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ARTICLE

Cross-Cultural Communication: Implications for Social Work Practice And a Departure From Payne

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Ruby Payne, author of the controversial *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005), outlines the structure of life in poverty through the single variable of economic status. This article highlights the insufficiencies of Payne's theory, which follows a similar ideology to the heavily disputed "culture of poverty" theory (Lewis, 1966; Wilson & Aponte, 1985), and explores a more ethical and respectful approach service providers can employ using effective cross-cultural communication. As similar theories have been substantially critiqued for pathologizing the language and mores of individuals living in poverty (Dudley-Marling, 2007), this article focuses on Payne's oversimplification of both the causes and effects of poverty, as well as the methods by which professionals might approach the socioeconomic gap. Finally, we accept that Payne's framework has filled a void amongst educators and other professionals, but we posit that this void is really about deeply embedded racism and classism that still exist in our educational and other social institutions (Gorski, 2008). Therefore, we do our best to provide another approach for those who work across various cultural communities in our professional and personal lives.

Introduction

By disregarding the roles of race, gender, ethnicity and social context, Payne removes the need to understand and appreciate cultural differences as an aspect of communication across socioeconomic and social bridges. Cross-cultural communication is a vital tool for the practice of social work, and it fosters a deep and broad knowledge of and respect for the myriad values and norms of individuals from diverse social groups who work with and on behalf of the economically disadvantaged; therefore, cross-cultural communication as a professional skill is a judicious alternative to Payne's sterile, narrow methodology. In spite of its deficiencies, Payne's work has garnered far-reaching acclaim, surpassing the borders of the teaching profession and entering the social, health, and legal fields. Momentum gathered by the book can be explained by the desire of people who work with under-resourced families and students to have a step-by-step guide, a pre-packaged manual for the delivery of services.

However, through on-going observation, direct practice, and volunteering with low-income children and their families, we have found Payne's theory to be irrelevant to most of the children served (see discussion below). Payne's (2005) *Framework* falls apart when one looks beyond surface level components of speech, mannerisms, and norms as supposed characteristics indicative of poverty and those peculiar qualities Payne identifies as in need of change. True to the tenets of ethical social work, a positive relationship and mutual respect between practitioner and client can better be fostered through the use of the paradigm of cross-cultural communication. Through an analysis of observations and findings while working at a community-based organization located in a university community in the Midwest, and in reviewing the meaning and importance of cross-cultural communication as a replacement for Payne's method, below we discuss useful implications for social work practice.

Critique of Payne

Despite being riddled with narrow generalizations, Ruby Payne's guide to teaching children living in poverty does address a pertinent issue. Educators and social service providers alike work with this population at length, and it is not surprising that such a large mass would grab onto the hope that there

is a “one-size-fits-all” explanation for understanding those who live in poverty. Payne’s methodological approach to working with those in poverty is reflective of the much disputed *culture-of-poverty* thesis, first theorized by social theorist Oscar Lewis (1966), but which has taken on a life of its own since the concept was initially introduced in sociology (Coward, Feagin & Williams, 1974). By squeezing the diverse lives of all poor people into the same black-and-white ideology, Payne oversimplifies an issue that is both socially complex and incredibly intricate at the personal level.

For example, research has revealed that generational poverty, the type of poverty most often associated with a culture of poverty, is the least common type of poverty, as “only about one-sixth of all poverty spells last eight or more years” (Corcoran, Duncan, Gurin, & Gurin, 1985, p. 524). Yet Payne suggests that all people can be boxed into one of three categories: the poor, the middle class, and the wealthy. It is also crudely assumed in the *Framework* that all poor people have shallow roots and move often; all know how to access guns, and they have homes that are disorganized and violent. Moreover, Payne (2005) grossly generalizes that “...three of the hidden rules in poverty are the following: The noise level is high (the TV is always on and everyone may talk at once), the most important information is non-verbal, and one of the main values of an individual to the group is an ability to entertain” (p. 9). According to Payne, these norms of behavior or so-called values in homes of those living in poverty carry over into the school environment.

Next, Payne presents several scenarios that are supposed to model common life situations of those economically disadvantaged. In these scenarios families are portrayed as comprised of absentee fathers and promiscuous single mothers. From a social work perspective, it is disturbing that such a clearly unsubstantiated set of beliefs is so widely accepted as the go-to model for understanding the full extent of people’s life experiences. Social workers are duty bound to be culturally competent and to assess, understand, and take responsibility for their beliefs and attitudes about any group or individual (Marsh, 2004). Consequently, social workers are ethically bound to reject *Framework*, on the grounds that it reduces the economically disadvantaged to a subhuman class, economically as well as socially.

At first it is hard to pinpoint precisely what is missing from Payne’s work, but upon close scrutiny it becomes clear that the only considered variable in Payne’s analysis is that of socioeconomic status. The problem with this limited focus is fundamental, for in other studies poverty has been shown to be a product of other social factors, especially race (Wilson & Aponte, 1985; Irelan, Moles & O’Shea, 1969), rather than a product itself of some cultured “attitude” (Payne, 2005, p. 47). Payne ignores the fact that “poverty interacts with almost all other social problems” and that “the interaction between poverty and these other social problems is complex” (Zastrow, 2004, p. 127). Therefore, it is not recommended and nearly impossible to approach practice with groups or individuals with only a focus on how much income or wealth one possesses.

Overall, Payne’s work employs a single lens to define and explain behavior of an entire group of people and exanimate methods to interact with children living with poverty, methods which grossly disregard the importance, worth, and richness of the human experience. In viewing poverty as something that can be combated by teaching particular behaviors and standards that are deemed proper by a certain segment of the population, a professional service provider loses the opportunity to partake in culturally competent practice that is considered to be respectful, empathetic, and which sustains the dignity of the individual (Marsh, 2004). Cross-cultural communication, instead of stamping out one group’s social practices by another group that has deemed itself superior, offers opportunities to cultivate relationships where the social worker and client can learn from each other and make meaningful connections. Mutual trust and respect between two individuals from diverse social backgrounds can be fostered through respectful and empathetic communication.

Observations at Haven: A Case Example

Haven Community Center is a multi-faceted organization, not only serving the children in the local neighborhood, but also providing for the parents of the students who attend its after school program. Haven began humbly in the summer of 2003, taking over a small business space next to the neighborhood laundromat. Provoked by the growing problem of gangs and teenage idleness in the community, and the failure of a new police substation in the area to procure a change, a resident approached the local university extension and city officials to ask for monetary support and interest in an innovative program to involve and improve the community. The resident, Ms. Johnson, a single mother of three, managed to gather the resources to begin the program.

The programs at Haven are designed to provide a continuing education beyond the hours of school. Far more than acting as a childcare center, Haven provides an environment where children can relax, socialize, participate in cultural activities and get assistance with schoolwork. A typical day at Haven starts in the early afternoon, when the center's doors are open to community adults. On site there are GED resources as well as computers adults can access to complete job applications or practice job-related skills (e.g., English language learning, typing, and reading). During afterschool hours, volunteers and the students filter in and begin activities such as homework help, Girl Scouts and 4-H. The words purposely used in the mission statement describe Haven as a safe, dynamic, and culturally rich learning space.

In the simplest terms, Haven serves the surrounding public housing apartment complexes. The organizing and administrative bodies that coordinate and run Haven daily are a diverse conglomeration of community members and professionals. Frankly, the governing body's make-up is nearly a direct contrast to the local community. The majority of the volunteers are white, some are African American, and many are college students from the nearby private and public universities. Two of the full-time staff members comprise the face of Haven, Ms. Johnson, an African American woman who was also a resident of the neighborhood, and Ms. Little, a young woman who interned at the center before graduating from college and becoming the site coordinator. Haven's advisory board is comprised of local community members, including corporate workers, public officials, university professors, retired seniors, and a couple of mothers from the community.

Observations for this report took place during the Fall 2007 at least once a week. However, it should be noted that more formal observations have taken place at Haven since its inception. As a requirement for a Profession of Social Work course (designed by above first author), students were charged with not just observing another classroom or community-based organization, but to integrate themselves into Haven, as measured by on-going program development, participating in center activities, grant writing, and face-to-face daily interactions with students, families and/or staff members. In tune with learning the ins and outs of the social work profession, Haven Community Center served the purpose of offering pre-service practitioners a challenging and culturally invigorating experience. The course was made up of White, female, middle-class class students, from mostly suburban and small town communities. Below, Cowie (the co-author), a pre-service social work college student, reflects on her course preparation, immersion and initial reactions to being placed at Haven as a social work intern:

It was as though I was walking into Haven without the right tools to connect with the community it served. In social work class, I was reading and discussing the issues of poverty and public welfare, family problems, crime, problems in education, racism and ethnocentrism. I took those textbook concepts with me to Haven, where I interacted with real people affected by those issues, and learned to communicate with children and adults in a way that was valuable to both of us.

Understanding that this was going to be the first time I worked closely with both adults and students economically and racially different from myself, I became incredibly nervous. I feared

they would project whatever images or generalizations they had of “white college kids” onto myself and dismiss me as such. As it turned out, interacting with the children actually gave me the chance to shed labels, and at Haven, the children were able to leave stereotypes behind as well, and we were able to work together. When I walked out that door after my first night of volunteering, I knew I was now taking part in an experience that was going to teach me a lot about communication, community outreach, and working with people who have a less privileged and unique life experience from my own.

As Cowie admits in the reflection above, initially she had entered the field experience with apprehension. Most of the apprehension stemmed from her own preconceived notions of how the children of Haven might react to her as a White female college student. For the most part, she believed that the children of color would see her as an outsider, because of identity as a White woman and her educational status. Furthermore, her thoughts reveal that she also went into field placement believing that there would be stark differences between her and the students, simply because of their social class and racial differences. She continues below to describe how she coped with her own internalized anxiety due to perceived differences between her and the young people at Haven:

Had I been familiar with Ruby Payne’s work before my first evening at Haven, I too may have eagerly read the pages of *Framework* in hopes of quickly familiarizing myself with the language and mannerisms of the students and parents with whom I would be working, and more importantly, the reasons for their specific behaviors and beliefs. Fortunately enough, for the sake of the participants’ dignity and my own, I only went in with the expectation that the students and I would not connect across the vast economic disparities between us. The truth is that I did feel disconnected from the children at first, but in far more ways than simply the difference in our socioeconomic status. With each other the students used informal speech and had a direct, and not so impolite, body language and interaction. And on top of it all, they were quite un eager to start their homework, and I felt they were much better at telling me “No” than I was at motivating them to work with me (Student reflection, Cowie).

If Cowie would have embraced the culture of poverty theory, or even if she had allowed herself to immediately generalize that each of the children had “broken,” “dysfunctional” homes based on their participation in a free, after-school program and the location of their houses, she could have used a framework, such as Payne’s, to assess the cause of their behavior. Employing such a school of thought would have easily led her to actively work to become an “appropriate role model” (Payne, 2005, p. 9) of appropriate middle class behaviors. As Cowie writes in the reflection below:

I would have taken pains to correct them if they used a casual phrase or word different from my verbal repertoire. I would have emphasized the importance of their school work and speech on future endeavors, assuming that there were no such ideas or values impressed upon them in their broken homes. After all, generational poverty is all part of the culture of poverty, the norms and values of which are socialized in children from early childhood.

Nonetheless, instead of employing a pre-established set of guidelines for interacting with the participants at Haven, Cowie and the other students enrolled in the Professional Social Work class with Evans-Winters, followed the guiding principles of the social work profession, studied the surrounding demographics of the community served, spoke with their African American female professor about her life (and research experiences) growing up in low-income, working class neighborhoods, and actively interacted with students and families at the center to understand what they needed and wanted from the volunteers to improve their lives at home, school, or in the neighborhood.

All of the above are necessary prerequisites to meaningful cross-cultural communication, even the

conversation with the professor, because the best informant is someone who has enough local experience to know the social facts and customs of cultural group, but also enough life experience to highlight what is the same and what can be different within a group (Hilton, 2007). Again, Cowie explains in the reflection below how the absence of a “how-to” guide helped develop her knowledge and skill base for not only working with a new community context, but also working with individuals across race, class, and gender differences:

I mingled with the other volunteers as I watched the children begin to filter in. I decided to open myself up for small talk with the kids and see if they approached me first. Sure enough, a small second grader named Demarkus walked straight up to me. I asked him about his family and learned he was the oldest of three children, his favorite subject was math, and he liked to read. Later I would meet Demarkus’s mother, a weary looking woman, but a dedicated mother who found time to volunteer every now and then at Haven while taking night classes, working, and raising three children on her own. The more time I spent with Demarkus and the other participants, the more apparent it became that the initial distance between us was narrowing.

Haven was chosen as an ideal field experience site, because it exposes pre-service social workers to multiple social issues pertinent to the field of social work, like issues of race and poverty, location and segregation. Consequently, students, like Cowie, interpreted what they heard and saw at Haven through the filter of what was logically understood in the profession of social work, primarily its pillars of service, the dignity and worth of each person, and the importance of human relationships. This is not to imply that there were no fundamental differences between students and the youth at Haven, or even that the differences were insignificant. In Cowie’s own words,

I had luxuries and privileges these children had never known, simply because I was White and not another race, and they likewise, I am sure, understood that I did not live in their neighborhood or in an environment like their own. I took stock of the person they were by accepting the fact that we were different, but that mutual respect as opposed to the impressing of my middle class values would cultivate a meaningful and fruitful partnership.

Fortunately, for the social work interns and the children at Haven, Cowie, through time and on-going communication, viewed the children to be, above all other things, children. Through observations and activities at Haven, Cowie conscientiously rejected Payne’s definition of poverty, an existence characterized by poor parenting, limited emotional and physical resources, speech and other learned behaviors that erroneously represent a so-called culture of poverty:

I admit that Payne’s assumptions are founded on all of the assumptions I had about poverty and the type of people who receive welfare before I began working at Haven, but I have found her scenarios unable to effectively and fairly represent students like Demarkus and his family (Cowie’s reflection).

Poverty is a social condition that affects one’s housing choices, safety, physical and mental health, and may indeed require an individual or family to focus more on the here and now. A legitimate focus for someone living in poverty might be on how to maintain food, clothing, and shelter. Consequently, the influence of poverty on how one behaves is undeniable; and, to deny the existence of its influence would be to shortchange those who survive it, conquer it and are resilient despite the forcefulness of its residual effects.

Therefore, after careful consideration we found one major flaw in Payne’s framework—economic status, though incredibly important, was the only construct used to explain the mores of children living in poverty. To place all individuals in a society as diverse as the U.S into three categories—the poor,

the middle class, and the wealthy—is (1) a gross understatement of the diversity within socioeconomic groups, but also such an analysis; (2) overlooks and downplays the significance of how race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religious and spiritual beliefs play out in individual's and group's experiences in the social world. Besides the weakness in the methodological approach of Payne's framework, there exists the inherent lack of dignity and self-worth offered to those living in poverty and those working alongside the poor. Below, in her reflection, Cowie explains from a novice practitioner's perspective the deficit in Payne's framework:

I would have done a great disservice to Demarkus as a teacher, mentor, and friend, if I labeled his economic status and assumed that both he and his schoolmate Gregory, a boy in his grade who also attended Haven, were experiencing exactly the same home life. I found out first hand that Demarkus's mother was not at all like the damaging or incapable parents portrayed in all of Payne's "scenarios". She was a single mother, as Payne would have assumed, but she was dedicated to bettering her work life by going to night school, utilizing the community center, and she did all of this while remaining composed and juggling her three children.

Through on-going inquiry, personal observation and work with children in low-income families, we have concluded that Payne, never accounting for the existence of her own biases, completely disregards the dignity of all communicating across cultural lines. By suggesting that students be taught the behaviors of the (White) middle class, thus, to be lifted out of poverty, Payne assumes the way of life of families living in poverty is not only inferior, but also that poverty can simply be wiped away by the upgrading of hopes and aspirations and the changing of vernacular.

If someone ignorant of social institutions (e.g., media, religion, education, economy, and government) and processes (e.g., institutional racism, gender discrimination, and segregation) were to read Payne's book, that person would assume money and economic status were the sole dividers in society. This individual would believe that people are poor because they embody a culture, a taught and internalized set of behaviors and beliefs that, through re-socialization, could be reversed and replaced with the appropriate standards of middle- and upper- class society. Sadly, a relationship forged with a client using Payne's methodology would be a narrow, superficial one based on a self-serving agenda. Also, it would be a relationship that denies the client, community and social worker the merit deserved for conquering and challenging institutional and societal pressures faced each day.

Cross-Cultural Communication

We have established that the main problem with *Framework* is its demeaning focus on the proposed existence of an inferior *culture of poverty*; the oversimplified method Payne proposes for working with members of this culture focuses on the victims of poverty and their individual characteristics as the problem, and completely ignores the possibility that other social processes may be the culprits behind poverty. Furthermore, Payne's method fails to provide means for challenging the institutional underpinnings of poverty from a professional standpoint. Here we suggest a more empathetic and accommodating working relationship across socioeconomic borders, using cross-cultural communication.

We acknowledge that there is an immediate dissonance between this proposed counter to Payne, and our clear refusal of the culture-of-poverty theory. If we do not believe in the existence of a culture of poverty, then it makes no sense to use cross-cultural communication as the antidote to the ailments of her theory. In reality, it is the paradigm of cross-cultural communication that can be used as a replacement for Payne's framework, for meaningful cross-cultural communication is based on the overarching goals of (1) learning firsthand about the life of another individual; (2) avoiding blanket

generalizations about a particular group of people; and (3) not concluding that one's own cultural experiences are superior to another's experiences.

In other words, cross-cultural communication diverges from Payne's framework, because it is stipulated on respecting human diversity within and across cultural contexts. With this pointed out, it is important to mention that from our point of view, often there exist cultural differences between social work practitioners and those whom we serve; however, here we do not assume differences are solely due to socioeconomic status, but we believe that social class often interacts with other social dynamics, such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and/or cultural context. It is from this perspective that we propose cross-cultural communication as an alternative to a culture-of-poverty framework for working across cultural communities.

First of all, cross-cultural communication begins with being culturally proficient (Hilton, 2007). As Cowie discovered in her field placement, "Cultural proficiency doesn't mean memorizing every cultural nuance of every market. It's knowing when to listen, when to ask for help, and when — finally — to speak" (Hilton, 2007, p. 35). Before it can be determined that there are significant differences between two individuals, the outsider of the context first needs to sit back and listen to learn from the social actors themselves in a particular social context. Another important aspect of cross-cultural communication is the awareness of context. In this article, we borrow the following conceptualization of context put forth by Geoffroy (2007) in her research:

Context, as used in this paper, refers to the background of an individual. It is about an individual's setting, about the time, place and circumstances against which his or her narrative is set. As suggested by its Latin etymology (*cum- textere*, "join with"), it is also about the links that bind an individual to a specific background. Context is ontologically unique as it is given by the conditions of birth: one is born at a certain time, in a certain place and in certain circumstances. (p. 281)

The above conceptualization of context allows practitioners the opportunity to understand that culture is context-specific and historically bound. Even more important, this conceptualization of context as it relates directly to cross-cultural communication actually acknowledges the individual within a cultural framework. Within culture-of-poverty frameworks, like Payne's framework, the individual social actor is habitually overlooked. As an example of the significance of context, in our above description of observations at Haven community center, we did not ignore the fact that this majority Black low-income neighborhood was nestled within a majority White middle-class university town.

As those who embrace cross-cultural communication, we recognize that the context in which Haven's children live, work, play, and are schooled inevitably shapes their individual and group identities; context also shapes the identities of the college student volunteers. The acknowledgement of the role of context in cross-cultural communication fits within the social work profession, because of the profession's person-in-environment perspective. Ethically social workers must always consider what resources and support systems are available to individuals and groups in their immediate environment. If support systems or resources are not in place, it is the role of the social worker, along with the client, to advocate for needed supports (e.g., Haven's beginnings) and to work collectively to change the physical environment or the larger social context that is causing suffering or undue hardship. In short, by not understanding the whole context of children's experiences (Kneebone, 2007), we may be overlooking meaningful ways to communicate thoughtfully with them and/or on their behalf.

To a large degree, cross-cultural communication has its roots in the business world. When it comes to exchanging information and ideas in business ventures, the intersections where it is critical to understand cultural differences are perceptions of time and space, beliefs about fate and personal

responsibility, face and face saving, and the intricacies of nonverbal communication (LeBaron, 2003). Juxtaposing the business definition of cross-cultural communication with a model for the classroom (Brown, 2006), the focus here is on learning about and respecting the individual for the sake of forging meaningful connections, as opposed to completing business transactions with ease. Depending on the circumstances at hand, cross-cultural communication is used as a skill base to achieve different outcomes, but in each situation value is placed on learning about and appreciating differences, not assuming one's culture is superior.

In sum, cross-cultural communication commences when individuals possessing different values, beliefs, and self-concepts, influenced by the context in which they live, interact with open minds, ears, and mutual respect for each other. Although we do not support the culture-of-poverty thesis, we are bound by personal and professional ethics to consider and actively seek understanding of cultural differences that might exist between clients and practitioners. Nonetheless, we believe that any cultural differences can be understood and navigated by adapting a paradigm of sensitive and effective cross-cultural communication to the practice of social work.

Implications of Practice

Now that we have examined the flaws of Ruby Payne's *Framework*, showcased an actual neighborhood and organization where her theories failed to frame the population, and defined cross-cultural communication and its alternative paradigm for understanding and working with people unlike oneself, we have cultivated suggestions for avoiding the dehumanizing pitfalls of Payne's methodology and applying the sensitive and respectful paradigm to the profession of social work.

In her chapter titled "Role Models and Emotional Resources," Payne uses the case study of a girl named Ellie. The narrative of Ellie's story is quite troubling because it echoes again themes of vulnerability and weakness among the economically disadvantaged and their inability to be positive agents of change in their own lives. Payne continuously portrays them as victims pathologically destined to inherit the wiles of poverty from their parents and guardians. The following suggestions are intended to be both harmonious with the Social Work Code of Ethics, critical of the most abhorrent effects of Payne's framework, and modeled after the values of cross-cultural communication:

- *Do not assume that poverty will be the cause of all problematic behaviors.* It is an inescapable truth that poverty is a powerful force in an individual's life. The oppressiveness of poverty can adversely affect mental health (Saraceno & Barbu, 1997). However, social workers should avoid the trap of labeling poverty as the cause for all of a person's behaviors and attitudes. Laughing at discipline, arguing loudly, using vulgarity, and using physical violence are all labeled as behaviors related to poverty (Payne, 2005, p. 9). However, effective social workers understand that labeling a list of fairly common defensive behaviors only furthers the spread of the culture-of-poverty idea, and they work to empathize with and explore the situation or experience causing the behavior.
- *Do not characterize your client as a victim.* The most troubling characteristic of Payne's scenarios is the way each individual is viewed primarily as a victim. She views each of the individuals from a perspective of pathological and predetermined failure. In the case of Ellie, a nine-year-old girl, it is the presence of Ellie's suicidal mother with dependency issues that leads to Ellie's teenage pregnancy. While it is likely that Ellie's choices may have been impacted by her mother's state of illness and depression, the narrative of her story focuses on a pathology of dependency that is presumed to inevitably follow her for the rest of her life. Ellie's potential for resiliency and transformation to a functional adult and parent are automatically deemed all but impossible in this fatalistic perspective. With a lack of confidence in her abilities, Ellie's failure

is almost guaranteed to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, social workers can effectively spark positive change in their client's lives if they view them from a strength perspective. There is no culture of poverty; those like Ellie are not predetermined to follow the "rules" of poverty.

- *Understand all factors of discrimination, bias, and social construction affecting the attitudes and behaviors of your clients.* By examining Ellie's situation using a culture-of-poverty framework, there appears to be a direct connection between Ellie's teenage pregnancy, her decision to quit school, and the manipulative, dependent state of her ill mother. If a social worker follows Payne's belief in the pathological nature of generational poverty, that social worker does little justice to the stage of evaluating a client. To effectively evaluate Ellie's situation, one must step back and take in the entire picture. Payne may hold a piece of the puzzle: Ellie's mother's history of suicidal behavior, for example, will affect her daughter's overall development. On the other hand, other social forces at work in Ellie's and her mother's lives all played a role in the path of her childhood. What Payne fails to incorporate are all the other social factors impeding Ellie's life's experiences. For example, as a young female, it is possible she was simply not raised to be assertive about her wants and rights. It could also be true that she did not have access to adequate or quality reproductive education, due to her geographic isolation or lack of affordable healthcare. A sharp sociological analysis contemplates the myriad social forces at play in any given situation.
- *Do not just treat the symptoms of the problem.* Completely absent from *Framework* is the encouraging of students (or clients) to exercise the powers they have in a situation to help resolve what is causing the problem. The social injustices at work in these people's lives are not challenged, only the negative effects of these injustices and how to better cope and live with them. In each case study, the suggested plan of attack for the adult working with students involves cultivating the academic and life skills that they supposedly lack, because they know only of the "rules" of poverty. For instance, in the case of a girl named Lakeitha, the solution to her defiant behavior and lack of time to complete assignments is to focus on creating time in school for completing tasks and teaching her how to voice her anger in the "adult voice" (Payne, p. 71-74). Despite the fact that she is essentially raising four younger siblings and doing so with parents frequently incarcerated, there is no mention of counseling to aid Lakeitha to address issues of stress and coping. Payne vaguely suggests giving "Lakeitha the phone numbers and addresses of organizations... that can help provide some relief to her" (p. 74), but the message is clearly that helping Lakeitha to better function in a middle-class environment will be sufficient to meet her needs.
- *Examine the works of Payne and others critically before applying them to practice.* As a contribution to the body of knowledge within the fields of education and social work, Payne's work deserves to be studied. The key in studying Payne is to do so critically with a keen awareness of the numerous generalizations and false assumptions about poverty. When taken out of the context of her book and placed in a setting like Haven, her ideas fail to frame the people. For example, Payne states, "The culture of poverty does not provide for success in middle class because middle class to a large extent requires the self-governance of behavior" (p. 77). Imagine if a social worker walked into situations assuming that people who live in poverty cannot control their behavior. This social worker would be abandoning the duty to promote in every individual, regardless of income, a strong sense of self-concept and responsibility to self and community. If one blindly attributes the demeaning characteristic of a lack of self-control to poverty, that person denies dignity and worth to a significant portion of our nation's population.

Conclusion:

A Departure from Payne

Again, it is important to note the value *A Framework For Understanding Poverty* does possess. In particular, the controversy within its pages has opened up a firestorm of debate, encouraged a review and extension of research on the topic of poverty, and unveiled the extent to which the assumptions and generalizations about poverty are ingrained in the social fabric of this country. Credit must be given where it is due, and it is a fact that trying to frame this problem in any fashion is a noble effort. Payne's book and theories must have filled a serious void in our knowledge and practice working with children living in poverty for it to be so eagerly swiped from the shelves and adopted for the curriculum in college classrooms, departments of sociology, and in teacher preparation courses. One could even argue that its controversial existence has done equally as much good for the service fields as it could potentially have done harm. It has at the very least awoken us to the continued existence of poverty, its expansiveness across our nation, and its undeniable connection to the education, health, and governing of our people.

But as a self-proclaimed must read for educators, employers, policymakers, and service providers (Payne, 2005), the book's framework collapses under the scrutiny of application to real-world organizations. As exemplified at Haven Community Center, the scenarios of Payne's book fail to encompass the true diversity and dignity of the real people who resist the confines of poverty daily. As most theories, Payne's are reincarnations of previously researched and deeply embedded ideas about the poor. Unfortunately, the missing piece of the puzzle is simply this: with minimal research one can find that Oscar Lewis and his predecessors have been refuted by many and challenged by a body of counter-research and theory that continues to grow today. Multiple theorists and researchers have refuted the idea that poverty is a result of culture and that changing this "culture" can procure any meaningful change in the state of poverty (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ludwig & Mayer, 2006). In her book, Payne does not explore the views of her critics nor even acknowledge the existence of them and their differing opinions. For someone who did not know better, *Framework* would seem like the bottom line on understanding the complicated, wide-reaching world of poverty.

Notwithstanding the observation that Payne's work only contributes to the continuation of racism and classism (Gorski, 2008), we argue that the removal of Payne's work from education and social work would be detrimental as well. As stated before, it has been a catalyst in the debate about poverty and the methodology for dealing with it in this country. In the classroom, Payne's work can be critically analyzed and dissected. It poses many interesting discussion and lesson points. Payne focuses on generalized characteristics of poverty-stricken individuals that reduce the poor to mere pawns, people who are pathologically doomed to live in poverty unless the middle- and upper-class social workers, teachers, and employers help them redefine their culture to be modeled after the middle class. Especially useful for study in the social work profession, practicing psychotherapists and counselors can examine the victim perspective taken by Payne and interpret the case studies and theories in poverty through a strength perspective. Also, very little of *Framework* speaks about aiding students and clients to change the relationships, habits, and environmental issues they have control over to better their lives or eradicate the addiction and abuse in their lives. Good social work should evaluate the situation and implement a course of action for the client to take that will help them develop self-determination and help themselves. *Framework* eliminates the idea that people can personally be positive agents of change in their own lives, and replaces the individual's strength and ability with the helping hands of the middle and upper classes.

In the end, it should come as no surprise that a book with nine chapters and roughly two hundred pages fails to encompass all of the ins and outs of understanding poverty. The debate about the culture of poverty itself has been actively researched and argued for nearly fifty years. A single book cannot outline a definitive process for aiding, working with, and bettering the lives of those who live in poverty. The most effective professionals in any field are those who seek to continually expand their expertise and exposure to the body of literature, research, and knowledge within their field. No book

should be taken as the bottom line on an issue as hotly debated and researched as poverty. Ideally the continued study of poverty and the critical analyses of newly emerging theories will continually push the profession of social work forward and lead to a departure from Payne.

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