A Framework for Understanding Poverty

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What is Poverty?

In order to discuss poverty and its effects on individuals and communities, it is important to define what poverty really is. A rather simplistic approach to defining poverty is that used by the United States government. The federal government defines poverty through the use of "poverty thresholds".[1] This concept of poverty thresholds was originally developed in 1963-1964 by Mollie Orshansky of the Social Security Administration. Orshansky based her poverty thresholds on the economy food plan — the cheapest of four food plans developed by the Department of Agriculture. The actual combinations of foods in the food plans, devised by Agriculture Department dietitians using complex procedures, constituted nutritionally adequate diets; the Agriculture Department described the economy food plan as being "designed for temporary or emergency use when funds are low." Orshansky's plan was based on data from 1955 showing that, at that time, households spent one-third of their household income on food. She also assumed that, when a household needed to cut back its overall spending, expenditures on food and non-food would be reduced at the same rate. This assumption, of course, does not take into account the fact that many non-food expenditures, such as those for housing, transportation, utilities, etc., are mostly inflexible at least in the short term. In addition, while Orshansky used after-tax income as the basis for her model, the U.S. government has consistently implemented the poverty thresholds based on pre-tax income. Figure 1 gives the U.S. Poverty Threshold data for 2004.

Size of family unit	Weighted average thresholds	Related children under 18 years								
		None	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	Seven	or more
One person (unrelated individual)...	9,645									
Under 65 years.....	9,827	9,827								
65 years and older.....	9,060	9,060								
Two persons.....	12,334									
Householder under 65 years.....	12,714	12,649	13,020							
Householder 65 years and older...	11,430	11,418	12,971							
Three persons.....	15,067	14,776	15,205	15,219						
Four persons.....	19,307	19,484	19,803	19,157	19,223					
Five persons.....	22,831	23,497	23,838	23,108	22,543	22,199				
Six persons.....	25,788	27,025	27,133	26,573	26,037	25,241	24,768			
Seven persons.....	29,236	31,096	31,290	30,621	30,154	29,285	28,271	27,159		
Eight persons.....	32,641	34,778	35,086	34,454	33,901	33,115	32,119	31,082	30,818	
Nine persons or more.....	39,048	41,836	42,039	41,480	41,010	40,240	39,179	38,220	37,983	36,520

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Figure 1.

[1] "Poverty Guidelines, Research, and Measurement", web page of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/index.shtml

Figure 2 shows how the U.S. population generally spends its income. No segment of the population spends less than 30 percent of its income on housing, with segments with relatively less income spending greater percentages of its income on shelter. Individuals in the "under 35" and "35 to 64" segments spend approximately 20 percent of their income on transportation relative to the "over 65" segment which spends about 16 percent of its income. (This difference could reflect the difference in job-related transportation needs.) This figure, based on 2000 data, shows that individuals in the "over 65" spend about 12 percent of their income on health care. More recent studies show that the elderly population spends about 19 percent of income on average with lower-income seniors spending as much as 35 percent or more. It is not unreasonable to assume that, as health care has become more expensive across the board, all Americans are spending a higher percentage of their income on health care than is shown in the data for 2000. A number of studies have shown, as families struggle to meet their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter, the amount spent on food is significantly reduced because that part of the budget is most flexible.[2]

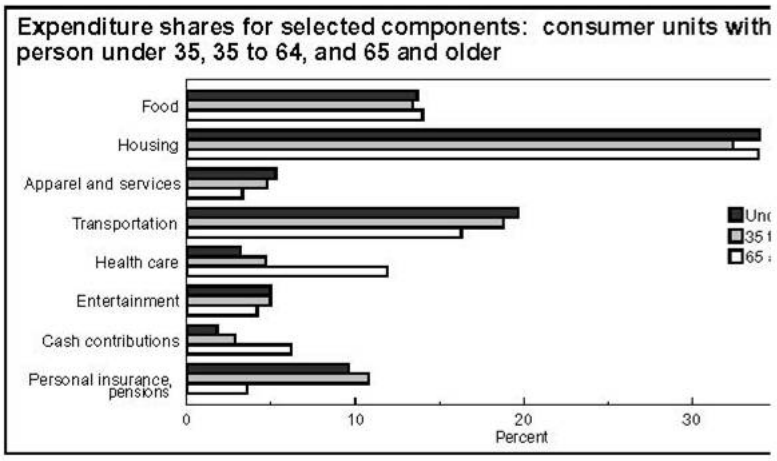

Figure 2.

Dr. Ruby Payne, in her book "A Framework for Understanding Poverty"[3], asserts that the most useful definition of poverty is "the extent to which an individual does without resources", where financial resources are only one of many. Financial resources, while obviously important, do not fully explain why some individuals succeed in advancing out of low-income circumstances and others do not. Dr. Payne outlines the following resources as being critical to success in overcoming poverty:

Financial: having the money to purchase goods and services

Emotional: being able to choose and control

[2] "Hunger in America", America's Second Harvest, Chicago, IL, 2006.
[3] Payne, R. K., Ph.D., "A Framework for Understanding Poverty", Fourth Revised Edition, aha! Process, Inc., Highlands, TX, 2005

Mental:	having the mental abilities and acquired skills (reading, writing, computing) to deal with daily life.
Spiritual:	believing in divine purpose and guidance
Physical:	having physical health and mobility
Support systems:	having friends, family and backup resources available to access in times of need
Relationships/role models:	having frequent access to adult(s) who are appropriate, who are nurturing and who do not engage in self-destructive behaviors.
Knowledge of hidden rules:	knowing the unspoken cues and habits of a group

It also is useful to recognize the differences between situational poverty and generational poverty. Dr. Payne characterizes situational poverty to be a lack of resources resulting from a specific event: divorce, health crisis, death, etc. In this instance, poverty is an unfamiliar state for the individuals involved and, many times, these individuals bring more resources to the situation than those in generational poverty. Generational poverty is a more long-term experience for families, the members of which have lost contact with a previous life in which resources existed in greater abundance or never experienced another type of existence. For individuals living in generational poverty, it is likely that they do not remember a time when anyone in their family owned land, do not know anyone who has benefited from education, or has contact with anyone who has moved up the ladder of authority in their job.

How Environment Defines Generational Poverty

Steven Durlauf at the University of Wisconsin at Madison suggests that "membership theory", or the idea that group affiliations influence socioeconomic outcomes, has implications for anti-poverty policies. Studies have shown in many contexts that knowledge of group behavior is useful in predicting individual behavior. Durlauf articulates this by saying, "Suppose that an individual's socioeconomic outcomes depend upon the composition of the various groups of which he is a member over the course of his life . . . These memberships can exert causal influence on individual outcomes through a range of factors." He defines these factors to include peer group effects, role model effects, social learning and social complementarities. Also, he acknowledges that some group memberships are not choice variables. Race and gender are obvious non-choice variables but, indeed, some variables can be choices for some and not for others, such as the neighborhoods in which they reside or the schools they attend.

In fact, membership theory has been most commonly applied to the role of residential neighborhoods in transmitting poverty and inequality across generations. Entry into neighborhoods may be restricted through the cost of housing, by restrictions on the construction of rental housing in certain areas or, at times, by overt discrimination. Over time, as those who

have the resources to move to more affluent neighborhoods do so, the social isolation of those in poverty increases. As articulated by William Julius Wilson[4], ". . . changes have taken place in ghetto neighborhoods and the groups that have been left behind are collectively different that those that lived in these neighborhoods in earlier years. It is true that long-term welfare families and street criminals are distinct groups, but they live and interact in the same depressed community and they are part of the population that has, with the exodus of the more stable working- and middle-class segments, become increasingly isolated socially from mainstream patterns and norms of behavior."

In "Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City", Elijah Anderson says, "Almost everyone residing in poor inner-city neighborhoods is struggling financially and therefore feels a certain distance from the rest of America, but there are degrees of alienation, captured by the terms "decent" and "street" or "ghetto," suggesting social types. The decent family and the street family in a real sense represent two poles of value orientation, two contrasting conceptual categories."[5]

Families in the inner city exist in an environment of fear and dishonesty. Life often features an intense competition for scarce social goods in which "winners" totally dominate "losers" and in which losing can be a fate worse than death. So, one must be on one's guard constantly. Because the street element so dominates the public spaces, even "decent" people must show they are ready to meet the street ethic in order to survive unmolested. As a result, most decent parents encourage their children to hit back if challenged, particularly if the child is backed into a corner. It is difficult not to fight back, because status and esteem are often at issue. This makes an emphasis on talking one's way out of confrontations or walking away rather exceptional, but many young people try such a tack and engage in fighting only as a last resort. As one thirteen-year-old girl in a detention center for youths who have committed violent acts said, "To get people to leave you alone, you gotta fight."

High rates of unemployment among working age adults in low-income neighborhoods negatively impact the likelihood that many will attempt to better their situation in life. Children rarely interact with people who are employed. As a result, there is no network that offers connections that can lead to jobs. It is well established that 80 percent of all jobs are never advertised; they are filled through networking, inside contacts, and word-of-mouth. The jobs that poor individuals hear about generally are the ones that no one else wants – tedious, unchallenging or hazardous – and getting to that job can be difficult, if not impossible, if the individual must rely on public transportation. Also, because many of these jobs pay less than public assistance, adults struggle with the choice of working and having their children come home to empty homes and dangerous neighborhoods or being stereotyped as "lazy welfare bums" and keeping their children safe.

The environment for the rural poor is somewhat different than that for the urban poor. The lack of decent paying jobs that match the limited skills sets of rural residents is a major cause of poverty. Although as many as 75 percent of rural families have at least one person in the family

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[4] Wilson, W. J., "The Truly Disadvantaged", University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1987.
[5] Anderson, E., "Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City", W. W. Norton and Company, New York, 1999.

working, the job generally are in the service industry and pay minimum wage. Children in these families cannot understand the value of hard work when they see no connection between their parents' efforts and rising out of poverty. Education becomes meaningless without viable job opportunities upon graduation. While some become angry and frustrated with lack of opportunities for a better life, many become resigned to their situation, seeing it as inevitable.

Getting a job comes with its own set of problems for individuals in generational poverty. If an individual is successful in finding a job, there are few, if any, peers who can model appropriate behaviors for dealing with work-related problems. The geographic isolation of low-income neighborhoods from those of potential mentors from the workplace makes it difficult to develop and use those types of relationships. Also, when poor individuals begin to show a level of commitment to a job that is outside the common behaviors of the group and especially if they begin to become successful, family and friends many times will begin, consciously or unconsciously, to undermine future success. So, with no support at home and isolation from middle class society, moving out of poverty becomes very difficult.

The environment of generational poverty differs in urban and rural areas, but the outcomes are the same – a lack of role models who show the value of education through meaningful work that provides sufficient income to raise a family out of poverty. In addition, the rising number of homeless families – both urban and rural – establishes an environment of instability and chaos for family members. The developmental needs of the children, educational and occupational goals and quality of life issues for most of these families take a back seat to survival.[6]

How Language Defines the Culture of Generational Poverty

How we obtain information has a dramatic impact on how we experience the world. In his landmark book "Orality and Literacy"[7], Walter Ong pulled together two decades of work by himself and others on the differences between primary oral cultures and writing cultures to look at how the shift from an oral-based stage of consciousness to one dominated by writing and print changes the way we humans think. He addresses the development of script and how this restructures our consciousness. One of the most important effects he discusses is the way that writing distances the originator of a thought from the receiver. Writing does this by enabling the existence of discourse "which cannot be directly questioned or contested as oral speech can be because written discourse is detached from the writer". In addition, the further entrenched writing becomes as a mode of expression, the more humans move from an oral-aural-based sensory world to one where vision reigns supreme. This shift promotes the interiorization of thought, prompts us to see ourselves as situated in time, and allows for precision, detail and the development of an extensive vocabulary.[8]

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[6] Slinski, M. D., "Building Communities of Support for Families in Poverty," unpublished report, Cooperative Extension, University of Massachusetts, 1990.
[7] Ong, W. J., "Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word". New York: Methuen, 1988.
[8] Bingham, Art, "Review of Walter J. Ong's Orality and Literacy", web page of the University Writing Center at Northern Illinois University, http://www.engl.niu.edu/wac/ong_rvw.html

According to Dr. Donna Beegle, oral culture is spontaneous, repetitive, emotional, physical, focused on the present and holistic. Relationships are central to the oral culture and are given first priority.[9] By contrast, print culture is a learned way of relating to the world in which information collected through the five senses is processed and analyzed into categories, classifications and styles of reasoning. Characteristics of print culture are self-discipline, separation and disconnection, ability to delay gratification, ability to strategize and plan ahead, ability to set goals, ability to develop technology, ability to break things down into parts and ability to organize efforts according to predetermined goals.[10]

Every language in the world has five registers: frozen, formal, consultative, casual and intimate.[11] Figure 3 illustrates the connection between oral/written culture and registers of language.

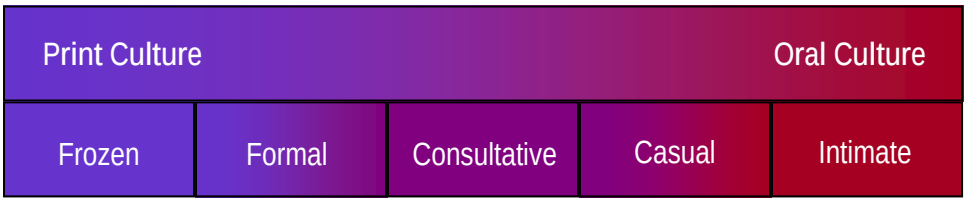

Figure 3.

Frozen register is explained as language that is always (or nearly always) the same: the Lord's Prayer, wedding vows, etc. Formal register is the standard syntax of work and school; complete sentences and specific word choice is important. Consultative register is the one that is used between strangers or distant work colleagues, that is, among people who do not share the same immediate knowledge. It is the everyday style of many middle class, middle aged, educated Americans. The speaker has to supply background information about a topic and does not presume to be understood without it. Casual register is the language of friends – very informal, depending heavily on non-verbal assists. Intimate register is the language used between very close friends or family members; it can be inappropriate in public settings. Linguist Martin Joos stated that, in most societies, it is acceptable to shift up or down one register during a conversation, but not more.[12]

In generational poverty, many suffer from true or functional illiteracy because of insufficient education. As a result, the culture of generational poverty is an oral culture. Most individuals living in generational poverty do not have access to formal register at home. It is a world of casual and intimate conversations based on an oral tradition. This lack of understanding of formal register and the lack of vocabulary necessary to employ formal register is a barrier to those who may attempt to escape generational poverty.

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[9] Beegle, Donna, Ph.D., "Educating Children of Poverty", Communication Across Barriers, Tigard, OR, 2003.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Joos, M., "The Styles of the Five Clocks"
[12] Ibid.

The Hidden Rules

Because the worlds of work and school use middle class rules of behavior as the norm, individuals who did not grow up in the middle class are at a disadvantage when trying to achieve success. The following chart shows some key differences in the world view of individuals from generational poverty, middle class and wealth.

Hidden Rules	Poverty	Middle Class	Wealth
Possessions	People	Things	Pedigrees, legacies
Money	To be used, spent	To be managed	To be conserved, invested
Personality	Is for entertainment; a sense of humor is highly valued	Is for acquisition and stability; achievement is highly valued	Is for connections; financial, political and social connections are highly valued
Social Emphasis	Social inclusion of people who are liked	Emphasis is on self-governance and self-sufficiency	Emphasis is on social exclusion
Food	Did you have enough? Quantity is important	Did you like it? Quality is important	Was it presented well? Presentation is important
Time	Present is most important; decisions made based on feelings or survival	Future is most important; decisions are made based on future ramifications	History/tradition is most important; decisions made in part based on tradition and decorum
Humor	About people	About situations	About social faux pas
Conflict Resolution	Physical fighting; respect is accorded to those who can physically defend themselves	Fighting is done verbally; physical fighting is viewed with distaste	Fighting is done through social inclusion or exclusion or through lawyers
Destiny	Believes in fate; cannot do much to mitigate chance	Believes in choice; can change future with good choices now	Noblesse oblige
Driving Force	Survival, relationships, entertainment	Work, achievement	Financial, social, political connections

One key difference between classes is the way in which money is viewed. One of the biggest difficulties in getting out of poverty is learning how to manage money. Also, relationships are placed above all else by people living in poverty, since possessions may be few. People, in a sense, become "possessions" and express a great deal of fear about leaving their culture and bettering themselves through education. Leaving poverty often requires leaving relationships behind.

Strategies for Communities

It is clear that the environment of generational poverty does not prepare individuals for success in the middle-class world of work and school. In fact, Reuven Feuerstein[13] states that, if an individual depends upon a random, episodic story structure for memory patterns (oral culture), lives in an unpredictable environment (low-income neighborhood) and has not developed the ability to plan, then:

[13] Feuerstein, R., et. al., "Instrumental Enrichment: An Intervention Program for Cognitive Modifiability", Scott, Foresman and Company, Glenview, IL, 1980.

If an individual cannot plan, he/she cannot predict.
If an individual cannot predict, he/she cannot identify cause and effect.
If an individual cannot identify cause and effect, he/she cannot identify consequence.
If an individual cannot identify consequence, he/she cannot control impulsivity.

The culture of generational poverty sometimes is seen in the workplace when an employee:

- gets mad and quits; the emphasis is on the current feeling, not the long-term ramifications
- settles conflicts with verbal or physical assaults; the language of negotiation and conflict resolution does not exist
- uses inappropriate ways of addressing people; casual and intimate registers of language is all that is known
- is always touching others; oral culture relies heavily on non-verbal data and touch
- shows favoritism for certain people and give them preferential treatment; relationships are very important
- talks back loudly and is not reserved when angry; authority is distrusted in the poverty culture and loss of face is feared
- is very disorganized and frequently misses deadlines; does not have the ability to plan and problem solve that comes from growing up in a print culture.

A business that draws employees from a labor pool that has a large number of individuals from generational poverty would be well advised to be proactive in helping these employees learn the "hidden rules" and key skills required in the workplace. Regular training on appropriate ways to deal with conflict, ask for help and create effective work plans can introduce individuals to the behaviors necessary to achieve success. Direct modeling of desired behavior by supervisors – goal-setting, planning, coping strategies, accessing information – can have dramatic impact. The Human Resources staff also must be trained to recognize the root cause of inappropriate behaviors so that effective coaching can be provided. It is important to remember that, many times, these behaviors are not intended to be disrespectful or disruptive but are the result of a lack of information.

Schools can help children achieve greater levels of success by helping them learn the "hidden rules" that will help them navigate the educational system. Direct teach study skills and classroom behavior skills; require daily goal-setting and procedural "self-talk". Also, school administrators, teachers and staff must recognize the hidden rules of poverty in order to bridge the divide between parents and the school. Because life in poverty can be so chaotic, every effort schools can make to provide consistency and stability is valuable for children in generational poverty. Strategies may include having teachers stay with assigned groups of students for multiple years rather than having the children change teachers as they move from grade to grade. This allows the teacher to get to know each child's strengths and weaknesses more fully. There is a trend toward making schools "centers of community"; that is, placing services and support systems for struggling communities on school campuses. By creating a sense of community at the schools and placing resources that support success close by, children are more likely to achieve academic success. Peer support programs like "Mediator Mentors" help children learn negotiation skills and coping strategies.

In both of these environments, mentoring can be a valuable asset to those from generational poverty who are attempting to make a transition out of poverty. A mentor can be anyone with a knowledge and understanding of the hidden rules and values of the work/school environment, based largely on that of the middle class. These mentors help others – usually one-on-one – to replace learned, but ineffective or destructive, behaviors with new habits of behavior that are in sync with the norms of the individual's new environment. Mentoring can be formal or informal, casual or structured, frequent or sporadic, active or passive. It is important for mentors to determine the present set of resources available to the mentee when mentoring starts. The more resources that a mentee

It may be desirable for employers to institute a structured program in order to introduce the mentoring to employees who are unfamiliar with the concept and its outcomes. Also, individuals from generational poverty who may already feel lost and intimidated by a work environment so foreign from their home environment may feel unworthy of the attention given to them by a mentor and, therefore, unable to make the choice to participate in a voluntary program. A mentoring program that includes all employees or all new employees also will make it less likely that an individual will misconstrue the mentor's attention as negative rather than positive.

That critical point for many of our nation's youth is high school. The transition through it and into early adulthood can determine future economic opportunities and life satisfaction. Work-based mentoring programs appear to provide guidance to a growing number of students as they make this transition. Work-based mentoring typically takes place in the offices of the sponsoring company-as distinguished from company-wide initiatives in which employees are encouraged to mentor young people off-site during company time. These programs are specifically designed to provide low-income students with job skills training, exposure to the world of work and access to labor market opportunities. Research on youth work-place mentoring programs has shown that students involved in well-organized work-based and apprenticeship programs have shown psychosocial, professional and educational gains. Research also suggests that work-place mentoring and apprenticeship can increase youth's optimism about their occupational future and lower their levels of aggression and delinquency.

Using the concepts of deposits and withdrawals (see Figure 4) outlined by Stephen Covey in "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" can help to further the success of individuals from generational poverty. According to Covey, behaviors in the "deposits" column strengthen relationships while behaviors in the "withdrawals" column damage relationships.

Deposits	Withdrawals
Seek first to understand	Seek first to be understood
Keeping promises	Breaking promises
Kindnesses, courtesies	Unkindness, discourtesies
Clarifying expectations	Violating expectations
Loyalty to the absent	Disloyalty, duplicity
Apologies	Pride, conceit, arrogance
Open to feedback	Rejecting feedback

Dr. Payne suggests that a similar chart can guide relationship building and mentoring with individuals from generational poverty.

Deposits made to Individual in Poverty	Withdrawals made from Individual in Poverty
Appreciation for humor and entertainment provided by the individuals	Put-downs or sarcasm about the humor or the individual
Acceptance of what the individual cannot say about a person or situation	Insistence and demands for full explanation about a person or situation
Respect for the demands and priorities of relationships	Insistence on a middle class view of relationships
Using the "adult" voice	Using the "parent" voice
Assisting with goal setting	Telling the individual what his/her goals will be
Identifying options related to available resources	Making judgments on the value and availability of resources
Understanding the importance of personal freedom, speech and individual personality	Assigning pejorative character traits to the individual

Conclusion

Even with its clear shortcomings, the U.S. poverty threshold measurements help to focus our attention on what may be the most critical flaw in its approach – defining poverty as a purely economic condition. Living in a low-income, or poor, household clearly is a factor in whether or not an individual lives in poverty. But, it is not the only factor. So, while public assistance programs can assure that poor children have a roof over their heads and some food to eat, it does little to change their life circumstance. That doesn't mean that this assistance isn't necessary and worthwhile; however, it does indicate that this assistance alone will not move people out of poverty.

Long-term actions that will impact the ability of individuals in generational poverty to achieve some level of mobility out of poverty are community-wide in nature and include issues such as development of adequate modes of public transportation and community development and

planning that minimize isolation among socioeconomic classes. But, it is possible to address the issues outlined in this paper immediately in the workplace and in the schools. Introduction of the hidden rules of work and school to individuals from generational poverty and introduction of the hidden rules of poverty to employers, supervisors and human resources professionals in the work place and to school administrators, faculty and staff can reduce confusion and frustration. Mentor relationships can make is possible for individuals from generational poverty to have the courage to cut ties with family or friends who undermine their success. Direct instruction of desired skills and behaviors can help employees and students to replace ineffective behaviors with habits that will yield success and achievement.

Individuals from generational poverty who take steps to move themselves out of poverty are, in every sense, "leaving home". Ruby Payne asks us to envision what it would be like for us to embark on this "great journey". You will be allowed to take only a limited amount of luggage; much of what has been meaningful to you is being left behind. You're also leaving behind many of the people on whom you've depended for love, support and friendship. They cannot or do not want to go on this journey with you. You have heard that the "old ways" don't work well where you are going and that you'll have to learn the "new ways". In fact, you don't even know the language of this new place. Would you have the courage to go anyway?