Understanding Poverty in Durham Region

Includes:
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By Katherine Cameron

Completed for: Community Development Council Durham
Supervising Professor: Alex Ferentzy
Trent Centre for Community-Based Education

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Poverty Report

Katherine Cameron
T90278971
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Executive Summary

People living in poverty experience stigma in their everyday lives. They are often mistreated by their family, friends and strangers. Their experiences range from quiet disapproval to outright physical violence. They are routinely excluded from social gatherings and consequently withdraw themselves from future gatherings.

Institutions, too, can be stigmatizing. The most common example is the social assistance system. This system is a source of great humiliation for people living in poverty. Their constant surveillance and lack of freedom leaves people living in poverty with very little control over their own lives.

All of these negative experiences come in addition to feelings of deep shame. Shame is not an easy emotion to identify. It can come in many forms: feeling stupid, worthless, inadequate or helpless, among others. Not surprisingly then, people living in poverty are likely to have low self-esteem, as well as high levels of stress.

Unfortunately, many people living in poverty end up coping with their stigma in a negative way. They try to hide their poverty status or compensate for it by drawing attention to their other socially pleasing qualities. Their shame causes them to distance themselves from poverty as much as possible. This can even cause people living in poverty to be critical of one another.

That being said, people living in poverty do not passively accept their stigmatized status. They become involved with their communities by providing support to others in need. They volunteer at community centres such as women`s shelters and food banks. This is a positive coping strategy, but it is a rare one.

How do we reduce poverty stigma? First, we must improve access to social goods and resources, as well as removing barriers to basic necessities. Next, information, education and communication campaigns can be useful in debunking common misperceptions about poverty. Finally, we must understand poverty as a human rights issue. The stigmatization and exclusion experienced by people living in poverty is unacceptable. Ultimately though, we need to work towards the elimination of poverty.

The poverty rate in Canada is approximately 14.4%.[1] Poverty is considered to be a major determinant of ill health, largely because of the chronic stress experienced by those living in poverty. [2] Stress is definitely experienced because of the financial limitations of poverty; however, it is also felt because of the stigma attached to living in poverty. This report will discuss poverty stigma and its effects, as well as what can be done to reduce it. To provide context, quotes from mothers receiving social assistance will be used, since their experiences are the best documented.

To begin, it is important to understand what stigma is. Stigma is an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" and that reduces a person "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one."[3] It involves elements of labelling, stereotyping, separation of "us" and "them", status loss, and discrimination.[4] Most importantly, stigma has an element of power attached to it – one group of people is labelling or stigmatizing another group. The end result is always negative.

Why are people living in poverty stigmatized?

Poverty stigma occurs because of low-income people's inability to participate in reciprocity. Reciprocity is the exchanging of favours and kindnesses without a contract guaranteeing payment. Communities are built on reciprocity. As long as the exchange is continued smoothly, trust and social bonding are strengthened. Once a favour is received, the receiver is morally obligated to return it.[5] A person who can continue to return favours is considered to have more social value than a person who cannot.

By definition, people living in poverty have fewer resources available to exchange and therefore cannot always participate in reciprocity. As a result, they are considered unreliable and potential 'cheaters' of the system. In order to avoid harm to future initiators of the exchange, all people living in poverty are given fewer chances to participate in reciprocity. This is also done to protect community trust and maintain social bonds. [6]

It is important to note that reciprocity also occurs on a broader level: between a person and their society. It is very much a give-and-take relationship. A person may use a social resource, but must also contribute to it. Social resources include healthcare, education, public transportation and welfare. More often than not, a person contributes to these resources through taxation.[7] Since people living in poverty do not contribute through taxation, they have fewer chances to participate in reciprocity on a broader level.

Another theory is that people living in poverty may also experience stigma because of what others, or society in general, believe to be the causes of poverty. Generally speaking, there are two basic beliefs about the causes of poverty that tend to increase the stigmatization of those living in poverty: individual and structural explanations. [8] Individual explanations blame the person for their poverty – the person living in poverty is seen as lazy, lacking motivation and irresponsible. Often times, poverty is seen as a "choice" not to work. As a result, moral judgements are often made about people living in poverty. These kinds of explanations are particularly dangerous because "if individuals are perceived to be responsible for their own poverty, then you can afford to ignore them."[9]

On the other hand, structural explanations point to economic and social conditions as the cause of poverty.[10] These conditions are often related to government policies regarding inadequate social safety nets, income assistance, job opportunities and wages. [11] Essentially, living in poverty is not a choice that can be made, but rather the result of a difficult set of circumstances. This view is not stigmatizing because no judgement can be made about a poor person's character.

The effects of stigma

People living in poverty experience a myriad of negative psychological and social consequences because of their stigmatized status. Many of the psychological consequences are rooted in shame. Shame includes many painful emotions that are not always recognized by the person feeling them. This is because shame can take the disguise of "being stressed and depressed, having low self-esteem, feeling stupid, inadequate, defective, incompetent, exposed, vulnerable, and helpless."[12] It can also be disguised as feeling apathetic, hopeless, resigned, depressed, and anxious.[13] One mother shares her experiences with shame:

> "I feel depressed about my situation. . . . It makes me feel like I'm not worth anything. I feel like I can't provide for myself or my daughter. You have very low self-esteem when you're low income, because you don't have anything to feel good about."[14]

Feeling like a burden is another common psychological consequence of poverty stigma.[15] This is related to the reciprocity theory. People living in poverty cannot contribute financially to social goods and resources; however they are free to use them. One mother recounts a comment expressed to her:

> "My brother-in-law said, I'm tired of supporting welfare people like you. Tired of supporting your kids. You had your kids, you raise your kids. Why should I go out to work to pay for welfare to look after you and your kids? I have to work for a living. Why can't you work?"[16]

At its most severe, people living in poverty can experience physical violence and verbal abuse because of their stigmatized status. [17] It is also not uncommon for people living in poverty to be treated in an unfriendly manner or be excluded from social functions.[18] One low-income mother comments on the social exclusion of her children:

> "If you have children at home and they're waiting for food or clothing to go to school, then you have to say no to them, and you also have to go to Salvation Army or Value Village to get clothing for them and then they feel less than a person at school, because their clothes are second hand and all the other children's clothes are brand new…If you don't get enough money, how do you look after your child's health, like their teeth and their everything, and then you want them to be in society, well if they're not looking like part of society, nobody accepts them." [19]

Since these negative reactions can be so powerful, especially when they come from friends and family, people living in poverty often isolate themselves.[20] They feel the need to withdraw from their social circle due to stigmatizing experiences with their loved ones and feelings of worthlessness.

In addition, people living in poverty experience humiliation in their encounters with various institutions. The social assistance system is one of the most stigmatizing. The humiliation of people living in poverty begins right from the moment an application is submitted. One mother writes:

> "They have you fill out all these demeaning forms and ask you every detail of your life. And then look at you and go ok, you're poor enough to be here. Good. Now that you're poor enough to be there, you need to work even harder for your money."[21]

Money is a huge focus for Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). There are many rules to follow, which leaves many people living in poverty without financial freedom. In fact, it has been reported that social assistance recipients sometimes have to "go against good budgeting sense to follow the rules".[22]

Another complaint against the social assistance system is that it leaves recipients feeling like they are living "under a giant microscope".[23] Surveillance occurs during the application process and continues as long as social assistance payments do. One example of this is when recipients must "sign a waiver granting access to one's bank account. The bank account is examined not just to determine whether assets are within allowable limits, rather, case workers consider any transaction fair game for questions."[24] Any purchase made by social assistance recipients can be put under scrutiny. As a result, many recipients report giving up personal financial freedom and feeling guilty for everything they do.[25]
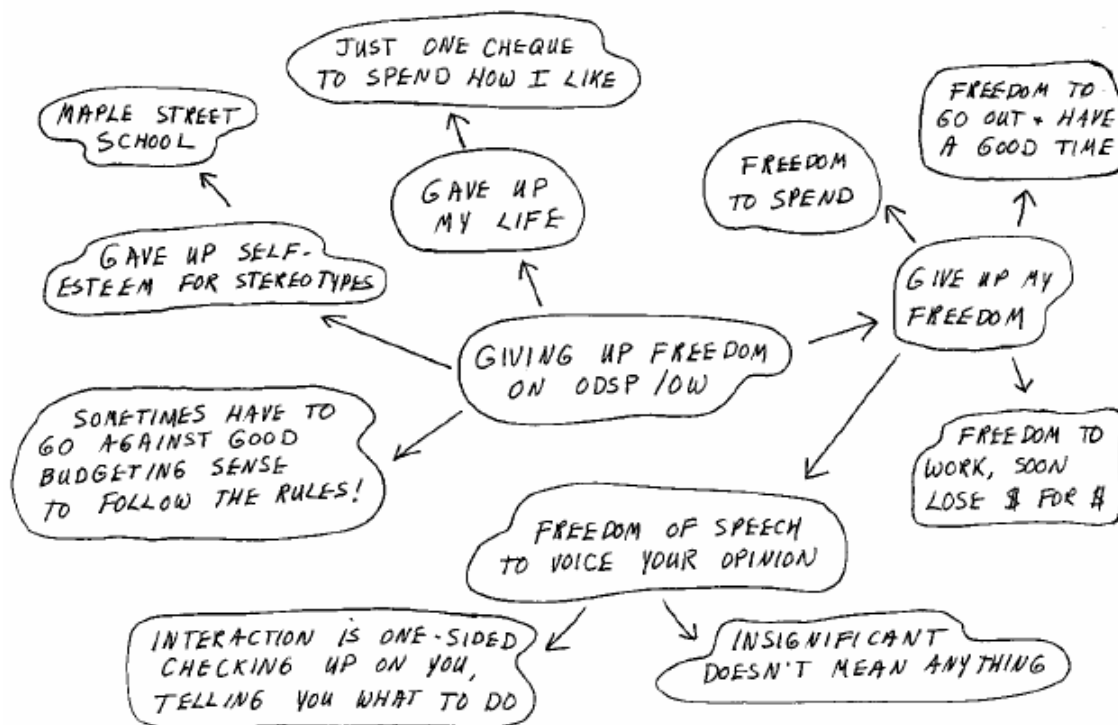

Figure 1: Giving up freedom, from Baker-Collins (2005), p. 24

How do people living in poverty cope with their stigmatized status?

There are many ways that people living in poverty cope with their stigmatized status. For example, people living in poverty may try to distance themselves from others living in poverty.[26] The goal is to represent themselves as 'deserving', by highlighting others who are 'undeserving'. One mother writes:

> "I wouldn't have got pregnant on purpose like I know a lot of my friends have done just so they wouldn't have to work. It is people like that—the ones like that—that give it a bad name . . . and funnily enough, half of them smoke; they go to bingo all the time but never have any money. I wonder why?"[27]

Other methods of coping include:

- Disregarding the negative responses to their poverty.[28] However, this method of coping can cause a person to internalize the negative response, ultimately causing feelings of worthlessness.

- Hiding their poverty status. This is especially common when people living in poverty interact with those that are wealthier.[29]

- Compensating for their stigmatized status.[30] People living in poverty may try to be more likeable and pay more attention to how they present themselves. Ultimately, the goal is to shift the focus away from one's poverty status and to encourage others to acknowledge more socially pleasing qualities.[31]

- Defining oneself by an alternate identity. People living in poverty can identify themselves as members of a community or network, such as a church.[32]

- Being involved with their communities. By volunteering or providing support to members of their community, people living in poverty feel like they are making a difference. This is especially true when they are involved with community centres such as women's crisis centers and shelters, food banks and community kitchens.[33]

What can we do to reduce stigma?

There are a few ways to approach poverty stigma reduction. To really make a difference in the degree of stigma, an approach must operate under two main principles. First and foremost, an approach must address disadvantaged outcomes, as well as individual and structural discrimination. An effective approach must also change the attitudes and beliefs of powerful groups that lead to "labelling, stereotyping, setting apart, devaluing, and discriminating, or it must change circumstances so as to limit the power of such groups to make their cognitions the dominant ones".[34]

To address disadvantaged outcomes, the ability of people living in poverty to participate in reciprocity must be increased. This includes increasing access to social goods and resources, as well as removing barriers (physical, structural, communication, or otherwise).[35] An example of this could be lowering the cost of public transportation or offering more routes.[36]

Information, education and communication (IEC) campaigns should be used to address discrimination and challenge the beliefs of the powerful. These campaigns are used to correct misperceptions in the community. [37] In the case of poverty stigma, campaigns could be used to address the low social value of those living in poverty, or to encourage a community to embrace structural explanations for poverty. The "Do the Math" challenge is an example of a campaign being used in Ontario. This campaign encourages Ontarians to see how their lifestyle compares to a single person on social assistance by calculating a monthly budget.[38] It helps Ontarians to understand the financial struggles of people receiving social assistance payments.

To satisfy the last principle, poverty and its stigma must be recognized as a human rights issue.[39] People living in poverty struggle to access basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter. In addition, they are not treated with dignity and are unable to fully participate in our society. Poverty elimination, then, should be the ultimate goal. By restoring some power back to people living in poverty, power will be more equally shared.

Notes

[1] Stewart et al., 2008, p. 79

[2] Reutter, Veenstra, Stewart, Raphael, Love & Makwarimba, 2005, p. 525; Reidpath Chan, Gifford & Allotey, 2005, p. 469; Robinson, McIntyre & Officer, 2005, p. 342.

[3] Goffman, 1963, p. 3

[4] Link &Phelan, 2001, p. 367

[5] Reidpath et al., 2005, p. 474; Stewart et al., 2009, p. 187

[6] Reidpath et al., 2005, p. 475

[7] Reidpath, et al., 2005, p. 475.

[8] Reutter et al., 2005, p. 515

[9] Reutter et. al., 2009, p. 300

[10] Reutter et al., 2006, p. 3

[11] Retter et al., 2009, p. 303

[12] Reid & Herbert, 2005, p. 161

[13] Stewart et al., 2008, p. 87

[14] Reutter et al., 2009, p. 302

[15] Reutter et al., 2009, p. 301

[16] Reutter et al., 2009, p. 301

[17] Reutter et al., 2009, p. 301

[18] Reutter et al., 2009, p. 301; Stewart et al., 2009, p. 186

[19] Morris, 2007, p. 3

[20] Stewart et al., 2008, p. 87

[21] UN Platform for Action Committee Manitoba (UNPAC), 2006, p. 1

[22] Baker Collins, 2005, p. 25

[23] Baker Collins, 2005, p. 24

[24] Baker Collins, 2005, p. 25

[25] Baker Collins, 2005, p. 25

[26] Reutter et al., 2009, p. 305

[27] McIntyre et al., 2003, p. 323

[28] Reutter et al., 2009, p. 304

[29] Reutter et al., 2009, p. 305.

[30] Reutter et al., 2009, p. 305

[31] Shih, 2004, p. 177

[32] Reid & Herbert, 2005, p. 179

[33] Reutter et al., 2009, p. 306

[34] Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 381

[35] Reidpath et al., 2005, p. 483

[36] Stewart et al., 2008, p. 86

[37] Reidpath et al., 2005, p. 483

[38] The Stop Community Food Centre, 2011

[39] Reidpath et al., 2005, p. 483

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