

# Teaching “Real Utopias” through Experiential Learning

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Lindsey Peterson<sup>1</sup>, Joseph Witt<sup>1</sup>, and Carolyn Huntington<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

In this article, we describe a way to encourage students to envision “real utopias” through the Global Village experience at the Heifer Ranch in Arkansas. The Global Village experience introduces participants to issues associated with global hunger, poverty, environmental sustainability, and resource consumption and provides opportunities to experience simulated poverty and resource inequality. Using student journals recorded during the experience and participant observation, we demonstrate how students’ learning is enhanced by temporarily living outside their typical comfort zones and closer to the global averages of consumption. We find that the Global Village experience is an effective and unique tool for engaging students in global and transnational issues and for encouraging students to imagine other possible worlds.

## Keywords

globalization, qualitative methods, poverty, learning outcomes, active learning

Teaching global stratification to American undergraduate students is a daunting challenge. Numerous recent publications in *Teaching Sociology* have pointed to the need to develop creative pedagogical approaches to overcome this challenge and help facilitate student understanding of sociological concepts. For example, Arabandi, Sweet, and Swords (2014) pointed to the effectiveness of teaching global stratification using global public-data world development indicators, while Norris (2013) described the use of simulation games in class to engage students with economic and class inequality. Additionally, in their work on teaching poverty in the United States, Steck et al. (2011:260) argued that “student’s attitudes and assumptions about people who are impoverished may not be assessed or influenced by provision of information alone.” Instead, they continued, experiential learning proves more effective. This conforms with other studies pointing to the importance of “active learning” (Bonwell and Eison 1991). While several other recent publications support the effectiveness of creative and experiential approaches to teaching sociological concepts (Hoop 2012; May 2015; Scarboro 2004), such approaches become more difficult when seeking a global perspective. In this article, we describe an endeavor

undertaken during a fall break trip that encouraged global learning through out-of-classroom experience at the Heifer International Ranch in Perryville, Arkansas.

What does a global perspective add to the educational experiences of American college students? Sohoni and Petrovic (2010) trace the calls for sociology to globalize its curriculum over the twentieth century. One of the most compelling reasons to teach comparative sociology is also one of the most basic to the discipline—by encouraging students to deeply understand global inequalities, other cultures, and diverse ways of organizing local and national societies, students are induced to confront the society they themselves live in through the same critical lens. As Mills (1959) argued, it is the job of sociologists to demonstrate how individual “biographies” are entwined with “history,” and like

<sup>1</sup>Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS, USA

<sup>2</sup>Auburn University, Auburn, AL, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Lindsey Peterson, Department of Sociology, Mississippi State University, P.O. Box C, Mississippi State, MS 39762, USA.

Email: lpeterson@soc.msstate.edu

perhaps never before, history is shared across the globe.

Recognizing this shared history is one of the first steps toward “envisioning real utopias” (Wright 2010, 2013), as we will argue in this paper. Most of us who teach sociology do not do so simply to state and restate the status quo to our students, particularly in the face of profound inequalities, human rights violations, food insecurities, and environmental degradation that exist at home but especially abroad (Arabandi et al. 2014). Our teaching, therefore, is intended to be transformative, illuminating, and challenging. Through teaching about global stratification and other ways of life, we help our students see “other possible worlds” (Bowles and Gintis 1998; George 2004; Wright 2010).

Research shows that only 9.4 percent of American undergraduate students study abroad during their degree programs (Institute of International Education [IIE] 2014). The top four destinations are the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, and France—popular tourist attractions that generally offer North American students a moderately familiar setting that does not significantly challenge their physical and cultural comforts. China has risen to fifth in the most recent IIE (2014) report, though, suggesting that there may be some more diversity in study-abroad destinations in the future. However, what is clear is that (1) most students are not directly exposed to travel abroad and (2) even if they are traveling abroad, they are not likely going to developing countries (but see Fobes 2005 for a discussion of study abroad in developing countries).

Furthermore, most North American undergraduate sociology programs are organized around the “American” experience (a popular phrase referring to mainstream encounters with U.S. social, political, religious, and cultural structures), with good reason. First, many professors do research on North Americans and North American social institutions. Second, although the number of non-American students is growing in U.S. universities, most sociology students have lived the American experience only (IIE 2014). Third, as noted above, very few students travel abroad, and if they do, they are likely to interact with people who are at the same or similar levels of development, consumption, and education. To be fair, *any* study abroad is important for expanding “worldmindedness” (Douglas and Jones-Rikkers 2001), but generally, students are lacking direct experience with the developing world. Fourth, global sociology is typically relegated to one or two elective courses, or one or two

weeks at the end of a topical course, such as Social Stratification. It is challenging to give adequate coverage to all corners of the globe, and therefore the lessons typically stay at or near the surface of critical engagement.

Given these realities, what are professors of global stratification to do? In this article, we discuss a novel way to bring the rest of the world to American students, and it requires only a trip to Arkansas to the Heifer International Ranch, attached to the nonprofit organization Heifer International. Specifically, we consider how students engage with their own beliefs about the world by considering how others live and how they can theorize alternatives to the status quo. This experience places students in simulated impoverished living conditions for a weekend and requires them to negotiate the distribution of limited resources among themselves. While it is obviously not a substitute for international travel or research, the Global Village experience nonetheless forces students to break out of their comfort zones and deal with some of the real challenges of poverty and food insecurity across the globe, albeit temporarily. It is thus a way for educators to bring abstract global dynamics to the immediate, local level. Based on a study of student participants from 2014, this paper points to ways experiences like Heifer International’s Global Village can facilitate greater student understanding of complex sociological concepts and help these students engage with global issues both in and out of the classroom.

## REAL UTOPIAS AND EMANCIPATORY SOCIAL SCIENCES

Erik Olin Wright’s project on “real utopias” (Bowles and Gintis 1998; Wright 2010, 2013) is a valuable framework for explaining what the students on this trip learned from their experiences. Wright’s work on real utopias begins with two theses. First, “many forms of human suffering and many deficits in human flourishing are the result of existing institutions and social structures.” And second, “transforming existing institutions and social structures in the right way has the potential to substantially reduce human suffering and expand the possibilities for human flourishing” (Wright 2013:2). We conclude that experiential learning projects that compel students to imagine the experiences of distant others are acts of emancipatory social science (ESS; Wright 2010) which includes four main tasks:

1. Specifying the moral principles for judging social institutions.
2. Using these moral principles as the standards for diagnosis and critique of existing institutions.
3. Developing an account of viable alternatives in response to the critique.
4. Proposing a theory of transformation for realizing those alternatives. (Wright 2013:3)

We argue that ESS is a valid way to frame essentially any sociological teaching, and specifically, it is a viable framework for teaching global inequality. By encouraging students to think critically about the world as it is, and what other worlds are possible, we can move them toward transformation of the self and society.

In his 2012 American Sociological Association presidential address, Wright (2013) makes the case that one of the most difficult aspects of envisioning real utopias is the actual envisioning part at the very beginning. Because neoliberal capitalism is accepted by so many as a social law akin to the physical laws of gravity, students (and people in general) have a difficult time seeing alternatives to the overwhelming power of supply-and-demand dynamics. Although the idea of “pure,” unadulterated capitalism is as much of a utopia as any planned-economy proposition, the term *laissez-faire* is so ingrained in the American consciousness by the time students reach college that to teach alternatives is seen as near seditious (Block and Somers 2014). If “hands off” is the rule, then exceptions that put “hands on” are doomed for failure at best and may actually be cures that make the sickness of inequality worse (Hayek 1944, 1948).

Of course, college is meant to be a time of challenge and growth for young adults. One way that social scientists can aid in this growth is to demonstrate the ways that “reality” has changed over time and continues to diverge across space. Comparative case studies, in particular, force students to confront their own notions of American exceptionalism. While historical examples of alternative economies are instructive, they are too easily dismissed as “failed” by students: if they had worked, they would not be historical, or so the argument goes. Living, breathing people living in real societies with alternative ways of tackling social problems are the very best teachers. We can bring some of these people into our classrooms using biographical accounts, case study readings, documentaries, and new social media. But we can also take

students out of the classroom and allow them to do the hard work of envisioning real utopias by putting themselves in the place of an “other.”

Envisioning real utopias requires students to commit to the notions of social and political justice. In other words, they must believe that people everywhere deserve to live healthy and productive lives (Sen 1999; Wright 2010) and that socially constructed nation-state borders are porous enough to allow for radical thinking at the global level.

Are young adults more likely to “envision real utopias” than the average adult? College students today may be more keenly aware of the realities of poverty and inequality, and the social problems that these can bring about, than in any of the immediately preceding cohorts. They came of age during the worst recession in recent American history, they are exposed to global crises frequently through mass and social media, and they have barely experienced life without the United States at war. On September 11th, 2001, today’s 20-year-olds were around 6 years old. The rhetoric of the War on Terror that has nearly always been a part of their lives is framed in part through the rhetoric of development, poverty, inequality and anti-modernity in the Middle East. On the other hand, this generation has also experienced a retrenchment of American conservatism and the rise of the ultra-individualistic Tea Party as a quasi-third party in the American political system (Block and Somers 2014).

Data from the World Values Survey (2014) allow us to examine trends in utopian attitudes American over time. We examine where young adults 18 to 24 years old stand in relation to those 25 and over on two issues: favoring equality of incomes and believing that there can be enough wealth to go around. The first question specifically asks,

Now I'd like you to tell me your views on various issues. How would you place your views on this scale? 1 means you agree completely with the statement on the left; 10 means you agree completely with the statement on the right; and if your views fall somewhere in between, you can choose any number in between.

We reverse-coded this item so that 1 means “we need larger income differences as incentives for individual effort” and 10 means “incomes should be made more equal.” In 1995, 53.39 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds in the U.S. sample scored above 5 on the scale, meaning that they tilted toward

**Table 1.** Percentage of U.S. Sample Tending to Agree with That More Income Equality Is Preferable and Wealth for All Is Attainable.

Year	Income equality		Wealth for all	
	18–24	25 and over	18–24	25 and over
1995	53.39	52.87	72.17	71.48
2000	46.03	43.89	—	—
2005	35.64	35.23	53.47	61.19
2010	47.06	49.62	61.01	63.72

Source: World Values Survey (2014).

favoring more equality in incomes over more inequality. In 2000 the percentage fell to 46.04 percent and in 2005 fell again to 35.64 percent. This downward trend suggests that young Americans moved away from tending toward socialist or progressive views over the 1990s and into the early 2000s. However, the most recent wave of data, collected in 2010, shows that 47.06 percent of young adults in the United States tilt toward favoring equality over inequality. This is not as high as it was in 1995 but is nearly 12 percentage points higher than only five years earlier. The clearest explanation for this change is the Great Recession, which occurred around the years 2007 to 2009. The damaging effects of inequality were widely felt and oft discussed in major news outlets.

The second question was set up the same as the previous one, but in this case, 1 corresponded to “people can only get rich at the expense of others” and 10 corresponded to “wealth can grow so there’s enough for everyone.” In 1995, 72.17 percent of the 18- to 24-year-old U.S. sample scored 6 or higher on this scale, meaning that they were more likely to agree that wealth can grow so that there is enough for everyone, rather than that people must be selfish to be rich. As with the question on income equality, 1995 proved to be the most utopian year of the three waves when this question was asked (it was not asked in 2000). In 2005, the percentage of young Americans scoring 6 or higher on this scale fell to 53.47, a precipitous drop. But, as with the income equality question, the score rebounded to 61.01 percent in 2010.

But are young adult Americans more or less utopian than older Americans? Table 1 presents a comparison of the results for those 18 to 24 years old versus 25 and older. In fact, we find that young adults are about equally utopian (or not) in their views as older adults. In fact, if anything, older adults come out slightly more utopian than younger

adults, but there is very little difference between the samples. We also examined the impact of having at least some higher education on the utopian ideals of older adults and found virtually no difference in opinions between those with at least some college and those with a secondary degree or less.

So, over the past 20 years, young American adults have been similar or less utopian in their visions for equality than older American adults. They became more disillusioned with the ideas of income equality and wealth distribution until the mid-2000s, but the trend reversed in the most recently available data. How can alternative fall break trips, like the one to the Heifer International Ranch, or similarly designed programs encourage students to “envision real utopias?” In the sections below, we describe the Heifer Global Village experience and examine the findings from the qualitative written data using the three basic tasks of ESS outlined by Wright (2010:10): “elaborating a systematic diagnosis and critique of the world as it exists; envisioning viable alternatives; and understanding the obstacles, possibilities, and dilemmas of transformation.”

## THE GLOBAL VILLAGE EXPERIENCE

The Global Village experience is a two-day immersion event that encourages students to see nations as part of a whole-world society, confront the unequal division of global resources, and acknowledge their privilege in the world society. It is hosted at Heifer Ranch in rural Perry County, Arkansas, and is associated with the international nongovernmental organization Heifer International. Although Heifer International’s global work is somewhat controversial and heavily criticized by some (Rosenberg 2008), the Global Village experience is primarily an educational opportunity focused on

teaching about global hunger and poverty, with less of an emphasis on promoting one solution to the issues. Students are not required to donate to or support Heifer International in order to participate in the Global Village. The three authors of this paper began organizing and chaperoning student trips to Heifer Ranch in 2012, with the support of a variety of university departments, including academic colleges, Student Affairs, and a program called Mississippi State (MSU) Maroon Edition, which is the first-year reading program for the university. By raising funds for rental vans, gas, and the program fees, we have been able to offer the trip free of charge to the students. The costs per student depend on the size of the group attending, but for a group of approximately 30 students, the price in 2014 was \$130 per student. The main advertising for the trip goes through the MSU Maroon Edition. The trip is open to all students but heavily advertised to first-year students. Interested students were required to submit an application and a short paragraph describing their interest in the trip. We began requiring the paragraph for the most recent trip after finding that some students signed up for the weekend without having a clear understanding of what they were getting into and therefore were not prepared to sleep rough, have little access to modern facilities, and eat a more restricted diet than they were used to. We found that having students read over the information packet provided to them about the program and writing up their rationale for going cut down the number of "unprepareds" to zero. Of course, we work very hard to keep the details of the experience quiet before the trip because part of the experience is the shock and disorientation that comes from being immersed in the Global Village.

While the experience is not limited to sociology students, it is an excellent way for both majors and nonmajors to have a "sociological experience" outside their normal routines. The experience begins with a brief tour of the ranch and discussion of Heifer's mission and work. After a night's sleep in an open-air barn, participants move to several physical group activities. These activities are variable and may change from time to time, but they often include asking the whole group to run under a swinging rope in an increasingly short amount of time. At first, the group of students is allowed as much time as needed to get under the rope, but toward the end, the entire group must get through in one swing. Such a task requires total group coordination. Another activity involves completing a large puzzle of multicolored pieces. Students

initially assume that pieces of the same color must form the same completed puzzle, but after working together, they discover that the completed puzzle is multicolored and assuming that the colors must go together leads them down an ineffective path. A final task involves breaking students into four groups and asking them to get all of the "resources" (represented by various small toys scattered in the middle of the room) into their respective areas. Students initially struggle over the "resources" but later come to find that they may combine their spaces, thus sharing resources among all. These events get students thinking about cooperation and teamwork early in the experience, priming them for the events of the evening. The main lessons the students take away from the physical and group activities are cooperation, listening, taking turns leading and following, and that sharing resources is often more efficient than struggling and competing against each other.

After the physical activities, the students reflect together on their homes, communities, traditions, and eating practices, summarizing what they have from material and cultural perspectives. They are sorted randomly into their nation-families where they will spend the night. The Global Village itself is a physical space on the Heifer Ranch grounds with several small structures representing living conditions in some of the regions where Heifer International conducts development efforts, including Guatemala, urban slums, Appalachia, Thailand, Zambia, a refugee camp, and Tibet. Each nation-family has a certain set of resources: Guatemala has water rights and plenty of food, Appalachia has firewood, and Thailand has rice. Refugees not only have nothing; they are not allowed to speak to any other participants outside of their own group (modeling a language barrier). Some students are designated as "pregnant" (with water balloon babies in harnesses), while others may choose to accept a disability (e.g., loss of eyesight, black lung disease, or splinted leg) or spend some of their resources to "cure" the disability. Students must thus account for issues of gender and ability in their management of the experience. Once in the village, participants must then barter and trade among groups in order to meet their needs. For some, such as the refugees with nothing to trade, such a task might seem impossible. For others, such as those in Guatemala, with relatively substantial food stores, or Appalachia, with the much-needed firewood, bartering seems far less essential. It is ultimately left up to the students how they will exchange resources, if at all.



After spending the night in the Global Village, the last day begins with chores—cleaning up the camp, taking care of animals, washing dishes—then several hours of processing, when students discuss their experiences. Students are asked to stand on a large map of the world painted on a barn floor. They must then distribute themselves across the map based on global population and wealth. The event facilitators then provide them with accurate data, often surprising students with the global wealth disparity. Following this discussion, the event ends. But the question remains, just what do students take away from this experience in both the short term and the longer term? Do they gain greater appreciation of global economic disparity, or is it merely a summer camp-like experience? In a pamphlet distributed to Global Village participants about the event, Heifer International promises,

In a complex world of nearly 7 billion people, how can we find solutions to the challenges of hunger, poverty, and environmental degradation? Through your two-day immersion at the Heifer Ranch, you will begin to answer this question for yourself. Spending the night in our Global Village will allow you to experience lifestyles from around the world. You will explore your cultural identity and discuss similarities within the global community while examining issues of population, resource distribution, quality of life and standard of living. (Heifer International 2014)

We were curious to what extent student participants really engage with these issues, so we designed and implemented the following study.

Because we worked to let the experience in the Global Village and with the Heifer volunteers serve as the lesson, without our interference as instructors, we did not have a particular theoretical frame in mind when establishing our data collection protocols. Instead, we collected information from the students via a short survey before the trip and loosely structured writing throughout the time at the Heifer Ranch, and we analyzed it afterward to allow the students to tell us what they had experienced and learned. The following three writing prompts were given throughout the trip, as will be described in more detail below:

1. What are you most excited about experiencing here at the Heifer Project? What are you most concerned about? Why did you

want to spend part of your fall break on this trip?

2. How did today go for you? What was the most important thing that you learned? How did you feel about working with the rest of the students? What were some of the challenges you faced that you had to overcome together? Were you satisfied with the decision-making process and outcomes? Why or why not?
3. What village did you stay in? What were the particular challenges you faced there? How did you overcome them? What did you find most surprising about the experience in the Global Village? If you were describing this trip to a friend who was thinking about coming next year, how would you describe it?—include the good and the bad!

We found that students primarily experienced personal growth, challenges to their existing world-views, and a better sense of appreciation for the interdependence of people and nations.

## THE GLOBAL ORIENTATION OF THE STUDENTS

The research for the current study has three components. First, we conducted a pretrip survey of the enrolled students that tapped into a wide variety of attitudes, such as those on the environment, poverty, altruism, authority, and food consumption. Second, we gave out notebooks during the trip and collected written responses to open-ended questions that we posed. These questions and notebooks allowed the student participants to record their thoughts and concerns during the actual experience. And third, the authors collected participant observations during the trip. All of the researchers fully participated in the Global Village with the students, although they restrained themselves from guiding student decision-making processes. We each recorded our field notes in small notebooks and then discussed and analyzed our perceptions in later meetings. This research was approved by the MSU Internal Review Board for research on human subjects and conforms to all MSU standards as well as the American Sociological Association's code of ethics. While the researchers have gathered anecdotal evidence from previous years' experiences, the primary data for this paper come from one trip offered in early October of 2014. In this section, we use the pretrip survey data

to describe the group of students on the trip but focus more on the qualitative survey responses and our own observations to highlight the ways in which students engaged in “real utopian” thinking on the trip. Any of the quotations used in the text reflect “typical” attitudes of the students, except where noted as idiosyncratic. The sample size is relatively small, so we do not attempt a deductive, systematic breakdown of what percentage of students said *X* versus what percentage said *Y*. Instead, we allow the students’ words to shape our presentation of findings by presenting as large a number of direct quotes as deemed reasonable.

In the discussion that follows, when we refer to “the students” on the trip, we are referring to the 19 students (out of 22) who agreed to participate in the research component of the trip and answered the pretrip survey during the 2014 semester. Of the three students who did not participate in the research, one was a graduate student and one was an international student. Since this article is primarily focused on teaching global sociology to American undergraduate students, the fact that these two students (and one other) chose not to participate is unlikely to affect our results. However, we do include the data from one other student who is both a graduate student and an international student. The other 18 students in the sample were currently enrolled undergraduate students at MSU.

The students on this trip were primarily in their fourth year or more of college work (nine), followed by those in their third year (four), second year (three), and first year (two), along with one graduate student. While most college-supported outdoor camping trips are disproportionately attended by white students (Bloch 2014), on this trip over half of the sample identified as black/African American (nine), followed by white students (eight) and two students who identified as Asian. As is typical on service-learning-type trips, 15 of the students were women and four were men. We asked the students to think back to a “typical” year while they were growing up and choose the income category that most closely matched their family income. Seven students reported growing up in families that earned under \$30,000 (lower or working class), seven students reported family incomes of \$30,000 to \$70,000 (middle class), and five students reported family incomes over \$70,000 (upper-middle class).

On the pretrip survey, we asked students a series of questions to gauge their feelings about the role of the United States and other core countries in the world. We found that students had a high degree of

variation in terms of global orientation before the trip. We asked the following: “We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. Given that, are we spending too much, too little, or just the right amount of money on foreign aid?” Thirty-seven percent said the United States spends too little and 31.5 percent said about right or too much. Fifty-seven percent agreed that people in wealthy countries should make tax contributions to help people in poor countries, while 37 percent were neutral on this, and only one student disagreed with that statement. Likewise, 62 percent of the sample disagreed with the statement, “If there are problems with hunger in poor countries, there’s not much the U.S. can do,” while only 10 percent agreed with that statement. But there is a tendency for students to agree more with the statement that “it is important to help people in America who are worse off” than “it is important to help people in the rest of the world who are worst off.” We asked those questions on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 being *very important*. The average score for helping people in America is 6.10, while the average score for helping people in the world is 5.63.

In general, this group of students leaned more toward helping than not helping and being engaged with the rest of the world over being isolationist. In another question, we found that 47 percent of students felt that it would be best for the future of the United States to stay involved in world affairs, and only 20 percent of the group disagreed with that assertion (the rest were neutral). However, the fact that on many of the survey questions students remained neutral led us to conclude that it was likely a lack of information that prevented students from forming opinions on several of these topics. Indeed, only 10 percent of the students reported that they were “very informed” on American foreign policy issues, and another 30 percent reported being somewhat informed. Students were much more confident in their knowledge of inequality: a full 78 percent reported that they were “very” or “somewhat informed.” Even in this highly select, volunteer-oriented group of students, they were much less sure of themselves with regard to the rest of the world.

## LIVING IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE: LESSONS LEARNED

### *The World as It Is*

On the pretrip survey, we asked students to write in a few sentences what they thought were the biggest

problems facing the world today. Sixteen students provided responses. The key problems mentioned are hunger (six students), greed/exploitation (six students), poverty (five students), disease (four students), water (two students), violence/attacks (two students), apathy (one student), and overpopulation (one student). Several students considered the distribution of resources throughout the whole globe. One student wrote directly about the distribution of resources: "I think the biggest problems facing the world as a whole are diseases, lack of clean water, and food supplies being unequally distributed." Others pointed directly to U.S. political involvement in both global and national economic inequality. As one student wrote, "as stated for America there is a lot of greed throughout international business and politics. I think there's also so much turmoil and political unrest that those living in poverty are suffering and conditions are worsening for them." Another student also pointed to individual greed as a cause for global problems: "The ever constant hunger for power. Not enough unity of coming together and finding common grounds. And obviously the conditions of third world countries."

While many of the students pointed to greed and inequality as roots of global problems, another offered a "world systems"-type analysis (Wallerstein 1974, 1980, 1989, 2011) even before participating on the trip. The student wrote, "Overpopulation, resource allocation and lack of sustainable models of production. Theocratic-minded groups with military-grade weapons. *Continuous exploitation of the poor and the weak for the comfort and convenience of those lucky enough to be members of a Western super power* [italics added]. Endless greed, war profiteering." This student's comment points to a perception of the influence of religion in politics as well as exploitative systems of production. In general, students saw the global status quo as a system of inequality.

### Anticipating the Challenges

At the end of the first day, students had their first opportunity to write in their journals. Prior to this point in the experience, they had only ridden in a van ride to the Heifer Ranch and eaten dinner on the premises. We posed the following questions: "What are you most excited about experiencing here at the Heifer Project? What are you most concerned about? Why did you want to spend part of your fall break on this trip?"

The students were most excited about having an "authentic" experience, but this was also their biggest source of concern. One student said that she was most excited about "not only being there [in a mock-developing nation] but actually living how they live, experiencing all of their struggles. . . . Most concerned: probably the cold. I don't like cold weather too much." This trip was conducted in early October of 2014, when there was a threat of cold and rainy weather (although it ultimately was unseasonably warm and comfortable). Interestingly, no students listed lack of access to technology as *their* concern, but several students worried that *others* would complain about lack of access to technology and ruin the experience. As one student put it, "I'm concerned that some may be over 'materialized' and may not handle the global village." Another student noted that there was a lot of anxiety expressed among one van of students on the several-hour drive to the ranch about whether or not they could live without technology for even one day. On previous trips, the researchers heard some similar grumbling about technology and saw students trying to sneak watches and cell phones into the Global Village. On this particular trip, though, the sense of community and camaraderie was so strong that participants were willingly piling up cell phones, watches, e-readers, and tablets before they even really needed to. Students seemed excited to throw themselves into the experience. Throughout the night in the Global Village, none of the authors heard anyone wishing he or she had the technology back.

We wondered, why were these particular students so agreeable to living without technology while previous groups had a few "challengers" to this component of the trip? Indeed, in previous years we had noticed some students surreptitiously checking cell phones during the experience, even though they were expressly prohibited from taking them into the Global Village. After reading the journal entries, we found a common theme that helped explain this: these students were up for an adventure. In previous iterations of the trip, there were several preordained cliques of students that decided to come on the trip together. On this trip, most of the students did not know each other at all before meeting at trip orientation, and the few who did knew each other only vaguely. Holding the trip during a fall break vacation (a change from previous years) at MSU appears to have tilted the appeal of the trip toward those who are typical "alternative break" students, although it was not advertised as such. Some typical quotes from the students on why they decided to join the trip follow:



I knew this would be an experience that I will always remember!

I wanted to travel and see how Arkansas really looked like.

This type of trip is exactly how I would want to spend a break from class.

It's something very different from what I am used to doing. So, I thought a change would be refreshing in my life.

In addition to the promise of adventure, many students noted that they were hoping to gain a new appreciation for how others lived and for what they had themselves. Three students linked this hope directly to their intended career paths:

I wanted to come here to challenge myself, and learn more about world hunger as a social worker.

I want to work overseas (Lord willing) and so this seemed like a great opportunity to get a glimpse of what it would look like to actually live and be a part of another country.

... At some point I want to work for a nonprofit or organization that is looking at the bigger picture and this seemed like a good opportunity to become more knowledgeable about third world living conditions.

Others were less specific but had a more general wish to gain a broader perspective and challenge themselves:

I think this is a beneficial opportunity to live how others live.

I wanted to come to perhaps gain insight and appreciation for the difficulties of a less 'powered' and consumable living, and reset my appreciation for what we often take for granted.

I am most excited to experience living without the things that make me comfortable, so that I can appreciate them more.

I felt as if this trip would allow me to appreciate life more, being a only child I

don't have to share, and being w/ 20+ people you understand more about those who are as fortunate.

### *Difficult Decisions*

After a night's sleep in an open-air barn on bunk beds, the students spent the first full day of the trip engaged in team-building activities and walking around the Global Village as a group learning activity about global stratification by nation. At the end of the day, but before we entered into the immersive Global Village experience, we asked the students to reflect on the following questions:

How did today go for you? What was the most important thing that you learned? How did you feel about working with the rest of the students? What were some of the challenges you faced that you had to overcome together? Were you satisfied with the decision-making process and outcomes? Why or why not?

Most of the day's activities required the students to work together as a system. They were not competing against each other for resources. Instead, for example, they were all joined together in a huge human knot, holding onto a rope. As a whole group, without letting go of the rope, they had to unknot themselves. The lesson they learned was about the need to work together to distribute resources, protect the environment, and maintain strong food systems. As it is with nations, cooperation among the students proved challenging at times. The group was composed of quite a few primarily Type A personalities, nearly all of whom were used to taking on leadership roles. As one student put it, "the most important thing that I learned today was taking a step back from thinking about myself and first taking into consideration of what others have to say," and another said, "One challenge that I noticed with myself is getting frustrated when things are not going as I want. I learned that being frustrated gets nothing solved." We would like to quote another student's reflection on this first day at length because it encapsulates the myriad goals of the trip:

Today was good! We were able to do fun activities to help us loosen up and open up to one another. A thing that I had known before but was solidified today was that there are leaders and there are supporters and learning

who is which can make the difference between good and bad cooperation within a group or community. It's hard to listen to many voices trying to dominate over each other. We have to be humble enough to be willing to be a supporter if that is what we're meant to be. Working with the students was frustrating but good for me because I am hoping to work with communities of other nations and I will definitely run into frustrating situations because of the language barrier (if there is one) so it's good I experienced this.

### *Envisioning Alternatives*

After the students completed the writing reflections, we went into the Global Village and split into our separate nation-families. This was the beginning of the real test for the students. Each family received a basket of food and/or tools. The contents of each basket was different for each family; for example, one nation-family received all of the firewood in the entire Global Village and could choose to keep it all, barter for other resources, or share with other nation-families without bartering. Other than the firewood, individual nation-families did not know what other nation-families were given as resources. They had to walk all over the Global Village and ask each other what they had and then begin making decisions about how to barter and negotiate with other families to get sufficient food and resources for the night. The students faced a series of decisions: Would we barter for resources, leaving some winners and some losers? Would we all just keep the resources we started with, this time leaving some people full and warm, and others cold and hungry? Or would we pool our resources and share the food and firewood equally? It is important to note that all three authors stayed out of the decision-making process—we agreed before leaving on the trip that we would fully participate in the experience, accepting the houses and roles we were given to play, but would not influence student decisions. Initially, students turned to us as authority figures for guidance but soon stopped when they found that we would not help in that way.

In the end, the students realized something in their microcosm that nations and national leaders struggle to comprehend: they were all better off when they pooled their resources and shared the food and firewood among themselves. This did not happen right away. In the beginning, students acted very "nationalistic." For example, the Guatemalan

family had all of the eggs, the only source of protein, for the village. For quite a while, the fact that there were eggs at all was just a rumor among nation-families. Then, whispers began to spread that Guatemala (the most developed nation-family in our set) was hoarding eggs and trying to get the best deal before there could be a trade. Very quickly, the rumors spread and some moderate outrage ensued. It did not take long for the pressure to get to the Guatemala family, and there were apologies all around and assurances that it always meant to share but was simply not sure what the "rules" of the game were yet. In the group processing on the morning after the Global Village experience, one member of the Guatemala family even reported feeling "guilty" about having more resources than others. Such a response is interesting in a number of ways, including that these excess resources really included only some cornmeal, eggs, vegetables, and cookware—resources that may have seemed vastly insufficient for a meal to students before they engaged in the experience. We (the authors) believe that Guatemala's intentions were actually as the members stated, but there is the very real possibility that with a different "system of nations," there would have been a very different, and much more unequal, outcome. Instead, the group came together in the end to cook all the food at the same place (in the urban slums, where there was a cooking grill). Many of the students reflected on this process in their journals the next day, which we describe below.

Aside from the decision-making process around dinner, there were other difficulties to work through in the Global Village. For example, one of the male students staying in the urban slums quickly realized that there would be no way to keep the door shut to the shack where "slum dwellers" were staying. Indeed, the model urban slums area was composed of several wooden frames with corrugated steel roofs, dirt floors, and some limited paneling for walls. This opened up a discussion about security and privacy in other parts of the world. We discussed the fact that a person would really have to trust his or her neighbors if he or she could not truly shut them out. Actually, the only structure with a latching door was in Guatemala. So, most students were staying in structures that were open to the elements. This particular student said he was most worried about animals getting in to the shack while he was sleeping, which he also noted in his journal entry on the first day of the trip. His concern appeared to run deeper than that toward a feeling of total insecurity. He spent a long time away from the

group trying to use sticks to rig up a latch for the door. He laughed with everyone else when it was pointed out that there would be no way to latch it from the inside. Eventually he let the project go when the other slum dwellers assured him that he would be fine. The next day, a different student staying in the slums put it this way:

I did not feel very safe. I felt like anyone or anything could walk in at their own free will without me or any of my family to fend for ourselves. It was definitely a challenge trying to fall asleep and get comfortable, but I eventually relaxed my mind and stopped worrying so much and finally fell asleep for a few hours. The most surprising thing I found about the Global Village is how important it is to have those basic human skills.

The next morning while processing the event as a group, many students reported having a greater appreciation for the normal comforts—such as closing doors and feeling secure at home—that they had previously taken for granted. As students reflected in breakout, one stated, “This is somebody’s life,” while another acknowledged how the inability of the refugees to speak exacerbated the image of their difference and created even more separateness.

### *Dilemmas of Transformation*

All of the students made it through the night without incident, although there were some tense moments when the coyotes sounded like they were getting quite close. Because we had no electricity save a few flashlights, each nation-family went to bed as soon as it was dark. Many students mentioned being thankful for lights, and particularly for indoor plumbing, in their own homes, but the darkness also afforded new experiences to some students. The second author of this paper was placed among the “refugees,” a group given no resources and not allowed to speak with anyone other than members of the group. The refugee hut was situated on the outer fringes of the Global Village near a large field. While returning home after the meal, some of the students in the refugee group took time to stop and appreciate the stars. They reported that they were very happy to have taken part in the Global Village experience. This points to how, although the Global Village can be a surprising and uncomfortable experience, in this particular trip it

also served as a peaceful moment of relaxation and reflection for overconnected college students. Providing this extra space to reflect is an important part of students’ growth in knowledge through the experience.

The slum dwellers had an intriguing conversation that night that sparked particular interest for the author staying with them. This nation-family was responsible for fetching the ingredients for breakfast and preparing the meal for the entire group on the day we woke up in the Global Village. This meant that the family had to wake up at least an hour earlier than the rest of the village to get to work. While describing the slum dwellers’ duties, the Heifer volunteer told them that after they had cooked breakfast, they were done. What she meant was, “You don’t have to carry the breakfast around the village and serve everyone; they will come to you,” but the slum dwellers interpreted her comment to mean that once they were done cooking breakfast, they would have no more chores. They deemed this “only fair,” since they had to do so much extra work as it was. When they found out that their morning chore was to wash all of the dishes from both dinner and breakfast, they were initially dismayed. As they got down to business, they asked the first author why she did not tell them what was coming, and this gave an opportunity to discuss the fact that for urban slum dwellers, the work never really ends and that neither global labor nor leisure is equitably distributed.

We posed the final set of questions for students to reflect on around lunchtime of the last day at the ranch, after we were out of the Global Village. We allowed the students to keep their notebooks with them in the vans for the ride home, in case they wanted to reflect more on their responses. We asked,

What village did you stay in? What were the particular challenges you faced there? How did you overcome them? What did you find most surprising about the experience in the Global Village? If you were describing this trip to a friend who was thinking about coming next year, how would you describe it?—include the good and the bad!

Several students noted that their eyes had been opened to how people in other parts of the world live. In describing the conditions of refugees, one student said, “It is still hard for me to consider that people really live in those conditions, but at least now I have a little more of an idea of what some

people's reality is." When writing how they would explain the trip to a friend, several students used the word *humbling*, such as in the following example:

Honestly, what I found most surprising about the experience in my global village was how much I struggled to sleep, the little sleep I got. I didn't think it would be an issue, but it was sort of painful sleeping on the wooden floor. And that was just for one night. Just another humbling experience. I would describe this trip as humbling, tiring, eye-opening, thought provoking and fun.

The student's last sentence revealed an important point about the pedagogical effectiveness of experiences like the Global Village—the experience can be both challenging and fun at the same time. As educators, and as social scientists, this is likely the best outcome we could have imagined. The student viewed the experience not just as an ordeal to survive but as an opportunity for personal and intellectual growth.

Most students, however, also retained a sense of pragmatism even while practicing utopian thinking, as reflected in this quote by one student:

Something I found most surprising about the experience in the challenge was the fact that the majority of the villagers wanted to consolidate resources and become one village for the night, so to speak. My expectation for the night was to barter and try a little bit to obtain resources, just like the represented villages may do in real life. Honestly I was excited and prepared to play this game. *However, I understand why those people who wanted to come together expressed so, because that is what we as a globe hope to accomplish one day* [italics added]. We had much more food to go around as opposed to the amount we might have had in individual villages.

For those of us who teach global sociology, it was enlightening to read the following: "I think the most surprising thing I learned was that normally groups do not join forces and share with the other countries. I thought doing that was the most obvious solution." She was referring to other groups of Global Village participants in this passage, but the lesson is a powerful one for nations as well.

Another said, "I would describe this trip as a positive learning experience for anyone who is willing to allow themselves to see . . . into other cultures, struggles, etc. + how we are all inter-connected." Another student noted that when everyone was separated into their nation-families, the resources seemed so small, but when everyone pulled together, no one went hungry: "The most surprising thing from this experience was that one can help feed the world but barriers must be taken down. This means people must communicate with others. Also the amount of food that was given didn't seem enough for 29 people but no one went hungry when we shared." It was a good sign at the end of the trip that at least some student participants had been able to move from awareness and appreciation of global inequality to a desire to take action in their own lives to address the situation.

## CONCLUSION: WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

One student began her third journal entry by repeating the question that the Heifer International volunteers had posed throughout the trip: "If there is enough for all, why don't all have enough?" In the end, neither she nor any of us can answer that question with authority. Nonetheless, the Global Village experience proved to be an excellent way to engage students in ESS. Students were forced to overcome unequal resource distribution, language barriers, physical challenges, and insecurity, none of which are typical occurrences in their day-to-day lives.

In the classroom, the connections between developed, developing, and underdeveloped countries are hard to make. In our experience, American college students often come away with the sense that they are being "blamed" for their country privilege. They may feel fortunate that they were born into luxury (globally speaking), but they do not often see how their luxury, and consumption patterns, really influence the "have-nots" of the world.

The Global Village experience encourages students to consider how what they have, buy, and want is influenced by the *lack* of luxury in other parts of the world. After noting that the trip helped her get out of her comfort zone, one student noted, "This was important as I know I have become jaded and these challenges did encourage me to hope more." The connections in our Global Village microcosm made the much-larger-scale problem of global stratification seem somewhat less impenetrable. Students learned that stratification now is

not what it has always been, and this gave them more hope for the future.

Of course, we are under no illusions that this single weekend trip gives students a “real” sense of what it means to live in poverty. There is no way to simulate the powerlessness that comes with malnutrition, oppression, housing insecurity, and fear (or the combination of all these factors) and the psychological toll that takes on people and populations over the long term. Students who go into the Global Village maintain all of their rights and privileges that they have always had, including the choice to walk out if they want to. They also know that their discomfort has a time limit, which makes it much easier to bear. That being said, we as educators would rather have students learn *something* about global poverty while having fun and being personally challenged, instead of learning *nothing* because they stay entirely in their comfort zones at home.

This research has several limitations that must be noted. First, we have a relatively small sample size. Twenty-two students participated in the trip, and 19 completed the research components. Second, and relatedly, these students are not a random sample of American university students. They are students who chose to go on fall break with a group of strangers and into a completely unknown environment. Given these facts, it remains an open question as to what would happen with a much larger, more representative group of college students.

We are also interested in how other variables might have impacted the experience. For example, what if some of the students had poor interpersonal relationships before even engaging in the experience? We have found in past trips that one extremely negative participant can sometimes impact the experiences of the whole group, so how might such infighting similarly change the experience? We also wondered how cooperative the students would continue to be in a longer-term stay. After more than a few nights in such rustic conditions, would tempers begin to rise and sharing become less popular? Would they have chosen to share resources if other nation-families were composed of students from a rival university rather than their own school?

In addition to these questions, we do not know at this point what the long-term benefit of the Global Village experience will be. Will students continue to engage in real utopian thinking? Of course, defining *the long term* is difficult. We plan to follow up with students at a reunion event in the future, possibly joining participants from all past

trips together for a discussion. This will open an opportunity for further data collection. Anecdotally, we would like to note that one student participant from last year’s trip was so transformed by her experience that she is herself working at the Heifer International Ranch for the summer 2015 season as a volunteer and educator.

A final important limitation of note is that not everyone will be able to take groups of students to the Heifer Ranch in Arkansas. How can faculty bring a Global Village experience to students instead? First, we can envision a similar, albeit smaller-scale, Global Village set up on a college campus in a space like a gymnasium, residence hall, or even classroom. For example, facilitators could set up the common areas of a residence hall into nation-families, distribute resources unequally, and allow the students to figure out how to cook a meal.

However, there are existing programs that have the same goals of the Global Village experience, utilizing methods that are more amenable to the resources of many universities. Harris, Harris, and Fondren (2015) describe how “hunger banquets” teach global inequality and food insecurity through active learning. As in the Global Village, organizers of hunger banquets randomly sort participants into stratified global classes, and the size of one’s meal depends on which global class one is in. Harris et al. provide an excellent overview of how to work hunger banquets into the sociology classroom. We can envision an expansion of their hunger banquet model to include the opportunity for “real utopian” revision. Specifically, we would be interested in how the experience would play out if students first engaged in a traditional hunger banquet, where everyone was “stuck” in their global class position with no opportunity for exchange, and then a second experience the following week, where students were stratified, given unequal food resources, and then given the chance to barter, exchange, or share as they can in the Global Village. Harris et al. provide qualitative evidence of the discomfort students feel both in having nothing and in having privilege at hunger banquets. It would be very interesting to compare these initial feelings to a follow-up where students are encouraged to change the status quo.

In conclusion, we believe there is a lot to be learned on teaching global sociology and engaging with real utopian thinking. First, removing students from their regular lives does not require a full study-abroad experience, however ideal that might be. The Heifer Global Village experience in Arkansas is much



less expensive than studying abroad. For us, this meant that we could raise resources from university sources and not charge the students anything. By providing the experience for free to students, we did not put an undue burden on students with less money, which can and does prevent some students from traveling abroad. In this time of rising tuition across the board and weaker commitments from states for their public universities, along with rising enrollment rates of economically disadvantaged students, providing opportunities for any travel and extracurricular-but-educational activity can only add value to students.

Second, giving students actual resources to barter for and distribute, and providing them consequences for failure to do so, is extremely important. In this case, if the students could not come to an agreement before it was dark, or before the firewood ran out, or before an approaching storm, then they were not going to have dinner. This would not have been a crisis—one skipped meal may be uncomfortable, but it would not have endangered student health. However, the students really did want to have dinner that night, particularly because they had engaged in physical activities all day.

Third, and finally, the experience requires students to confront their nation privilege. In the classroom, encouraging students to confront privilege can often come off as preachy and can even provoke hostility in students who feel that they are being blamed for their privilege. The Heifer Global Village experience barely requires any formal statement about privilege; it just comes up naturally. For example, one group of students somehow missed the warning not to drink the water out of the lake in the Global Village, even though there was a pump nearby to draw the water out. They decided that they did not want to walk up to Guatemala to draw clean water from the tap and that they would go ahead and use lake water. The group filled its cooking pots with lake water before the authors heard that it was happening. Fortunately, the students did not drink that water or cook with it, but immediately we could talk about how strange it was not to have clean water just flowing out of taps at every turn. This allowed us to talk about privilege in a real and immediate way, without having to state that “some people in the world don’t have access to clean water.” For a little while, students had to live that reality.

We hope, and believe, that the small groups of students we take on these trips return to their lives and tell other students about their experience, which spreads the educational component beyond the students we reach directly. The feedback on the trip is very positive: it is life-changing, humbling,

and educational. While we, as faculty, can do only so much in our classrooms to teach global inequality, our fervent hope is that our trip participants are continuing our work outside the classroom toward “real utopian” goals.

## EDITOR’S NOTE

Reviewers for this manuscript were, in alphabetical order, Bhavani Arabandi, Paul Dean, and Peter Kaufman.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Lindsey Peterson** is an assistant professor of sociology at Mississippi State University (MSU) and a research fellow of the Social Science Research Center at MSU. She earned her PhD in sociology from The Ohio State University. Her research is primarily in political sociology, with a strong emphasis on stratification and development. She teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in stratification, power, social change, and research methodology.

**Joseph Witt** is an assistant professor of religion at Mississippi State University. He earned his PhD in religion from the University of Florida. His research focuses on the intersection of place-based education, religious studies, and environmental studies, and he continues to work to develop creative and experiential learning opportunities surrounding issues of environmental justice. He teaches courses on religion and environmental ethics and has also taught at the Middlebury College intensive summer School of the Environment.

**Carolyn Huntington** earned her BS in animal sciences from the University of Illinois, her MS in nutritional sciences from the University of Illinois, and her PhD in animal sciences from the University of Missouri. She served Mississippi State University for eight years beginning as the undergraduate coordinator for the Animal and Dairy Sciences Department and later as the director of undergraduate advising for the College of Agriculture. Currently she is the undergraduate program officer for the Animal Sciences Department at Auburn University. Her responsibilities include overseeing advising, curriculum, and teaching efforts as well as recruiting new students to the department. She teaches several undergraduate courses as well as a first-year experience course for the university.