

# **Toward a Deeper Understanding of Issues Surrounding Poverty:**

*A Response to Critiques of A Framework for Understanding Poverty*

*Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D., and Philip DeVol*

People in poverty face challenges virtually unknown to those in the middle class or wealth—challenges from both obvious and hidden sources. *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* provides practical and respectful strategies for addressing the impact of poverty on people's lives.

Several critiques of the book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* have surfaced. They have centered around the following arguments:

1. The book does not address systems issues and therefore is a racist and classist model.
2. The book presents a deficit model and is oppressive because it identifies strategies for people to use to adapt to the school and work environments.
3. The book is based on inaccurate generalizations and is not legitimate research.
4. Race and class are inseparable, and one cannot be examined without the other.

**Critique #1.** The book does not address systems issues and therefore is a racist and classist model.

Research on poverty can be clustered into four major areas (see chart on next page).

- Behaviors of the Individual
- Human and Social Capital in the Community
- Exploitation
- Political/Economic Structures

All have validity. The debates and arguments arise over which clusters of research one cites and believes come closest to dealing most effectively with the issues.

CAUSES OF POVERTY			
Behaviors of the Individual	Human and Social Capital in the Community	Exploitation	Political/Economic Structures
<i>Definition:</i> Research on the choices, behaviors, characteristics, and habits of people in poverty.	<i>Definition:</i> Research on the resources available to individuals, communities, and businesses.	<i>Definition:</i> Research on how people in poverty are exploited because they are in poverty.	<i>Definition:</i> Research on the economic, political, and social policies at the international, national, state, and local levels.
<i>Sample topics:</i> Dependence on welfare Morality Crime Single parenthood Breakup of families Intergenerational character traits Work ethic Racism and discrimination Commitment to achievement Spending habits Addiction, mental illness, domestic violence Planning skills Orientation to the future Language experience	<i>Sample topics:</i> Intellectual capital Social capital Availability of jobs Availability of well-paying jobs Racism and discrimination Availability and quality of education Adequate skill sets Childcare for working families Decline in neighborhoods Decline in social morality Urbanization Suburbanization of manufacturing Middle-class flight City and regional planning	<i>Sample topics:</i> Drug trade Racism and discrimination Payday lenders Sub-prime lenders Lease/purchase outlets Gambling Temp work Sweatshops Sex trade Internet scams	<i>Sample topics:</i> Globalization Equity and growth Corporate influence on legislators Declining middle class De-industrialization Job loss Decline of unions Taxation patterns Salary ratio of CEO to line worker Immigration patterns Economic disparity Racism and discrimination

Much of the criticism has come from individuals who believe that the research areas regarding exploitation and political/economic structures are the most crucial. Because the book does not speak directly to exploitation (though to be uneducated *is* to be exploited) and systemic issues, the argument is made that the research in the book is flawed. To suggest that one cluster of research is more valid than another is myopic. All four contribute to poverty. It's not "either/or" in a complex world; it's "both/and" (to the fourth power!). The book, however, intentionally deals with just the first two areas of research. Are the other two areas important? Absolutely. Is racism alive and well? Certainly. From the outset (see 12 "key points" in the book's Introduction) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* is straightforward regarding its twofold goals: The book mostly addresses issues pertaining to the individual (enhancing resources, e.g.) and those relating to school improvement.

***The real question is how to change systems.*** Historically, the mechanisms for change have been revolution, legislation, financial supports for those in poverty, and education. Systems are only as moral as the individuals in them. The same could be said of governments and religious organizations, which also have systemic characteristics. Systems are the result of structures, patterns, purposes, and processes that organisms engage in to survive. Because

teachers play such an important role in the *educational* system, *Framework* focuses on how teachers can help students be successful.

In addition, on the social services and community side, aha! Process works with professionals from other disciplines and with community leaders on poverty and prosperity matters—touching on the workplace, healthcare facilities, churches and other religious organizations, law enforcement, correctional institutions, and social service agencies. Some communities are working to create sustainable communities. At aha! Process we offer the prism of economic class through which communities can start to make systemic changes. Underlying principles for this work include:

- Strategies must be developed for all causes of poverty (see preceding chart).
- All three classes must be at the table when decisions are being made by the community as a whole.
- The work of communities is to help families build resources.
- Communities need to collect data on quality-of-life indicators, then give progress reports on quality-of-life improvement.

In Springfield, Ohio, e.g., the community is confronting predatory lending and is developing community quality-of-life indicators as part of its effort to work at poverty issues.

In some communities the focus is on improving the outcomes of organizations that work with people in poverty. This requires that organizations examine and, if necessary, change their theories of change, program designs, policies, procedures, and frontline-staff skills. We know that most people in poverty already are excellent concrete problem solvers; the goal is for them to then parlay those skills into helping communities make systemic changes.

**Critique #2.** The book presents a deficit model and is oppressive because it identifies strategies for people to use to adapt to the school and work environments.

The second critique of *Framework* is that the work is a deficit model because it looks primarily at issues involving the individual. Part of the thinking in the research on exploitation and political/economic structures is that the individual is powerless and can do little against the system. But many individuals do make it out of poverty, largely due to relationships and education. And they make it out *in spite of* the system.

The argument continues that it is an oppressive model because it requires that people in poverty adapt to a middle-class environment or assimilate into it. Ignorance is a brutal form of oppression. Public schools are now the main mechanism by which most poor people are educated. Therefore (again) this is where the book focuses its attention.

The work is an additive model and states simply that, in order to survive, one must be able to negotiate the environment where he or she is. To survive in poverty one must focus most of one's energy and problem-solving skills on immediate concrete problems: cars that break down; housing that is crowded, unsafe, and too costly; low-paying jobs that come and go;

dangerous neighborhoods; trying to get healthcare. Living in the tyranny of the moment requires that one be non-verbal, sensory, and reactive. The environment of middle class is more stable, thereby relieving people of the worries of day-to-day survival; the middle class can attend to the future. In order to survive in school and work, one must be verbal, be able to live in the paper world (abstract representational systems), and be proactive. By law, individuals are required to operate in the school and work environments. To negotiate those environments requires the addition of skills. To negotiate or adapt to an environment does not mean one has assimilated into it or must assimilate.

**Critique #3.** The book is based on inaccurate generalizations and is not legitimate research.

First, *Framework* is an analytical approach to class—not descriptive or statistical. It looks at the patterns individuals use to survive their particular setting. Patterns are always generalizations. Patterns are how the brain sorts information. When people use informed patterns, their decision making is better. The critique is that the patterns are not valid. However, many individuals who have a great deal of real-life experience in the poverty environment say the patterns identified strike a deep and responsive chord of recognition within them. Indeed, tens of thousands of people are using this information. They are being helped. Relationships are being improved between teachers and students, between school folks and families—especially students and families from poverty. In fact, the work of aha! Process goes far beyond the *Framework* book. People from all walks of life come to training sessions and, yes, have “aha!” moments. People then take their learnings and insights back into their communities and are making a difference in those communities.

Researchers ask questions; practitioners want answers. Researchers want a clean research design that fits a theoretical frame of reference and a clean methodology; practitioners want information that addresses the ecology and reality of the classroom. Unfortunately, few research designs are available that address social complexities and ecologies. Classrooms are complex social systems in their own right, just as social systems are. So the work is sometimes questioned around the research methodology. A significant portion of the background for *Framework* was a 32-year case study of generational poverty in a Caucasian neighborhood in which narrative and anthropological approaches were used.

Much of the research in poverty is done by individuals who either analyze numbers or look at systemic issues; both approaches have the advantage of clean methodology that is less subject to criticism. Other research involves stories and anecdotes, narratives, and ethnographic or anthropological data. The latter elements were more heavily used in *Framework*, which (as stated above) is an analytical study.

It should be noted that research projects and dissertations that demonstrate the efficacy of the *Framework* concepts have been completed in recent years. In addition, studies are currently being conducted at more than a half-dozen other sites throughout the United States where aha! Process concepts are being implemented.

Critique #4. Race and class are inseparable, and one cannot be examined without the other.

One *can* be examined without the other. One can talk about gender separate from class. One can talk about geography or roles or religion separate from class. Class exists around the world with many different races. It can be examined separately, and we do so.

***In conclusion***, the main purpose of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* was and *is* to help teachers and administrators educate children and teenagers. An understanding of economic-class environments and the hidden rules that arise from those environments has helped many middle-class educators develop relationships of mutual respect with children and families from poverty. Those relationships constitute the heart of this work. Dr. James Comer of Yale University says, “No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship.” Most educators are middle class and often do not understand the living situations of many of their students, especially those from poverty. Mentoring relationships—along with other support systems, resources, and education itself—are vital for students and others from poverty who choose to break the cycle of poverty.

Is the school setting often problematic? Yes, it is. But, short of revolution or massive educational change, it is the one we must live with for the foreseeable future. While we work at improving teaching methodologies, the present educational environment is the one in which children and teenagers from poverty are living and working.

Indeed, every cluster of research has its limitations. And every organization—including aha! Process—has its flaws. So when critiques (whatever the motives) are offered, they serve to make us stronger and better able to work effectively. They challenge us to think hard about our work and where we are going. As the title of this piece states, such critiques can and do take us to a deeper understanding of the issues involved—indeed, of our mission, which is to positively impact the education and lives of individuals in poverty around the world.

Having said that—and acknowledging our individual and collective growth areas—we must keep moving. Research limitations and all. Flaws and all. Debate can be healthy, even inspiring, but if the discussions lead to inaction, we need to move on. We have work to do. At aha! Process we have worked in practical ways at these issues for 10 years. One can be distracted by criticism, or one can continue addressing issues with answers available at the time. We’ve come too far to do otherwise.

***Finally, we believe it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.***

---

Dr. Ruby K. Payne is founder and president of aha! Process, Inc., based in Highlands, Texas. She has written or co-authored a dozen books, including her seminal work, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (1996). She has personally spoken to and trained tens of thousands of people in solutions regarding poverty the past decade.

Philip E. DeVol of Marengo, Ohio, co-authored *Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities* (2001) and *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World: Building Your Resources for a Better Life* (2004). He is a consultant with aha! Process.