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Much like race, religiosity, sex, and a whole host of contrived privilege points in the U.S., poverty and class have remained for the most part *don't-go-there* designations; topics that individuals, human service, and educational institutions often avoid openly discussing (Argyris, 1991; Caruthers, Eubanks &Thompson, 2004). By not intentionally thinking, talking, and teaching about socio-economic privilege associated with class, however, we undermine our ability to make significant progress in connecting with and supporting people who may be bearing the brunt of the wealth disparity burden. On the contrary, we serve each other well when we initiate and sustain chains of interdisciplinary and "cross-class" communication (Bennet, 1988), allowing for respectful curiosity, sharing theories for effective interventions, and asking questions. When we ask and respond to questions of ourselves and others relating to poverty and class distinctions, a critically important dialog ensues.

Unequal Playing Fields

Questions from the philosophically complex to the rhetorically mundane fuel our discussions and nurture our understanding of the issues, if and when we pause for consideration and rejoinder. The simple question of how to successfully work with youth in poverty, for instance, is one of the most common inquiries I receive from teachers and human service practitioners in the field. Years ago, I frankly considered such questions naïve—seeking a silver bullet for responding to issues of poverty, a panacea through which all of us *service providers to the poor* may find profound success. I commonly interpreted the question as a disguised method of stereotyping, and *othering* people experiencing poverty (Ang, 2001; Collins, 1998; Johnson et al., 2004; McVannel Erwin, 2003). Today, I only occasionally do so.

My generic and defensive responses were often something like, "the same way you succeed with anybody…", or in other words, I was implying that people in poverty are no different than anyone else. After years of contemplation however, I am convinced that my early reply was by itself, for the most part--wrong. Granted, people are people, regardless of their resources, and deserving of respect and equal access to opportunities for happiness and prosperity. However the underlying implication in such a response is that the human service and educational *needs* of "poor" kids and their families are no different than the needs of their counterparts who are not experiencing poverty. To put it delicately, it was the responder [me] who was naïve, and not the asker. By implying equity in the needs of children regardless of economic status and social class standing, I was fueling the longstanding American myth that there is some semblance of equity and a level playing field in our individual opportunity to pursue prosperity, life, liberty, and happiness (Shipler, 2004). By insinuating equality in needs and, therefore, in necessary supports, intervention services, and approaches to schooling, I was essentially joining forces with those who lay blame on the individuals who are circumstantially less privileged for maintaining their own "underclass" position in life (Katz, 1993; Niemonen, 2002; Rector, 2008).

My early responses were certainly not intended to imply either the existence of an equal playing field, or to cast blame. Rather they were intended as suggestions that those experiencing poverty simply deserve to be treated as people first, with their economic status being but one ancillary variable to consider. In other words, a person's past, current, or future class status or financial privilege does not define who they are. A similar distinction has been made by Allan Johnson regarding race privilege:

> Individuals are the ones who experience privilege or the lack of it, but individuals aren't what is actually privileged. I'm not race privileged because of who I am as a person. Whiteness is privileged in this society, and I have access to that privilege only when people identify me as belonging to the category "white." (Johnson, 2008, p. 117)

Similarly, those individuals experiencing poverty do not lack privileges because of who they are as individuals, but rather as a matter of their *membership* in the category of poverty. Their circumstances and socio-economic class distinctions are situational. While this is clearly a different premise than race, as one's poverty or class status often changes over time, Johnson's (2008) premise holds true: It is the category (and reality) of *poverty* that afflicts the individual.

Poverty by Choice

If we buy into the notion that the best way to support youth and their families is consistent *regardless* of class and privilege, we may easily subscribe to the notion that those who are experiencing poverty are principally to blame for their lot in life (Banfield, 1992; Bradshaw, 2006; Gwartney & McCaleb, 1985; Lewis, 1966; Mooney, Knox, & Schacht, 1997; Rector, 2008). After all, it stands that if class and economic status do not influence needs of or access to supports, there must be some equality of opportunity. This myth is debunked every day in communities, schools, and homes throughout the country, and has been widely challenged by practitioners and scholars for years (Elliot et al., 2006; Freiere, 1970; Glover-Blackwell, 2008; Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud, & Eggers-Pierola, 1997; Massey & Denton, 1993; Niemonen, 2002; Shipler, 2004; Wilson, 1990).

Despite the breadth of literature taking a comprehensive look at the multiple, interconnected reasons for poverty and disparity in wealth and class status, people experiencing poverty continue to be blamed for their circumstances in the United States. As reported by John Iceland (2003), a 2001 poll in the U.S. asked if the greater cause of poverty today is that people are not doing enough to help themselves, or circumstances beyond their control. Responses were closely split between "people not doing enough" (48%) and "circumstances" (45%). Since 2000, the number of Americans living in poverty jumped by 5.7 million to 37.3 million; and the poverty rate rose to 12.5 percent in 2007 (U.S. Senate Joint Economic Committee, 2008). If we use the premise of lifestyle and choice as a leading cause of individual and family poverty rates, then we can see a significant increase in people choosing to become poor.

The U.S. Joint Economic Committee (JEC) recently held a hearing on current problems associated with poverty titled, *Leave No Family Behind: How Can We Reduce the Rising Number of American Families Living in Poverty?* The hearing included testimony voicing different and opposing perspectives, from individuals who view continued governmental interventions as an obligation of government to support our most vulnerable citizens, to individuals who believe reports of poverty are inflated, that means-tested welfare programs do not work, and who hold impoverished people singly accountable for their individual circumstances. In his opening remarks, U.S. Senator and JEC Chairman, Charles Schumer, stated:

> …Make no mistake, poverty is not a problem we can look at as isolated in inner cities or depressed areas of rural America… And contrary to the stereotypes of some, these low-income families work. Over 70 percent of all low-income families with children have an employed parent. And more than one-quarter of all working families with children in the U.S. earn less than twice the poverty line… Poverty is not an abstract issue for these families, and it can't be for us here in Washington either…we should be able to build a safety net that guarantees a dignified standard of living for every family willing to work hard and play by the rules. (U.S. Senate JEC, 2008)

In this address, Schumer did not cast blame but rather stated relevant statistical data while inferring a need for families to "work hard and play by the rules."

Moments later, Robert Rector, Senior Fellow for Domestic Policy for the Heritage Foundation, provided testimony that offered his personal insights into the cause of American poverty in today's society. Rector stated that the U.S. in 2008 will have exhausted $679 billion through welfare spending, exceeding total defense outlays, including the war in Iraq. He went on to state that, "Since the beginning of the War on Poverty under Lyndon Johnson, the U.S. has spent $14.3 Trillion on welfare" [in constant 2007 dollars]. His thesis posits that the money spent on services for people in poverty has not only been misguided, but has also encouraged a culture of poverty. In Rector's words,

> There is little support [from U.S. tax-paying citizens] for assistance to individuals whose need for aid appears to be largely self-inflicted. An abiding concern remains over the culture of poverty, which, by fostering self-defeating behaviors, constricts the ability of individuals to support themselves and prosper. There is little public support for a welfare system that rewards idleness, or promotes single parenthood while ignoring or penalizing marriage. Unfortunately, the current welfare system does both. (Rector, 2008)

Aside from idleness and an unwillingness to obtain legal employment, Rector stated that the principal causes of poverty include out-of-wedlock childbearing and an influx of low-skilled, un-educated immigrants – particularly from Mexico. Rector stated that with "…one in ten Mexicans [living] in the U.S.", the population of low and semi-skilled immigrants and their families make up 20% of all poor persons in the country. Currently, 38% of all children born in the U.S. are born out-of-wedlock. Fueling the notion that poverty is a choice, Rector, citing an earlier study, stated that the greatest reason for childhood poverty in this country is out-of-wedlock childbearing: "Out-of-wedlock births commonly occur to the least educated women in society….Virtually no non-marital pregnancies are due to a lack of access to birth control", and as such, "…if poor single mothers married the fathers of their children, almost three-quarters would immediately be lifted out of poverty (Rector, Johnson, Fagan, & Noyes, 2003)." Throughout his testimony, Rector simultaneously cast blame on those who are experiencing poverty and expressed an over-reporting of relative poverty in this country, frequently stating that people claiming to be in poverty today are in fact living in relative comfort. Citing such material goods as air conditioning, microwave ovens, and cable television, his case is made that what we perceive to be poverty today may in fact be privileged from a historical or global perspective when and where poverty was something much more dire.

In keeping with Iceland's observations (2003), and Rector's testimony (2008), during a recent study of poverty in northwestern Washington State (Winter, Korsmo, Dallmann, Battis & Anderson, 2007), low-income participants frequently shared frustration in being blamed for their current financial crisis. Such blame was a common theme throughout the qualitative data, such as the sentiments of "Steve", a young man who was attempting to obtain support through a local human service agency: "While I was on the intake call, they actually said, 'You are so articulate, how did you ever get into this position?', which was demeaning, as if I must have done something to bring this on." In other words, the service provider was operating under the principle that Steve's ability to coherently articulate his needs was representative of something other than poverty. Holding all things equal, a seemingly educated, articulate man such as Steve should not find himself in poverty; shame on him. In Steve's case, like so many others, the intake worker's unwillingness to engage with him in respectful and relational dialogue, and to consider his genuine need for support without casting blame was enough to dissuade him from further seeking and therefore obtaining the services he so needed.

What's Your Story? A Hermeneutical Approach

The Joint Economic Committee hearing was a timely testament to the need for increasing dialogue relating to class and poverty. Such dialogue needs to take into consideration multiple perspectives in order to critically consider the varying opinions on this complex issue, including the reality that there is not an equal and level playing field in terms of service needs and provision. A colleague with whom I engage in work relating to responsible use of privilege is fond of quoting football coach Barry Switzer, stating "Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple" (T. Nicholas, personal communication, September 26, 2008). This simple quip hits the proverbial nail on the head when it comes to the consideration that in reality and in the context of our individual lived experiences, we are *not* all provided equal opportunity.

Some among us simply have privilege points that set them on a sharper trajectory for success, while some have hindrances that create needs of a different sort. Poverty and its general effect of minimizing personal and familial resources is a contributor to encumbrances placed on youth and families who may have been born outside of Switzer's baseball diamond altogether, perhaps a mighty distance from third base. During a lively conversation after a recent workshop on privilege, an astute participant asked, "How the hell can I hit a triple when I don't even know which end of the bat to hold, and don't understand why the guy is throwing balls at me in the first place?" Reality succinctly shows the questioner that her implied doubt is valid. Indeed, it is unlikely that she will even make contact with the ball – let alone hit a coveted triple.

The baseball analogy is not dissimilar from hundreds of comparative metaphors and personal similes presented to me over the years by people experiencing poverty. In a recent study of barriers and supports to poverty in Whatcom County, Washington, (Winter et. al., 2007), a participant described his experiences in terms of "…being looked at and treated as if you were some kind of germ…because you don't make $60,000 a year…" Another respondent indicated "…I felt like a rag doll being tossed around from one place to another," when describing her attempts to receive help for medical challenges. Others described their experiences in terms of being "left behind," "left out in the cold," "on a roller coaster ride from hell," "a punching bag," "stuck in a rut," and countless colorful and expressive comparative images. During a previous, similar study investigating poverty in the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State (Korsmo, 2006), participants frequently shared stories and circumstances that described feeling like they were part of a "perfect storm," and "caught in a catch-22." We all have multiple meanings we make of our existence and of our challenges and successes, regardless of our socio-economic status. Whether offering up analogies for our life experiences or metaphors that capture our interpretations of them, we all have stories to tell.

Mutual exchange of such narrative and life stories supports the engagement of positive relationships with youth and adults experiencing poverty. This contributes to a genuine understanding and sense of empathy, and is a key ingredient for successfully working with them (Baizerman, 1996; Batsleer, J., 2008; Fewster, 1990; Fewster & Garfat, 2001; Garfat, 1995; Krueger, 1998). In order to embody and act on our empathic reasoning as educators and human service practitioners, we are well served to learn the other person's story. Being authentically interested in people's lives is an integral part of general human service practice, and can be expressed through empathic curiosity and relational engagement. Youth work scholar, Mark Krueger, has written prolifically about engaging with youth (regardless of socio-economic status), and has cogently expressed:

> We have more or less come to the conclusion that we can't, as is often said in youth work, "put ourselves in someone else's shoes." If each worker and youth has a unique story, then it is impossible. We all see the world through a different lens, experience life differently based on our prior cultural and familial experiences, and subsequently make different meaning of what we experience. (Krueger, 2003, p.1)

Although we cannot place ourselves in someone else's shoes, we can qualitatively inquire for more information to support our understanding of the other person's experiences.

While capturing the stories of those who are experiencing poverty to enhance our thinking and to shape programming and services is not a new venture, it is seeing increasing attention in qualitative reports, ethnographies, and autobiographic sketches (Beegle, 2006; DeParle, 2004; Eitzen, & Eitzen Smith, 2003; Gardner, 2006; Holloway, et. al., 1997; Kozol, 1988; Kozol, 1991). Through mutual sharing and understanding, reciprocally beneficial relationships can occur, and when this happens there is a greater likelihood for success. Such relationship-building, however, is all too often outside the norm of what people experience when obtaining support services related to their poverty status (Korsmo, 2006; Winter et. al, 2007). Thus, when authentic relationships occur between a human service provider or educator and a client or student, it is markedly different than how people experiencing poverty frequently depict their routine interactions obtaining services. This relationship is frequently cited as the determining factor for success (Fewster, 1990; Fewster, 1991; Korsmo, 2006; Krueger, 1995; Krueger, Galovits, Pick & Wilder, 1999; Maier, 1987; Stuart, 2001).

What Would Happen if we Knew Each Other? A Relational Approach

During a county-wide summit on poverty in 2006, more than 100 service providers, policy makers, educators, and community members from Whatcom County, Washington, came together to critically investigate the toll poverty was taking on the local economic and social aspects of the community. The summit itself was a culminating gathering of stakeholders to report back on local findings relating to community economic health, the genesis of which was a general concern for growing rates of poverty in the County. According to the U.S. Census, 13% of Whatcom County residents lived below the poverty line in 2003. That rate climbed to 13.4% in 2004, and to 13.7% in 2005, compared to 11.9% for the State of Washington as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). This statistical trend, together with anecdotal testimony from residents and service providers supporting the notion of increased financial difficulties, troubled residents, political leaders, and service providers alike. It was determined then to conduct a County-wide assessment to investigate what it meant to experience poverty in the County, and to look into what seemed to be working well and what was lacking, in terms of provision of care.

One of the consistent recommendations that came out of that work was to convene a group of people to support each other relationally through their pursuits of prosperity, and to understand and overcome obstacles created by poverty. The notion of relationships as being a key ingredient for success was a dominant theme that emerged in both the quantitative survey results from over 600 households and the more than 100 individual participants in qualitative focus groups and one-on-one interviews. Participant statements such as the following were commonly heard:

> …I don't think it's a program. I don't think its money. It's attitude and relationships. And education…We need to somehow make it so everyone feels emotionally safe and tied to the people here, and so people feel like they can access what they need…. (Winter et. al., 2007)

The relationships people have developed with both lay people and professional service providers were frequently referred to as networks of support, as mentioned by a service recipient in Bellingham, Washington:

> I think that the key to surviving in our difficult situations is having a lot of social networks. We need supportive people – not just people to do stuff for us, but people who support. Who care and show respect and just support. It is all about that type of network…. (Winter et. al., 2007)

In response, a group of individuals volunteered to join forces as a *Community Engagement Group*, which has proved an apt example of how a relational approach to dealing with poverty can be successful.

The goal from the outset was to create a circle of engagement and support for a small group of community members who had a personal interest in learning more about overcoming poverty. The members represent a variety of professional and personal interests and experiences: Substance abuse, homelessness, single parenting, incarceration, untreated medical needs, domestic violence, and hunger are but a few of the obstacles that members of the group had faced. However, while acknowledging them, the group does not focus exclusively on the deficits and challenges each member has overcome, or is currently facing, but considers their supports, hopes, and aspirations.

Through bi-weekly meetings, and an ongoing cycle of communication, action, and reflection (communicating needs and ideas for resources; planning actions to address those needs; enacting those plans; and evaluating and assessing the outcomes), the participants have experienced numerous individual, and collective positive results. One of the outcomes was the receipt of a one-year community-based research grant from Woodring College of Education at Western Washington University that supported the formalization of a participatory action-research approach to the group's efforts. Action research has been used for years to encourage and enhance social and personal change and empowerment that aims to increase fairness, wellness, and self-determination (Argyris, 2000; Greenwood & Levin, 2000; Raelin, 1997; Watkins & Brooks, 1994), and has been an effective methodological approach for this group.

Additionally, the group procured a contract with the Washington State Department of Social and Human Services (DSHS) to create a *Community-Navigator* approach to supporting participants of the Work First program. The Community Navigator position was designed as a way to utilize a relational approach to case management, in which Navigators work with designated DSHS clients who are on sanction and at risk of losing financial supports to reconnect them into the system of care. The Community Navigator was imagined as a lay person or trained practitioner who understands firsthand the "hidden rules" (Payne, 2005) of different class groups, and what it takes to navigate through the systems that are often designed by those who don't understand these class differences. The Navigator connects with individuals and families as a *partner* in achieving their success, helping them build a network of informal supports to sustain them beyond any current crises, opposed to serving them as a *case manager* who holds a ranking position over them (Fuller, 2004).

Equally salient to minimizing power imbalance was the necessity for Community Navigators to engage in relationships with the clients as a purposeful method for supporting them. After considerable success during the initial trial period, it was decided to enter into a longer-term contract with DSHS (G. Morgan, personal communication, July 7, 2008). The contract is a tangible outcome in that it is an opportunity for part-time employment and financial gain for some of the members, and is also a testament to the efficacy of its model of using relationships and engagement to work with people experiencing poverty that are caught up in the system.

A more personally rewarding, albeit less quantifiable, outcome for the group has been the personal relationships and supports created for dealing with emergent life challenges (Korsmo, 2008). By sharing personal narrative and family stories, and ultimately engaging in each other's lives, all members have been affected in a relational way that empowers them to address the various challenges associated with poverty. The group values the reciprocal nature of relationships across traditional class boundaries, acknowledging and embracing the mutual benefits of being engaged with each other. This acknowledgement and reciprocity is missing in typical top-down service provision when a practitioner or teacher sees himself or herself as *doing for* the other.

The Community Engagement Group is offered here as but one example of how a relational approach to better understanding and confronting poverty is working. Through regular dialogue regarding socio-economic-status and class among and between people currently experiencing varying degrees of both poverty and prosperity, this group is effectively connecting with and supporting each other. All participants gain from their engagement in the critical dialogue that ensues, which fuels the group's interest in each other and supports the collective growth of a supportive network that was called for from the outset.

Moving forward, as I am asked how best to serve those experiencing poverty, I will provide the successes seen by the Community Engagement Group as an example of a promising approach. Engaging in dialog and empathic and genuine relationships provides the ability to make connections and to deepen awareness of each other's strengths and challenges. Some argue that there simply is not enough time in the day for service providers to *engage* with, or *form a relationship* with clients. On the contrary, if we are sincere in our intents to both ameliorate and remediate poverty, there isn't sufficient time *not* to engage. Avoiding the sharing of voice and perspective when working with someone in relation to something so personal as his or her socio-economic and class status is a detriment to the supporting process.

On the contrary, we see progress when we bring clarity and volume to the voices of those whom we are serving in our human service and teaching ventures. In the words of humanitarian and social activist, Arundhati Roy, "There is no such thing as the voiceless, there are only the silenced and the deliberately misheard" (Roy, 2004). In this vein, and as proven possible through such efforts as those of the Community Engagement Group in Whatcom County, Washington, human service practitioners and educators are encouraged to engage in multi-directional, reciprocal dialogue with individuals in our classrooms and communities. As we progress in our cross-class communication efforts, our ability to hear, understand, and collaboratively support each other becomes profound.

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