



**Historical and Contemporary Synopsis of the Development of Field Education Guidelines in BSW, MSW and Doctoral Programs**

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# Notes from the Field: Promoting an Interdisciplinary Understanding of Obstacles to Success in Reentry

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*Moak, Hitchcock and Sherer*

## Abstract

Each year in the United States, hundreds of thousands of offenders leave institutional settings and attempt to transition into society. Social work practitioners will interact with these citizens or their families, yet few opportunities exist for social workers to explore criminal justice issues and understand barriers to successful reentry. Continued education is necessary to inform social work practice on these issues. One innovative approach is with simulation, where participants step into the role of a recently released offender. This paper focuses on the use of simulation-based learning to provide experiential learning to social work practitioners around the issue of offender reentry.

## Introduction

Understanding effective strategies for successful reentry into society for formerly incarcerated people is a critical issue in U.S. society, with implications for public safety, social justice, and fiscal responsibility. Often missing from policy discussions and from intervention development is the field of social work. Offenders return to communities in one of two ways. Either they complete their sentence and return to communities, usually after long periods of time, with no supervision requirements and no network of reentry services; or, they are released early from their prison sentence and required to finish their sentence in the community under supervision. Regardless of the situation, challenges faced by this special population trigger at least two ethical concerns for social workers, as defined by National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017). First, social workers challenge social injustice and pursue social change, particularly on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of

poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. Those who have been incarcerated represent a different oppressed group that is rarely talked about. Additionally, the condition of having been formerly incarcerated is compounded when the person is a member of any other oppressed group, such as being a Black male who has been incarcerated or a single mother who has been incarcerated. Two or more conditions add to the likelihood of living in poverty, being unemployed, and suffering discrimination. Social workers are charged with the responsibility to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Additionally, social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people. That should include those who have been incarcerated. Because their offense most often prohibits them from being able to vote, they are particularly vulnerable to being silenced in civic interactions. Social workers can carry their issues to stakeholders and provide a voice for them in policy areas that negatively impact their opportunities for success.

The second ethical principal associated with reentry is promoting the dignity and worth of the person (NASW, 2017). Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers promote clients' socially responsible self-determination. Those labeled as ex-offenders already face a host of legal barriers to successfully reentering society. Without social work services, many will return to prison in as few as three years. Research estimates indicate that of the 600,000 offenders returning to society from federal and state prisons every year (Petersilia, 2003), the majority will be rearrested within three years (Alper, Durose, & Markham 2018). Numerous obstacles hinder successful reintegration of offenders, including difficulty in obtaining employment, acquiring housing, and

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admissions into colleges and universities. Serious social and medical problems and mental health issues ranging from depression to low self-esteem to anger management problems also hinder successful reintegration for some (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2011). Offenders encounter stigma, loss of social standing in their communities, and a lack of social support and health care. The communities they left are remarkably different from the ones to which they return. Technology has passed them by, and family support is often absent. The largest survey of prisoners undertaken in Britain (Cleary, Ames, Kostdintcheva, & Muller, 2012) found that reconviction rates for released felons were higher in those who experienced discrimination than those who did not. Mass incarceration has exacerbated the issue of reentry because prisons across the US are overcrowded and often dangerous. In addition to dealing with the stigma of having been incarcerated, many offenders leave prisons with new psychological issues related to being institutionalized in unsafe conditions. As a result of heightened attention to these conditions, states are being commanded to release offenders who, based on risk assessments, can reasonably be supervised safely in the community. Considering the overwhelming odds against successful reentry, however, social workers need to receive continued education and heightened awareness and sensitivity to the plight of this special population.

#### **Simulation as a Learning Tool for Continued Education**

Simulation based learning is experiential learning designed to put participants into the circumstances of the group they are studying. Generally, this means increasing empathy toward the oppressed group. Empathy refers to a sensitivity and understanding of how others feel about events or situations (Parra, 2013), the ability to see situations from another's perspective (Chenault, Martin, & Matusiak, 2016), and is the foundation for service-oriented work (Greenleaf, 1991; Spears, 2004). Additional definitions include developing capacity to share the feelings and emotions of others, to "walk in someone else's shoes" (Myrick & Erney, 1985). Empathy involves both understanding another individual's experience and experiencing

thoughts and emotions as similar as possible to those of that individual (Parra, 2013). Empathy studies have demonstrated that developing and maintaining empathy toward oppressed groups robustly decreases prejudice and discrimination toward them (Boag & Wilson, 2014).

Research has shown that role-taking and experiential learning are critical in developing empathy. Studies demonstrating the greatest change in empathy from challenging participants' own way of thinking and making them experience circumstances from another person's viewpoint. This role taking skill can be enhanced with situations or training that put individuals in the role of others such that they have a better understanding of what that person is experiencing. Social worker practitioners who take on the life circumstances of former offenders, even for a short period of time, have a more realistic perception of the emotions and realities of that group and can advocate more productively for their unique needs.

#### **The Reentry Simulation Description**

The simulation developed through the (Author's organization de-identified for peer review) and offered to participants at the (Author's organization de-identified for peer review) brings together people from multiple majors and practice settings, including criminal justice and social work, to better understand the challenges faced by offenders released from institutional settings who are trying to reenter society. The reentry simulation includes a post-simulation small group workshops designed to promote greater understanding of structural barriers that inhibit successful reentry into society. The simulation is free and open to students and practitioners, and, beginning in the fall of 2019, it will carry three hours of continued education credit for social workers. The reentry simulation experience is designed to sensitize participants to the realities of what it might be like to return to the community after a period of incarceration. It is a simulation, not a game. Participants must assume the roles to which they are assigned. Participants interact with volunteers who assume the roles of service providers such as police officers and social service providers. Participants develop coping skills that allow them to navigate a complex and confusing process. By

then end, they better understand how all of the system parts work to create barriers to successful reentry. Through the small group debriefings, participants work in teams to formulate solutions and work toward breaking down barriers, especially across different types of service providers that will enhance successful reentry. Table 1 (p. 12) provides the simulation's learning objectives and brief agenda often required for continued education.

The simulation was developed by the (Author's Name and organization de-identified for peer review) and is packaged in a kit format with props that represent items from the real world. It takes approximately three hours to run the entire simulation, from set-up to debriefing. The simulation kit contains name cards, life cards, a certain number of transportation tickets, a certain amount of money, and other critical information for each participant. Participants are randomly assigned to a unique role of an individual recently released from prison. The main part of the simulations includes an orientation, the four 10-minute weeks which represent a month, and a debriefing period at the end of the simulation. During the orientation, participants are given facts and statistics about reentry in general, but not much information about the simulation. The lack of specific instructions is intentional, as it replicates what newly released ex-offenders receive by way of instruction and guidance. Up to 80 people can participate per simulation, and the simulations are generally better if they are crowded and chaotic. Additionally, approximately 15 volunteers are need to play to roles of service providers.

During the simulation, participants assume the roles of up to 26 different unique people leaving prison. Some offenders are unemployed, some have fines they have to pay, and all of them have to address transportation issues and other personal challenges. Each participant is required to eat on a weekly basis by purchasing food from the grocery store, which takes money. They also must complete drug tests, obtain identification (ID) cards, and avoid being arrested by the roving police officers for technical violations such as failing a drug test. The task of each individual is to comply with all of the conditions of his or her probation or parole, and must be completed within the four 10-minute weeks for the duration of the simulation.

The simulation is conducted in a large room with participants seated in groups in the center of the room. The chairs where participants sit represent their home, whether it be an apartment or a half-way house. The chairs can be arranged in rows or clustered in small groups. On the perimeter of the room, various service providers and court related stations located at tables with chairs. These services include a bank, super center, community action agencies employer, utility company, pawn broker, grocery, social service agency, faith-based agency, payday and title loan facility, mortgage company, drug screening clinic, plasma donation center, and state ID office. The volunteers in the roles of service providers have the various props needed for their role.

Upon arrival to the simulation venue, participants will check-in with a volunteer and are assigned an identity with a name badge and packet of props that includes their life card and possibly some cash and transportation passes. Each participant is then directed to a configuration of chairs to wait for the start of the simulation. Participants are asked not to open the instruction packet until directed by the lead facilitator. If participants do not follow directions, they are sent directly to jail once the simulation begins. The simulation matriculates through the four 10-minute intervals, which represent one week in the life of an individual.

Participants are directed, through their life cards (see Table 2, p. 13) and the lead facilitator, as to the requirements for each week. These include things such as paying fines, seeking employment, drug testing, securing an ID, and looking for housing. At each station, participants must pay transportation expenses, which represent all forms of transportation such as gas for a car, a bus pass, or even the energy needed to walk. If they cannot pay these expenses, they receive no services from the provider. They must figure out how to get money, such as pawning items (if they have any according to their packet) or donating plasma (if they are allowed according to randomly drawn cards at the plasma donation center).

Participants are not directed from one station to another. They are not given any directions as to what services are located at the other tables in the simulation. Law enforcement officers roam the room looking for the opportunity to re-arrest an

individual who has not complied with the conditions of his or her release. At the end of each week, when participants return to their seats, they have additional life cards on their seat that explain a new situation. Perhaps they lose their job, or they get sick, or they receive a birthday gift. Whatever the card tells them, that obstacle is in their life for the upcoming week. When a participant is taken to jail, it is completely up to the discretion of the arresting officer as to how long to keep him or her there. The volunteer service providers are instructed to give no additional instructions or help beyond what their station provides. Also, there is no requirement that service providers be helpful or respond timely to requests.

After completing the four 10-minute weeks, a debriefing session is conducted by the lead facilitator immediately following the simulation. During the debriefing, participants and volunteers share their feelings and experiences and talk about what they have learned about the challenges of reentering society and complying with conditions of probation or parole. Participants are led through a series of questions by the lead facilitator and are asked to comment on the simulation experience. This could include a summary of participant reactions to the volunteer service providers, comments about one's ability to cope with the requirements of each reentry "week," previous experiences or special information or facts which may reinforce the realities of reentry, how it feels to be reentering society during this simulation, and whether or not there was a perceptible change of attitude on the part of the participants during the simulation. Participants are asked to formulate potential options for overcoming challenges or barriers using a team-based approach. Working together from multiple disciplinary perspectives is expected to improve both understanding and cooperation among disciplines and allow for better team-based solutions. The expected outcomes include greater understanding of the complexities of reentry, greater understanding of the confusion and lack of coordination that those returning from incarceration face, and greater empathy for the plight of those returning from incarceration. Through these realizations, participants are expected to be better equipped to serve in the field of reentry.

### Learning Outcomes

The reentry simulation has been piloted with students from social work, criminal justice, and public health. The results from the pilot are encouraging for creating change in attitudes toward offenders and fostering greater understanding of obstacles and barriers to successful reintegration. So far, approximately 40 students have completed the simulation. The results discussed below have been generated from student reflections and classroom discussion following the simulations.

First, results indicate that participants changed their perceptions of formerly incarcerated persons. Reflecting upon the simulation in general, participants stated:

*People don't always treat you fairly and you sometimes don't always meet your needs due to uncontrollable circumstances.*

*Some tax money should be given to prisoners just to at least help them get a bus ticket or buy food for the week, some people just reoffend because they are guaranteed a meal and shelter in prison.*

*I did not realize that having an education whether a GED or some college does not mean anything when someone is convicted of a felony.*

These responses indicate that participants gained an understanding of how ex-offenders are treated as well as some of the specific difficulties of those first weeks outside of prison.

Participants were also asked to identify barriers that they noticed to anyone being successful upon returning to the community from prison. Participants responded:

*One thing can tie you up in trying to access anything else. I got nothing done in week one because I was waiting to get an ID. This made it impossible to do everything that was expected of me: go to probation officer, get food, go to AA, and so on.*

*I was turned away numerous times for small reasons. I felt like as soon as I made progress in one area, one of the other areas was dragging me back to the beginning.*

*Every week I had to meet with my probation officer, buy food for myself, and receive treatment for my drug addiction, all while trying to get a job and rebuild my life. I tried multiple times to get a job, but I was denied and once I finally got one, I could not pass a drug test to actually work.*

*Everything cost money and I had very little of it.*

*Getting a job was very difficult because most employers did not want to employ a person who had committed murder even though it was 20 years ago.*

*Getting from place to place was a struggle.*

These responses indicate that participants felt the struggles that are faced by those returning from incarceration and experienced the frustration of being judged for past events and being unable to comply with the overwhelming number of demands placed on ex-offenders by the system. From issues of employment to transportation to discrimination, these realities of daily life are highlighted in the responses of participants.

Finally, on the issue of developing empathy, we wanted to understand whether participants could actually put themselves in the place of someone who was trying to reenter society. Responses include the following:

*I found myself very lost at the beginning of the simulations, unsure of where I was supposed to go. This was to simulate how real ex-prisoners feel, who are basically set free and not given very much guidance.*

*I felt alone trying to reenter society, no-one was there to help, guide, or support me in any way.*

*I felt like the world was against me when I was trying to reenter society.*

*I felt very overwhelmed. There were so many decisions to make in so little time with minimum to no instruction or support.*

*I felt very overwhelmed. There were so many decisions to make in so little time with minimum to no instruction or support.*

These responses indicate that participants were able to step into the shoes of ex-offenders trying to rejoin society. Based on these results, using reentry simulations as continued education for social workers creates awareness based on empathy and identification of obstacles to successful community life which will allow practitioners to design interventions and advocate for ex-offenders in more authentic ways. Reentry services have typically been fragmented at best and nonexistent at worst. Cross discipline training is critical to providing a continuum of care to this special population. Training social work practitioners along with criminal justice and public health practitioners will improve service

delivery by creating understanding of substance abuse, lack of social support, housing difficulties, transportation issues, child support, and many other complicating factors. Through working together in an interprofessional way, public safety will be enhanced and communities will be stronger. Simulation experiences such as this one, which involve multiple disciplines and place participants directly in the role of the experience of others, appear to be a good teaching tool to provide insight into the barriers to success and to improve empathy in service delivery.

### **Table 1 – Learning Objectives & Agenda for Reentry Simulation**

#### **Learning Objectives**

By the end of this simulation, participants will be able to:

1. Describe how being an ex-offender affects individuals, families, and systems of care in the United States;
2. Contribute as a team member in their defined role as part of the simulation;
3. Identify through critical reflection the influence of personal biases and values of working with diverse individuals and constituencies, especially those who are returning from prison; and
4. Discuss the importance of engaging in practices that advance social and economic justice.

#### **Agenda**

Date: June 13, 2019

Time: 1:00 – 3:00PM

Please arrive 15 minutes early to have time to check-in for the simulation. Wear comfortable clothing and shoes, as you will be moving around.

To successfully complete this simulation, participants must complete the following tasks:

1. Participate in an assigned role as an ex-offender who is trying to meet the demands of probation or parole
  2. Participate in one of the small group debriefings immediately following the simulation
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**Promoting an Interdisciplinary Understanding of Obstacles to Success in Reentry**

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**Table 2 – Sample Life Card for Participant in the Reentry Simulation**

Your name is ANNA.

- Criminal Background: Served 7 years in state prison for drug manufacturing with intent to distribute-meth
- Your education is: HS diploma.
- Financial Situation: Money on hand-\$200 saved in prison.
- Employment-\$120/week working part time at fast food restaurant.
- Your housing situation is: with significant other in rundown apartment.

General Instructions:

- It costs one transportation ticket each time you arrive at a booth. They can be purchase for \$1 at the Transportation Station.
- If necessary, you may have items in your packet you can pawn.
- Plasma can be given twice per week. You will receive \$25 the 1st time and \$25 the 2nd.
- You must have food each week.
- You see your probation officer the 1st and 3rd weeks.
- You must attend treatment/counseling the 2nd and 4th weeks.
- You will do a UA prior to seeing your PO and upon receiving/changing employment.
- You must attend AA/NA weekly.

The following are your living expenses and court ordered appointments:

	Cost	Week1	Week2	Week3	Week4
Treatment	\$15/visit				
Probation	\$30/month				
Food	\$25/week				
Rent/Utilities	\$400/month				
UA Test(s)	\$5/test				
AA/NA	Free				

You have the following ID: State ID   
 Birth Certificate  S.S. Card

Housing situation changes: \_\_\_\_\_

Check-in at the Career Center Weekly to look for full-employment.

**Career Center:**

Week 1	Week 2
Week 3	Week 4

**Home Cards:**

Week 1	Week 2
Week 3	Week 4

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