

The Culture of Poverty

A couple of weeks ago, I attended an all day workshop on the poverty culture. We in the helping professions try to be culturally sensitive. We learn about the Black culture, the Hispanic culture, and some of the Asian cultures, and some African cultures now coming to this country. But, who has learned about the poverty culture? It was most enlightening. I had been looking for this information for sometime. I knew that I was missing something that could give me a better understanding of the thinking of some of the people I work with. The workshop gave information on the culture of poverty, of the middle class, and the wealthy.

Each culture has its rules for survival. Unfortunately, most of us working with people with a poverty mindset have very little clue what things are crucial to them. We operate from our middleclass mindset. Just as our survival depends on money from a job, theirs depends on family and friends. We know how important it is to keep our job. We would not do anything to jeopardize that job. It is our survival. They feel the same way about their family and friends. They will not do anything to jeopardize those relationships. They must drop whatever they are doing when a family member or friend needs something because their survival depends on it just the same way we feel our survival depends on our job and all of our other middleclass responsibilities. We don't have any other reality. Neither do they for their reality. We believe that if we work hard enough we will succeed. We can better our life. Those with a poverty mindset DO NOT believe this. They believe that their situation is determined by fate or destiny, it can not be changed. So, they have to come up with a way to survive and that is family and friends sticking together and always being there for each other. If a person with a poverty mindset gets a call from a family member or friend that they need a ride to the Laundromat or to the doctor or a job interview, they tell their supervisor they have to go and not give much of an explanation. By middleclass thinking they are jeopardizing their job to just leave without a very good reason. For them it is a good reason. They have to do this because if they don't that person won't be there for them when they need it. It boils down to survival. The wealthy consider family, friends, and political connections as important and critical to their survival. They must always maintain their connections.

There were many other differences in thinking between each of the economic classes that were presented. Also, people are on a continuum from totally thinking according to the poverty culture to totally thinking according to the wealthy culture. Most are in between the two extremes. It was all pretty interesting information and gave me an insight into the thinking of some of those I work with. Now I understand why a person doesn't keep an appointment because they have to give someone a ride some place. I understand why they leave a job because they believe the boss doesn't like them or they don't like the boss. It does not make sense to them to stay in a job that they perceive the boss does not like them. If someone does not like you they are not going to be there for you, you can't count on them.

Not all people who are poor have the poverty mindset. This is truer of people who have come from generational poverty, two or more generations.

I am anxious to apply my new realizations/information to the way I work with the people in the program I run. We have to start with people with where they are not where we want them to be. We can't assume they have the same values we do. So I have at least an idea of their thinking which I can then start from there and hopefully support them in making some changes that will get them in a better financial position.

Georgianne

Poverty Responses

First I would like to say, I hope all of us continue to depend on friends and family to a degree regardless of our social levels. From this aspect one could infer depending on the culture you represent the Extended Family concept is very important which includes both family and friends. They practice the whole village philosophy. On the other hand, I have found the populations we serve are unique and that each of our clients has his/her own circumstances although there are similarities. Many of them have burned out their resources as they relate to family and friends. They feel they should be "given" whatever they need because they have been conditioned to depend on the system for their livelihoods. This dependence is no longer going to be the way it used to be and they have to realize and accept the change. This is where we will be necessary in assisting them in the transition. I agree many of these clients are generational and it will take longer for them to realize the reality of what is taking place. When I was a child I used to enjoy a movie "The Prince and The Pauper." In this movie, the prince and the pauper somehow got switched at a parade or some activity held in the "market square." The prince and the pauper were very much out of their comfort zones. The prince who was used to a certain lifestyle was not comfortable being a pauper and the pauper being poor all his life was not comfortable with all the conveniences due a prince. The clients we are dealing with are out of their comfort zones. They "feel" they are comfortable with the lifestyles they have come to realize over the years.

In one of the workshops I conduct, we view a video entitled Conditioning and Self-Image. The conditioning portion of the video tells about our conscious, sub-conscious and our creative sub-conscious minds. It is on our creative sub-conscious level that we decide whether or not something is important enough for us to follow-through with it. This applies to appointments, schools, training, work, and other activities they are not accustomed to. Steven Covey's book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" speaks of paradigm shifts. This is what it's going to take for many of our poverty stricken clients to understand what is taking place in their lives. This system did not take a short time to produce and it will not take a short time to elevate.

If we have a poor image of self, it is going to take awhile to get this turned around. Many of our clients have been victims of abuse both verbal and physical. This can reduce a person to less than their lowest common denominator. Building a person up from this state takes time and patience.

I feel we need to ascertain the needs of our clients, develop a plan with them, counsel with them the importance of keeping their plans, introduce them to goal setting, and have them goal set for short-term accomplishments and lengthen the times as you go. Reward their smallest accomplishments and continue to build on their confidence levels. Then as you make progress, introduce other ideas and ways of "earning" a living to them. Follow each accomplishment and continue to praise and develop. When they fall short of accomplishing a task, reassure them and let them know we all do this and it is not the end of the road, just start from where they are but continue the race.

The concept of "giving" has gone to far and needs to stop. We are only enabling them when we give, give give and they take, take take. How can one appreciate what they have when we have not made the necessary sacrifices of ownership? To reward an individual for a "job" well done is one thing, but to continue to give without expectations is not effective. As a (very) small business owner, we are almost thrust out of business because we cannot compete with the agencies who can afford to "give."

As far as diversity training is concerned, we should know something about the various cultures represented. The new workplace will contain people from all backgrounds and ethnicities. These people will come with their sets of beliefs, customs, lifestyles, and views. We will have to respect them and teach them our lifestyles, customs, etc. This will make a wholesome USA for all of us to enjoy. We should not try to "change" them to our way of thinking and not think their ideas are not acceptable due to them not being an "American." We need to learn conversational Spanish and other languages so that we can communicate with our new Americans; while we teach them about us. Diversity Training must consist of representatives from various backgrounds conducting the training so that we learn from all aspects. Invite them out to socials and have various events that focus on the ways and customs of different countries depending on the cultures representative in the community, school, church, workplace, or other areas of socialization.

Take care and enjoy your day. I appreciate the topics of discussion you come up with and this one especially caught my eye as a member of this poverty group you spoke of. But I am thankful that being poor is a condition that can be overcome if one so chooses. Opportunity + Determination = Unlimited Possibilities. Let us find a way to introduce these concepts to our clients. The people coming here from other countries will not all be from poverty and they will be vying for jobs, housing, education, training, and other opportunities that our poverty clients will be needing. They need to know this. Whatever it takes to motivate them. We will have to try various methods of training them to break the generational cycle. Thank you. :) Joy OK

Thanks for the e-mail. I found Georgianne's letter interesting and I think she made some very good observations about the poverty mindset, but working in this business for the last four years I can't agree with her about all of it. This last group of clients that I've had in the past year are the fourth generation living in Public Housing and receiving welfare, free daycare etc. Most are under 23yrs. of age, have newborns, are single mothers and their average grade level is 8th or 9th grade. At Campus South where we teach self-sufficiency and do everything humanly possible to teach them skills, give them affordable housing, get their GEDs and find good employment for them, it's just not working. We truly care about our students, we look the other way many times when they don't meet their end of the bargain, we counsel them, we help them avoid eviction, we lend them money, we care about their children. Unfortunately, my opinion is that they really don't want self-sufficiency. My students actually said to me one day, "Welfare never use to be like this, what's up"? I truly understand that you're not going to change a fourth generation mindset overnight, but it's so frustrating when people choose not to change. An example that comes to mind is homeless people in Key West. The community is not very sympathetic to their plight because a large portion of homeless people in KW choose that lifestyle. We as compassionate humans WANT TO SYMPATHIZE, just like with my clients, but when you have exhausted every means of honestly helping them, and they still CHOOSE to stay where they are, it's heart breaking and very

frustrating. At this time I have one student out of ten who is trying, the rest don't come to class, don't work, don't pay their rent, blow-off appointments with private, expensive tutors and most are still using drugs and alcohol. I will continue to try because that one student NEEDS me, but I honestly am tired of enabling my students by accepting their "poverty mindset". GLG, Key West, Fl.

"Poverty". My personal point of view regarding to this issue as a Mexican is: In my country it is important to work. If you don't work you don't eat. Mexican people have distinguished themselves for being a working class. The term work has become an important as well as an essential part of our vocabulary. It's a way of survival. Since we are a underdeveloped country with lack of government support and without any access to free social services for example: Social Security, Unemployment office (check), programs to attend to school, etc; work becomes the only way to access a better life for you and your love ones. The people understand, if you don't work you don't have any rights. In Mexico the social classes are mark by the economical classes. For example: Rich 30% (economically and socially), Middle class% (professionals) and Poor class 25% (no education at all).

The middle class is trying to survive and better themselves through education. Jobs are so competitive that you have to be good, really good, at what you are doing or you don't have a chance. Mediocrity is not tolerated by working classes. When you become part of the working class you know that you play by someone else rules, you are there to do a job at the best of your knowledge and not to question the system. People with leadership characteristics are often observed as a treat, you don't say anything because this can jeopardize your job. People work and develop the sense of loyalty as a way of thank the company for the opportunity it is giving you. Our culture has always played the submissive role. And this submissive role has damaged the Mexican people. I always have been against this feeling of total control. To me is not acceptable. My father said that I should be a lawyer; I would make a lots of money. He said I have the spirit of a warrior. I have always been against what it is unfair, unconstitutional, and most of all a passive role. I want to be heard even if I'm wrong. I want to have freedom to make my choices, have the right to make a mistake and correct them.

This mentality is been passed through generations and is reflected in everything. Moral ethics, professional ethics, working relationship, family boundaries, relationships between husband and wife, father-son, mother-daughter, etc. Poverty is part of our culture, a mark that we can not erase, but we combat day by day. Poverty is a reminder of life, it is an invisible giant that has marked our destiny and lets us know day by day, that, if you don't work you can be the next victim. It's waiting for you. Even when I'm home I don't relax, I'm constantly doing something, I feel quilt if I set down. I have to do something productive to earn my right to eat and rest at bed time. Maria AR

I attended the same training two years ago. It was totally enlightening and opened my mind to some of the behaviors I had observed growing up.

I came from a "poor" family. My parents worked extra hard in order to give my sister and I the best education. My parents also strove to teach us good manners, self-esteem and consideration for others. Growing up I noticed that extended family members (on both sides), would attempt to discourage my parents efforts and if that didn't work, they would insult my parents by accusing them of being superior. I know this hurt my parents but they stuck together and kept moving forward.

I think there is a danger in becoming too liberal in our thinking of the culture of poverty. I know what it's like to be poor and to be discriminated against, I also know what it's like to survive, feel good about myself and ignore those family members who are trying to keep me in the "crab bucket" rather than letting me crawl out.

I use my bi-cultural knowledge to empathize with as well as to encourage others to move up and out. Just because you start out poor doesn't mean you have to stay there. Sometimes one has to detach in order to become successful. "If you do what you always did, you get what you always got." Calif.

I haven't been formally trained in understanding where others come from, but over the years, my clients have been my most important "trainers." Learning to listen to my client is the key that has helped me the most. It takes a great deal of patience to slowly assist clients in changing their behaviors that have taken them a lifetime to learn. I make progress getting new ideas to stick in their brain if I openly talk with my clients about concrete back-up plans to "take dad to the doctor" or give them examples of ways to plan ahead in case of emergency, what to do if boyfriend gets out of jail, or family illness. Teaching life, work, and problem-solving skills to clients takes time and an open "ear" to really listen to where they are coming from. I can't and shouldn't change their ideas and beliefs about what is important to them, but I can listen to them and accept what they believe. Finally, the challenge is to convince them to listen to new suggestions. Acceptance is the key. If they know you aren't judging them and accept who they are, they will slowly listen and apply new ideas in their own lives. Jennifer, CA

This also applies to people with disabilities. Thanks Terry CA

As for the letter written by Georgianne, she made several strong and good points. For me, I believe it is important to help others, and work it out, so that you are not hurting yourself during the process of helping others. I was one who always helped others, and forgot myself. Then when I needed help, many of those I once helped, were not willing to stop what they were doing, to help me.

Trading talents is another way to help yourself and others. From networking, web page building, working on a car, etc., etc., we all have a link to someone or something, we all have gifts, talents, and when I help one out in an area they lack, and I get help from another in an area I lack, it all balances out. I do not believe that if I help you, that you have to help me. I do favor that if I help you, you then in return help another, and the chain grows.

Maybe this is way too much from me on this topic, not sure exactly what you were looking for, but from what I read and picked up on in her letter, this is what I came away from, (thinking). Patty CA

My first reaction to this email today is my family comes first, but there is certainly an element of truth in class differences. We will all respond to emergency situations and take off work to meet the needs of our families, but I also know that my "emergency situation" is much more defined than my clients. I also delegate, I have a wonderful support system to turn to, I expect my husband to jump in immediately and help!. My family and I live our lives by the calendar; coincidentally I was making out my Sept calendar while reading this e mail, mapping out where I need to be the next 30 days at work and at home. Compulsive, obsessive about scheduling? Yes I am and it gives me middle class comfort to do it. So yes I do agree that I treat work as my #1 necessity to take care of my family needs, and my time away from work is limited, but I also have the luxury of telling my boss ahead of time ,I want sick time for a family member, I want vacation time for myself and I can and need to schedule it early, my clients often have no way of doing this in their jobs and taking time off for planned or last minute needs when they feel they are the only ones who can "handle" the situation happens often. I know every month what hours I am suppose to work, my clients may not know until the next time they go into work what that's week schedule will be. planning ahead is a luxury they have been denied by their employer. If I never knew on Monday how many hours I will get paid for that week, what times I will be working and how I will be getting there and I had to struggle to find daycare, rides and make appointments around this uncertainty, my view of "working" would be that work is the barrier to any organization and if the work itself was frustrating and difficult, it can feel insurmountable do live in different worlds of employment and attitudes. Carla Illinois .

Yes, the culture of poverty has its own uniqueness. I have realized some of the same things the letter writer tells us about. We do have requirements the clients must meet, but at the same time, we have to recognize that their sense of urgency to conform to our State requirements is not as great as that sense of urgency to family and friends as the letter stated. We have to be willing to become their mentor (and sometimes their Mother) and try to effect change in increments rather than expecting complete and total conformity in a short amount of time. I have had female clients who were prostituted out at a very early age in order to support the mother's drug habit or pay a needed utility bill. To us, this is horrible...completely and totally unacceptable child abuse. But to the mother and to the daughter it was a means to an end and a way to survive. The daughter never realized she was being abused. I guess this is a shocking example, but it happens. If we have 48 TANF months, and if we approach clients from their mind set, it is possible to help them make the needed changes in the way they think about work and survival by the time the TANF is exhausted. It would be helpful to the client if we can learn to draw them mental pictures of how life can be if they are willing to step out of their comfort zone and try new ways of thinking and surviving. Susan GA

What I find amazing is that those of us dealing in "the helping profession" do not bother to ask what is important to our clients. Of course having a job is as they would like a roof over their head, food on their table, etc. But they may have other needs that we don't understand. Have we, as professionals, come to believe that we know what is best for others about whom we have no clue. The principles of psychological preventive strategies include both assessing and asking what is needed in a community. We banter about the term empowerment but without fully understanding the needs of our clients, we cannot assume that we know what is best for them. Successful programs require not only that we listen to the needs of our clients, we must also hear them. A healthy dialogue opens not only the eyes and minds of those that we serve but ourselves as well. Would any of us do anything without fully understanding the implications? I seriously doubt it but we do oftentimes do expect our clients to do just that. Perhaps when we start listening, we'll become better professionals and our clients will actually get the services that they deserve rather than our clients being a vehicle for our own egos. Pam

I read your e-mail and wanted you to know about a program that I'm familiar with here in Chicago. What this groups does is run you through a series of experimental exercises which help you to understand and become more sensitized to how people in poverty function and why they make the choices they do. It's very humbling, because you realize that it's possible for anyone to become poor and become forced to make similar choices. Anyway, if your interested in finding out more about this group, I and can track down the information on them for you. Let me know. Take care. Julio IL

People in poverty also have pride and self-respect. If you look at the working poor, they have strong work ethic. They do not jeopardize their jobs just for any little thing. Yes, I do believe the poor put more value on people like friends and family. But, that's because the poor are not as materialistic. We become materialistic when we acquire a little bit more than most.

Those individuals that miss appointments regularly are those individuals that don't believe in themselves or in what you think you are trying to do for them. They feel mistreated, neglected, forces and doubt that you will do anything for them that will really benefit them.

But remember, they do believe in people. And they do respond to respect. But, you have to earn it. Listen and do little things to help them. Once they respect you, they will start listening, not before. John CA

Regarding diversity training ... I have not participated in any. I think it would be a huge benefit to all of our staff since we are becoming increasingly multicultural in McHenry County. We have a huge Hispanic population, but we also deal with people from India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Russia, Poland, etc. Many of them have not been in this country for many years and speaking and understanding English is still a difficulty. It would be great to learn more about their cultures and their customs so that we can work with them in an ethical and culturally correct manner. Mary IL

I got your mail this morning and was glad to hear that a discussion of the culture of poverty is taking place. The foremost authority, in my book at least, on this topic is Dr. Ruby Payne. She has written several excellent books on working with those in poverty. She has a website, but I don't have it info right at hand. If you haven't heard of her, it is worth researching. We all KNOW this stuff, but she has made some sense of the insanity we face each day. Becky OK

I believe the mindset theory is true for some, but you really need to assess the individual to determine their thinking and relationships. Some of the people in this poverty category are happy to be there and work harder at staying there than they do at progressing. I don't believe they have the attachment to family and friends that the mindset implies. I do, however, believe they are lazy and expect the world owes them a living. These people are harder to work with than the true poverty person. Sometimes, you cannot be a "bleeding heart" because that is not the approach to use. I think it also depends on what background they come from. Second, third and fourth generation welfare people tend to know no other way of life and are fine with where they are. I guess you don't miss what you never had. Have a great week. Tammy NY

Yes I had a great weekend thank you. I read the letter on the cultural differences and poverty, I found it to be quite interesting. I have attended diversity training in a couple of the my previous jobs. The one thing that I found most interesting is that the instructor had never really spent any time in the ethnic cultures. The writer of the letter is right about one thing poverty is a mindset to some extent, especially if that is all you know or have known. One thing I have learned is that people will not change until they are uncomfortable, and in many instances our clients are not yet uncomfortable with their situation. Our clients leave to take someone to the store or call off not because they need the support later but because they don't know any better. Many times this is what they see or hear from "friends, relatives", who have job hopped most of their lives. I firmly believe that if you want to work you will find a job, the problem is helping to overcome the barriers to keeping the job. Example a client hadn't worked for over 2 years, helped him get a job. Was told by the employer that during their probation period they would be subject to a random drug test. Was called to work for a safety meeting for new hires and they decided to do the drug testing the same day. The client proceeded to tell the safety director that he had smoked crack over the weekend. Proceeded to take the test and the employer called me and was suspended until the results came back which were negative. I spoke to the client regarding the incident and he try to tell me that he only smoked on the weekends. Crack is not a recreational drug, these are the areas that we need to help our clients through. I respected his honesty but they must learn to leave those associates, friends that only show up when they have money in their pocket. We should be concerned about helping them develop a new "support" Michael