

Actor Training in Social Work Education: A Pilot Study of Theatre Workshops to Enhance Clinical Empathy

Amanda Coleman and Estefanía Gonzalez

Abstract—In the 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards publication, the Council on Social Work Education states that to successfully engage with diverse clients and constituencies, "students must use empathy, reflection, and interpersonal skills." The assessment methods most commonly used in social work education, however, are not equipped to assess students' empathetic engagement. Research suggests that empathy may be enhanced by mentally, physically, and emotionally putting oneself in the place of another, a practice that is fundamental to stage acting. While educators in the medical field have taken advantage of theatre training's potential to improve students' empathic engagement with patients, the integration of theatre into social work education is less common. Drawing from developments in medical education, researchers will conduct and evaluate a three-part pilot theatre workshop with master level social work students ($n \approx 30$) to evaluate the workshop's ability to enhance empathy among participants. Outcomes will be measured using semi-structured post-intervention interviews with a subset of participants ($n \approx 10$) as well post-intervention written reflections and pre-and-post intervention quantitative evaluation of empathy using King and Holosko's 2011 Empathy Scale for Social Workers. The content of the workshop will differ from traditional role plays, which are common in social work education, in that it will draw from role theory and research on "creative empathy" to emphasize role reversal with clients. Workshops will be held February and March of 2017 with preliminary findings available by April.

Keywords—education, empathy, social work, theatre

A. Coleman is with the Social Work department at California State University Northridge, Northridge CA, 91330 USA (phone: 818-677-3332 email: amanda.coleman.899@my.csun.edu).

E. Gonzalez is with the Social Work department at California State University Northridge, Northridge CA, 91330 USA (phone: 818-677-3332 email: estefania.gonzalez.805@my.csun.edu).