

poverty: are you part of the problem or solution?

Benjamin Yep

Extension and many other human service organizations are becoming increasingly involved in programs for low-income people. As these organizations work directly with low-income individuals and families, their professional staff, in addition to having particular program knowledge and skills, should be aware of their own values and attitudes toward poverty. This process of value clarification about poverty is a significant step toward learning more about ourselves and our basic professional orientation toward low-income people. Do we see the low-income person as “worthy” or “undeserving” of our programs and services?

... this article is to help you develop a deeper understanding of your values and attitudes toward poverty; and, in the process, to better understand how others view poverty.

This process of value clarification should also help us better understand our low-income clients and how they view their own problems. As Rescher states:

When we know someone's values, we are able to grasp what makes him “tick” and we are better able to understand him and to deal with him. The possession of diverse values set people apart, and shared values simplify their working together.¹

The purpose of this article is to help you develop a deeper understanding of your values and attitudes toward poverty; and, in the process, to better understand how others view poverty.

Research Framework

Two research perspectives will be used in this article. The first is based on the adaptation of the value clarification process² which is predicated on Raths' seven processes of valuing.³ These processes encourage people to think about

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values to: (1) choose freely, (2) choose from alternatives, (3) choose after giving thoughtful consideration to consequences, (4) prize and cherish, (5) publicly affirm their choices (6) act on their beliefs, and (7) develop patterns of repeated actions around important beliefs.

I've modified the value clarification process so it will be more structured and oriented toward a specific problem area—poverty. I've tried to adhere to the three basic guidelines proposed by Simon for value clarification strategies and techniques.⁴ The first guideline is that there are no right or wrong responses in the exercise. Secondly, your right to pass or not participate is guaranteed. The third guideline is that the leader or author share his values.

The second research perspective is a typology of societal values and attitudes toward poverty in the United States I developed after extensively reviewing the sociological and psychological research literature in this subject-matter area. A typology is a classification framework for organizing data and information and is a type of conceptual model useful in guiding research and developing theory.⁵ This typology of societal values and attitudes toward poverty is a historical analysis based on three chronological periods—I: before 1930, II: 1930-1964, and III: 1965-1972.

A questionnaire and scoring sheet based on the typology developed by Yep⁶ was produced and tested by Meredith and Needles.⁷

Questionnaire

It's time for you to become directly involved in this value clarification process related to poverty. We'd like your opinion and comment about the following statements on poverty. There's no right or wrong answer. We're seeking your honest response:

SD=Strongly Disagree
 D=Disagree
 A=Agree
 SA=Strongly Agree

Circle the one after each statement that comes closest to expressing your feelings about that statement.

- | | | | | |
|---|----|---|---|----|
| ✓ 1. Few poor are poor by their own choice. | SD | D | A | SA |
| ✓ 2. Low-income people are victims of our society. | SD | D | A | SA |
| ✓ 3. People on welfare really don't want to work. | SD | D | A | SA |
| ✓ 4. Performing the role of an educator is the most important task of the professional working with low-income audiences. | SD | D | A | SA |

5.	The role of the professional working with the poor is one of advocate.	SD	D	A	SA
6.	The philosophy "I am my brother's keeper" is the most appropriate for a professional working in the area of poverty.	SD	D	A	SA
✓7.	Programs planned to meet the specific needs of a social group can be effective tools in promoting the ideas of self-respect and individual worth within low-income people.	SD	D	A	SA
8.	Poor people are innately disadvantaged.	SD	D	A	SA
✓9.	Low-income people are often culturally disadvantaged.	SD	D	A	SA
✓10.	Creating appropriate educational opportunities is the key to resolving poverty.	SD	D	A	SA
✓11.	Poor people should participate in the decision-making process involved in welfare programs.	SD	D	A	SA
✓12.	The poor are just like everyone else; they just need education so they can wisely use their resources.	SD	D	A	SA
13.	Hard work is the most expedient solution to problems faced by welfare recipients.	SD	D	A	SA
✓14.	Less time should be spent improving the physical environment of the poor and more concentrated on improvement of their moral character.	SD	D	A	SA
15.	A person who has a family and doesn't work is shirking one's responsibilities.	SD	D	A	SA
16.	A person shouldn't have to hold a job to survive today.	SD	D	A	SA
✓17.	The most basic cause of poverty is the fact that many people have never had a chance to get a decent education.	SD	D	A	SA
18.	A lot of people would choose not to work if there were a guaranteed annual income.	SD	D	A	SA
✓19.	The majority of our efforts should go into changing the environment and the institutions that make up society.	SD	D	A	SA
✓20.	People who can earn their living, should earn their living.	SD	D	A	SA

- 21. Answers devised by "outsiders" are, for the most part, inappropriate solutions for the poor. SD D A SA
- 22. Programs planned to meet the specific needs of a social group do more harm than good because they isolate low-income groups rather than bring them into the main-stream of society. SD D A SA
- 23. The children of a poverty-stricken family often inherit the laziness of their parents. SD D A SA
- 24. An able-bodied, educated person has no reason to be on welfare. SD D A SA

Scoring Your Responses

Each response (SD, D, A, SA) has a particular point value. So, after each statement, write the point value corresponding to your answer:

- SD=1 point
- D=2 points
- A=3 points
- SA=4 points

Now, transfer those point values to the following scoring sheet:

	Column I	Column II	Column III
Statement 3.	___ points	4. ___ points	1. ___ points
Statement 6.	___ points	9. ___ points	2. ___ points
Statement 8.	___ points	10. ___ points	5. ___ points
Statement 13.	___ points	12. ___ points	7. ___ points
Statement 15.	___ points	14. ___ points	11. ___ points
Statement 18.	___ points	17. ___ points	16. ___ points
Statement 20.	___ points	22. ___ points	19. ___ points
Statement 23.	___ points	24. ___ points	21. ___ points

Add total points in each column ___ total points ___ total points ___ total points

Add the total points for each column—to give you three separate scores.

Interpreting Your Scores

If your highest score was in Column I, then your values and attitudes toward poverty probably most closely correspond with societal values and attitudes toward poverty in the first historical period before 1930. The societal attitudes toward the poor could best be described as moral and judgmental with the professional performing in a "Puritan" role.

The highest score in Column II would suggest that your values toward poverty most closely reflect the societal values and attitudes of the second historical period, 1930-1964. The poor were seen as culturally and educationally disadvantaged and an attempt was made to make the poor conform to white, middle-class values. The professional became an "expert" in governing the lives of the poor.

If your highest score was in Column III, your values toward poverty approximate the emerging societal perspective toward poverty from 1965-1972. The poor were seen as victims of our societal structure and the role of the professional shifted to being an "advocate" for the poor.

If two or more of your column scores were similar, then this cluster of scores suggests your values and attitudes toward poverty are a mixture of different historical perspectives.

Historical Periods

What were the major societal values and attitudes toward poverty in the three historical periods just described? For each historical period, we'll consider:

1. Basic assumptions about causes of poverty.
2. Societal values in resolving poverty.
3. Proposed solutions and programs to deal with poverty.
4. Role of the professional staff person.
5. Role of the low-income person.

The Puritan Period: Before 1930

Before 1930 and the "Great Depression," the majority of Americans believed that poverty was due to the innate inferiority of poor who were "born that way." The poor were seen as having character defects due to heredity. Low-income people were referred to as "less fortunate" and "scum of the earth." The dominant societal value in resolving poverty was to change the low-income person's moral character to fit Christian virtues.

Some proposed solutions and programs for poverty were workhouses, charities, orphanages, and poor homes. The roles of the professional were judge, comforter, and caretaker. Low-income people were seen as dregs, outcasts, charity recipients, and wards. This historical period could best be described as the Puritan period.

Those of you who had your highest score in Column I probably share the above values about poverty.

The Conformist Period: 1930-1964

This second historical period began as our country struggled out of the "Great Depression." The change in societal values toward poverty was signaled by President Roosevelt's "New Deal" policies and extended through the beginning of President Johnson's "War on Poverty." Poverty was no longer seen as an inherited quality. It was attributed

to individual incompetence resulting from negative environmental factors like diverse cultural backgrounds and family styles, and a lack of appropriate educational opportunities. Low-income people were called "culturally disadvantaged." The major societal value in resolving poverty was to correct the low-income person's disabilities and to increase his competence to conform to white, middle-class values.

Some proposed solutions and programs from poverty were individual counseling, specific education and training, and temporary welfare assistance. The role of the professional was an "expert" and the low-income person was a client or learner. This historical period is perhaps best described as the "conformist" period when our society tried to remake the poor and minority groups into white, middle-class Americans.

If your score was highest in Column II, your values toward poverty probably most closely correspond to the societal values and attitudes of this period.

*New
Humanitarianism:
1965-1972*

Selma, Alabama, and the Watts riots in Los Angeles marked the beginning of this third historical period. Urban riots and the emergence of welfare rights organizations indicated that the poor didn't like the way they were seen and treated by our society. There was a major shift from placing the responsibility for poverty on the individual to looking at the causes of poverty in society and in social and economic inequity and injustice. In this context, low-income people were seen as "victims" of our societal structure.

The major societal value in resolving poverty then was to change society, and the social and economic conditions that led to poverty. The poor and the minority groups demanded that our society respect and foster their unique cultural values and abilities. Proposed solutions and programs included cultural and ethnic programs, legal and judicial reform, and family income-maintenance programs. The role of the professional was that of an "advocate" for the poor, working "with" rather than "for" low-income people. The low-income person becomes an equal rather than subordinate in his relationship with the professional. This historical period could be described as the "new humanitarianism" where the poor were seen as people with unique cultural values and individual strengths.

If your score was highest in Column III, you most likely identify with the societal values and attitudes of this period.

Summary

Through the use of the value clarification process and the typology of societal values and attitudes toward poverty, you should now have a greater awareness of your values toward poverty. These values reflect historical periods in this country when our society viewed poverty from different value orientations.

Are the values and professional roles of one historical period necessarily “better” than the values and roles of the other historical periods in helping the poor? Is it preferable to be an “advocate” rather than an “expert” or “Puritan”? The research findings are inconclusive about whether one value orientation is more effective than another in resolving the problems of poverty. Therefore, we must look to each value position to assess whether we’re helping or hindering the low-income client.

From the viewpoint of a poor person, each of the three value positions probably has its good and bad points. The “Puritan” value orientation toward poverty is based on an interpretation of Christian beliefs and values in this country. A positive “Puritan” position toward the poor would emphasize Christian love and charity, while a negative position would dwell on moral condemnation and punishment for the poor.

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The “expert” value orientation toward poverty is based on the belief in the importance of education and training as a strategy for the resolution of personal and social problems. This value position has been adopted by the land-grant university and the Extension Service. A positive interpretation of the “expert” role in relationship to the poor would be an awareness of the individual educational and training needs of the poor and willingness of the professional to provide this help in a way that’s acceptable to the low-income person. A negative application of the “expert” role would emphasize the poor person’s subordinate role and require the client to accept the worker’s “white, middle-class” way of solving problems.

The “advocate” value position toward poverty focuses on changing society rather than the poor person and his family. The responsibility for poverty is seen in social inequity and injustice. The “advocate” is primarily concerned with changing institutions and social practices so that poverty is eliminated. A positive “advocate” recognizes that societal and institutional change is a slow process and would be aware and sensitive to the day-to-day needs of the poor. The negative “advocate” pushes for rapid social change regardless of its consequences for the poor people he’s trying to help and for society in general.

If there’s a culprit in this area of poverty, it’s the professional who really doesn’t care one way or the other what happens to the poor. He’s usually too busy with his work and tied up with his family and hobbies; he just doesn’t have time to get involved in working with the poor.

A current slogan states: “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” Which are you?

Footnotes

1. Nicholas Rescher, "What Is Valuing," *Forum* (Spring/Summer, 1972), p. 3.
2. Sidney Simon, Leland Howe, and Howard Kirschenbom, "Strategies for Value Clarification," *Forum* (Spring/Summer, 1972), pp. 8-11.
3. Louis E. Raths, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney B. Simon, *Values and Teaching* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill Publishing Company, 1966).
4. Sidney, Howe, and Kirschenbom, "Strategies for Value Clarification."
5. George A. Theodorson and Achilles G. Theodorson, *Modern Dictionary of Sociology* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969).
6. Benjamin Yep, *Societal Attitudes Toward Poverty* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University, October, 1972).
7. Nancy Meredith and Cynthia Needles, *Opinion and Comment, What's the Score* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University, October, 1972).

hunger

I was hungry
and you formed
a humanities club
and discussed my hunger.
Thank you.

I was imprisoned
and you crept off quietly
to your chapel
in the cellar
and prayed for my release.

I was naked
and in your mind
you debated the
morality of my
appearance.

I was sick
and you knelt and thanked God for
your health.

I was homeless
and you preached to me
of the spiritual shelter of the
love of God.

I was lonely
and you left me alone
to pray for me.

You seem so holy;
so close to God;
But I'm still very hungry,
and lonely, and cold.

—Bob Rowland

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