The Disadvantaged

Poverty is a relative concept—there is no exact way of measuring the extent to which families are deprived

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CHARACTERIZING low socio-economic families is difficult because of the variations from one subculture to another. Wide socio-cultural gaps exist between low socio-economic families from one region to another, within a state, and sometimes even within counties. An educator may have difficulty understanding the culture of such people because he thinks of them as having the same social and economic values as he has. Yet, there is increasing evidence that regardless of where poverty is found, it has some identifiable patterns of behavior.

Oscar Lewis' study of *Five Families* in poverty in Mexico City reveals patterns of thought and behavior strikingly similar to those of very poor people in other parts of the world even though the host cultures are quite different. The Falk Project for Economic Research in Israel reports on a group of Oriental Jews in Israel who comprise approximately thirty per cent of the population. Their circumstances of life are characterized by extreme poverty; and, in general, they represent the lowest class of the Israeli society. The group has become the object of increasing social research as a result of the government's great concern for this third of the population.

What do they find? They find the rate of school dropout to be high. It appears that children leave school not only because they cannot afford to go on—their economic contributions being needed by the family—but also because the school system is organized around the learning styles of the more advantaged child. The Oriental Jew, who tends to particularize and has difficulty with conceptualization, does not perform well in school. The researchers also

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find a relative inability to defer gratification in many social functions. Employment with good possibilities for learning and advancement is often left for other positions that bring a small but an immediate increase in income.[1]

Regardless of where poverty is found, certain characteristics are often identifiable. Some characteristics of the culture of poverty often described are: poor mental and physical health, inadequate education, low income, limited job opportunities, poor and overcrowded housing, and unemployment. A high rate of school dropouts is often characteristic because the family needs the economic contribution which children can make. But an even more important factor related to dropouts is the lack of understanding by the educator of the learning styles of the disadvantaged.

Catherine Chilman[2] has identified some characteristics of the poor which are important to their participation in the education system:

1. Family life and early experience have given them little opportunity for developing skill in verbal communication.
2. They are more skillful in concrete than abstract thinking.
3. They have a distrust of science and evidence.
4. Emphasis is on "personalness." Teachers are good if nice, not because they have lots of experience and training.
5. Emphasis is on magic and fate.
6. They are alienated from the middle-class world.
7. Objective in school is to keep out of trouble, not to learn something.
8. They have a distrust of the outer world.
9. They do not have a middle-class time orientation.
10. They alternate aggression and withdrawal, hostility and shyness.

Differences in Values

It is important for the educator to recognize that low-income families' values may be quite different from those held by middle- and upper-income families. Unlike the middle class, the lower social classes are not strongly motivated by a desire to get ahead. No doubt many wish for higher status but unlike members of the middle class, they often think that it is not possible to attain. Thus,

[1] Jerome Cohen, "Social Work and the Culture of Poverty," *Journal of Social Work,* IX (January, 1964), 3-11.

[2] Catherine Chilman, "Child Rearing and Family Life Patterns of Low Income Families: Implications for Home Economists," speech given before the AHEA Low Income Workshop, Chicago, Illinois, March, 1965. Abstracted by Mason E. Miller (East Lansing: Institute for Extension Personnel Development, Michigan State University, Action Abstract No. 2, May, 1965).

they become resigned to their present location on the social status ladder. This is reflected by a sense of apathy and defeat. In cautioning against comparing the poor with middle class, Riesman says that comparison with the middle class is dangerous because the poor and the middle class face very different problems, and a middle-class yardstick generally should not be employed in appraising the characteristics of the disadvantaged.[3]

Metzler described the culture of the low-income hill people in rural areas as having a basic motivation that is neither economic nor agricultural. "Folk culture" or "peasant culture" comes much closer to describing the complex of values to which they subscribe. Family, moral, and spiritual values are basic to their culture. They lack the entrepreneurial point of view, lack experiences in the use of money, avoid indebtedness, have a low level of economic aspiration, are not interested in protracted work on a regular schedule, have education and training taking place mostly within the family circle, and set a different value on formal education.[4]

A Kentucky Extension home economist has found that the mountain culture puts emphasis on woman's role in the home and on man's role as the decision-maker. School also is a term demanding respect. Therefore, after one cooking school, a husband of one of the women took it upon himself to go "up and down the holler" to tell the men folk "to git their wives down to the cookin' school" because his wife "went and larned to fix something good." Attendance grew when the husband gave this sanction to the meeting.[5]

The Hard to Reach

The educator must adjust the educational programs to the way of life of the various subcultures he is trying to reach. To be an effective planner, he must have some knowledge of the home life and aspirations of families. There is no one best approach to "reaching the hard to reach." As more knowledge of the people is gained, the approaches taken should become more realistic.

An important consideration is to have methods appropriate to the people involved. For example, as the basis for establishing an approach in community and county program planning to truly involve the people, the Texas Agricultural Extension Service studied

[3] Frank Riesman, "Low Income Culture: The Strengths of the Poor," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, XXVI, No. 4 (November, 1964), 418-19.

[4] William H. Metzler, "Socio-Economic Aspects of Manpower Adjustment Low Income Rural Areas," *Rural Sociology*, XXIV (September, 1959), 227-28.

[5] Evelyn H. Johnson, "We're Helping Our 'Less-Chance' Kentucky Folks," reprint, Federal Extension Service, HE-30, Washington, D.C., May, 1965, p. 1.

Mexican-American culture. Its study revealed the following important characteristics:

1. Mexican-American culture is present oriented.
2. Family habits are a culture combination of the old and new.
3. Family looks for leadership in its own group.
4. Youth mature early, marry early, and withdraw from school. Work must be done in early ages to reach family through children.
5. The people have little trust in banks or those outside the family group.
6. They seem to be jealous of each other to the extent that if one progresses to leadership status, he ceases to be trusted.
7. Women work some outside the home; however, men do not help with homemaking chores.
8. There is a language barrier—programs must be mostly "show how" as communication is difficult. Leaders must be people who can speak both English and Spanish.
9. Clothing is chosen for beauty, color, and conformity rather than durability.
10. They have little knowledge of the care of various fibers.

Knowledge of these characteristics helped determine approaches to working with Mexican-American families. First approaches included locating, recruiting, and training natural leaders in things that interested them; then, the program was broadened to meet their needs and the needs of the county.[6]

Involvement

People must become directly involved in helping themselves. Although their leadership is not readily recognized by the educator, it does exist. An important strength of the community action phase of the Economic Opportunity Act is the criterion that, to the maximum extent feasible, the poor should be involved in planning programs for themselves. It is a challenge to all agencies to avoid telling the poor unilaterally what they must do. When people begin to say, "What can we do about the situation?" we will have performed an important role as educators. Being discontented with a situation is an important motivating force for change.

Aides or "non-professionals" can serve as a bridge between the professional and the neighborhood. They use the same language

[6] Pauline R. Brown, "Home Economics Extension Work with Rural Families in the Lower Socio-Economic Levels of Our Society," *Report of Seminar: Cooperative Extension Work with Low Income Families* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Extension Service, USDA, ESC-552, June, 1963), pp. 40-41.

and can help set standards for the poor. The only way disadvantaged families can learn new skills needed to join society is to practice and become proficient in them. Thus aides can provide this significant path needed to reach the poor with new information.

Extension home economists have found that involvement of low-income families in very simple things can have profound effects on the family. For example, (1) there is a close relationship between clothing, cleanliness, and self-respect; (2) families which are given an opportunity to succeed in very small things gain courage enough to try something bigger; and (3) the sincere interest of someone who is not a threat to their limited security can rekindle the desire for a better way of life, particularly for their children.[7]

Conclusion

Income, education, and occupation are indices often used to indicate socio-economic status. Needs of families depend on the size of the family, age of family members, and condition of health. Poverty is a relative concept; there is no exact way of measuring the extent to which families are deprived. How well needs are fulfilled depends on resources available to the family, effective management of these resources, job opportunities available, experience, training, and ability to move where opportunities are available.

The Cooperative Extension Service and other agencies have important contributions to make in understanding and helping low socio-economic families. Each agency must go to the people and not wait for the people to request its services. Contributions can be made in:

1. Understanding values, goals, and wishes of families.
2. Contributing "action" research to better understand how to meet the needs of families.
3. Finding ways and means of adapting methods and techniques to fit needs.
4. Helping families make the best use of their available resources.
5. Helping families find ways and means of increasing their resources.

By understanding the culture of the poor, a more effective means of programming for them can be developed.

[7] *Working with Low Income Rural Families* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Extension Service, ESC-557, USDA, June, 1964), p. 6.