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Pauline Garcia-Reid

Robert Reid

Bradley Forenza

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# An Ecological Approach to Experiential Learning in an Inner-City Context

Pauline Garcia-Reid<sup>1</sup>, Robert J. Reid<sup>1</sup> and Brad Forenza<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Montclair State University, <sup>2</sup>Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

*In-depth, qualitative interviewing was employed to describe processes and competencies experienced by family science interns, who practiced in a high-risk ecological context. Twenty interns from a 3-year period were recruited. All had interned on the same federally funded, HIV/substance abuse prevention grant in the same focal city. Within this sample, it was determined that experiential learning—vis-à-vis the internship—facilitated both intrapersonal processes and ecological competencies for family science interns, who may otherwise have lacked this knowledge when assuming professional roles. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.*

**Keywords:** at-risk youth; experiential learning; family science interns; training

Experiential learning is a process by which individuals make linkages among their personal, professional, and educational sphere (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning may “empower individuals to gain control over their learning and hence their lives, and to take responsibility for themselves” (Griffin, 1992, p. 32). Because experiential learning is assumed to be a critical component of professional growth and development, internships—one type of experiential learning—may serve as a transformative step between student and professional role (Olsen & Montgomery, 2000).

Internships allow students—typically college undergraduates—to work for a finite period of time in their chosen field of study. Often, learning objectives accompany such a placement. Internships are a response to employer claims that new hires often lack practical experience and professionalism (Knouse, Tanner, & Harris, 1999; Williams, 2004). Research has consistently demonstrated that education alone does not prepare students for entering the workforce. On the contrary, internships allow for the attainment of job readiness skills (Garavan & Murphy, 2001) and can bridge the gap between theoretical and professional domains (Callanan & Benzing, 2004).

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**Authors' Note:** Pauline Garcia-Reid, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Family and Child Studies & Center for Child Advocacy and Policy, College of Education and Human Services and College of Humanities and Social Science, Montclair State University. Robert J. Reid, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Family and Child Studies, College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University. Brad Forenza, MSW, is a Doctoral Candidate in Rutgers University School of Social Work, The State University of New Jersey. Please address correspondence to Pauline Garcia-Reid, Department of Family and Child Studies and the Center for Child Advocacy, Montclair State University, 1 Normal Avenue, Montclair, NJ 07043; e-mail: garciareidp@mail.montclair.edu.

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Because learning occurs in diverse ways, allowing family science theory to be understood by students often requires theory be placed in context and practiced. Theoretical learning that is connected to real-world experience—vis-a-vis internships—increases the likelihood that students will understand and apply theory in their future work. Kolb (1984) has argued that “true” learning occurs through a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experiment. It embodies six characteristics which are described as follows. True learning (i) is a continuous process rather than one conceived in terms of outcomes, (ii) is grounded in experience, (iii) requires resolution of conflicts, (iv) is a holistic process of adaptation, (v) involves transactions between the person and environment, and (vi) creates new learning resulting from merging social and personal knowledge.

Studies have demonstrated that internships (particularly for undergraduates) are linked with positive developmental experiences (Taylor, 1988), which may yield other favorable outcomes such as career decision making, self-efficacy, and the shaping of a vocational self-concept (Brooks, Cornelius, Greenfield, & Joseph, 1995; Taylor, 1988). Bead and Morton (1999) identified six strategies for intern success: (i) academic preparation, (ii) positive attitude, (iii) quality of supervision, (iv) organizational policies/practices of the placement agency, (v) proactivity, and (vi) compensation. Despite the myriad evidence demonstrating the benefits of internships, there is a limited body of research describing this type of experiential learning for undergraduate family science students. In the absence of an internship, these students are likely to graduate and begin work in a field of practice that is often implemented amidst disadvantaged socioenvironmental contexts. These contexts might differ from the students’ life histories and prior experiences. Discussion of what might lead to successful internship experiences for this population is minimal or nonexistent. In response, this article describes a university–community partnership that incorporated 28 undergraduate family science interns into the training and delivery of HIV/AIDs and substance abuse prevention for at-risk youth in a distressed urban community.

## BACKGROUND

As inner-city life becomes increasingly more challenging, there is a dire need to prepare students in the field of family science to be able to understand and address the many factors that contribute to family and community strife. Few would disagree with the public health axiom that “the most effective way to control a social problem or epidemic is to prevent them, rather than treat their seemingly endless victims one by one” (Bloom, 1995, p. 1895). Many fields of practice have embraced treatment and rehabilitation over preventive services, including social work and psychology (Bloom, 1995; Schinke, 1997). Because the mission of the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS) (n.d. a, n.d. b) is to “provide leadership and support for professionals whose work assists individuals, families, and communities in making informed decisions about their well-being, relationships, and resources to achieve optimal quality of life,” family science students should encounter these ideals through experiential learning—such as internships—before formally entering the workforce.

As many low-income communities continue to be affected by multiple stressors, the federal government has made a concerted effort to support demonstration projects in urban centers that have been hardest hit by the twin epidemics of HIV/AIDS and substance abuse. One such initiative is Project C.O.P.E. (Communities Organizing for Prevention and Empowerment) (Reid & Garcia-Reid, 2013). This program was funded to develop and coordinate comprehensive community-based substance abuse and HIV/AIDS prevention services targeting underserved and at-risk African American and Hispanic/Latino youth aged 12–17 in a high poverty, urban community in the Northeast. According to Census estimates (2012), the focal community is the third largest in its home state, its estimated population is almost 150,000, and median household income is \$33,583. Estimates in 2012 suggest that 62.5% of families spoke a language other than English at home, 27.6% of individuals lived below the federal poverty line, and only 10.3% of all residents had a college degree. Also, ethnicity of the focal community was identified as 31.7% Black/African American, 57.6% Hispanic/Latino, and 5.3% as two or more races.

Through a university–community partnership, Project C.O.P.E. provided willing undergraduate Family and Child Study (FCST) students with a 350-hr, one semester, and prevention-oriented internship opportunity. Through the training sequence, interns were exposed to the realities and intricacies of prevention programming efforts at both the microsystem (i.e., the direct settings in which a child interacts with and is influenced by, like family and school) and exosystem (i.e., the ecological forces that have an indirect affect on the child, like economic and political systems) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This type of experiential learning prepares interns for launching careers in the field of family and child studies, as well as related family science practices.

### **Training Experiences**

The undergraduate interns who served on the project were recruited from the Department of Family and Child Studies at a large public university. Participating interns were in the second semester of their senior year. They were required to simultaneously complete senior seminar, a capstone course that explored the integrative nature of family–child studies and the roles, conflicts, and decision-making perspectives of beginning professionals.

Through Project C.O.P.E., the interns received extensive on-campus training, which focused on how to facilitate the delivery of evidenced-based, substance abuse, and HIV/AIDS prevention services targeting underserved and at-risk Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino youth from the focal urban community. At the beginning of the internship, interns were required to complete 2 weeks (35 hr per week) of intensive training, followed by 1 day of training per week throughout the duration of the internship. Interns also received weekly individual and group supervision and were expected to engage in community service activities allied with the mission of Project C.O.P.E. Community service, which constitutes another type of experiential learning, included volunteering 2–3 hr per week at several of the community-based Project C.O.P.E. partner sites. This allowed interns to gain a deeper understanding of the context in which they were working.

As their primary output, the interns assisted in activities such as the delivery of risk reduction and health promotion workshops that targeted program

participants (Black and Hispanic youth) in the focal city. The lessons were usually delivered in a paired format with senior prevention counselors. Each wave of service delivery typically consisted of nine meetings which included the gathering of consent/assent forms, administration of pre- and posttest surveys, and the facilitation of about six prevention modules. The modules were provided twice a week for 3 weeks during the school day. Specifically, modules were conducted during the health classes of the participating youth. A final session on the distribution of the program's incentives was also conducted. In addition, the interns coordinated and facilitated focus group discussions with youth to solicit their input regarding ways to improve strategies, practices, and knowledge about HIV and substance abuse prevention throughout the focal community.

*Microsystem training.* The effectiveness of any prevention initiative depends on the training, knowledge, and experience of the staff delivering the intervention. Through a well-developed workforce plan, Project C.O.P.E. administration was encouraged to provide ample opportunities for practitioners (e.g., the interns) to become versed in a variety of intervention approaches that would enable them to effectively intervene on behalf of their service population (SAMHSA, n.d.). Thus, interns received training on topics such as HIV/AIDS and drug abuse knowledge, gang awareness, cultural competence, decision making, and advocacy skills. They were exposed to several engagement strategies including role-playing, interactive demonstrations, and small-group skills-based discussions. Interns were also instructed on how to deliver evidence-based model prevention curricula (e.g., CASASTART, Be Proud! Be Responsible! Focus on Youth, and Street Smart) [Centers for Disease Control (CDC) n.d. a, n.d. b, n.d. c; Murray, 1999; Murray & Belenko, 2005].

Interns were guided on how to engage participating youth in the helping process through hands-on activities which included the use of games, exercises, and videos. The interventions focused primarily on facts about HIV/AIDS and drugs, communication skills, values clarification, and goal setting. Interventions also utilized positive self-talk to build self-esteem, decrease substance use risk, and increase self-efficacy for safer sex (Centers for Disease Control [CDC] n.d. a, n.d. b, n.d. c; Murray, 1999; Murray & Belenko, 2005). In general, the curricula focused on asset building among program participants and the benefits of rendering responsible decisions. By developing the interns' prevention knowledge, cultural awareness, and case management/training facilitation skills, the interns were expected to become active participants in providing a "prevention safety net" for adolescents residing in high-risk urban communities (Reid, 2006). It was anticipated that the skills the interns acquired through these experiential learning activities would increase the likelihood that such skills would be applied in their eventual professional roles.

*Exosystem training.* From an exosystems perspective, the interns were exposed to institutions that indirectly affect Project C.O.P.E. youth. The interns attempted to address community-level needs and social problems through community service and activities in the focal city. The ultimate goal of their efforts was increasing social justice possibilities for participating youth and their families. This was accomplished by gaining knowledge of community conditions, identifying resources and capacity for systemic change, and emphasizing

linkages within the community. Because the purpose of community intervention is to address health disparities through ecological approaches, affecting change in the exosystem is assumed to improve the health and welfare of participating youth and their families and enhance their capacity to promote future community wellbeing (Davis, Cook, & Cohen, 2005; Trickett, Beehler, Deutsch, & Green, 2011).

During the program development phase of Project C.O.P.E., administrative staff and interns began a community-wide network analysis to explore the capacity and connectedness of the social service agencies serving families and children in the focal city. Through this process, interns contacted more than 100 community-based organizations throughout the city and conducted field interviews with key staff members at each of the agencies (e.g., directors, community outreach workers, and case managers). This was an invaluable exercise that allowed interns to become knowledgeable about the nature of service provision throughout the focal city. In other words, the interns learned to identify gaps in service delivery and to learn about resources that could benefit the youth participants of Project C.O.P.E. (Reid, 2006).

In this qualitative study, the authors interviewed former interns to gain their perspective regarding their Project C.O.P.E. training experiences, preparedness for engaging in family science work, and perceived effectiveness in the field. The purpose of the interviews was to describe the intrapersonal processes by which interns began the transition from students to professionals.

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Design and Sample

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of undergraduate interns as they entered and completed the final semester of academic study. Through their internship with Project C.O.P.E., interns received training on how to engage in activities at the micro and exosystem levels of practice. The training activities were aimed at improving health promotion outcomes for Black and Hispanic youth residing in an economically disadvantaged community that contained problems associated with poverty, including disproportionate levels of crime, violence, drug use, drug trafficking, and HIV/AIDS infection.

After approval was obtained from the university institutional review board (IRB), a retrospective, open-ended, individual interview was utilized to gather the interns' perspectives. The broad method of qualitative research was assumed to be appropriate for this descriptive study, where the authors aimed to contextualize the experiential learning of interns. Similarly, the specific qualitative technique of individual interviewing was assumed to be the most practical method to probe for the depth of an intern's thoughts regarding experiential learning processes (Patton, 2001).

Under the direction of the project's coinvestigator, a masters-level researcher, who was also a member of the research team, coordinated the sampling strategy. First, a sampling frame—a list that included the names of all interns from 2009 until 2012 ( $N = 28$ )—was secured. Then the interns were sent a recruitment letter which explained the purpose of the study to assess the interns'



interest in participating. As many of the interns had become geographically dispersed (the majority were working full-time and most were managing multiple responsibilities), telephone interviews were utilized to collect data. Telephone interviews are considered a versatile data collection tool in which respondents are assumed to be relaxed, willing to talk freely, and willing to disclose intimate information (Chapple, 1999; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

Of the 28 possible research participants, 20 former interns consented to the study (response rate: 71.4%). The remaining eight interns could not be located. Of that 20, 16 (80%) were female. Their ethnoracial background was Caucasian (45%), Black/African American (25%), Hispanic/Latino (25%), and Middle Eastern (5%). Their mean age was 24 years. More than half (55%) indicated that at the time of their internship they resided in an urban community. Forty percent lived in a suburban environment, while one intern (5%) reported living in a rural community. Most of the interns (55%) indicated that they had limited human service experience prior to beginning their internships.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

A semi-structured approach to interviewing was utilized. Twenty-five broad, open-ended questions encompassed the following sensitizing concepts: (i) training experiences, (ii) preparedness for engaging in the work, and (iii) effectiveness in the field. In the absence of a quantitative hypothesis, sensitizing concepts—according to Blumer (1969)—afford the qualitative researcher a roadmap or lens with which to approach the interview and the subsequent raw data.

The interview guide was created by a doctoral-level family sciences researcher, who was also the coinvestigator of Project C.O.P.E. In that capacity, she had supervised the 20 former interns currently participating in this study. In an effort to maintain objectivity, a graduate family sciences student—one trained in qualitative methodology and data collection, who had no prior affiliation with the interns—was recruited to administer the individual interviews. In the tradition of semi-structured interviewing, the interviewer guided each interview via the formal interview guide. However, the initial questions were followed by impromptu probes to encourage retrospection on factors such as readiness for engaging in substance abuse and HIV/AIDS prevention with minority populations.

Interviews were conducted in a conference room, and each interview lasted approximately 45 min. With the consent of the interns, all interviews were audio-recorded. Recordings were transcribed for the purposes of data analysis. Specifically, content analysis was conducted by a doctoral-level researcher/coinvestigator of Project C.O.P.E. utilizing qualitative analysis software (Dedoose, Version 4.5.9, 2012). Dedoose (2012) is a cross-platform web application for analyzing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research developed by professors from University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). It was designed as an easy to use, highly visual, cost-effective alternative to traditional qualitative data analysis software. To bolster the objectivity, rigor, and confirmability of analysis (a qualitative proxy for reliability), an outside member of the research team, who was a doctoral student and experienced in qualitative research, analyzed stratified selections of transcript. Substantive agreement was achieved. Findings appear in the analysis section, organized by

sensitizing concepts (training experiences, preparedness for engaging in the work, and perceived effectiveness in the field) can inform and enhance a person's understanding of the constructs under study and can provide logical generalizations to a theoretical examination of similar types of phenomena (Morse, 1999).

## RESULTS

### Training Experiences

The majority of descriptions of Project C.O.P.E. training experiences were positive. Most interns indicated that while they believed their academic coursework was helpful, the training sequence (e.g., quality of supervision, number of training hours, range of topics, and depth of substance abuse and HIV/AIDS prevention information) was paramount to internship success. To quote one intern, "The training that I received prepared me to take any job in the field of family science." Another stated, "The trainings prepared me to go into the field and deliver workshops on HIV/AIDS and substance abuse, something I would definitely not have been able to do (without them)."

The interns emphatically indicated that the training they received on how to facilitate workshops and deliver evidenced-based, model prevention curricula, using multiple and varied techniques and strategies, increased their confidence and capacity for engaging in professional family science work. The interns stated that their training enabled them to understand the contextual factors influencing the situations they encountered.

### Preparedness for Engaging in the Work

Prior to beginning their internship, the majority of interns stated that they had little understanding of how to prevent youth from engaging in risk-taking behaviors or how to intervene on behalf of children and adolescents living in a marginalized, high-risk community. While interns represented a diverse group of individuals, many indicated that they were less familiar with the consequences of living in at-risk communities beyond the knowledge that they acquired in their coursework. "The problems that these kids have to deal with seem insurmountable. When I first learned about the population that I was going to be working with, I wondered how could I possibly make a difference," said one former intern. This statement was an indication of the angst that undergraduate students may have had about working in ecological contexts that might differ from their own.

While several of the interns indicated that they had some practice-oriented experience with children and/or families, prior experiences were generally limited to early childhood settings. According to one intern, "I took a course called Poverty and Families last year, and we talked a lot about the challenges (of working in disadvantaged settings), but when you see it up close and in your face, it is just so jarring." To quote another intern reflecting on the C.O.P.E. experience, "It's amazing how it all came to life... it was no longer just theoretical. When I completed my internship, I felt ready to enter the field."



In spite of a desire to work in distressed communities, analysis of the data suggests that—prior to engaging in such work—few interns had an understanding of the myriad oppressions that such communities face. The general sentiment expressed regarding internship placements was that “The community really opened my eyes to what’s going on. . . I am so glad that I completed my hours at my internship site because, otherwise, I wouldn’t be prepared for what I’m doing now.”

This quote from an individual currently working in the field of family science explicates the need for ecologically based internships and experiential learning that physically places students in the socioenvironmental context of their chosen field of practice. Perhaps the most novel of insights comes from an intern who suggested that—after working with Project C.O.P.E.—she was better able to recognize the exosystem forces that may impede a client’s development: “This type of internship was very much hands-on, and brought to focus the options that young people have, and the choices that they make may be part of the environments that they grow up in. . . if the youth lives in a toxic environment, it is probably harder to see a different way. It is (therefore), important to also address community conditions alongside the (prevention) process.”

### **Perceived Effectiveness**

According to the Family and Consumer Science Code of Ethics (accessed 2013), family science workers are expected to “promote an integrative and holistic approach, aligned with the FCS body of knowledge, to support individuals, families, and communities” in their professional endeavors. By extension, these activities could include various forms of social justice efforts, including advocacy and youth empowerment. For example, interns were asked what resources they believed they possessed to affect change on behalf of youth participants and to inspire the youth to see the possibilities of that change. The interns stated that acquiring accurate health promotion information equipped them with the tools that they needed to educate youth, which could lead to healthy decision making and was, in their opinion, a form of social justice. As one intern noted, “Educating a population is a way of trying to create social change, because we go there and we try to empower them, really, with information that would not only help them at the individual level, but. . . hopefully change their whole community.”

When the interns were asked whether they believed that the adolescents would implement the harm reduction and health promotion strategies on a long-term basis, the majority of the interns were hopeful. However, several speculated that lack of necessary supports in the youths’ micro and exosystems could impede sustainable behavioral change. As described by one intern, “I think the outside influences have a lot of impact. Like, possibly the violence they see and the gangs—that will shape what they do despite our best intentions.” To quote another, “The community where these youth live in is filled with so many problems. Yet, most of the youth who I have worked with seem committed to overcoming these barriers.”

Most interns seemed to believe that the youth were better positioned following their intervention to make life-affirming choices that may not be modeled in their ecological environments. “I firmly believe that I was able to play a small role in helping the youth have access to information that could

hopefully change their lives," said one intern. The interns also seemed to recognize the adolescents' inner strength and resilience and that the youth appeared to become more aware of the structural conditions that could interfere with healthy development.

Overall, the interns seemed to finish their internships better informed about the challenges of working in high poverty, urban communities than they were at the outset. This finding extends to the notion that, subsequent to their Project C.O.P.E. internship, interns were also better prepared to assume professional careers in the family sciences.

## DISCUSSION

### Implications for Policy and Practice

Findings support the benefits of providing family science students with experiential learning and comprehensive training that addresses both the microsystem and exosystem. Most of the interns had little experience working with disenfranchised populations prior to initiating their internships. However, the skills that they acquired specific to HIV/AIDS, substance abuse prevention, and diversity, as well as the workshops that they facilitated on topics such as decision making, communication skills, and goal setting enabled them to develop the confidence and ability needed to effectively engage in the work. The interns also assisted the youth in making health-promoting choices, which could have contributed to the youths' empowerment process. On the exosystem level, interns recognized that the interplay between substance abuse and HIV/AIDS is a product of multiple community conditions and circumstances. Interns were involved in initiatives aimed at increasing the capacity of the community to engage in effective action which might by itself constitute a form of social justice.

Because family life is increasingly more complex, it becomes essential to equip future family science workers with a prevention toolbox that includes ways to intervene on the micro- and exosystem levels of practice. This newfound skillset can aid interns in identifying how to draw out family strengths and assets, which are techniques that could be transferred into their professional roles. When the interns were trained to recognize that neither problems nor solutions occurred in vacuums, the interns were better positioned to aid in advocacy efforts, encourage social justice activities, and support empowerment initiatives that could lead to improved outcomes.

This study highlights the benefits of providing undergraduate family science interns with well-coordinated, multifaceted training opportunities that enable them to understand the relationship between individuals, families, and their communities. The findings also illustrate the gains to students who participate in internships that enable the attainment of real-world work experience and networking opportunities, which may increase their confidence in the field.

Interns entered the Project C.O.P.E. placement with varied levels of understanding of professional knowledge and skills. Helping students to more fully examine their learning goals through focused discussions with their site supervisor and internship coordinator could further assist in helping students be successful at their internships and, subsequently, in their careers (Olsen & Montgomery, 2000).

## Limitations

Because qualitative research is context bound, the authors cannot generalize beyond the present study. Qualitative interview methodology was selected to answer the research question for several reasons. In-depth interviews have been utilized in studies that are more interested in the richness of the data rather than breadth (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). However, there are limitations to telephone interviewing: For example, the interviewer does not see the interviewee, so body language cannot be used as a source of extra information. Another disadvantage is that the interviewer has no view of the context in which the interview is occurring. Because of this, the interviewer has less possibility of creating optimal interview conditions (Opdenakker, 2006).

Regarding the specific limitations related to this study, interns may have been concerned about possible breeches in confidentiality as the interviews were audio-recorded, and as a consequence, they may have been reluctant to disclose negative experiences. Despite these apparent limitations, the authors believed that the telephone interview approach was appropriate.

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