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Cultural Event Project #1  
Eastern Illinois University

I attended a poverty simulation (with a Hispanic twist) at Effingham High School on Friday, February 03, 2006, offered by the University of Illinois Extension office. My view of how people of different cultures cope changed dramatically as I experienced and assessed our simulation.

### **What I expected**

At first, I expected that we would be put into groups to determine how to solve problems that people in poverty have to deal with on a daily basis. I expected it to be more intellectual than experiential. I did not expect to “become” a person of poverty as quickly as I did.

### **What happened**

First, we found a seat in one of the family units around the room. The family I chose had a father and three children. As we began, we chose roles, and I became the oldest son, at thirteen. I had three-year old and nine-year old sisters. My father was raising us alone, after a divorce.

A packet of information gave us our resources including money, transportation passes, and items that we could use for barter. It also told us what we needed to do each week: get food, go to work or school, take the baby to childcare, and pay bills. We were given four periods of simulation, each representing a week. We had restrictions: Around the outside of our “community” were police who would take us to jail if the children weren’t in school, businesses who would not work with us if we did not have a transportation pass, childcare services that had to be paid first, and a Spanish-speaking businesswoman who would not sell us transportation passes or cash our checks if we did not speak Spanish. As the oldest, I wanted to help handle the finances, buy the food, and take care of my youngest sister. But for each of the four weeks, I was expected to be in school all day.

The first week, my father was almost brought up on child-abuse charges because of a misunderstanding with the daycare. We did not purchase food, so all four of us had to wear signs around our necks that said we were hungry. My father never made it to work that week because he was trying to get childcare for my sister and because he had no more transportation tickets after he used what we had to try to find the resources around the community that could help him.

The second week I suggested to my father that he write a note that I would be late to school due to family business, and that I would go buy our food for the month (other families could only buy a week's worth at a time). We no longer had to wear "hungry" signs, but my father still had not been to work and my sister still had not been to daycare. We decided that I would risk being truant to sell our furniture to buy transportation passes so my father could go to work to earn a paycheck.

When I went to buy the transportation passes, I discovered that I would have to speak Spanish. I had to ask others what I should say. I heard the businesswoman double the price of the passes for the woman in front of me because she spoke Spanish incorrectly, so I approached her meekly, made my request politely and correctly, and received my passes at the right rate.

That week, my middle sister took my three-year old sister to school so our father could go to work. Someone told the teacher. Then, my middle sister was called to the office because she had a gun at school. The police took them both away. They announced that school was being dismissed because of the gun and that the parents needed to go home or they might be found for child neglect. Fortunately, my father had been at work the required eight minutes, so he got his paycheck. The police let my sisters go, but told my father that he would be put into jail if it happened again.

Finally, in the fourth week, we had just enough money to eat, get transportation, pay our bills, and put my sister in daycare. She was the only child who made it to daycare any of the four weeks. My middle sister and I were able to go to school and my father was able to pay our bills and go to work to get another paycheck. However, we were the only family that was able to do so; most families struggled. Some had had children taken away. Two families moved in together because they could not make it on their own. One family did not have food for four weeks.

#### **Analysis of what occurred**

Though it seemed like a "game" at first, there was an underlying sobering recognition that many families live in situations even worse than this every day. I did not expect it, but I "became" a child of poverty. It became an emotional experience for me.

I deceived people to get food for my family. I did not let them know I was a child because I knew my father could not do it alone and my family would go hungry if I did not do it.

It was degrading to have to speak the language of someone who would cheat me of my resources if I did not do it “just right.” When I spoke in Spanish (which simulated how Spanish-speaking people feel in an English-speaking community) in just the “right way,” I felt violated.

When my sisters were taken to the police station, I felt an overwhelming sense of personal responsibility. It had been my idea to take her with us to school, and I was (literally) afraid of what would happen to them. I think it was then that the simulation became so real to me that I could imagine the panic, hopelessness, and fear that a Spanish-speaking (or any) family living in poverty might feel when their best efforts weren’t enough to be safe, secure, and have their needs met.

#### **What I learned about the culture**

I learned many things about persons in a minority culture and persons in poverty. As a “Spanish-speaking” person, I learned what it felt like to be degraded by a person of another culture. I pretended to be someone I was not for the sake of my family. But I was ashamed and humiliated to have to do it that way.

As a person in poverty, I learned that people in poverty may do things that they normally wouldn’t, because they have to in order to get by. Sometimes persons in poverty may be backed into a corner and do things they shouldn’t. Then they get arrested or labeled. I learned how hard it must be to see things as right or wrong when sometimes the only right choice is to do something the culture sees as wrong. I also learned that a feeling of family—when poverty exists—takes on a new meaning of protection and responsibility in order to simply survive. Finally, I learned that families in poverty are probably often criticized for things beyond their control; society often doesn’t give them much choice or much of a chance. Sometimes, no matter how hard they try it just isn’t enough.