incarcerated for substance abuse, and their fathers are not in the picture.

Although not the focus of this paper, a discussion on the community workers is important to establish context. The community workers maintain table stations located around the periphery of the room. See Figure 3 for a diagram of the room layout. The community workers serve the family members and represent the institutions we, as consumers, encounter in everyday life. They include a banker, a doctor, a school teacher, and staff who represent social assistance programs. For instance, the supercenter clerk accepts Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards to process the character's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. The Social Service Office Caseworker connects student-participants with benefits such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and SNAP.

Figure 3. Layout of the CAPS Room



Dataset and Sampling Procedures

Fifteen student reflection papers were drawn from Fall 2015, and 10 were sampled from Fall 2016 students. In Fall 2017 and 2018, 12 and 8 student reflection papers were sampled, respectively. In Fall 2019, 11 student reflection papers were sampled. Therefore, this research analyzed a total of 56 student reflection papers. These students were enrolled in the same family resource management course at a large public university in the South. Table 1 shows the number of student reflection paper data by semester.

Table 1. Adult Family Member Participants by Semester

	Fall 2015	Fall 2016	Fall 2017	Fall 2018	Fall 2019	Total
Student Enrollment	98	66	97	100	99	460
Adult Roles	15	10	12	8	11	56

Purposive sampling is a standard sampling procedure used in qualitative research. It involves a series of strategic choices about with whom, where, and how one does research and how the sample is conducted (Palys, 2008). This approach is grounded in the notion that there is no one best sampling strategy since the sample should depend on the research purpose and the ontological and epistemological arrangement (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Whereas quantitative research is focused on questions about the representativeness, generalizability, significance, and central tendency of a group, this form of qualitative research is less concerned with the majority but is concerned with a particular case or specific group of individuals. Purposive sampling, within the context of this paper, involves specifically choosing student papers from those who simulated the adult roles.

Each student compiled a two-to-four-page reflection paper. The students responded to five reflection questions:

1. Please provide a thorough description of your experience. (What role were you in during the simulation? What challenges did you face?)
2. Please describe how you felt about your experience during the CAPS.
3. What did you learn from CAPS?
4. What were some of your takeaways (highlights/key points) from this experience?
5. Did this simulation change your attitudes toward poverty?

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

This research used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach to analyze students' attitudes before and after completing the CAPS simulation. The six phases of RTA include

- Phase 1: Reading and re-reading the data

- Phase 2: Generating initial codes
- Phase 3: Constructing themes
- Phase 4: Reviewing themes
- Phase 5: Defining and naming themes
- Phase 6: Producing the report

During phase 1, each student's reflection paper was read twice. While reading the paper, the lead researcher highlighted phrases and maintained a list of initial codes. Only one author conducted the data analysis, which is acceptable for this form of qualitative data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During phase 2, the lead author compiled the initial codes from the first and second readings. In the third phase, she organized those codes into meaningful themes. During phase 4, the researcher reviewed themes, ensuring that all the codes in that theme were relevant to the theme. Then, in phase 5, she named and renamed the themes until the themes' names fit with the codes. The researcher knew when all the candidate themes reflected the data when a specific name and brief description of the theme were generated. The sixth and final phase corresponds with the results section.

Results

This research constructed three themes to address the research questions: (a) empathy, (b) a turn from internal attributions, and (c) systematic attributions.

Theme A: Empathy

As reflected in this theme, students expressed a newfound empathy for those living in poverty. Prior to the simulation, many expressed being originally apathetic. Specifically, many students outright stated that their affluent or middle-class background precluded them from even having to think about poverty, thus leading to an apathetic attitude. In the simulation, the fifty-two-year-old Yuri Yarrow character is a grandfather with a physical disability who is raising his two minor grandchildren with his wife. The student that simulated Yuri Yarrow in 2019 stated:

My view on poverty really didn't change too much. I do however have a deeper level of empathy for the impoverished folks that I encounter in my life. It is always easier to make snap judgements about people instead of truly getting to know them and what makes them uniquely themselves. If anything, this activity further enforced my views and convictions about poverty. The issues that impoverished folks face are often very deep as well as cyclical and they won't be fully helped with band aid solutions.

This theme shows the students, if nothing else, gained "a deeper level of empathy" as a result of the CAPS simulation. Another student who simulated Doris Duntley referenced how the simulation allowed them to take a walk in someone else's shoes. Doris Duntley is a single

mother that was recently abandoned by her husband. The student who simulated Doris Duntley in 2015 stated:

Before the poverty simulation, I had not given too much thought on the hardships of being a single parent. ... The poverty simulation served as a good reality check. It demonstrated a route that anyone can end up taking if they are not careful. It was quite scary to experience what living in poverty was like. I do not ever want to end up living paycheck to paycheck and live in constant fear of being evicted from my home. Living in poverty would mean having to devote most if not all of my time to finding income. There would not be much time for leisure and even if there were, I would not have the resources for entertainment. The simulation was overall effective in teaching the hardships of living under the poverty line and value of time.

As expressed by this student, CAPS was an effective “reality check” that enabled participants to experience poverty and begin to empathize with those who are living in it.

Theme B: A Turn from Internal Attributions for Poverty

Many of the students in this sample originally held internal/individualistic attributions of poverty. However, after completing CAPS, many students reported seeing the role that systematic/structural attributions play in perpetuating poverty. An individualistic belief system attributes a poor person's poverty status to some personal deficit of the individual (Brady, 2019). Examples include lack of education, low work ethic, laziness, or lack of sound morals. Laziness is one of the predominant explanations of poverty. It explains that people are poor simply because they are lazy and do not want to work. Specifically, many of the students stated that they originally associated those living in poverty with a dispositional attribution. After completing the simulation, many students no longer felt laziness was the sole explanation for poverty. In the simulation, the character Vince Vimmer is an 85-year-old homeless widow living in relatively good health and poverty. One student simulating Vince Vimmer in 2018 stated:

I am a refugee, my family lost everything and some close family during a genocide. We moved a lot from one country to another, in search for shelter and peace. However, upon each move, we were welcomed by poverty. ... In 2011, we ... were very fortunate and were granted a resettlement in the USA. Although I grew up poor, I was sheltered from some of the impacts by my parents. I was a recipient of their successes and shielded from worries. They did everything they could for me and my siblings to live well. Therefore, I thought that there is always a way out of poverty, and that people who result to bad behavior because of being poor was a result of complacency. This idiotic thinking of mine changed during the simulation. Being able to assume the adult role really gave insight of decisions, sacrifices adults, and probably my parents, also had to decide on to make ends meet. ... My hope is that my fellow classmates and I will use this experience to change our views on poverty and to find ways to help others in need.

The student simulating Vince articulated that he originally felt poverty was always a choice since he watched his parents constantly find ways for them to escape it as it occurred. However, once the student began to encounter challenges in the simulation, he noticed the difficulties associated with living in poverty. He thus began to ascribe poverty less to the dispositional attributions of poverty. Additionally, the student simulating 85-year-old widow Eunice Ussar in 2017 stated:

The biggest thing I can take away from this simulation is that most of the time, the people living in poverty are not there because they are lazy. Instead the people living in poverty are mainly there because of unforeseen events such as death in the family, car breakdown, accidents. I would never believe that something so small could make a family go from alright to in big trouble.

The student simulating Eunice expressed that poverty is not simply just the result of laziness. Like many of the other students, this one expressed that poverty can be the result of unforeseeable events or bad luck.

Theme C: Systematic Attributions

Systematic attributions suggest that families live in poverty because they are being exploited, discriminated against, or are not afforded the same opportunities as everyone due to a broken economic system. In the simulation, the character Anthony Xanthos is a 52-year-old diabetic grandfather who is co-raising his minor grandchildren with his wife. A student who simulated Anthony Xanthos in 2016 discussed being double charged by the Utility Company due to not having a receipt. According to this student,

My experience at the poverty simulation showed me that individuals and families could be making every effort to prevent their decline into poverty but face tremendous adversity in seeking out employment or additional resources. The simulation also showed me the plight individuals and families are subject to from financial institutions and collection agencies. Families in poverty simply do not have the resources to devote towards fighting unfair charges or bills and are given little to no leeway in paying their outstanding obligations. The realtor in the simulation was going to evict my family for failing to pay our mortgage payment, even though we had all the funds at our disposal to paying off a portion of the debt.

As mentioned by the students, poverty can be perpetuated by shady financial practices and a lack of access to consumer protection laws. The student simulating Stella Smith in 2018 reported being a victim of criminal activity, which resulted in her losing even more money. As a result, the student who simulated Stella Smith in 2018 stated,

My next priority was making sure I had a way of defending myself. ... I missed a whole week's worth of meals ... keeping in mind that I was an 85-year-old retired widow and the money being given to me by the government was not cutting it at all.

By being a victim of theft, the student was able to see better how being the victim of criminal activity can put someone in a deeper financial situation.

Conclusion

This research explored students' attitudes toward poverty before and after the CAPS program. The sample was drawn from 56 reflection papers authored by students across five different years. These students were enrolled in the same family resource management course at a large public university in the southeast. Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), this research constructed three themes: (a) empathy, (b) a turn from internal attributions, and (c) systematic attributions.

Discussion of the Themes

Many students in this study developed a newfound empathy for those living in poverty. This finding aligns with Nickols and Nielsen (2011), who revealed that students in their study often believed poverty was primarily caused by laziness and poor decision-making prior to the poverty simulation experience. As guided by Attribution Theory, the research found that students (as observers) expressed holding both internal and external attributions of poverty (Heider, 1958). This paper adds to the literature by using Attribution Theory to assess students' change in attributions for poverty. As noted in the literature, this research found that college students may have negative attitudes and hold internal attributions of poverty (Hunt, 2004). This research also showed that educational interventions such as CAPS can enable students to turn from internal attributions as the sole cause of poverty to appreciate the role structural attributions hold. In congruence with other research (Arnett-Hartwick & Davis, 2019; Arnett-Hartwick & Harpel, 2020; Nnakwe, 2021), this research demonstrates that students reported attitudinal changes about poverty following a poverty simulation.

Implications and Limitations

This study adds to the literature by analyzing multi-semester, qualitative data emanating from an Extension-hosted CAPS program. However, this research is not without limitations. Qualitative research has limited ability to establish generalizability. As such, these findings cannot be generalized to all Extension programs or all college students. However, they do reflect this particular group of student-participants. Extension program specialists could benefit from using CAPS with college FCS students. Additionally, future research in this area might consider using mixed methods analyses to assess attitudes toward poverty further. Future research might explore

the use of other poverty simulations on FCS and Extension audiences such as Spent (Parks & Worthy, 2023).

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Jessica Parks is an Assistant Professor of Business at Nevada State University in Henderson, NV. She teaches Financial Planning, Investment, and Personal Finance courses. Please direct correspondence about this article to jessica.parks@nevadastate.edu

Portia Johnson is an Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist with a joint appointment with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and the Department of Consumer and Design Sciences at Auburn University in financial resource management and workforce development. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9131-1116>

Diann Moorman is an Associate Professor at the University of Georgia in the Department of Financial Planning, Housing, and Consumer Economics. She teaches personal finance, consumer economics, and consumer policy courses. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0207-4882>

Sheri Worthy is Associate Dean for Academic Programs and Professor in the College of Family and Consumer Sciences at the University of Georgia. She holds the Samuel A. and Sharon Y. Nickols Professorship. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7069-830X>

Leigh Anne Aaron is a Public Service Associate with the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. She serves as the FACS Program Development Coordinator.

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