

POOR, POVERTY, GOVERNMENT DEPENDENCY AND PROSPERITY
A CIRCUMSTANCE, A CHOICE, A GOVERNMENT DESIGN, A MENTALITY OR
A MINDSET

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Abstract

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This paper was developed to report any scientific or social evidence that would support the fact that, once poverty has been introduced to a family, the mentality of governmental support/dependency is passed on from generation to generation, as if it is an inherited right. The history and the intent of governmental assistance will be explored, and the entitlement program that it has turned into today will be explained. The goal is to introduce this program to those that have not had the opportunity to unveil their personal opinions of food stamp recipients, and also to enlighten those who have been trapped by the generational low class thinking that inhibits one from escaping this inheritance waiting to keep them suppressed.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Poor people often remain poor throughout their lifetime. The legacy of poor and poverty is inherited from generation to generation as if it were a birthright (Garzel, 2007). The term poor is not only defined by one's income level or financial status, but can also be used to describe the situation or circumstances that one experiences. Such areas are cognitive ability/emotions, social skills/relationships, intimacy/closeness, physical ability, spiritual connection, and education. A "poor" mindset in these areas will lead to a lifetime of poverty if the individual is unwilling or unable to change his or her views on poverty and change the mindset of being poor in all areas mentioned. It is well known that living in poverty can have profound consequences for many aspects of life (Seccombe, 2000).

Poverty has existed and has been documented for centuries. During "The Great Depression" in the 1930's the government designed a program that was a sincere attempt to alleviate hunger experienced by American families. This program was designed to help both poor people and farmers. Farmers were producing more food than the nation could consume or export, and there was a large group of people who were going to bed hungry. People could literally buy stamps that could be used to buy food. A family could buy orange stamps on a one-to-one basis and the government would give the family blue stamps on a one-to-one basis – that is, \$10 from the family would buy \$10 worth of orange stamps and \$5 worth of blue stamps. Orange stamps could be used to buy any food; blue stamps could be used to buy surplus food. The program fed 20

million people at one time or another in nearly half of the total counties in the nation. This program was eliminated in 1943 as “The Great Depression” came to an end (Garzel, 2007).

In 1961, the program was redeveloped, reintroduced and implemented as a new way to help poor people feed their families and farmers acquire the income necessary to continue the production of food and afford them the ability to financially support their families (Garzel, 2007). The redeveloped program was and is commonly referred to as welfare. Welfare benefits are the government’s response to poverty. When the program was implemented in the 1960s it was introduced as “The Food Stamp Program.”

The inception of this program caused the poor/poverty mentality to saturate the United States. The poor/poverty mentality led to popular conceptions of welfare recipients that attribute the responsibility of poverty to irresponsible decisions and lack of effort on the part of recipients. Thus, there is an acceptance that poverty is self-made (Luna, 2009). This perspective holds that the norms and values of the poor are dysfunctional embedded cultural traits.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is, is poverty or being poor a result of choices, circumstances, generational lack of motivation within oneself, or a depressive or oppressive mindset? Has the government allowed dependency programs to be viewed as a part of a normal lifestyle and therefore acceptable behavior? Is prosperity a mentality or a mindset that allows for one to become and remain self-sufficient through self-discipline and other motivating choices?

Definition of Terms

Mindset: cognitive control, the ability to establish/overcome the automatic response in a favor of less salient or novel answer.

Poor: a family of a certain size income for a year is below the amount deemed necessary to support the family.

Poverty: a chronic pressing need for money and materials. Deficiency in amount. Unproductiveness. The state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions.

Culture of poverty: a set of beliefs that are passed from generation to generation.

Prosperity: a successful, flourishing, or thriving condition, especially in financial respects; good fortune.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

Poor in the United States: United States Bureau of Census

Poverty in its most general sense is a lack of necessities. Basic food, shelter, medical care and safety are generally thought to be necessary based on shared values of human dignity (Bradshaw, 2007). An individual is determined to be in poverty if the household income for the family size for the survey year is below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) as defined by Poverty Income Guidelines (Santhiveeran & Jimenez, 2004). According to the United States Bureau of the Census (2005), a family is considered poor if its income for a particular year is below the amount deemed necessary to support a family of a certain size. For example \$15,219 was the poverty threshold for a single parent with two children in 2004 (Burney & Beilke, 2008). However in 2011, the income was slightly higher for the single parent with two children (\$15,441.70). A family of four is considered to live in poverty if its annual income is less than \$22,050. No racial or ethnic group is immune from poverty, nor do they experience poverty in a universal way.

Poverty Income Guidelines (P.I.G) are updated yearly by the U.S Department of Health and Human Service (Santhiveeran & Jimenez, 2004). The government uses these guidelines to establish and maintain government programs to assist those in poverty to potentially provide basic food, shelter and medical care and safety for their families. Programs include but are not limited to:

- Low income housing
- Low income health care
- Federal assistance with energy payments
- Local government assistance with energy payments
- Assistance with educational opportunities

The government assistance programs are set in place to assist impoverished families or individuals; however it has become a way of life for millions of Americans. The government does not maintain any timelines for assistance programs, therefore allowing Americans to continue to seek additional government programs without seeking self-sufficiency.

Choosing Poverty and Government Dependency over Self-Sufficiency

In 1996, the U.S Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which sought to change the culture of welfare from a system of dependency to one of personal responsibility and economic self-sufficiency through workplace participation. The State of Wisconsin sought to study this by examining the views of case managers and area employers of Wisconsin. This research sought to identify the problems and barriers to self-sufficiency among former welfare recipients and other low-income workers and evaluate the effectiveness of services and programs available to address these barriers. The studies found situational barriers, education and learning experience barriers, personal issues and disabilities to impede the development of low-income workers.

Wisconsin was one of the first states to undertake the challenge, and in 1998, it completed its transition from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to Wisconsin Works (W2), the state's version of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). As with the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA), W2 required all who were employable to obtain immediate employment. As a result of these changes in the welfare policy and positive labor market conditions during the early period of the welfare reform era, welfare caseloads substantially decreased. During the period of March 1994 to September 1998, Wisconsin's cash assistance decreased by 89%, the largest decrease marked in the nation. To that end, Wisconsin has been hailed as the most successful reform state in the nation.

The decrease in Food Stamps during the late 1990's has been attributed to the strong, robust economy during that era. However, Food Stamp participation increased significantly between 2000 and 2009 (Shore & Shore, 2009). In March of 2009, the program participation reached its highest level on record, nearly 33.2 million participants.

Poverty is also created by the transmission over generations of a set of beliefs, values and skills that are socially generated but not individually held (Bradshaw, 2007). Individuals are not necessarily to blame because they are victims of their dysfunctional subcultures or cultures. Culture is socially generated and perpetuated, reflecting the interaction of individual and community. The social interaction makes "culture of poverty" theory different from "individual" theories that link poverty explicitly to individual abilities and

motivations. Technically, the culture of poverty is a subculture of poor people in ghettos, poor regions, or social contexts in which residents develop a shared set of beliefs, values, and norms for behaviors that are separate from but embedded in the culture of the main society (Bradshaw, 2007). Once the culture of poverty has come into existence it tends to perpetuate itself. By the time slum children are six to seven years of age they have usually absorbed the basic attitudes and values of their subculture. Thereafter they are psychologically unready to take full advantage of changing conditions or improving opportunities that may develop in their lifetime.

The culture of poverty theory explains how government anti-poverty programs reward people who manipulate the policy in the welfare program to continue receiving government assistance. The underlying argument of conservatives is that government welfare perpetuated poverty by permitting a cycle of “welfare dependency” in which poor families developed and passed on to others the skills needed to work the system rather than obtaining the skills needed to gain employment and seek self-sufficiency (Luna, 2009). However, other variables also contribute to the culture of poverty.

Poverty, Cognitive Development and Economics

The general relation between poverty and cognitive development was established as early as 1967. By the age of 2 years, children from low-SES backgrounds begin to score lower on standardized tests of intelligence than do higher-SES children. Recent studies show that children from economically disadvantaged families exhibit lower levels of cognitive functioning, academic

achievement, and social development than children from more advantaged families (Petterson & Burke-Albers, 2001). Children in families with income less than .5 % of the poverty line had IQ scores six to 13% lower than children with incomes 1.5 to 2.0 times the poverty line. Children in families with incomes closer to, but still below the poverty line also fared worse than children in the higher income group; these differences are smaller, but usually statistically significant. Thus, children from impoverished families are disadvantaged cognitively as well as financially. Children in poor families may also experience less capable parenting than their peers.

Economically disadvantaged mothers are likely to experience more psychological distress than their advantaged counterparts. Community studies indicate that poor women, especially those with young children, are more likely to experience psychological problems compared with other women. Depression is associated with a host of adverse outcomes in infancy such as language and cognitive problems, insecure attachment, social interactive difficulties, and behavior problems. Infants of depressed mothers have difficulties engaging in social or object interactions as early as 2 months of age (Petterson & Burke-Albers, 2001). Thus, children in poor families may experience emotional neglect and may also experience less capable parenting than their peers.

Economically disadvantaged individuals are likely to experience social isolation as well. Social isolation refers to “a state in which the individual or group expresses a need or desire for contact with others but is unable to make contact” (Stewart, Makwarimba, Reutter, Veenstra, Raphael, & Love, 2009, p.

174). Inadequate incomes can prevent individuals from participating in various social activities in their communities or restrict people's ability to create and maintain social support, leading to experiences of being devalued and unneeded or of feeling that one is incongruent with other people, groups, or environments.

Assuming that adults living in poverty would prefer to be employed, individuals' lack of jobs and income can lead to deteriorating self-confidence, weak motivation, and depression. The psychological problems of individuals are reinforced by association with other individuals in similar circumstances. Associating with such individuals can also lead to a culture of despair or perhaps a culture of poverty under some circumstances. In rural communities this culture of despair affects individuals as well, generating a sense of hopelessness and fatalism (Bradshaw, 2007).

Poverty Barriers and Challenges

Employers have identified insurmountable barriers that are present with low-income workers that are not readily identified with other employees. Employers have noted that the lower-income workers are faced with more situational problems, educational and learning problems, personal issues and disabilities that interfere with successfully sustaining employment (Taylor & Smith-Barusch, 2004). The indicated barriers can cause recipients of welfare to remain dependent on the government subsidy program, therefore not achieving self-sufficiency in the future.

When identifying educational and learning experience barriers employers believe low-income workers experience employment-related problems as a result of the absence of education and training, interpersonal skills and work experience required for effective performance in the work place. The most serious educational problems are perceived to be those associated with basic education and literacy skills (Alfred & Martin, 2007). Weak written and verbal English skills and reading and mathematics skills were all rated in the range of 2.54 to 3.08 on a 5 point scale, indicating low-income workers are a little more likely to experience the identified problem areas than other workers. Poor interpersonal skills, poor work habits, and problems with either not attending training or failing to apply training knowledge were rated in the range of 1.65 to 2.36 on a 5 point scale, indicating that low-income workers were likely to display such problems.

Most poor people do not obtain a quality education, and education directly affects one's ability to obtain employment (Taylor & Smith-Barusch, 2004). Employers are hesitant to employ individuals who do not have a high school diploma, G.E.D, or high school equivalency.

Few children from high-poverty schools get the education needed in their early years that would prepare them for the advanced curriculum they will need for college preparation (Burney & Beilke, 2008). Future achievement of a child has been directly associated with the level of achievement demonstrated by their parent without regard to race or income levels. Parental education expectations for a child, along with emotional stability and a stimulating home

environment, could allow a child to perform well despite limited financial and educational resources. A lack of education is apt to result in low-wage employment and short employment durations (Taylor & Smith Barusch, 2004).

Low-income workers experience more personal issues than higher-income workers. They are found to be absent from work more often than other workers. Illness, domestic abuse, criminal misbehavior and substance abuse are other noted personal barriers present to low-income workers. Studies indicate that adult females living in poverty have on average at least one domestic violence episode in their adult life. Some incidents have resulted in police involvement. Domestic violence may also results in female victims being harassed at work by the assaulter. In some cases the abuse goes unreported and the victim may stay home from work, therefore jeopardizing her employment (Taylor & Smith-Barusch, 2004). Absenteeism, tardiness and problems with illness remain the most serious personal barriers hindering secure employment and self-sufficiency.

When identifying the same class of workers and noting situational barriers employers believe low-income workers experience social and structural problems that affect their employment development and career advancement. Several situational problems have been identified. Problems with child care, problems with transportation, housing instability and caring for one or more persons with disabilities can cause a low-income worker to miss or arrive to work late (Alfred & Martin, 2007). Of all the situational barriers employers have identified, problems with child care and transportation seem to be the

most serious. Situational barriers represent structural and contextual barriers that impede the workplace participation efforts of former welfare recipients.

Substance abuse also has been identified as a barrier for those living in poverty. Substance abuse often causes persons to lose motivation and responsibility, preventing them from holding a job or performing the duties the job entails (Dannelly, 2004). Studies suggest that approximately one in five long-term welfare recipients currently abuses drugs and or alcohol. Substance abuse is often associated with depression, poverty and welfare.

Depression has also been identified as a barrier to employment. Depression among poor mothers is of concern because maternal depression is associated with a host of adverse outcome in infancy (Peterson & Burke-Albers, 2001). The adverse outcomes include language and cognitive problems in infants, as well as social interactive difficulties and behavioral problems, compared with children of non depressed low-income women. Thus, poor children do not learn social skills that are important in securing and maintaining employment. Depressed women's maternal behavior is variously characterized as less responsive, more helpless, hostile, critical, alternatively disengaged or intrusive, disorganized and less active, avoidant of confrontation and generally less competent than that of other mothers (Peterson & Burke-Albers, 2001). This suggests that children of depressed women may exhibit the same characteristics as parents. These characteristics prevent adult individuals from seeking higher education, gainful employment, and social acceptance, which leads to low-income, poverty and government dependency. The

characteristics in children are indicated in behavioral problems, emotional disconnection and lack of social interactions with peers.

SUMMARY

Poverty is a lack of basic necessities. Food, shelter, and medical care are considered necessities which are essential for human dignity. The federal government has guidelines set in place to determine if an individual or family meets the criteria of poverty. The government considers family size and the total income level for that particular year and if the income falls below the amount deemed necessary to support the family or the individual, then it is determined that the family lives in poverty.

Government programs that can be utilized by impoverished families or individuals to maintain a better quality of life are: Low income housing, low income health care, food supplement benefits, child care assistance, local assistance with energy payments and assistance with educational opportunities. These programs have no set timelines.

Poverty is a recognized culture of its own. The culture of poverty is a set of beliefs, values, and skills that are transmitted from one generation to the next. Not all individuals who experience poverty in their lifetime remain impoverished. Most children by the age six or seven develop a poverty mentality, but not all impoverished children submit to this mentality.

There are studies showing that children from economically disadvantaged families exhibit lower levels of cognitive functioning, academic achievement and social development than their more affluent peers. By the age of two the

differences are able to be documented. Scores are lower on standardized tests of intelligence. Impoverished mothers of young children are more likely to experience psychological problems than other mothers. The depression experienced by some impoverished mothers has been noted to cause adverse outcomes in their infant children, adverse outcomes such as cognitive delays, insecurity issues, lack of social skills, and behavioral problems. The adverse outcomes have been documented in infants of depressed impoverished moms as early two months of age.

Social isolation is an experience of many impoverished individuals. The individual is aware of the need for contact with others but is unable to make contact. Limitations prevent individuals from participation in many community and social activities. This leads to the inability to create and maintain social support. Being unable to make social connections can lead the person to feel of inadequate, devalued and unneeded. Social isolation leads to a lack of self-confidence, lack of motivation and depression, as well as to reduced income.

Limited education and learning barriers prevent individuals from gainful employment, which results in lower incomes. Inadequate basic education and lack of literacy skills, accompanied by weak written and verbal English skills are barriers identified by employers. Also noted as employment barriers to those in impoverished situations are low reading and mathematics abilities. Education affects an individual's ability to be hired. Most poor people do not obtain a quality education. Although the government has included educational

opportunities in government funded programs, many individuals lack the motivation to take advantage of such programs, or the desire to explore education options. This lack of motivation means the impoverished may not receive their high school diploma, G.E.D, or high school equivalency.

There are even more identified barriers that prevent impoverished individuals from gaining and maintaining employment. Illness, domestic abuse, criminal misbehaviors and substance abuse are barriers that cause individuals to be absent from work. Child care, transportation, and housing instability are also reasons for absenteeism, which can result in loss of employment and therefore loss of self-sufficiency. The individual continues in impoverished conditions and remains government dependent.

Welfare rolls declined from 1996 to 2000, after the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA). Unfortunately, PRWOA did not ensure job placement or job security. Many recipients found themselves requesting the assistance of the government within a five year period from leaving governmental programs (Santhiveeran & Jimenez, 2004). Individuals found that when exiting government dependency programs there were various factors that influenced success. Such factors included: family size, marital status and the duration that one had previously live in impoverished conditions. The chances of attaining self-sufficiency are more than two times greater for married welfare recipients compared to those who are not married. The probability of self-sufficiency is two times greater for the individuals who have been living out of impoverished conditions longer prior to attempting self-

sufficiency. Past employment was significant in attaining self-sufficiency, as well. Those who had employment prior to PRWOA were five times more likely to achieve total self-sufficiency.

Food Stamp participation increased significantly between 2000 and 2009. In March 2009, the program participation reached its highest level on record, nearly 33.2 million participants (Shore & Shore, 2009). The U.S. Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A.) research indicates that, in 2007, 11% of American households experienced some degree of food insecurity. That is, they lacked reliable and socially acceptable ways to get food that is nutritionally adequate for a healthy and active life. Nearly 40% of the people in these households were children.

Chapter Three: Conclusion and recommendations

With respect to all information considered here, poverty and government dependency is an individual and social circumstance. The poor will always be among us. There will be individuals who believe it is their destiny to remain poor and impoverished, uneducated and government-dependent. Individuals who do not face the unmotivated experience face other circumstances. They have to deal with mental and physical health problems, domestic violence, or drug and alcohol problems. They experience behavioral problems with their children and many parents are referred to child protection services for allegations of child abuse or child neglect.

The research is not conclusive, but surely a firm case can be made that the United States government designed a program to help Americans that has grown into a dependency system for some uneducated, impoverished and unmotivated individuals. Due to the dependency upon entitlement programs some individuals fail to seek basic education and self-sufficiency and in fact maintain poor mindsets and poor quality of life.

Although the government has implemented many programs to encourage self-sufficiency, the programs have become more of a “crutch” than a true social success. With there being no timelines in place many individuals adapt to the lifestyle and find comfort in knowing government security. Although the state of Wisconsin through the W2 program requires individuals to complete

job searches, individuals have found “holes” in the system and use those “holes” to manipulate policies. Such recipients take advantage of the W2 payment and full food stamp benefits without seeking true sustainable employment.

While the government provides food subsidy programs, low income housing, health care and other benefits, an individual may find self-sufficiency to be too much work. To gain employment and then become totally responsible for living expenses, housing, transportation and food can be quite overwhelming. Self-sufficiency is a responsibility that many individuals prefer not to undertake.

The American design of obtaining a high school education, possibly even a college degree, and then becoming a candidate for gainful employment is diminished in a community when an individual faces circumstances that prevent taking the first step. Without encouragement and support individuals find it discouraging to complete a basic education. Failure to complete education imposes multiple barriers that result in government dependency. It then becomes an uphill battle that most impoverished individuals choose not to fight. They begin to enjoy the relative comfort of the government provided lifestyle.

There is evidence that some individuals fall into a pattern of poverty but will not accept it as a life choice. These individuals make a conscious decision not to accept what is expected of those born and raised in impoverished circumstances. These individuals take advantage of the government programs that have been implemented and achieve success. They accept the help as a

life changer, refusing to remain dependent on government entitlement programs. They may take advantage of low-income housing and then budget the money received to find affordable housing once they have attained self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency is their ultimate goal and their driving force. These individuals seek and obtain their high school equivalency or G.E.D. They move further to complete a college degree or learn a skilled trade. Once they have secured gainful employment they notify the government that they are no longer in need of government dependent services and chose to be self-sufficient.

The government designed a program to help Americans. Americans took advantage of the program. Americans began to inform the government of other social and economic needs and revealed that they need more government help. The government responded by designing and implementing more social dependency programs. As more Americans began to hear of the government designed programs, more began to take advantage. Without timelines implemented, individual dependency became family dependency, which became generations of dependency. The government did not intend for this to be a way of life for Americans, but the need became so great that the government became more and more responsible.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that the government review the entitlement and dependency programs. After reviewing the intention of the programs, policy changes should be implemented. These changes will begin to change the mindset of individuals by establishing, setting and maintaining timelines for each government entitlement program.

Recipients should be informed the new enforceable regulations of the programs and educated regarding the intent of the government. The policies were not designed to foster a culture of poverty, but to temporarily assist individuals to become productive, responsible, self-sufficient citizens.

An appreciation of the importance of education should be fostered in recipient families. The responsibility of self-sufficiency for each family should be reinforced. Policies should encourage individuals to strive for the very best lifestyle.

It is also important to acknowledge that there will be those who must remain government dependent due to multiple barriers and serious health conditions, but no longer should the government be solely responsible for individuals who choose not to be responsible.

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