

## CROSSING THE TRACKS

### *Building Relationships Across Socioeconomic Differences*

A program director expresses this concern: “Whenever we talk about the low-income families we serve, I hear our staff and volunteers say, ‘*They never this and they always that and why don’t they just.*’ We sound so judgmental! It’s like we don’t believe there are reasons for the behavior we see. The race and ethnicity of our staff and volunteers match our community and our clients, so I’m thinking this is about class. We are mostly

well-educated, middle-class people serving the poor, and we just don’t understand.”

In the 1990s, many people providing health and human services — volunteers and professionals alike — set about to learn interpersonal skills to help bridge ethnic and racial differences. Diversity training debuted in community-based organizations, governmental agencies, and businesses. Participants in these workshops questioned stereotypes and explored the impact of both subtle and explicit prejudice on delivery of services. We learned that to understand our judgment and fear of people different from ourselves, each of us needs to understand the impact of circumstances, examine beliefs, and seek a deeper understanding of our individual backgrounds and value systems.

Educating ourselves about ethnic and racial groups diversity is now a recognized “best practice” in alcohol and other drug (AOD) prevention work. We readily acknowledge that understanding differences in human experiences and perspectives is crucial to meeting needs and working together. Many of us have worked hard to clear away misinformation, recognize stereotypes, and familiarize ourselves with the experiences and perspectives of others. So why aren’t we addressing differences in socioeconomic status in the same way?

This *Prevention Tactics* focuses on building authentic relationships across socioeconomic differences, using concepts and approaches learned in diversity work. Actual railroad tracks don’t necessarily delineate the poor part of town anymore. However, those of us who are middle-class and working directly with the poor can — and should — examine our assumptions if we hope to “cross the tracks” that still divide us.



by Barbara E. Webster, M.N.A.

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**Tactics** (tak'tiks) *n.* 1. a plan for promoting a desired end. 2. the art of the possible.

## Debunking the “Culture of Poverty” Theory

### ANALYSIS

THE “CULTURE OF POVERTY” THEORY, developed by social scientist Oscar Lewis in the 1960s, still accounts for some of middle-class America’s mis-

laziness, stupidity, lack of ambition or motivation and inadequate preparation for an occupation are often linked to these characteristics.



Poverty is a condition, not a culture.

givings about the poor today. Lewis described poverty as “a culture in the traditional anthropological sense in that it provides human beings with a design for living, with a ready-made set of solutions for human problems.”

This theory—now widely debunked by anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists and other social scientists—asserts that:

1. Poverty results from characteristics of the individual poor person that influences his or her success.
2. A virtually autonomous subculture exists among the poor, one that is self-perpetuating, self-defeating, and passed on to children in values or motivations that are set by about age seven.
3. Characteristics of poor individuals include a sense of resignation or fatalism and an inability to put off satisfaction of immediate desires in order to plan for the future.

Rather than simply “blaming the victims,” most social science theories now view poverty as part of problems within the economy and/or within society. The reasons for poverty are complex, including lack of reasonable access to good jobs, education, health care, adequate housing, and insurance. Contributing factors may include “labor market segmentation” (meaning what jobs are available where and to whom), discrimination, or both.

### How “Culture of Poverty” Thinking Affects Us

Remnants of the culture of poverty theory can still be discerned in the way poor people are often perceived and stereotyped. This can be very damaging in human services, where mostly middle-class people serve the poor. A culture-of-poverty mindset can hinder the development of meaningful relationships because it:

- Promotes an impression that all of the poor share one unified set of values and mores.
- Suggests the ways of the poor are passed down from generation to generation when facts show that most poverty in America is situational and periodic.
- Implies intractable differences, making the poor “the other.”
- Starts from the belief that middle class behaviors are the appropriate standard regardless of actual material circumstances — that is, non-poor people interpret the behavior of the poor in terms of unstated assumptions of what is sensible and worthy based on the material realities of the lives of the middle-class.
- Can cause people who care to feel paralyzed by the belief that it is either inappropriate or impossible to try affect change for someone whose way of life is different from their own.

KEY CONCEPTS

## WHAT IS POVERTY?

### What is the “poverty line”?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the poverty threshold in 1999 for a family of four that includes two children under age eighteen is \$16,895 of income per year.

### What is an “economy budget”?\*

The poverty line was originally set in 1963 by the Social Security Administration. It is based on an “economy budget,” which was defined as the least amount of money required for a family of four to meet minimal nutritional requirements, multiplied by three (because at that time the cost of food made up one-third of the total budget for an average family). Food has fallen to approximately one-sixth of the average budget, yet the calculations remain at one-third.

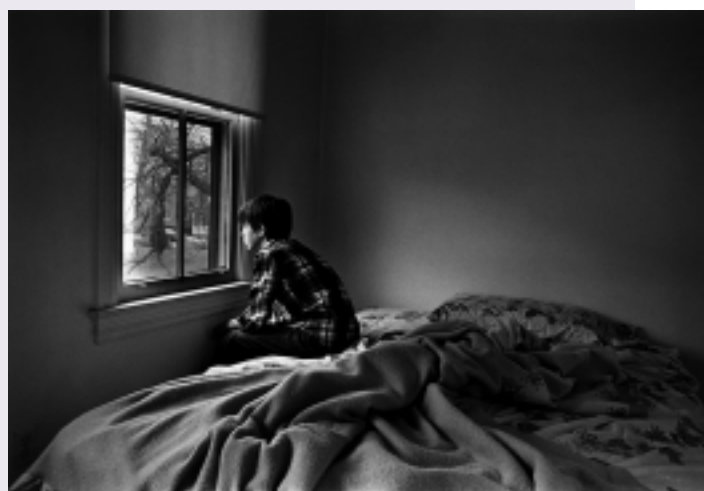
### What is it like living near poverty?

Imagine how your life would be impacted living on an “economy budget.” If everything goes as planned, you have enough money to have a roof over your head, put food on the table, pay for utilities, keep your family clothed, and get to and from work (you are lucky because your current employer provides health insurance). By keeping these basic necessities to a minimum, and assuming that no one gets sick (requiring a \$5 co-pay for visits and medicine) or the refrigerator doesn’t break, you have about \$50 left over each month for your family. Every once in a while you may have money for one of these “middle class luxuries”:

- taking the family out for pizza
- going to a movie, concert, or ball game
- paying for a campsite for a weekend
- hiring a baby-sitter
- visiting out-of-town relatives
- giving spending money to your children
- purchasing lessons or home-learning tools for your children
- buying books or music

- buying toys
- paying for a haircut
- buying a magazine
- spending money for school trips or other activities with a fee

You have nothing to fall back on. You don’t have a credit card. You don’t know anyone who can lend you more than a few dollars.



### Taking a look at the broader circumstances of poverty...

To understand poverty requires that we look beyond its physical effects and become aware of the many ways it impacts a person’s life. Consider how poverty affects the following aspects of daily life.

Physical	Activities	Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health</li> <li>• Food</li> <li>• Housing</li> <li>• Possessions</li> <li>• Transportation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Work</li> <li>• Travel</li> <li>• Extracurricular activities (such as social life, sports and recreation)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-perception</li> <li>• Self-expression</li> <li>• Peers</li> <li>• Parents, siblings, other family members</li> <li>• Authority figures outside the family</li> </ul>

\* from *Keeping Women and Children Last* (see Resources, page 8)

## Misinterpreting behavior and other barriers to crossing the tracks

THE ABILITY to develop relationships across differences starts by understanding how our current interactions may not allow us to grasp the realities of another person's situation. Here are a few reasons why the middle-class tends to misinterpret the behavior of the poor.\*

### KEY CONCEPTS



**Unrepresentative Interaction Situations.** Middle-class people tend to interact with the poor only in limited situations, yet may assume that the behavior and attitudes they observe are typical of all poor people in all situations.

**Sample Bias.** Primary data are often based on statistics drawn from the records of people who are dependent upon public institutions or in trouble with authorities.

**“Sociocentric” Interpretations.** The middle-class person tends not to become engaged with a person of a lower socioeconomic level in acts of authentic decisionmaking. Such decisionmaking involves common efforts to size up and interpret situations and events, weigh-

ing alternatives and considering means. As a result, a middle-class person may assume that lower-income people lack thoughtful analysis and decisionmaking skills. Interclass relationships are largely defined in terms of authority and control of resources. A middle-class person is likely to experience a poor person who is in a dependent, serving or employee role as either passive or hostile.

**Fear of Falling.** In the *Inner Life of the Middle Class*, Barbara Ehrenreich observes that middle-class people feel afraid that misfortunes could lead them into a downward slide toward poverty. If middle-class people believe that people are poor because of “how they are,” and “how *they* are” is fundamentally different than “how *we* are,” then the middle class can feel safe from the threat of poverty.

### Who's Poor

- California is among the states with the highest percentage of people living in poverty.
- More than 40 of California's central cities of all sizes continue to have double-digit poverty rates. “If [the Central Valley of California] were a state — and with 3 million residents, its population rivals Oregon's — it would have the nation's sorriest economy. Unemployment averaged 9.9% in the Valley last year, 2.2% higher than West Virginia, the state with the worst unemployment in America.”<sup>1</sup>
- Of Californians under the age of six, 29% or 950,269, live in poverty.<sup>2</sup>

Which statistics surprise you?

- Contrary to the prevailing belief that poverty happens to people who don't work, 61% of all poor children live in families in which someone works, and nearly 1 in 4 lives in a family in which both parents work full-time, year-round.<sup>3</sup>

### Bouts of Poverty<sup>4</sup>

- Poverty is typically a transitory problem at the individual level. People move in and out of poverty as a result of events in their lives, such as injury, illness, job loss, death of a wage-earner, or divorce.
- As many as 60% of all poverty bouts end within 3 years.

### Poverty and Substance Abuse<sup>5</sup>

*Findings from the first-ever California Household Substance Use Survey, released in 1999, reveal that alcohol and drug use is not higher among low-income people:*

- Respondents *above 200% of the poverty level* had significantly higher rates of alcohol consumption than those below 200%.
- There were *no significant differences* between the two income levels in the proportion of respondents who had engaged in any illicit drug use in the past 30 days and little difference in illicit drug use in the past 12 months (one percent higher for respondents below 200% of the poverty level).
- Respondents with incomes *above 200% of the poverty level* where more likely to have used illicit drugs in their lifetime (47.9% of those in the higher income level versus 40.5% in the lower income level).
- Statewide there were *no significant differences* between the two income levels in the proportion of respondents needing treatment.

<sup>1</sup> The Sacramento Bee, January 2000.

<sup>2</sup> *Map and Track, 1998*, published by the National Center for Children in poverty.

<sup>3</sup> *Keeping Women and Children Last: America's War on the Poor* by Ruth Sidel, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> *Rural Poverty in America*, edited by Cynthia M. Duncan, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> *California Household Substance Use Survey Summary Report*, State of California, Health and Human Services Agency Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs, Office of Applied Research and Analysis, November 1999.





## What's scaring you?

THE SINGLE MOST important aspect of promoting understanding across differences is understanding oneself—one's own values, beliefs, perspectives, choices and early messages about people who are different.

*"I soon realized that no journey carries one far unless, as it extends into the world around us, it goes an equal distance into the world within."*

Lillian Smith

Often we unconsciously judge others according to our internal

assessments of what we did or would do in similar circumstances. We extrapolate how we would feel and what our priorities and values would be. When we become conscious of how our own experiences inform our judgments, we can critically test our assumptions about others.

### 1. What are your experiences of poverty and plenty, of wants and unmet needs?

Take this personal inventory of poverty and plenty. These questions may bring to mind forgotten circumstances from your own family history or help you think about the feelings, perspectives and actions of poor children and families you work with. They may also provide clues about the source of some of your own beliefs and attitudes about poverty and people who are poor.

- Has anyone ever treated you as if you were stupid, laughable, incompetent, dangerous, insane or simply unimportant because of how you looked?
- Did adults in your family ever cut the size of their own meals or skip them entirely to allow their children to eat?
- Have you ever slept in a car or camped out because you had no other reasonable option?
- Have you or your immediate family members forgone important medical or dental treatment because you could not afford it?
- As a child did you ever try to ameliorate the stress your parents felt about finances? How?

- What kind of work, if any, did you do *before* you were a teen? Why did you work? Did you get paid?
- Did you ever have trouble concentrating in class or at work because you were hungry or worried about how you would get food that day or where you would be sleeping that night?

### 2. How do you feel when you talk about poverty and poor people?

Talking about money and class brings up all kinds of personal, social, political and cultural issues and ramifications. When we are not expecting them, these barriers surface in interactions with others in the form of stress, embarrassment, defensiveness, inappropriate humor, shutting up or shutting down. Have you experienced any of these feelings when the topic of poverty comes up? How do you feel when the topic comes up with someone who has more money than you? Less money than you? Do you know where these reactions come from?

### 3. How do your experiences and feelings of class difference compare to others?

Take a small risk and start talking about how class differences affect how you interact with people of higher or lower socioeconomic status. Share your feelings and concerns with a trustworthy friend or colleague. You might be surprised by how similar — or different — other people's experiences are. Regardless of their response, the conversation will help you begin clarifying your own poverty issues and open a dialogue.

### 4. Why try?

Ask yourself: "What barriers or challenges do I feel when I work with — or think about working with — poor people?" Quickly list whatever comes to mind without judging yourself. Now go back through your list and write a brief response to the question: "What will I gain and how will the work I do benefit from overcoming this obstacle?"

## SHIFT YOUR PARADIGM! Focus on Resilience

RESILIENCE RESEARCH is the study of how individuals throughout the human lifespan can — and do — transcend risk and adversity and become competent, confident and caring people (see *Prevention Tactics 2:3, 1998*). This promising research is shifting the focus of prevention programs from risk reduction—focusing on what's wrong in the life of the child or

family—to healthy development—building resilience traits in individuals and developing environments that support resilience.

The research clearly shows where and how change starts: with an adult's belief in the innate resilience of a youth, in his or her capacity for healthy development despite risk, problems and challenges. Adult to adult, this understanding of innate resilience is also key.

Resilience is a basic human capacity that transcends differences. Looking for resilience in others increases respect and opens the door to profound and lasting change.

## STRATEGIES

### A Case in Point...

PICTURE A MENTOR WHOSE 14-year-old mentee is two hours late to their meeting. The mentor asks why the mentee is late and the mentee says her mother's car broke down. The mentor, thinking of the mentee's future, tells her that she should have

called. To keep a job, to succeed in college, and out

of just plain politeness, calling is the right thing to do—that her success in life depends on her ability to handle these situations appropriately when they occur. The mentee, feeling like she has failed again, apologizes and says nothing more.

Had the mentor explored the situation further, she would have discovered that the mentee had been looking forward to their meeting together and had actually left home quite early. After the car broke down, the mentee walked two miles to a gas station to make a call while her mother, who has a medical condition that makes her feet swollen and painful, stayed with the car. When she got to the phone, she used her only change to make a phone call. She called her brother, who is good with cars, because the family has no roadside assistance insurance and can't afford a tow. She then walked the two miles back to the car to wait there with her mother for her brother. It was a long wait because he doesn't have the kind of job where you can leave

early. When he got there, it was dark and had begun to rain. The mentee stayed by his side and held a flashlight for him until he got the car running. But since it was just barely running, they drove straight home. She did try to call from home but the mentor's line was busy. Not wanting to miss the meeting altogether, she asked her brother to drive her over and drop her off. She would now have to find a way to get home from the meeting without a car.

Had the mentor been looking for resilience, rather than focusing on behavior associated with middle-class means and goals, she may have realized that the mentee demonstrated several developmental assets that will help her succeed in work, school and relationships:

- **ACHIEVEMENT:** The mentee was motivated to get to and get the most out of the meeting with her mentor.
- **CARING:** The mentee was concerned about her mother's health condition and her brother working alone in the dark and rain. She placed a high value on helping others.
- **DECISION MAKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING:** The mentee had to make tough choices about how to handle the situation of a broken down car with no money to move or fix it. She accomplished that goal.



## CONCEPTS IN ACTION

## What can you do?

Here are a few things you can do to help “cross the tracks” in your AOD prevention work.

### 1 Work With Yourself

Becoming conscious of your own internal dialogue around poverty can help you to:

- ❑ **ACKNOWLEDGE** that people living in or near poverty may see a situation, person, or event differently than you do.
- ❑ **UNDERSTAND** that reasonable people can and will reasonably disagree about meanings and significance of situations and events.
- ❑ **TAKE** a conscious and healthy interest in how others perceive the world differently than you.
- ❑ **KNOW** that your reactions and values have a legitimate source — they make sense in the context of your own unique mix of cultural and situational contexts, and help you survive and succeed there.
- ❑ **RESPECT** the individual. Even though your socioeconomic status — along with your religion, ethnic heritage, gender, the dominant culture of the geographic region where you grew up or live now — informs who you are, you are also ultimately an individual with your own unique personality, situation and perspective. You are not merely a collection of statistics and stereotypes, nor is anyone else.

### 2 Build Resiliency

If your work is already focused on building developmental assets and resilience in youth, you are on the right track. If you work with low-income adults, you can apply these approaches learned from resilience research, revisited and described below with a focus on poverty.

**Recognize and promote INTERNAL ASSETS, or RESILIENCE TRAITS:**

- ❑ **SOCIAL COMPETENCIES**, including empathy and friendship skills, the ability to understand others and to make oneself understood, the abil-

ity to resist negative peer pressure and identify dangerous situations. (Note: These are very different from class-based social competencies or etiquette, such as saying please and thank you or how to act in a restaurant!)

- ❑ **A STRONG SENSE OF PERSONAL IDENTITY AND AUTONOMY**, characterized by self-awareness, an internal locus of control, a sense of self-efficacy, and mastery.
- ❑ **PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS**, such as resourcefulness, conflict resolution, decision-making, goal-setting, and the ability to recognize and interpret messages of exploitation.
- ❑ **A SENSE OF PURPOSE AND FUTURE**, characterized by unique interests, motivation, persistence, faith, and personal coherence.



**Identify and enhance (in your work relationships with low-income individuals and in the community) these three EXTERNAL PROTECTIVE FACTORS proven to support resilience:**

- ❑ **CARING RELATIONSHIPS**, characterized by basic trust, attentiveness and interest, and looking beneath “problem” behaviors or appearances.
- ❑ **HIGH EXPECTATIONS**, including promoting innate resilience, reframing problems to resources, and challenging with support.
- ❑ **OPPORTUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE AND CONTRIBUTE** that include everyone, build lifelong skills, and promote ownership.

## NEXT STEPS

**POVERTY**

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*"If we hope to see ourselves with any clarity, we have to begin to make the effort to step back and see the middle class as one class among others... Because it is through the eyes of this class — and often also in its image — that we have, for so long, been content to see America."*

**Barbara Ehrenreich**  
**Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class**

**LET'S HEAR FROM YOU!**



We welcome readers' comments on topics presented. Call us at 916.983.9506, fax us at 916.983-5738, or send an email to [erica@emt.org](mailto:erica@emt.org)

prevention  
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