Summary of Research

Abstract
Efforts to understand poverty as well as how poverty is perceived have become increasingly important in the fight to eliminate poverty. This research investigated college student perceptions of people who are poor and how society and personal choices contribute to poverty in order to answer the following research question: How do student interpretations of issues surrounding poverty affect their attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of poverty as well as those living in poverty? The study gathered perceptions about whom the students believe the poor to be, what circumstances have occurred, and what choices people have made that contribute to their being poor. Through quantitative methods, using a 64-item questionnaire originally used in a study by the Kennedy School, students enrolled in courses at Wichita State University provided data regarding their perceptions. The discussion identifies that perceptions are dependent on the economic class of the student, metro status, and level of education. Additionally, the results for the questionnaire will be discussed further.

Keywords: Poverty, perceptions, Social Exchange Theory, Social Emotional Theory, stigma, attitudes toward the poor, recession, blame for poverty, responsibility.

Introduction
For decades, scholars have engaged in efforts to understand the causes of poverty, how poverty is perceived, and how those perceptions aggravate or mitigate poverty (Cozzarelli, 2001; Wilson, 1996; Linda et al., 2009; Owen & You, 2009; Williamson, 1974). The number of people living in poverty increased from 46.2 million in 2010 to 48.5 million in 2011 (US Census, 2012). This research investigated college students’ perceptions of people who are poor and how society and personal choices contribute to poverty in order to answer the following research question: How do student interpretations of issues surrounding poverty affect their attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of poverty as well as those living in poverty?

Theories of Poverty
Social Exchange and Social-emotional theories are used to frame a discussion of perceptions of poverty, in addition to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. George Homans (1958), framer of Social Exchange theory, described the theory as a series of exchanges that people make in which they perform a cost-benefit analysis, seeking the most profit in terms of the social and relational world. People weigh the potential benefits and risks of social
relationships, and when the risks outweigh the rewards, people tend to terminate or abandon relationships (Emerson, 1976). Lange and James explained the Social Emotional theory by stating that “witnessing an external stimulus leads to a physiological reaction. Your emotional reaction depends upon how you interpret those physical reactions” (1967).

Abraham Maslow conceptualized a theory in 1943 that described human motivation in developmental stages represented by a hierarchy of needs. This can be applied in the study of poverty and perceptions of poverty, because people often view those who experience poverty as deficient in some way. Maslow’s theory would assert that because their basic needs are going unmet, the poor remain paralyzed in accessing higher levels of experience and motivation (Maslow, 1970).

**Methods**

This research used quantitative methodology in order to produce generalizable statistical findings. The research procedures were formulated in advance and adhered to during data collection. The goal of the research was to gather college students’ interpretations of issues surrounding poverty and their attitudes and beliefs about people who are poor, as well as society’s role in poverty.

**Instrument**

The instrument that was chosen for this research was an adapted version of the NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy Study Poll on Poverty in America (2001). The questionnaire was designed to be anonymous.

**Procedure**

The survey was distributed to a cohort of convenience in two college classes: Women and Poverty and Political Science Model UN Human Rights, during the beginning of one class period. One hundred twenty-six students participated. It took approximately 45 minutes to complete. Beyond demographic questions, there were no specific identifiers of individuals. Results were analyzed using IBM SPSS software.

### Results

**Metropolitan status:**
- Urban: 50.9%
- Suburban: 35.8%
- Rural: 13.2%

**Education:**
- High school graduate or less: 9.3%
- Business, technical/vocational school graduate: .9%
- Some college or more: 72%
- College graduate: 10.3%
- Post-graduate training: 6.5%

**Economic class:**
- Upper class: .9%
- Upper middle class: 8.4%
- Middle class: 33.4%
- Working class: 45.8%
- Lower class: 11.2%
- Don’t know: 0%

**How would you rate your financial situation?**
- Excellent: 4.5%
- Good: 35.1%
- Fair: 48.6%
- Poor: 11.7%

**Would you say you are doing well financially primarily because of our own effort and abilities, because of good luck, or because of things other people have done for you?**
- Own efforts and abilities: 64.5%
- Good luck: 1.6%
- Things others have done for them: 33.9%
- Didn’t know: 0%

**Would you say you are not doing so well financially because of something they have failed to do, because of bad luck, or because of things other people have done for you?**
- Something they have failed to do: 60.3%
- Bad luck: 17.9%
- Things other people have done: 22.1%

In your opinion, which is the bigger cause of poverty today—that people are not doing enough to help themselves out of...
Is poor people lacking motivation a major cause of poverty, a minor cause, or not a cause at all?

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>44%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not a cause</td>
<td>26%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Didn’t know</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
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Discussion

Financial situation
As indicated from the responses to the questionnaire, over half of the respondents identified as working class or lower (57%), showing that they are experiencing or trying to work their way out of poverty, possibly through earning a degree or, in the case of 6.5% of the respondents, pursuing graduate studies. This majority of lower-class respondents could have potential effects on all of the data, as they have all been close to or actually in poverty. It is hard to understand poverty without experiencing it.

Success and Dependence
A majority of the respondents (64.5%) of this study indicated that their success was based on their own efforts and abilities. Metropolitan status, economic class, and education might have influenced the answers to the study. Specifically, respondents were all students who lived in the state of Kansas, so they may depend on their family for help. The second factor to be considered is the economic status of the respondents. The percentage of respondents who identified with the upper class status was only .9%. The rest may feel they have to earn their own way.

Failure and Dependence
Sixty percent of respondents took responsibility for their own failures. It is possible that education, metropolitan status and economic status have a lot to do with their responses. Most of the respondents can be said to have experienced poverty themselves or know people who live in poverty, with 57% identifying as working class or lower. As a commuter college, with 50% of students coming from urban areas, it is possible that these students are presented with more employment opportunities, and therefore believe they have a greater ability to further their financial status. Another possibility is that, considering that the survey was also given to two classes that might have a better understanding of poverty, this could have impacted their answers. Some respondents (22.1%) also gave credit to others for their success. This could be due to the fact that most respondents were students who may still live with their parents and receive support from them.

Circumstance of Poverty
An overwhelming 64.2% of respondents believed that circumstances had a huge impact on a population’s economic status. This could be because all of the respondents were students who could be experiencing financial difficulty, as well as the fact, noted above, that they may be more dependent on others for financial success.

Poverty and Motivation
The majority of respondents (26%) gave the poor the benefit of the doubt by saying that lack of motivation is not a major cause of poverty, even while they blame themselves for their own circumstances. This notion can be explained by looking at the charts for metropolitan status, education and economic status.

Limitations and Further Research
The sample is not representative of the population as a whole, preventing generalization at large. Limitations include sample cohort, as there are distinct populations (college students) who enroll in these types of courses. Future research should explore other populations.

Conclusion
Wilson (1996) identified the indirect and direct impact of how a culture perceives the poor, pointing out that perceptions can be advantageous or harmful depending on how individual beliefs develop. Some participants in this study put the responsibility for poverty with the poor themselves, a belief that is potentially harmful to the poor. Understanding these perceptions and beliefs can help in creating a world where the effects of poverty are minimized and the poor are helped and, more importantly, understood. The study concludes that perceptions are dependent on the experiences, background, and social class of the student, highlighting this issue’s complexity.
References


