Understanding the Needs of People Living in Poverty

Missouri Department of Mental Health
Spring Training Institute
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Why talk about poverty?

Socio-economic status will impact our

- Environment
- Worldview
- Thoughts, beliefs, behaviors
- Available resources
- Ability to navigate the world and relate to others

The Many Facets of Poverty

- Generational poverty
- Working-class poverty
- Immigrant poverty
- Situational poverty
- Global poverty
- Absolute poverty
- Relative poverty

Poverty in America Today

- Continues to rise
- 15% of Americans
- 45.3 million people
- Almost 20% of American children (1 in 5)

Per US Census
Bureau 2013 Data

Measuring Poverty

- How Poverty is Measured in the US
- Federal poverty line
  - Developed in 1963 for statistical analysis
  - Threshold = 3 times the cost of a minimum food diet in 1963

Criticisms

- Doesn't identify depth of poverty
- Uniform across geographic locations
- Not adjusted for standard of living
- Excludes many expenses and resources
- Outdated and doesn't reflect the changing needs of families today

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Where do our ideas about poverty come from?

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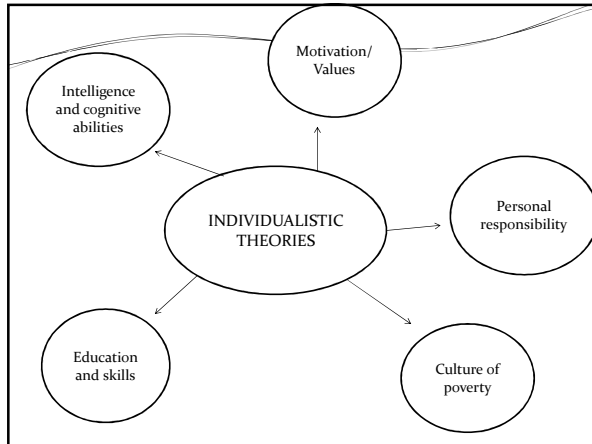
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"In the United States we are confused about the causes of poverty, and as a result, are confused about what to do about poverty." – David Shipler

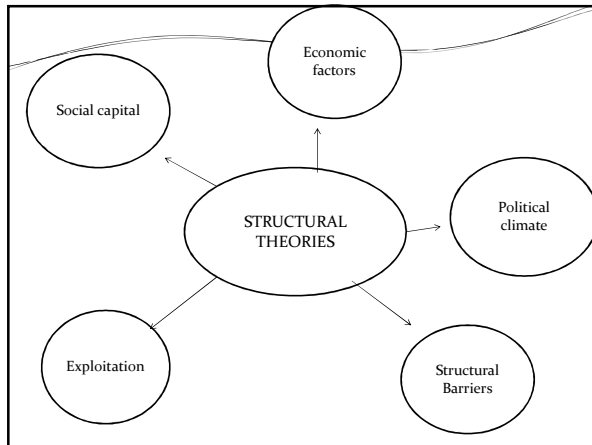Author of *The Working Poor*

Video Clip

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Individualistic Theories (diagram)

- Motivation/Values
- Intelligence and cognitive abilities
- INDIVIDUALISTIC THEORIES
- Personal responsibility
- Education and skills
- Culture of poverty

Structural Theories (diagram)

- Economic factors
- Social capital
- STRUCTURAL THEORIES
- Political climate
- Exploitation
- Structural Barriers

Focus of today

- Increase our understanding of the role of structural barriers in our client's lives
- Gain awareness into class structure and how it affects our interactions with clients
- Increase our cultural competence for working with people living in poverty

Structural Obstacles

"Poverty or near poverty is not a problem, it is an array of interlocking problems. These problems are cumulative, reinforcing and casually interrelated.....the cycle goes on and on, with endless permutations and combinations"

Edward Royce
Author of Poverty and Power: The problem of structural inequality

Education

- Resources/time
- Cognitive stimulation
- Access to technology
- School system

Housing

- Low-income housing / housing subsidies
- Residential Segregation
- Neighborhood Effects
  - Safety
  - Physical health
  - Social capital

Transportation

- Limits employment opportunities
- Doesn't match the needs of low-income work force
- Changing priorities/allocation for funds

Childcare

- Constraints/challenges
- Needs of low-income work force
- When it simply does not pay to work

Economic Factors

- Globalization
- Deindustrialization
- Technological changes
- Corporate restructuring
- Job shortage
- Pay disparity

Health and Healthcare

- Why is poverty is bad for your health?
  - Working conditions
  - Chronic stress
  - Inferior housing and neighborhoods
  - Access to health care
  - Environment constraints for healthy lifestyle

Legal Deprivation

- Employment and housing discrimination
- Predatory lending practices
- Exploitive employment practices
- Racial profiling

Racial/Ethnic Discrimination

- New Deal Era
- Current Statistics
- White Privilege

What does all of this mean for our clients, particularly for those living with a serious mental illness?
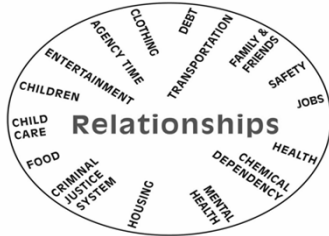
Barriers Generated by Poverty

- Crisis/survival lifestyle
- Low resources
- Co-existing problems
- Polarized thinking
- Distrust of institutions
- Difficult (and often misunderstood) decision making

Mental Model of Poverty

- Mental model = how we see our world
  - Often below our awareness
  - Influences our behaviors and actions
  - Creates hidden class rules

Mental Model for Poverty

Relationships

(wheel diagram with: CLOTHING, DEBT, AGENCY TIME, TRANSPORTATION, FAMILY & FRIENDS, ENTERTAINMENT, SAFETY, CHILDREN, JOBS, CHILD CARE, HEALTH, FOOD, CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY, CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM, HOUSING, MENTAL HEALTH)

Businesses in the neighborhood: pawn stores, liquor stores, check cashing, fast food, temp services, used car, dollar store, rent-to-own

Mental Model of Middle Class

Achievement

(wheel diagram with: VACATIONS, HOBBIES & INTERESTS, EDUCATION, FAMILY & FRIENDS, CHILDREN, CLUBS & CIVIC GROUPS, RETIREMENT, HOUSING & ASSETS, PREVENTION, CAREERS)
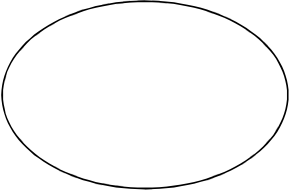
Businesses in the neighborhood: banks, fitness centers, office complexes, golf courses, coffee shops, restaurants

Using This as a Tool

- To raise awareness
- Abstract ⟹ Concrete
- Unconscious ⟹ Conscious
- Your turn:
  - Create one based off of your reality
  - Then create one based off a client or a generalization of the population you work with

- What would you list as the center of your mental model? What is your central focus or way to meet your needs?
- What things or thoughts do you spend your time on in a typical day?
- What resources does your neighborhood have?

Hidden Class Rules

- Poverty, Middle Class and Wealth
  - Varying realities, stressors, resources
  - Unspoken rules, norms and expectations
  - Must learn hidden class rules to thrive

	Poverty	Middle Class	Wealth
Possessions	People	Things	One-of-a-kind objects
Money	To be used, spent	To be managed	To be invested
Food	Do you have enough? (quantity)	Did you like it? (quality)	Was it presented well? (presentation)
Time	Decisions made in the moment based off survival	Future is important, emphasis on planning	Traditions and history are important
Education	Valued in abstract, but not as reality	Essential for climbing the success ladder	Necessary tradition for making connections
Driving Forces	Survival, relationships, entertainment	Work, achievement	Financial, political, social connections
			Excerpted from Ruby K. Payne's book, *Bridges out of Poverty*, (2006).

Challenges of Class Mobility

- Quiz time: "Could you survive in....."

Discussion

- What hidden class rules do you identify with?
- Does that differ from the clients you serve? If so, how does that affect them?
- Tying it back to your practice

Strategies for breaking barriers

- Withhold all judgment and create a welcoming atmosphere

- Be informed and knowledgeable of structural barriers, especially when brainstorming solutions to problems

- Allow opportunities to work on real (concrete) issues that may be their immediate focus

- Explore hidden rules of class for increased understanding

- Allow participants to bring their children

- Provide constructive outlets for frustration and criticism

- Try to find the "why" behind behaviors

- In times of frustration, remember – they may be doing the best they can with what they have under the circumstances they are in.

- Use stage of change and motivational interviewing techniques

- Celebrate every step of the way

Focus on Strengths

- Find ways to utilize natural strengths, skills and resources
- Do not approach as a victim, but as a problem solver

Focus on Assets

- The more internal and external assets a person has, the more likely they are to succeed
- Explore and develop internal assets
- Build partnerships in the community so you can connect people to legitimate resources
- Teach skills to navigate the middle class world

Focus on Connection

- Provide a connection to others, as well as to opportunities
- Provide connection to skills, knowledge and resources

What can we do as members of an organization?

- Examine agency policies
- Extensive and up-to-date resources?
- Knowledgeable staff?
- Training opportunities?
- Community partnerships?
- Advocate, advocate, advocate!

Wrap up

- Questions/thoughts/ideas to share

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Resources

Payne, R. (2005) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A must-read for educators, Employers, policymakers and service providers.* Highlands, TX: Aha! Process, Inc.

Payne, R., DeVol, P, Dreussi, T. (2006) *Bridges out of Poverty: Strategies for professionals and communities.* Highlands, TX: Aha! Process, Inc.

Royce, E. (2009) *Poverty and Power: The problem of structural inequality.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Shipler, D. (2005) *The Working Poor: Invisible in America.* New York, NY: Knopf.

Smiley, T., West, C. (2012) *The Rich and the Rest of us.* New York, NY: SmileyBooks.

Helpful websites:
http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/contacts.cfm
http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/about/index.html
www.combarriers.com