

## Academic Teachings vs ‘Real Life’ Experience: A Journey of Understanding Academia’s Usefulness Within Society

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*This article is a personal journey of self-reflection and exposure to working with disadvantaged people within the broader community of Perth. This took place as part of my work placement within my final year internship unit in Behavioural Science conducted at the University of Notre Dame, Fremantle, Western Australia. I will elaborate to how this placement related directly to the internship unit; the major project of the internship, which comprised of a conference on poverty in light of the global financial crisis; and finally how these combined experiences added value to the degree. Discussed in depth will be the conflict and contradiction experienced through my practical exposure to poverty and the introduction to the intellectual information presented pertaining directly to poverty. Greater issues of individualised poverty and structural poverty will also be discussed within the context of my own personal experiences.*

As a student of Behavioural Science I often contemplate the gap between the theories learnt in an academic environment and the practical application of these theories within the ‘real’ world. I recently graduated from the University of Notre Dame in Fremantle (UNDA), Western Australia with a degree in Behavioural Science. The arrangement of the degree is structured in so that each student is able to complete a ‘real-life’ work placement linked directly to the degree. This combination of theory and practice opened up a deeper understanding for me to how our society functions, behaviours formed and relationships and theories constructed. The foundational philosophy of this Behavioural Science degree places itself within the realm of community psychology. It is ecological in nature, which means that there is a powerful relational underpinning to its approach to social wellbeing, the importance of cultural relativity and respecting diversity (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). Oppression against marginalised groups is tackled not with a top-down approach but rather a bottom-up approach, where self-determination becomes the focus and the individual knows and understands what is best for themselves and their community (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). This knowledge combined with my work placement experience allowed a deeper

exploration into social problems such as poverty. If it were not for this collaborative understanding on dealing with individuals from different social positions I feel I would have struggled to comprehend possible solutions to poverty as a greater social problem.

The focus of this paper is the final semester of my studies, which involved my internship as the final part of my degree. Our major project in the internship was to develop and run a conference on poverty and the global financial crisis. Directly linked to this experience of organising and conducting a conference, part of our curriculum was to also undertake in work placement relevant to the degree chosen at each student’s discretion. For the vast majority of students in this unit, the work placement had strong ties to the conference theme. For instance, I chose to work and learn at a homeless shelter, for I felt it would provide me with direct experience relating to poverty, which could be transferred to the conference and my academic studies. I wanted to understand the role academia played in alleviating a hugely integrated social, economic, environmental and cultural problem such as poverty. Most importantly though, I wanted to understand what poverty meant to those living it and experiencing it directly. I will critically reflect upon the role I played within the conference and the relationships I

maintained with other students and our lecturer. I will focus on how these interactions changed me, and how the dynamics of these dealings opened a pathway to greater knowledge and awareness of poverty and its implications on those who are directly affected by it (those considered poor); and those indirectly affected by it (the remainder of society). I will also explore the tensions and frustrations between working directly with homelessness and poverty and theoretical frameworks explaining poverty, how the two can be different, and how I negotiated these tensions and contradictions.

### **The Internship Unit**

This unit was designed to articulate all that Behavioural Science at UNDA predicated itself upon and apply it to the 'real world' via our placement and the experience of creating a conference. This unit was extremely challenging, beginning with the workload itself placed upon us by our unit coordinator. My personal view pertaining to the work placement hours was that 150 hours of practical hours for our designated work placement was too long and unachievable. That coupled with the intense organisation of the conference and other task requirements I initially felt quite disorientated with the entire process, yet once immersed in my chosen organisation, it opened up a positive and direct correlation with the unit content. I found myself engulfed in the interaction of real people with real social issues, such as homelessness, drug abuse and poverty; and in fact I reached more hours than actually required. The internship consisted of four key components: individual weekly journals pertaining to our direct experiences with our internship work placement, an individual analytical and reflective report specifically based on our experiences of the internship work placement, the internship and then the conference itself.

I have been a part-time university student for six years; it is this part-time status that allowed me to lack confidence in my academic ability. My perception was that I was not equipped with the skills that the other students possessed to accomplish all of these tasks in a

professional manner; primarily due to the fact that I had been studying part-time for six years and felt detached from my peers and the 'proper' full-time student experience (Fleming, 2006). The roles I occupied at the conference included the keynote speaker and the liaison of the organising committee (which was the group I was directly involved with) and the chief liaison within all the other designated groups. Alongside this I also managed the work placement and personal employment. My exposure to university thus far had given me the perception that unless I was viewed as a full-time scholar I would not have the faith and belief of my fellow students; it was these thought processes, which initially forced me to feel quite distant from the entire unit. Having to coordinate the entire class engulfed me with feelings of nervousness, as thoughts of inadequacy would enter my mind. How would my fellow students trust me to organise an entire conference? Was my lack of full-time dedication to university a reflection of commitment? I reflect now and realise the absurdity of these thoughts, but at the time they were legitimate concerns that had the ability to negatively affect my potential and work application.

### **The Conference**

As the liaison person my aims were to practice humility, be fair to all students and deploy empathy towards their needs. Their external circumstances were important and included their families, social lives, other studies and general commitments. It would be imperative to understand that these commitments are multifaceted and require their time and personal attention. This degree instilled in us that we ought to value and respect diversity, cultural relativity, personal and social circumstance of all individuals (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). I would be required to organise and compile connecting ideas, timelines and distribute workloads evenly amongst the organising committee and ensure as much as possible that all other groups were load sharing equitably.

*Background and foundations to the conference*

The conference day beckoned and the project took shape in the form of our format and structure becoming visibly clearer. As part of the organising committee, I began to understand the importance of group cohesion being crucial to the overall success of this conference. I realised that a combination of open communication, effective task management and combining all the technical skills of all class members would enhance the quality of the conference (Seethamraju & Borman, 2009). My own confidence levels rose due to this and this further assisted me in understanding that I had contributed greatly as part of a larger collective to this project. I began to observe a connection between what the media portrayed as the definition of poverty and what social platforms are actually present. There is a powerful distinction between the physical reality of the existence of those who are considered poor and what the poor then experience; and the general social perception that is enhanced or created by the media (Jeppesen, 2009).

*Audience members of the conference*

The central theme of the conference was to identify how the notion of poverty related directly to the global financial crisis and how poverty affected a variety of individuals and groups. Conference delegates included local influential community members, workplace coordinators from each students work placement, resident lecturers and the Dean of Arts and Sciences at UNDA. Representatives of those affected directly by poverty and homelessness were at the time not considered as delegates. Upon reflection I feel there was great disadvantage not only for the students and their own learning experience but also for the portrayal of what poverty actually is and what the Behavioural Science degree predicates itself upon. There was no voice on behalf of poverty and homelessness to comment on the ideas presented. This potentially placed the conference at a disadvantage in terms of the effect of the message portrayed, for the physical reality of how poverty is felt and dealt with was not

present; indeed, the conference was dominated by academic ideology, philosophy and theoretical frameworks. I would argue that without the voice of direct experience the conference was somewhat hypocritical. I am not insinuating that the conference was useless or did not achieve its desired outcome of creating awareness of the reality and existence of poverty. Behavioural Science at UNDA predicates itself on equity, voice and collaborative efforts towards any social change. As students we believed this and even presented it within the paradigm of the conference, the fact that there was no physical presence representing poverty to assist in solidifying our thoughts and recommendations for social change perhaps devalued the power of the conference.

*Voice: Theory, practice or both?*

The homeless population experience extreme poverty and as groups and individuals are often ostracised and considered social outcasts (Cohen, 1994). Homeless people often lose their social identities, social roles within communities, families, jobs, homes and monetary earning abilities (Cohen, 1994; Magallanes-Blanco & Perez-Bermudez, 2009). Individuals and groups directly affected by poverty are constantly facing the unknown; lack of food, accelerated violence and social isolation (Magallanes-Blanco & Perez-Bermudez, 2009). It is this social exclusion that creates power imbalances amongst mainstream society and those who are poor (Hallerod & Larsson, 2008). Those considered poor or who are homeless are not respected or valued as highly by mainstream society as someone who is employed, has a home, is in possession of multiple material items and is a positively contributing and active member of the community (Turner & Lehning, 2007). Why was it that as part of the audience a homeless voice was neither present nor considered to add further depth to the structure and meaning of the conference? To answer this question, poverty's place within a mainstream social framework must be first understood. Creating

change within a social paradigm or altering systems that affect human conditions requires collaborative consultation with those affected most by those conditions (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). It is this process of collaborative consultation and understanding that can prove to be difficult due to the social isolation the homeless community receive, therefore hindering and inhibiting the possibility of open and cooperative communication (Hallerod & Larsson, 2008). This is what I believe was the core reason that a voice directly affected by poverty was not part of the audience and representing a view point from this disadvantaged group.

#### *Media portrayal and poverty*

Working with the poor, I found a strong distinction between the media portrayal of poverty and the existence of poverty. Poverty affects far more people than the media shows (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2001). What commenced to take shape was the greater understanding of poverty and where it stems from; why it occurs and why it continues to plague individuals directly and indirectly. The issue of poverty has the ability to affect all people from all walks of life; even those who were once financially stable and secure would feel the negative impacts of a global financial crisis (Jeppesen, 2009). Social constructs create the platform for poverty to flourish and grow and it is our economic systems which base their function and vitality on scarcity, economic debt, deprivation and employment which perpetuate poverty and allow it to multiply and exist (Eissel, 2008). The role media portrays is one of perpetual reinforcement, which is ultimately detrimental to the individual or group considered poor; it does this in two possible ways. Firstly, the media maintains the status quo, by driving consumerism through advertising, hence reinforcing what the mainstream consider to be socially acceptable practices and cultural norms (Hays, 2010). The problem that the poor face is again one of exclusion. Homeless groups, individuals and those who are poor do not have the purchasing

power or expendable income to sustain lifestyles that meet the expectations of the status quo and hence further face social stratification (Freeman, 2009; Hays, 2010). Secondly; the media portrayal of what homelessness and poverty represents is misaligned, socially segregating and marginalising to the reality that is actually occurring (Buck, Toro & Ramos, 2004; Dreier, 2005; Speak & Tipple, 2006). It is not an accurate portrayal of how individuals affected by poverty live or act. Individuals struck by poverty are often associated with crime, violence, and drug abuse and are considered socially unapproachable (Dreier, 2005). By questioning these social perceptions it was an intrinsic drive to work firsthand with organisations that dedicated their time working within the homeless community to deeper understand the reality of the situation.

#### **My Chosen Work Placement**

The process of direct placement with a not-for-profit humanitarian-based organisation was personally challenging at times and the potent question of whether or not my own convictions were in line with that of mainstream society were raised regularly throughout this powerful experience. Determining the part attitudinal values and policies within mainstream society play in perpetuating the negative stigma attached to disadvantaged persons is an important one for it offers direction to a solution to the social problem of poverty (Hunter & Jordan, 2010). Through the internship unit and my work placement, previous negative stereotypes and ideologies that I once maintained pertaining specifically to poverty were slowly removed. Why was I discriminatory in the first place? Should not years of university education, which is intimately linked with awareness, remove all this? I began to realise that the perception of university is of a high regard and, although many in Western cultures have access to university, it is still considered elite. Perhaps this elitism compounded over years unconsciously provided me with a false sense of superiority, which would be reflected through

my behaviour and thought processes (Tannock, 2008).

To think that a university environment that was highly valued by the general public would provide a platform for explicit discrimination appeared contradictory in nature. It was with this recognition that I was then able to work through behavioural patterns and thought processes. Just because I had an education there was no need to assume that those who were poor and homeless did not or if they did not that I was 'better' than they were; difference at any level does not indicate 'better'. Yet, as students we partook in these types of activities regularly through examinations and assignment work. Frequently instilled educative measuring tools such as regular exams and testing which was an avenue for students to gain knowledge perhaps provided students with a false sense of supremacy and advantage over those who did not or were not able to partake in this educative process and culture (Tannock, 2008).

#### *Structural and individual effects of poverty*

My previous thoughts on homelessness revolved around individuals and groups being born into poverty, living as alcohol and drug abusers, with low or little education and strong connections to crime. These thought processes can be typical of privileged people (e.g., middle-class, Caucasian) and can be attributed to the advantages that these groups of people receive throughout society (Clark, 2007). These are individualistic explanations of poverty and whilst these elements may be consequences of poverty, there are far deeper social structures and attitudes at play which constantly perpetuate a false perception of poverty (Saunders, 2003). Was the higher education system prejudiced towards disadvantaged groups? It was not until I immersed myself in dealing directly with poverty and those who suffer directly from it that my mindset began to alter towards that of a different viewpoint. This direct experience allowed me to understand how misplaced perceptions and negative connotations associated with poverty are not always true to those considered poor and structural poverty plays a

large role in the existence and continual cycle of poverty (Saunders, 2003). If it was not for the process of community engagement I believe that I would not have come to this understanding of the multifaceted aspects of poverty.

I chose to place myself at a homeless shelter within the Perth metropolitan area as I felt that this direct experience would provide me with a greater platform of exploration to what poverty truly represents within the community. It was here that I experienced openly the real effects of poverty upon individuals. I struggled to understand how the existence of theoretical frameworks such as the importance of cultural relativity and respect for diversity designed to limit discrimination and isolation of the individual and cultural groups did not alleviate segregation and poverty at a grass roots level (Bruner, 2008). I realised that structural causes of poverty and systemic oppression must be made obvious in order to tackle poverty effectively (Carter & Barrett, 2006). I had believed that philosophical frameworks were the basis for practical solutions; I came to realise that, without instruction on practical application, theoretical and philosophical frameworks are useless. I would often leave my work place and contemplate the poverty that existed hidden from the general public. Working at the placement opened up internal discussion and dialogue pertaining to society's principles of living promoting equity and fairness amongst individuals through policy and media discourse (Turner & Lehning, 2007), yet this was not what I was witnessing nor experiencing first hand. The reality is that the provision of services and organisations to assist the already suffering are superficial attempts to fix a situation that is fuelled by systemic pressures (Opatow, Gerson & Woodside, 2008). Without attending to deeper underlying issues such as discrimination and the economic system that lends itself to social pathology, an individualistic approach to resolving poverty can only be ineffective (Li, 2010; Turner &

Lehning, 2007).

*The difficulty of social integration*

During the work placement, I saw that basic physical necessities of homeless people were not being met nor were their cultural or psychological needs being met in the way of feeling as part of a healthy functioning community. I realised that the greater part of our society cannot accept the distress and dysfunction that occurs and that, if it was overt, it would disrupt the way society functions as an integrated whole. This mainstream approach to how society treats disadvantaged groups is disjointed and disregards these groups as not worthy of being part of a visible society. The individuals I had direct contact with, personally felt isolated from mainstream society and this seclusion and fear of public ridicule further drove them in to the depths of poverty and hiding. This isolation created a clear barrier between homeless groups and mainstream society (Jeppesen, 2009). The longer this occurred the more difficult it became for homeless groups and individuals to integrate within a social setting and portray themselves as part of the 'in group' or mainstream society (Jeppesen, 2009).

*Contradictions of theory and practice*

Simultaneously engaging with the conference and work placement did not assist in alleviating the contradictions and pressures within my mind. The contradictions and pressures were presented by the conference being quite academic and somewhat abstract and the work placement feeling so real and practical. The research collected for the conference offered broad resolutions to the growing problem of poverty, yet when I engaged directly with homeless I could not make these connections, nor could I observe these 'solutions' being implemented by higher institutions who had the capability of doing so (Carter & Barrett, 2006). During the conference I was part of group of young people attempting to explain poverty and provide solutions to this issue through expression of an ideology that we believe can actually make a difference and change not only

the perceptions of poverty by those looking at poverty, but alleviate poverty itself. I would then engage in my work experience and be surrounded by poverty and a lack of a social system that is not fully inclusive but rather exclusive largely based on social status accompanied by other factors such as race and physical attributions (Hunter & Jordan, 2010). This confusion led me to have an extreme lack of faith in higher governmental structures and at that stage became apparent that no matter how deep as a society we explore the intellectuality of such a serious social issue, it still seems to be growing and worsening as time continues (Freeman, 2009). This conflict disconnected me further from believing there is hope for equity and fairness to all groups in our society. Solutions are possible towards a serious problem; yet as a collective society we are still struggling to implement these strategies and prioritise this plaguing social issue.

*Issues of reflexivity*

One of the areas I found difficult was the implementation of reflexivity whilst dealing with individuals who came through the homeless shelter. I found myself at a constant point of contradiction. I was aware that I was dealing with oppressed groups and I understood that the only way to assist them successfully was to approach relationships collaboratively in a relational manner. How could I relate to their circumstances of economic deprivation and social isolation? There appeared a link between poverty, economic deprivation and the negative individual and social consequences of social isolation (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009). The reality was that I felt I could learn more from the people I was interacting with than they could learn from me. The fact that I had a home to go to at night allowed feelings of discomfort to dwell within me, perhaps I even appeared 'better' than others because somehow I had either created or was born into privilege and circumstance (Suchet, 2007). I felt guilt for being who I was and the further I reflected

upon this the more I began to contemplate issues of power imbalances and how these are tied strongly to individualism and Western culture (Torelli & Shavitt, 2010). As capitalism promotes competitiveness and scarcity, a severe consequence of this is greed and power imbalances within society where there are an elite few who control most of the resources and wealth (Li, 2010). Where does justice and fairness lay within this process? Does society perpetuate its own poverty? Yes it does; through prioritising wealth and aesthetics over wellbeing, mental health and equity amongst all groups (Opotow, Gerson & Woodside, 2008).

*Personal upbringing and communication*

At times I found it challenging to know how to communicate with the housemates in the homeless shelter. My upbringing as a child centred on discrimination against those who were to different from me (and different was considered a negative). Coming from an individualistic culture with strong ethnic national roots, cultural pride and superiority were at the forefront of my teachings (Emcke, 2000). For example, my father demanded that I respect our culture yet he observed no value in other cultures. For me, social status, ethnicity, skin colour, how much money one had and even physical features defined 'different'. Although over the years I had eradicated much of the discriminative attitudes associated with my upbringing, when faced with the situation of working with individuals that were very 'different' to me, I struggled greatly.

I struggled to reconcile old thought patterns with what I knew intrinsically was the correct path to take in understanding each individual at face value. It was during my time within this homeless shelter that I realised how racist, how discriminatory and how closed-minded I used to be and in reality was still learning not to be. I took refuge in the fact that I had made deep changes within myself to reflect the way I acted and thought about others who were different to me. We all inhale and exhale the same air and we are all living beings sharing one global home. This realisation assisted me in being honest with

the housemates and communicating with them with less personal inner tension. It opened up my mind to their potential, their story, their history, their way of life, and that this was legitimate and important.

*The value of grass roots organisations*

Being part of this grass roots level experience allowed me to contemplate what changes were required to enhance a greater and deeper understanding and community perspective of homelessness. How it would be possible to create real positive changes within this community and to then translate this working framework to other communities, not only within an Australian context but also within a global context? Prior to commencing my placement, my previous ideology was that if change is not made from a 'top-down' approach at organisational and institutional levels then it is a waste of efforts and resources, as substantial and permanent change simply cannot occur at any other level. I now firmly understand via firsthand experience that an integrated grass roots approach can be extremely successful in assisting in developing positive change to other's lives both at individual and collective levels (Uvin, 1995). Creating compassion, care, empathy and greater understanding of not only another's individual circumstances but how those individual circumstances are a reflection of greater social conditions is primary to assisting individuals realise their own empowerment. This does not address the root cause of poverty; it alleviates suffering largely at an individual level (which in and of itself has great intrinsic value), and recognising this was key to accepting that minor change is still valuable and can lead to greater collective change.

Greater social institutions such as our education systems could potentially provide a platform for challenge and transformation towards our current highly individualistic and ultimately selfish social context we as a community are all part of (Fox & Meier, 2009). Structural inequity lays at the

foundation of poverty and without institutionalised and policy based change, discrimination against poverty will always exist (Fox & Meier, 2009). Initially the change may not be at a scale worthy of collective impact, but as a community if we are at least educated in identifying the root cause of social dysfunction such as poverty then as people we will be more capable, equipped and empowered in dealing with and perhaps even pre-empting the disastrous effects of long term and high amounts of poverty (Misturelli & Heffernan, 2008).

Further, by working at a grass roots level clear distinctions are recognised to how individual circumstances of poverty are influenced heavily by external social factors, which ultimately lead to a collective perception of individualised poverty (Turner & Lehning, 2007). To understand institutionalised poverty, one must understand how individuals are affected by poverty (Turner & Lehning, 2007). For me this understanding was reached by working at a grass roots level with the individuals and groups directly affected by poverty. I have now understood that making a difference to one person's life, even if it is simply for a day, or even one minute has the powerful potential to cause positive ripple effects to other community members both directly and indirectly. Examples of this could be spending an amount of time with people who feel they are a minority group and simply listening to whatever it is they want to speak about. This gesture is to be sincere and not tokenistic. By partaking in this and similar actions all parties involved were exposed to a greater knowledge base and the increase of making positive change is possible through a greater gain in awareness. Homeless institutions care workers, counsellors, not-for-profit organisations and other systems of community support seldom have the potential to assist in empowering and positively affecting people's lives.

#### *A personal interpretation*

It has become more a personal journey for me and there have been many times throughout this

process where I question my own spirituality, my own psychological processes and the social status that I hold within Western society. I have been brought to tears; I have been humbled by acts of compassion and others personal life stories and I have been taught what it is to listen. I was guided by my supervisor at the work placement that it is with intent that one must listen carefully, absorb and apply mindfulness whole heartedly in order to truly respect the other person and to truly respect their integrated place within society. Life circumstances are not simply self-inflicted and are not necessarily a person's own fault. Media discourse and representation and social policy segregates individuals and the feeling of shame takes precedent (Misturelli & Heffernan, 2008). Perhaps this is why I have now acknowledged a greater value in working with individuals at a grass roots level; this is potentially *part of* the greater solution, for although the process may be slow, I believe a change in attitude in one person can perpetuate across to many others.

Some of the most challenging times throughout the entire experience came directly from some of the individuals dealt with directly within the parameters of my designated work placement. Some of the greatest lessons I learnt throughout this development came from the housemates and their personalities and their approach to life all supported by their life experiences. My direct supervisors at the work placement were always there to assist and provide detailed guidance; they constantly reinforced and encouraged self-expression of my feelings and the house mates feelings at deeper levels. The placement forced me to think about all factors involved on a relational grass roots level between two people and what skills are required to be effective in communicating with others; skills such as sincere listening, body language and passive verbal language with calm vocal tones. If a difficult situation were to arise between myself and the housemates and I was struggling to understand the situation or a particular social issue would invoke an emotive reaction within me, my

supervisors would always be there to provide techniques to self-soothe and understand my own psychological internal thought processes.

#### *Fairness, equity and justice*

Dealing directly with homelessness provided me with tremendous insight in to the de-legitimisation of the human person by attitudinal stereotypes placed upon poverty by society and what it is like to be isolated, homeless, to have little food to eat and the need to be resourceful. I related this immediately to my Behavioural Science degree and reflected upon our social standard of living and how there are so many of us who are living in what is considered to be poverty; where distributive justice is simply not being met (Opotow, Gerson & Woodside, 2008). Basic necessities are tied to notions of procedural fairness within the environment directly associated with homelessness and poverty (Opotow, Gerson & Woodside, 2008). Within the parameters of this particular homeless shelter procedural fairness and equity strongly existed. All members were treated as equals; it is outside the homeless shelter that particular individuals were scrutinised and judged based on their living conditions, actions and history. It is known that economically and culturally marginalised groups continue to endure untold degrees of suffering (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). This strongly affects their opportunity to develop themselves within mainstream society and limits their chances of positive relationships (Opotow, 2001). It also segregates these individuals further from mainstream society, causing deeper personal psychological issues whilst simultaneously creating a negative stereotype of anyone considered homeless (Misturelli & Heffernan, 2008). It is not the case for all but for many, excessive substance abuse is a harsh way of life and further promotes a negative image associated with poverty. The reality is that poverty not only affects those who are economically deprived, it also affects their families, friends and the general community through the relational and human ecological principle of existence

(Lichter, Olson, Evans, Pillemer & Mathios, 2009).

Spending time with the workers and residents of this homeless shelter articulated an understanding that there is something deeply wrong with society. Judgement arises far too quickly when people interact with each other; appearance and posture are assumed far too often and allowances to grant the dignity and respect for those who reside within our communities does not exist. My experiences with homeless shelters and aid giving organisations and their face value approach forced me to think about how I was going to communicate with each person I met, regardless of appearance and social status. It taught me that judgment and assumption is not the correct path. Direct experience is something theory, textbooks and the classroom setting cannot teach and I began to appreciate the value of work placement within the undergraduate degree structure.

#### *The importance of administration*

I am learning to understand the path of non-judgment, what this means to me and how I could apply it to the people I interact with on a regular basis. One tension within an organisation, which operated at a grass roots level, was the limits of needing to adhere to the bureaucracy and politics of still being a larger scale organisation. I felt the at times unnecessary focus upon this area really took away the power and ethos of what are the foundational principles for most aid giving organisations, and that is to prioritise the disadvantaged individual and assist the community in building awareness around social conditions. If we were to solely focus on politics and the bureaucracy of running an organisation, unfortunately employees that may be involved in this process would become inefficient and not effective at executing what should be the sole purpose of any aid organisations what their foundational principals represent. Which primarily entails prioritising the social welfare, health and wellbeing of disadvantaged individuals and groups (Hancock, 1989). Becoming caught in this bureaucratic process was difficult for me as I felt it was a valuable

waste of resources and energy, it caused rifts between employees and the attention of assisting the disadvantaged, became lost to dealing with and corresponding to hierarchy and supervisors in what I viewed as an unnecessary manner. Perhaps this was because there was no group cohesion within this organisation or there was a lack of circulating trust. Regardless, human resources were better spent on the individuals who needed it the most, the disadvantaged.

Challenging old thought processes and habits are part of the process of change. I realised here that making me available to this change created a greater awareness of the social arena I am a part of. An increase of awareness increased my capacity to communicate, as I understood that when dealing with human lives how integral it is that communication remains open and honest. Clarity and honesty was the foundation for effective communication and also provided the ability to assist others in need. Aiding that individual to achieve their goals, whatever they may be, whether it is employment, a bed to sleep in or a psychological and physical safe space to be in was all made possible to clear communication. A process such as this is multifaceted and also involves high amounts of paper work. Prior to commencement of the placement I thought this was a waste of energy and time, and that energy spent with the formalities of this process be better spent fighting for human rights. It is these technical processes such as paperwork that aid in strengthening the fight for human equity and rights. It is crucial to keeping the communication lines open and through my experience at my work placement I further realised that there is great value in effective and accurate paper work. Whether it is inputting information in a communal database or taking accurate notes, there are so many third parties involved that communication is crucial to the overall health of many individuals. It can be the key difference between a clean and safe bed to sleep in and sleeping on the street.

### Conclusions

The intense and extreme feelings,

moments, trials, dilemmas and joys I experienced through working collaboratively with strangers was extremely unique to me in the sense that I was made aware of that poverty really does exist and it affects real people. The various aspects accompanying the entire internship unit are so comprehensive and character-building that I had no choice but to gain experiential knowledge from each situation, which was accompanied by doubt, intrigue and even some form of dilemma. Further, organising an entire conference and being responsible for the success of the conference and 22 other individuals involved was a tremendous and highly valued experience as it assisted me in understanding the importance of effective communication and time management. By working with individuals who were affected by the negative repercussions of poverty, I was forced to adapt to stressful situations with patience and humility, as exhibiting anger at a dysfunctional system, frustration at a stressful situation or expressed sadness towards suffering would only lead to the detriment of those I was attempting to help. I questioned academia's place and the positive role it may play amongst deep seated social issues. Whilst intellectual thought, philosophical constructs and theoretical solutions may lay the foundations for positive change, without practical solutions to a severe physical problem such as lack of food, basic needs and shelter, there is little to be done without grass roots physical assistance to those who need it immediately. The immediateness of a situation such as this is the determining factor in the usefulness of academia within a social capacity. The best academic and theoretical frameworks may offer are a catalyst for change within a paradigm of the future. In relation to fixing problems occurring *now* within a social framework, unfortunately they are not effective in practice.

Working directly with the homeless and economically poor has broadened my own personal views and altered my previous misunderstandings about poverty. These beliefs

have been replaced with a wider, comprehensive, more inclusive view that encompasses individual circumstance, a person's history and reduce generalisations and derogatory slander and blame towards those who are homeless. The realisation that homelessness and poverty can be a direct cause of broader economic and social circumstance has allowed me to understand the complex and multifaceted issues involved with identifying poverty. The greatest lesson learned through the active participation in this unit is that, if I am to place negative judgments upon another's life circumstances, I then hinder my own personal growth and full understanding of the world of which I am a part.

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