

BRIDGES **OUT OF POVERTY**

**STRATEGIES
FOR PROFESSIONALS
AND COMMUNITIES**

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I sit on the splintery front porch of my cheesy Oregonian love shack and watch these people struggle to escape their ugliness, only to be recaptured by it again and again. Once you go trash, you never come back. The current climate offers me nothing but self-denial, so I'm comfortable living in the past. It's like coming out of the closet—I've come out of the trailer. I embrace the shame.

– Jim Goad, *The Redneck Manifesto*

Makes me wanna holler.

– Marvin Gaye, Singer

Anyone could tell it, anyone who had a momma who went eighteen years without a new dress so that her sons could have school clothes, who picked cotton in other people's fields and ironed other people's clothes and cleaned the mess in other people's houses, so that her children didn't have to live on welfare alone, so that one of them could climb up her backbone and escape the poverty and hopelessness that ringed them, free and clean.

– Rick Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin'*

Introduction



Much has changed since this book was first published in 1999.

At that time the U.S. Welfare Reform Act of 1996 appeared to be producing impressive results. TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) caseloads had been cut in half, poverty and unemployment rates were at record lows, and there were substantial increases in the income levels of single-mother families. When the technology-driven economic boom ended in early 2000 it became apparent to poverty watchers, if not the media or the general public, that the gains were more a function of a strong economy than the welfare reform policy. When the attention of the nation shifted to terrorism and wars, people in poverty became invisible again, almost as invisible as they were in the 1950s.

Now, with a dubious debt of gratitude to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, poverty in the United States became visible again. Katrina blew away the generally held belief that welfare reform was a success and the U.S. economy was working for everyone. Even the popular media began raising questions about race and class.

But Katrina did more than make poverty visible again; it also has served as a metaphor for poverty itself. The storm threw communities into chaos, forcing community organizations, as well as individuals, into survival mode. Basic community resources such as housing, health care, education, police, transportation, and utilities were wiped out or severely disrupted. Community structures and budgets were overwhelmed. Similar language can be used to describe the impact of poverty on families. Poverty itself throws families into chaos, forcing them into survival mode. Basic resources are wiped out or severely disrupted. Family structures and budgets are inadequate and overwhelmed. Furthermore, the Katrina metaphor can be used to describe some

cities and rural communities. The difference between a natural disaster and the poverty disaster is this: For people and communities in poverty, the crisis tends to creep along in obscurity rather than front and center, day after day, in the news.

So what were the results of welfare reform, and what has happened since 2000 when the economic boom ended? Even though the minimum wage was raised four times during the 1990s, the arithmetic of life was still not working for people at the bottom of the ladder. In 1999 about 42% of persons considered poor *worked* and were still living in poverty. Poverty rates are up. From 2000 to 2005 the number of people in poverty in the United States rose 17%. In 2004 an additional 1.1 million people fell into poverty; it was the fourth year in a row that poverty numbers had grown. In 2004 there were 37 million people in poverty. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in December 2004 that 25% of all the jobs in the U.S. economy did not pay enough to lift a family above the poverty line. In some states 30% of all jobs did not pay a living wage. This country has become a nation where people can work full time and still be in poverty. Amy Glasmeier, in *An Atlas of Poverty in America*, sums up the current situation: “. . . [T]he experiment of the 1990s . . . has resulted in a growth in income poverty [as opposed to net-worth poverty] that leaves the nation’s most vulnerable members unprotected from economic uncertainty and insecurity.”

The Katrina metaphor can be used to illustrate how people respond to disasters and to poverty. To survive Katrina, people used reactive and sensory skills to solve immediate and concrete problems. There’s nothing abstract about keeping your head above water or finding food or shelter. Solving problems minute-by-minute, day-by-day with limited resources is a valuable survival skill that people in poverty possess. In a crisis of a relatively short duration—such as hurricanes, tsunamis, and earthquakes—concrete, reactive problem solving is eventually replaced by abstract, proactive strategies that are based on future ramifications. This is the experience of many middle-class and wealthy people caught in the upheaval and chaos of natural disasters. For folks in poverty, on the other hand, natural disasters create a double

whammy. First, there is the disaster itself, after which the unrelenting and unending crisis, as experienced in poverty, forces people into the tyranny of the moment. This is where the future is lost, where people get stuck solving the same problems over and over, and where proactive planning is difficult to do.

Individuals in poverty aren't alone in this trap; many communities across the U.S. are so busy responding to crises that they too are using reactive strategies to survive. The same can be said of nations where poverty rates are extremely high.

People at the very bottom of the economic ladder aren't the only ones in trouble. For the first time in U.S. history, the middle class is shrinking. The median household income has been flat for five straight years, and only the top 5% of households experienced real income gains in 2004. The structures that created the middle class—well-paying jobs, the 40-hour workweek, assistance with college loans and home mortgages, and employer-provided health care and pensions—are falling away.

The economic insecurity of low-wage workers and the middle class threatens the viability of our communities. When members of the middle class flee the cities, taking the tax base and spending power with them . . . when Main Street empties of viable businesses and refills with pawn shops, used clothing stores, social service storefronts, and payday lenders . . . when people can't afford to stay in the community to raise their children because of the lack of well-paying jobs . . . and when the free and reduced-price lunch rate at the schools hits 50%, our communities are becoming unsustainable.

Our work is to improve the lives of people in poverty and, by extension, to help make sustainable communities in which everyone can do well. In this edition of *Bridges Out of Poverty* you will find an essay titled "The Additive Model: the aha! Process Approach to Developing Sustainable Communities." It expands on the ideas introduced here and lays out the philosophy behind our work. In it you will read about:

- Using the knowledge of people in poverty to build an accurate mental model of poverty.

- Studying poverty research in order to develop a continuum of strategies for building prosperous and healthy communities.
- Theories of change.
- The additive model and how it applies to aha! Process constructs.
- Sharing aha! Process constructs with people in poverty.
- Creating sustainable communities.

Bridges Out of Poverty is a starting point where one can develop accurate mental models of poverty, middle class, and wealth. It is a new lens through which readers can view themselves, their clients, and the community. Readers can begin to work on front-line staff skills and to develop new program designs in order to improve relationships and outcomes. The purpose is to give community leaders from all disciplines a start on that path. Hundreds of thousands of professionals in education, social services, health care, law enforcement, corrections, business, and government already have been exposed to and inspired by Dr. Ruby K. Payne's understanding of economic diversity. Many towns, cities, and counties—and some states—have begun making changes that come from her ideas, techniques, and approaches to change.

We hope this book will contribute to the good work you are doing.

SOME KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

1. *Poverty is relative.* If everyone around you has similar circumstances, the notion of poverty and wealth is vague. Poverty or wealth exists only in relationship to known quantities or expectations.
2. *Poverty occurs in all races and in all countries.* The notion of middle class as a large segment of society is a phenomenon of the 20th and 21st centuries. The percentage of the population that is poor is subject to definition and circumstance.

INTRODUCTION

3. *Economic class is a continuous line, not a clear-cut distinction.*
In 2004, the poverty line in the United States was considered \$18,850 for a family of four. According to census data from 2003, the median household income was \$43,318, and 15% of U.S. households earned more than \$100,000 per year. Individuals are stationed all along the continuum of income; they sometimes move on that continuum as well.
4. *Generational poverty and situational poverty are different.* Generational poverty is defined as being in poverty for two generations or longer. Situational poverty is a shorter time and is caused by circumstance (i.e., death, illness, divorce, etc.).
5. *This work is based on patterns. All patterns have exceptions.*
6. *An individual brings with him/her the hidden rules of the class in which he/she was raised.* Even though the income of the individual may rise significantly, many of the patterns of thought, social interaction, cognitive strategies, etc., remain with the individual.
7. *Schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of middle class.* These norms and hidden rules are not directly taught in schools or in businesses.
8. *For our clients to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school, at work, and in the community.*
9. *We can neither excuse persons from poverty nor scold them for not knowing; as professionals we must teach them and provide support, insistence, and expectations.*

10. *In order to move from poverty to middle class or middle class to wealth, an individual must give up relationships for achievement (at least for some period of time).*
11. *We cannot blame the victims of poverty for being in poverty.* Economic systems are far beyond the reach of most people to control. Factories close, small farms fold, racism persists, and the economy fails to provide enough well-paying jobs. What we offer is a way for individuals to do better.
12. *We cannot continue to support stereotypes and prejudices about the poor.* There are many forms of welfare, but the poor are the only ones who are labeled “undeserving.” Others who receive welfare are students with government fellowships, homeowners with federal-tax and mortgage-interest deductions, corporations with government subsidies, and military bases that are kept open to prevent job losses.

When children grow up together in poverty, a bond is formed that is stronger than most anything. It's this same bond that causes so much pain. Adolph and Arnold reminded each other of their childhood, how they hid crackers in their shared bedroom so they would have something to eat.

– Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*

It still broke Rico's heart to see poor families out for walks, the kids (thanks to television with its commercial overloads) with the "gimme" expressions on their faces. Or the mothers who had no business having so many kids dragging their children along, rage in their faces and the kind of anger that, to Rico's way of thinking, amounted to a craving to both take and destroy at the same time, like the kids he knew who started out breaking windows, gashing car finishes with broken beer bottles and knives, graduating to armed robbery and sometimes murder. . . .

– Oscar Hijuelos, *Empress of the Splendid Season*

The only thing poverty does is grind down your nerve endings to a point that you can work harder and stoop lower than most people are willing to. It chips away a person's dreams to the point that the hopelessness shows through, and the dreamer accepts that hard work and borrowed houses are all this life will ever be. While my mother will stare you in the eye and say she never thought of herself as poor, do not believe for one second that she did not see the rest of the world, the better world, spinning around her, out of reach.

– Rick Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin'*

Sometimes, despite all her boundless "dignity"—that wondrous pride-saving province of the poor and working class—she got up in the morning and vomited, not from morning sickness or from something she'd eaten, but out of a kind of despair, the "bad nerves" that come from getting down on one's knees to wipe clean a stranger's toilet; from swallowing one's pride, out of necessity.

– Oscar Hijuelos, *Empress of the Splendid Season*

Definitions and Resources

To better understand people from poverty, the definition of poverty will be the “extent to which an individual does without resources.” The resources are the following:

FINANCIAL: Having the money to purchase goods and services.

EMOTIONAL: Being able to choose and control emotional responses, particularly to negative situations, without engaging in self-destructive behavior. This is an internal resource and shows itself through stamina, perseverance, and choices.

MENTAL: Having the mental abilities and acquired skills (reading, writing, computing) to deal with daily life.

SPIRITUAL: Believing in divine purpose and guidance.

PHYSICAL: Having physical health and mobility.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS: Having friends, family, and backup resources available to access in times of need. These are external resources.

RELATIONSHIPS/ROLE MODELS: Having frequent access to adult(s) who are appropriate, who are *nurturing* to the child, and who do not engage in self-destructive behavior.

KNOWLEDGE OF HIDDEN RULES: Knowing the unspoken cues and habits of a group.

COPING STRATEGIES: Being able to engage in procedural self-talk and the mindsets that allow issues to be moved from the concrete to the abstract. It is the ability to translate from the personal to the issue.

Typically, poverty is thought of in terms of financial resources only. However the reality is that *financial resources*, while extremely important, do not explain the differences in the success with which some individuals leave poverty nor the reasons that many stay in poverty. The ability to leave poverty is more dependent upon other resources than it is upon financial resources. Each of these resources plays a vital role in the success of an individual.

Emotional resources provide the stamina to withstand difficult and uncomfortable emotional situations and feelings. Emotional resources are the most important of all resources because, when present, they allow the individual not to return to old habit patterns. In order to move from poverty to middle class or middle class to wealth, an individual must suspend his/her “emotional memory bank” because the situations and hidden rules are so unlike what he/she has experienced previously. Therefore, a certain level of persistence and an ability to stay with the situation until it can be learned (and therefore feel comfortable) are necessary. This persistence (i.e., staying with the situation) is proof that emotional resources are present. Emotional resources come, at least in part, from role models.

Mental resources are simply being able to process information and use it in daily living. If an individual can read, write, and compute, he/she has a decided advantage. That person can access information from many different free sources, as well as be somewhat self-sufficient at the least.

Spiritual resources are the belief that help can be obtained from a higher power, that there is a purpose for living, and that worth and love are gifts from God. This is a powerful resource because the individual does not see him/herself as hopeless and useless, but rather as capable and having worth and value.

Physical resources are having a body that works, that is capable and mobile. Such an individual can be self-sufficient.

Support systems are resources. To whom does one go when help is needed? Those individuals available and who will help are resources. When the child is sick and you have to be at work—who takes care of the child? Where do you go when money is short and the baby needs medicine?

Support systems are not just about meeting financial or emotional needs. They are about knowledge bases as well. How do you get into college? Who sits and listens when you get rejected? Who helps you negotiate the mountains of paper? Who assists you with your algebra homework when you don't know how to do it? Those people are all support systems. They may also be role models.

Relationships/role models are resources. All individuals have role models. The question is the extent to which the role model is nurturing or appropriate. Can the role model parent? Work successfully? Provide a gender role for the individual? It is largely from role models that the person learns how to live life emotionally.

Knowledge of hidden rules is crucial to whatever class in which the individual wishes to live. Hidden rules exist in poverty, in middle class, and in wealth, as well as in ethnic groups and other units of people. Hidden rules are about the unspoken understandings that cue the members of the group that this individual does or does not fit. For example, 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. And in all classes there are hidden rules about food, dress, decorum, etc. Generally, in order to successfully move from one class to the next, it is important to have a spouse or mentor from the class to which you wish to move to model and teach you the hidden rules.

Coping strategies are the mindsets, approaches and techniques (including procedural self-talk) that allow issues to be moved from the concrete to the abstract. It is the ability to translate from the personal to the issue.

SCENARIO #1: SALLY AND HER SUPERVISOR

Background

Sally recently graduated with an LPN from a community college 20 miles from her home. Her education was paid for by the Home Health Aides Program at the local Department of Human Services. Because of her complex home life it took Sally twice as long as usual to get through the course. The head of the Nursing Department took a special interest in Sally and supported her determination to make it. Sally made friends with others in the nursing program, but none of them lives in her county. She was hired at the rural community hospital three months ago. While going through school she lived with her mother who looked after her children. Since getting a job she has moved in with her boyfriend who insulted Sally's mother, and now Sally and her mother aren't talking. Sally depends on her boyfriend to provide her with rides. He works construction and is laid off in the winter. He has agreed to look after her three children. Sally and her boyfriend fight often over his drinking, and she suspects that he is fooling around with another woman. Sally has gotten into trouble with her supervisor for taking and making a lot of personal phone calls to resolve family crises that occur almost on a daily basis. In the last three months she has used all of her sick days and has been late several times.

Current Situation

You've just gotten a call from your kids. Your boyfriend was meant to pick them up after your son's basketball practice, but he didn't show up. The two girls went to the gym to wait like you told them. You've talked to the coach but he can't take them home today like he has done in the past. The other two LPNs on the unit have agreed to cover for you, but your supervisor has said you can't leave. She says there are three hours left on your shift, and you have been missing too much work over family problems. You can't understand what the problem is if the others are willing to cover for you. You thought that when you got a degree you would be treated with more respect,

not like at the factory and fast-food places where you’ve worked for short periods of time in the past.

What resources does Sally have? Mark 1 if resources are very low, 3 if there are some but not enough resources, and 5 if there are enough resources to function in a middle-class environment. Use a question mark if there isn’t enough information to make a determination.

RESOURCES — SCENARIO #1	VERY LOW → ENOUGH					?
	1	2	3	4	5	
Financial						
Emotional						
Mental						
Spiritual						
Physical						
Support systems						
Knowledge of middle-class hidden rules						
Role models						

SCENARIO #2: BERTHA

Background

Bertha is a 23-year-old Caucasian woman with three children. She just got off probation for beating up a woman. Until ninth grade she did well in school, but in high school others teased her about her name, her looks, and her clothes. Her brother taught her how to fight to get respect and to stop the teasing. It worked, but she was angry a lot, and her grades kept dropping. Bertha dated older men and would take them home with her. Her parents were in their 70s and unable to control her. Several of the older boyfriends lived with her and her parents. The father of her first child took off before the baby was born.

Bertha has been on and off welfare since her first child was born. She has been to mental-health counseling twice—once as part of her probation and