

Employment Counselling and Poverty

A View From the Frontline in British Columbia

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PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. What are the reasons for poverty in a rich, industrialized country?
2. What makes a person or family considered “poor”? What income level or lack of income is involved?
3. To what extent do you think it is possible to eliminate poverty?
4. Are people poor because they are unemployed, or are people unemployed because they are poor?

Introduction and Learning Objectives

The other day I was walking from the bus stop to where I work as an Employment Counsellor in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, BC. On the corner a man stood with both a battered Tim Horton’s cup to collect spare change and several packs of counterfeit cigarettes tucked under his arm. Alternating pitches between “spare change” and “cigarettes, cigarettes” most passersby did just that. One elderly woman dropped a quarter into the repurposed coffee cup. As I approach, Bill looks up and gives me a cheery “Stephen!” We agree it’s a beautiful morning, and as I move to leave, Bill asks, “Are we still on for 9:30?” I tell him we are. We have an appointment to talk about finding work, emailing résumés, and whether the training we looked at last time might be available to Bill, existing on welfare of \$610 a month. This is employment counselling with people who are “living” in poverty, and it is a world away from career counselling, career exploration, or theories of employment models.

The W for Vancouver’s iconic Woodward’s department store becomes the background for a poem: “You’ll never live like Common People do, You’ll never do whatever common people do, You’ll never fail like common people, You’ll never watch your life slide out of view.” (From the song, “Common People” by Pulp, 1995.)

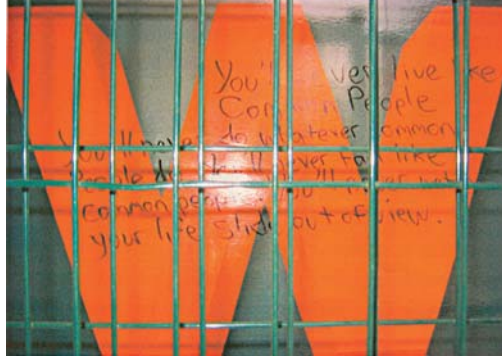


Figure 1: Photo of W with poem. Courtesy of Stephen Hill.

Despite the fact that Canada has one of the highest standards of living among all the developed nations, and has been voted numerous times in recent years by the United Nations as one of the best countries in the world in which to live, poverty is prevalent in Canada today (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). Chronic poverty results from the cumulative impact of discrimination, risk, vulnerability, and exclusion across the life-cycle and between generations. Multiple social and cultural factors, such as ethnicity, gender, physical disability, and mental health can determine an individual’s vulnerability. This chapter outlines the cycle of poverty and the impact it has on the lives of unemployed people, their search for work from a social justice framework, and the role of the career practitioner in helping to break the cycle. “Poverty of ideas” will be explored in order to examine different ways of conceptualizing poverty and taking social action.

The learning objectives of this chapter are:

1. Define poverty and identify measures of poverty.
2. List and describe the categories of poverty.
3. Understand the various terms used in accessing social services.
4. Describe the cycle of poverty and the impact it has on working lives.
5. Explain the role of the career practitioner as an agent of social justice.
6. Describe various community and national social justice initiatives.

Poverty and Unemployment, Unemployment and Poverty

*It would be nice if the poor were to get even half of the money
that is spent in studying them.*

— Bill Vaughan

People who are unemployed often become more fearful and anxious as their financial resources dwindle and social connections weaken. Individuals who are

also reliant on welfare have a second set of damaging problems to cope with: the shame, humiliation, and inadequacy of the welfare system.

What Is Poverty?

On the surface, being poor describes someone who doesn't have enough money. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (1983) views poverty as that standard of living at which one cannot "achieve adequate participation in communal activities ... and be free from public shame from failure to satisfy conventions" (p. 167). The United Nations (2001) defines poverty as: "A human condition characterized by sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights" (n.p.). Common to both definitions is "a sense of what is decent" (Shillington, Lasota, & Shantz, 2009, p. 2) or acceptable, in guaranteeing the general welfare of all individuals.

Canada has no official definition of poverty, no official method of measuring poverty, and no official set of poverty lines. Various measures of poverty exist, including: (a) low income cut-offs (LICO); (b) low income measures (LIM); (c) market basket measures (MBM); and (d) basic needs poverty measures. These terms are defined below (Shillington et al., 2009; Statistics Canada, 2010).

- **Low Income Cut-Offs (LICO):** A calculated income threshold that takes into account the amount of income a family spends on the necessities, food, shelter, and clothing. For example, cost of necessities as a percentage of income may be 20 percentage points higher for poor families as for the average Canadian family.
- **Low Income Measures (LIM):** 50% of national median income adjusted for family size.
- **Market Basket Measures (MBM):** Cost of a basket of goods and services sufficient for a standard of living.
- **Basic Needs Measures (BNM):** Cost of a basket of goods needed to meet the basic physical needs for long-term survival.

Adjustments are typically made to these measures to account for variables such as family size and composition, location (i.e., urban/rural categories or city), and changes in living standards or price levels (Shillington et al., 2009). What is missing here is the human element. These measures are used by provincial and federal governments to categorize those who are living in poverty from those who aren't, and pay little attention to the individual.

A more humane gauge is the Ontario Deprivation Measure (Tamarack, n.d.). A "deprivation index" is a list of items or activities considered essential for a

standard of living above the poverty level (given current social and economic conditions) but which poor people are unlikely to be able to afford. The intent of the index is to distinguish the poor from the non-poor. This poverty measure was developed through partnership of the Ontario Government, the Daily Bread Food Bank, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, and Statistics Canada. It is the first deprivation index developed in North America (Matern, Mendelson, & Oliphant, 2009).

According to researchers (Matern et al., 2009), the deprivation index: (a) reflects the real-life experiences of the poor; (b) paints an authentic picture of poverty to the public; (c) is inclusive of other dimensions of poverty beyond income (e.g., social isolation); and (d) complements existing income measures.

Coming to Terms With Poverty

National Council of Welfare (2007) has estimated that over 15% of Canadians are living in poverty (about 4.9 million people). Child poverty rates are highest among new Canadians, Aboriginal peoples, and single parent households headed by women. When it comes to the material welfare of our nation's children, Canada now ranks a dismal 17th out of 24 high-income countries as evaluated by UNICEF (Adamson, 2010). The face of poverty differs across communities, particularly in the various regions in Canada.

Social welfare in Canada includes all government programs designed to give assistance to citizens outside of what the market provides. The Canadian social safety net includes a broad spectrum of programs. Under Canada's federal system, social programs are largely the responsibility of provinces. However, the federal government has charge over the employment insurance program.

In order to understand poverty and the implications of being poor, one has to have a firm grip on the various terms used.

The **minimum wage** is a provincial legally imposed lower limit on wage rates. For example, the minimum wage in British Columbia is \$8.75 per hour; and in Ontario is \$10.25 per hour (both set in 2011).

A **living wage** is a level of hourly pay that enables a full-time worker to have enough to meet basic needs and build some savings for the future. This newer concept is based on the local cost-of-living and takes into account specific factors, with rent being the biggest single cost. In British Columbia, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2013) calculated the 2013 living wage for a family in Metro Vancouver at \$19.62 / hour. Several community organizations support the Living Wage for Families campaign whose slogan is "Work should lift you out of poverty, not keep you there." The living-wage measure includes other benefits such as medical services plan, matched RRSPs, a company bus pass, and other in-kind payments that contribute to the overall value of being employed.

Employment Insurance (EI) is a national program to assist Canadians who have lost their jobs or aren't able to work for other reasons. Canadian workers pay into a central fund that they may temporarily draw on if later they lose their job. The amount a person receives and for how long varies with previous salary, length of time at the job, and the unemployment rate in their area. Canadians who are sick, pregnant, or caring for a newborn or adopted child, as well as those who must care for a family member who is seriously ill with a significant risk of death, may also be assisted by Employment Insurance (Service Canada, 2013).

Hardship Assistance is a support and shelter allowance in British Columbia provided to persons who are not otherwise eligible for income assistance. A person who receives hardship assistance may have to repay the money to the Ministry of Social Development (<<http://www.eia.gov.bc.ca/factsheets/2004/hardship.htm>>).

Social Assistance is available in all provinces but the programs carry different names: "social assistance," "income support," "income assistance," and "welfare assistance." They are all popularly known as "welfare." The purpose is to alleviate extreme poverty by providing a monthly payment to people with little or no income. The rules for eligibility and the amount given vary widely among the provinces. For example, in British Columbia the following terms and categories are used:

1. **Income Assistance** is a basic monthly support and shelter allowance provided under the Employment and Assistance Act (EAA). People in poverty, without "good" work track records, savings, or family resources, are the frequent recipients in a recession.

Income-assistance benefits for BC families have not kept pace with inflation. In one of its last reports before being cut in the federal budget in 2012, the National Council of Welfare (2010) reported that between 1998 and 2008, inflation-adjusted annual income-assistance benefits in BC fell by \$449 for a lone parent with one child, and by \$1,474 for a couple with two children. The inadequacy of income assistance is revealed in the increase in the number of individuals assisted by food banks which has risen from 67,237 in 2001 to 96,150 in 2012 (First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2012).

2. **Disability Assistance** is a slightly higher, but still modest, monthly support and shelter allowance provided in British Columbia under the Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act (EAPWDA) to those who meet the definition of person with disabilities (Klein & Pulkingham, 2008).

Are You Living in Poverty?

by Stephen Hill

This easy-to-use calculator from A Living Wage for Families will show you if a person is being paid a living wage: <<http://livingwageforfamilies.ca/calculator/>>.

3. **Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers (PPMB) assistance** is another program in British Columbia. This is intended to help those people facing many obstacles to employment, referred to as “multi-barriered.” Those designated as “Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers” do not receive more money; this assistance simply gives a temporary reprieve to individuals from not having to prove they are actively seeking work.

Imagine waking up each morning knowing that you have been so described. Much of my work is about diluting or countering the effects of this stigmatizing language and categorization on my clients’ mental health, morale, and hope.

Categories of Poverty

Definitions of poverty can only be understood in relation to particular social, cultural, and historical contexts. Definitions are political and socially defined and as such have often been the source of controversy. There is no single “correct” definition. In Canada, Cabaj (2004) has developed a poverty matrix that identifies categories of people who are at risk of living in poverty.

At-Risk are those who are currently not poor, but are vulnerable to experiencing poverty in the near to medium future. Demographic groups that often fall into this category are young people struggling in school, people approaching retirement with little to modest savings or pension plans, people with mental disabilities, and persons working in struggling industries, businesses, sectors, or jobs (e.g., commercial fishery, downsizing corporations, etc.).

Working Poor (or Waged Poor) are individuals who are working in full-time, part-time, or seasonal jobs that pay poorly and provide few, if any, benefits. Workers receive inadequate wages and may lack the job stability to maintain themselves at a decent standard of living. Demographic groups that tend to fall into this category include youth, persons with high school education, single parents, older workers, seasonal workers, and immigrants.

Temporarily Unemployed are those individuals who are normally gainfully employed, often with good wages, but are temporarily unemployed due to a lay-off or firing, or because they have left a job voluntarily. Demographic groups that have a higher than normal incidence of temporary unemployment include those returning to school from the workforce, older workers transitioning to new employment due to a lay-off, seasonal workers, and women on maternity leave.

Persistently Unemployed are those who have trouble securing and maintaining paid work and often find themselves unemployed and frequently in need of social assistance. Demographic groups that experience higher than average rates of persistent unemployment include youth entering the job market, people involved in

the criminal justice system, people with physical disabilities, people experiencing mental illness, Aboriginal peoples, and those without a high school education.

Dependent Poor are those who are unable to work and whose major source of income is from savings or government income support. There are several demographic groups more likely to be viewed as dependent poor. These include retired persons living on a fixed income, persons on long-term disability pensions, single parents, Aboriginal peoples, immigrants, and students.

Homeless tend to be individuals who have sporadic income that is insufficient to pay for basic food, shelter, and clothing. Historically, persons with mental illness and young people have a higher than average risk for homelessness. More recently, fully employed persons in major cities where rent is high and vacancy rates low (e.g., Calgary, Victoria, Vancouver) may be homeless while they look for accommodation.

Surviving (on) Welfare

And Number 2: You have the right to food money

Providing of course you

Don't mind a little

Investigation, humiliation

And if you cross your fingers

Rehabilitation

Know your rights

These are your rights

— From “Know Your Rights” by The Clash

How do Bill and others in his situation survive on welfare and at the same time try to find work? The \$610 per month that Bill receives is based on \$375 for shelter and \$235 for “supports.” Supports consist of everything that everyday life requires — food, tea or coffee, bus tickets, toilet paper, razor blades, toothpaste, a pen, a notebook, all for around \$7.73 per day. Bill can't find a room at \$375; instead he pays \$435 for his room. The extra \$60 a month comes out of his \$235 support



Figure 2: A shopping cart is a common tool for carrying your belongings when you are homeless. Courtesy of Stephen Hill.

money, leaving him with just \$5.75 per day for living expenses.

If Bill finds work for a few days, he must report it to the B.C. Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation which will reduce his welfare cheque by the amount he earns. For example, if he earns \$400, his next welfare cheque will be \$210, which forces him to find a few more days work to survive, and so on — a vicious cycle.

The Cycle of Punishment and Reward: To Encourage the Others

*Dans ce pays-ci, il est bon de tuer de temps en temps un amiral
pour encourager les autres.**

— From Voltaire's *Candide*

In British Columbia, only those who have status as people with disabilities or multiple barriers are permitted to keep any earnings. The earnings exemption for people with disabilities is \$500. However, only a minority in this category are able to work. Currently, British Columbia is the only province in Canada that does not allow welfare recipients to keep some of the money they earn, although other provinces have restrictions on the amount of earnings allowed. All provinces force people to cash in retirement savings plans or other savings, and to drain their bank accounts to almost nothing as a condition for applying for welfare. In British Columbia, individuals are only allowed to have \$500 in the bank. This severely limits the resources available to secure employment. I recently spoke to a carpenter who had been told that he had to sell his hand tools, worth about \$1,500, before he could receive welfare. How do you find work as a carpenter without tools?

Applebaum (2001) aimed to understand how perceptions of the poor affect policy decisions and found that liberal policies were more likely to be recommended when the target group was perceived as deserving rather than as undeserving. The deserving poor were viewed as the very old, sick, or severely disabled. And the undeserving poor were those capable of working.

To request welfare, applicants must reveal bank accounts to strangers, stand in line, often outside in public view, to see a worker at the Ministry office, and sign declarations of poverty. Those in the “expected to work” category will be sent, not voluntarily, to an employment service of some kind with no thought or consideration of an applicant’s job skills, aptitudes, mental health issues, and so forth. Applicants will be expected to apply for a certain number of jobs per week or month and to keep records of these applications. It is not surprising that some people on income assistance

*“In this country, it is wise to kill an admiral from time to time to encourage the others.”

resort to panhandling, survival sex, or various illegal activities, or stay in abusive relationships. These points show the various ways in which society pays for the failings of the welfare system.

The reality is that someone has to appear to apply for jobs they don't want, won't get, or can't find. From an employment counselling perspective, this deeply damaging dance crushes an unemployed person's dignity. Much of my frontline work addresses the effects of the damage inflicted by welfare.



Figure 3: Shopping cart has a plaque with the words, "Paying with Interac Debit Just Feels Right." Clearly, this photo is not what Interac services intended. Courtesy of Stephen Hill.

Tales From the Frontline

I sit here at my TV lost in this little dirty underground welfare room. I turn away as a pizza commercail comes on, get up like off of fly paper from my garbage bin La Z -Boy. I look into the rooms' full size frigde, discovering only sad lonely 3 day old Kraft Dinner, stail brown bread and penut butter.

— Henry Doyle (Megaphone, April 2010)

Where to Start?

The core work of employment counselling varies little between different segments of society, whether rich or poor. When working with skilled professionals and trades people, for example, you are helping people who are dealing with the depressing and anxious effects of unemployment. However, as an employment counsellor working with disenfranchised and marginalized people living in poverty you may be confronted with the issue of your own loyalty and fealty to the system. Most employment programs, even those run by non-profit agencies, can trace their funding back to the very levels of government that run the employment insurance and welfare systems. Yet much of your work with people living in poverty will be spent trying to get the most out of the system — advocating for someone who is being wrongly denied benefits, working outside the system or bypassing it (e.g., tracking down work

clothing from a local charity or finding free personal grooming services). Effective work with people in poverty demands that we offer more than apologies for the system.

❖ *Stop and Reflect*

When you are providing employment counselling, who are you working for? Is it the government, the unemployed person in front of you, the taxpayers, or your own employer?



Figure 4: The homeless person's camp is not the sort of camping that's on sale. Courtesy of Stephen Hill.

Ignoring the “Hierarchy of Needs”

Almost all counselling and helping courses teach Abraham Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs (e.g., Betz, 1982; Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010).

Basic needs are at the lowest levels of the pyramid, and more complex needs are located at the top. At the bottom of the pyramid are basic physical requirements including the need for food, water, sleep, and warmth. When these lower-level needs have been met, individuals can move on to the next level of needs for safety and security. Further up the pyramid are more psychological and social needs such as love, friendship, intimacy, and the need for personal esteem and feelings of accomplishment. At the top of the pyramid is the process of growing and developing as a person to achieve individual potential or self-actualization. Upper levels of the hierarchy are deemed irrelevant by the welfare system.

In working with people affected by poverty you will break the integrity of this hierarchy every single day. No doubt the providers of welfare across Canada believe that they have taken care of the basic needs; however, this is not the case. A good suggestion when working with people affected by poverty is to ask them the question: “Is it recent, is it temporary, or is it a lifelong experience?”

As an employment counsellor working with the impoverished, you will coach someone on interview techniques who has not eaten for 24 hours. You will celebrate a client's new job offer, knowing that Mohsen will have to walk 30 blocks to work and back as he does not have the money for bus tickets, and he does not fall into the “right” category to be entitled to help to buy them. You will go to ridiculous lengths to provide food for Frank during his first two weeks at work until he receives his first paycheque. Frank has been using the food bank and other food lines to



Figure 5: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

feed himself while he's been on welfare, but these services are offered during the day when he will now be working. You will work hard to connect Jay to that chef job he wants and is absolutely qualified to apply for, hoping that he won't still be sleeping in the local park when the colder weather comes, and that he can still get free showers every day so he smells fresh when showing up to cook.

Tips for Employment Counselling

I quickly learned three key things as an employment counsellor working in a predominantly poor neighbourhood. First, leave your ego at the door; it's not the effect on you but the effect you have that's important. Second, dismiss any thoughts of whether the client is at fault. Finally, realize that the system is badly set up to help poor people, and that there is an element of punishment within the system that conflicts with your wish to help.

Get Out

Get out of the office and meet people on the street, their streets, in their community spaces. This does not mean chasing a person down the street, but it does mean being

visible and available. Some counselling models that are associated with more formal counselling practices (but are sometimes used to inform our work) advise against this and say that to acknowledge a client outside the “counselling setting” (i.e., your office where you have control) is inappropriate. This is nonsense.

Get In

Genuine community attachment is not “outreach.” Outreach — often an expected part of employment programs — can often mean handing out business cards and making light, casual connections to other services in the neighbourhood where you work. For example, I am fully involved in several arts and social justice groups in my work neighbourhood. I see this as an extension of my work that contributes to my credibility. It is not a cynical, planned strategy to satisfy “the funder” (i.e., the word used to describe the government money that most employment services depend upon) or to look good, but rather a natural extension of genuine care and interest in the affairs and well-being of the community in which I work and for whom I work.

Get Experience

It’s very useful for practical reasons and to build credibility that you have a range of experience. If you are new to the field, you may not yet have the range of work or life experience to be effective.

Be Available

You can indicate to clients that you are available and willing to help them in the way you address them (Laird, 2009). Use sentences such as these:

- Let me help you.
- I can give you all the time you need.
- Let’s figure this out.
- Whatever the issue is, I’ll help you get it resolved.
- It’s very important to me that you are satisfied with what happens here.
- You are unique. I’m happy to adapt things for you.
- I really want you to feel that this is a community and that you belong here.
- When things don’t work so well, we fix them together.
- I take my role, and yours, very seriously.
- I will stay with this until we find a resolution.

Use Humour

I use humour every day in my work. This does not mean off-colour jokes (though they can have their place!) or making light of bad situations, but simply giving the gift of a smile or a laugh. How people respond to humour is a useful indicator of

their mood and personality. Gentle teasing is a way of showing you care about them and establishing common ground.

Stay Current

It is essential to be aware of local events in addition to job fairs, arts and culture and recreational activities, discussions, activist meetings, and talks at the local library. Be prepared to talk about life, news, interests, politics, art, current affairs, sporting events and more. Read the local news every morning.

Acquire Local Knowledge

Having personal experience and familiarity with resources and places you can suggest people go to for additional help, support, or resources is crucial. Personally, I will not refer anyone to any service I have not visited and approved of myself.

Mind Your language

“Said, Meant, Heard, Felt” — Stephen Hill

Examine the following statements:

- “I’m going to send you for training ...”
- “I can offer you training ...”
- “I’m referring you to ... for training ...”
- “Go see my buddy, Lana; she’ll set you up. You go up the stairs and there’s a blue door on the right ...”
- “Oh, while we are at it, I’ve got some time; let me grab my coat and I’ll introduce you to Lana ...”

Handy in Your Desk Drawer

by Stephen Hill

- razor blades,
- tampons,
- toothpaste,
- toothbrushes,
- shampoo,
- combs,
- socks,
- stamps,
- condoms.

All the sentences listed above may mean the same but the nuances range from command and control to genuine knowledge, commitment, and caring. “How can I help?” is a phrase to use at each meeting with an unemployed person. The question forces you to be able to respond usefully to every answer they provide.

Keep Resources and Supports at Your Fingertips:

- sources of housing and free food;
- training opportunities;
- health care and dental care facilities;
- access to mental health, addiction, and battered women’s services, and to post-traumatic stress disorder specialists;

- location of free work clothing, showers, laundry, and bus tickets.

The relationship you build with people living in poverty is the foundation for all the work you do. This relationship looks a bit different from what you might expect as it requires more personal and authentic investment on the part of the helper.

A Poverty of Ideas?

*When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint.
When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.*
— Archbishop Dom Helder Camara

I realize that the picture I paint of a system that is broken and that damages those it is designed to aid is rather bleak. Here, I want to introduce some hopeful ideas and actions, all of which take a radical stance and use creativity to tackle both the effects and causes of poverty in Canada. Some are grand, all-encompassing ideas; others are small, local neighbourhood initiatives.

Mincom

Minimum Income or Mincom (Forget, 2008) was the name of an experiment in the town of Dauphin, Manitoba that was conducted in the mid-1970s, where every adult citizen was given a guaranteed income. The study and its findings were revisited in 2008 by Dr. Evelyn L. Forget of the University of Manitoba. The study was designed to test the prevalent idea, still so engrained in our society today, that people are inherently lazy. Did Mincom encourage people to be “lazy bums”? Well, the unemployment rate did alter slightly. Yes, a few people chose not to work, such as mothers staying home to raise their children. The divorce rate went up slightly as women gained financial independence and were able to leave unhappy marriages. Dr. Forget found that along with the positive mental health results, teenagers stayed in school longer, likely because their families were assured of a minimum income. The long-term health and social effects would be dramatically different for somebody who completed Grade 12 compared with someone who did not finish high school.

For some individuals, whose families were promised income security, the health and social consequences may have lasted much longer than the experiment. For example, adolescents of the families in the study appear to have been able to graduate from high school rather than entering the labour force earlier or working on family farms, in comparison with their contemporaries elsewhere in rural Manitoba who seemed to follow earlier patterns of leaving school before graduation. The life chances of adolescents in the experimental site may have been permanently altered

and, although more tenuous, their own children may have benefited from the better economic outcomes of their parents.

The Equality Trust

The Equality Trust Canada (<http://equalitytrust.ca>) advocates for income equality. Like the parent organization, The Equality Trust in the UK, it works to make people aware of the harm done by large inequalities in income. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett were co-founders of the UK organization. Their book, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, published in 2009, demonstrated, through analysis of international data, the connection between inequalities and a spectrum of social conditions. These range from obesity to trust, from the number of patents per capita to life expectancy. The clear finding was that it is not the wealth of a population that is most important but the spread of wealth within the population.

In 2010, Richard Wilkinson came to British Columbia to speak at Simon Fraser University and at the Downtown Eastside Carnegie Centre, across the street from where I work, in Vancouver. His audience at the centre was mainly people who were homeless and affected daily by the inequalities he highlighted. It was refreshing to see an academic practising what he preached. He began by acknowledging that he was about to say what most in the room already knew from personal experience — inequality is damaging. When asked by a member of the audience whether he thought change was possible he said: “We are meant to live in a democracy. This doesn’t mean we continue to allow the top 1% to get what they want” (Personal communication, December 13, 2010).

Small Is Beautiful

Living off the poverty grid demands alternative currencies. Alternative currencies include bottles and cans for recycling, saleable items found in dumpsters, calendars and magazines for sale — usually produced by non-profit organizations. In Vancouver, we have United We Can for recycling and two publishing projects: *Megaphone* and *Hope in Shadows*.

“Binning” or making money by collecting resalable items from dumpsters has been turned into a major project by the perfectly named United We Can. Hundreds of people show up each day with shopping carts, strollers, or garbage bags full of cans and bottles and anything else that has a recycling fee attached to them. The cash they receive helps to supplement welfare benefits.

United We Can has recently expanded into growing vegetables and herbs in raised beds, a project known as SoleFood. Unused parking lots and the flat roofs of supportive buildings provide jobs for local residents and tap into the popular **locavore movement**.

Megaphone is a fortnightly magazine that is sold by licensed vendors. The vendors buy each copy for 50 cents and then sell them for a cover price of two dollars though some purchasers choose to pay more. The articles are written by both local residents and well-known authors. At least one vendor now lives off the system and is self-sufficient through only sales of *Megaphone*.

Hope in Shadows is a program that involves handing out cameras to local Downtown Eastside residents who take pictures of their community, places, and people. Some photographs are touching and gentle, others more gritty and political. A judged selection process is used to choose the 13 photographs (one per month and one for the front cover) to be featured in the calendar. Local vendors, often including the photographers themselves, then buy the calendars for \$10 and sell them for \$20.

SPOTLIGHT: CITY LINKS

by Lara Shepard

In Calgary, City Links offers a safe and supportive work environment where those individuals who encounter employment barriers can receive paid work experience, work skills training, and vocational counselling. For example, workers are trained to help low-income seniors to live safely and securely in their homes. There is no charge for this service and clients are provided with basic yard care, snow removal, house cleaning, painting, and minor repairs. The City Links Program has been around for over 40 years, in various formats, and is partially funded by Alberta Employment and Immigration. For more information, go to:

<<http://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/CNS/Pages/Seniors/City-Links/About-City-Links.aspx>>.

Summary

If you have a passion for social justice, not as a theory but something you simply have to put into practice by taking action, then being an employment counsellor for people living in poverty is a calling, not a job. It can be bleak. Some of the people you meet and the stories you hear will stay with you forever. I am asked about burn-out and how I stay fresh. Personally, I stay strong by remaining relentlessly current, and grasping the creative new initiatives for a nationwide change of attitude towards the treatment of people living in poverty.

If Senator Hugh Segal (2010) is right and we really have an opportunity in the next 5 years to make radical change, then a hopeful picture remains possible. Imagine if we could guarantee everyone \$20,000 a year.

- Welfare? Gone.
- Employment insurance? Gone.
- Food banks? Gone.
- 75% of non-profits who exist to prop up or supplement the current broken system? Gone.
- The stress and tension and humiliation of the current poverty machine? Gone.
- But in the meantime, Bill still needs my unwavering support.

References

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Glossary

Basic Needs Measures (BNM) is the cut-off point based on the cost of a basket of goods needed to meet the basic physical needs for long-term survival.

Disability Assistance is a monthly support and shelter allowance provided under the Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act to those who meet the definition of “person with disabilities.”

Employment Insurance (EI) is a national program for Canadian workers who are laid off. Canadian workers pay into a central fund that contributors can temporarily draw on if later they are unable to work.

Hardship Assistance is a support and shelter allowance provided to persons who are not otherwise eligible for income assistance. A person who receives hardship assistance accrues a debt owing to the government.

Income Assistance is a basic monthly support and shelter allowance provided under the Employment and Assistance Act (EAA).

Living wage is a level of hourly pay which enables someone working full time to have enough to meet their basic needs and build some savings for the future. This newer concept is based on the local cost of living and takes into account specific factors of these local conditions with rent being the biggest single cost.

Locavore movement was first used on World Environment Day 2005 as a way to describe the now increasingly popular practice of eating foods harvested from within a local area, usually within a 100-mile radius.

Low Income Cut-Offs (LICO) are incomes set where families are spending a substantial share of their incomes on necessities, for example 20% higher than the Canadian norm.

Low Income Measures (LIM) is 50% of the national median income adjusted for family size.

Market Basket Measures (MBM) is based on the cost of a basket of goods and services

sufficient for a standard of living “between the poles of subsistence and social inclusion.”

Minimum wage is a provincially imposed lower limit on wage rates.

Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers (PPMB) refers to people who are facing multiple barriers to employment. This assistance gives temporary reprieve from not having to prove that they are actively seeking work.

Social assistance is also known as “income support,” “income assistance,” and “welfare assistance.” These programs are intended to alleviate extreme poverty by providing a monthly payment to people with little or no income.

Discussion and Activities

Discussion

Discussion Questions

1. Julie is on welfare and she often mentions that she struggles to get enough to eat and has to spend several hours a day lining up at food banks and soup kitchens. You are working with Julie on her résumé, and you smell alcohol on her breath.
 - Does this mean that Julie has a drinking problem?
 - Does it change your view of her?
 - Does it mean that she is not good with money?
 - Does it change your view of how realistic her job search is?
2. Born Poor versus Becoming Poor
 - Does someone who grew up in poverty, and who is still poor, find it easier or more difficult than someone who was wealthy, and who is now poor?
 - If a previously wealthy person became poor through addiction, how would this change your view of that person?
 - If a rich woman lost her wealth through ill health, how would this change your view of her situation?
3. “Poverty Pimps” and “Povertarians”
 - Poverty Pimps and Povertarians are the disparaging descriptions of people who work in poor areas of town, are not poor themselves, nor live in the area where they work. These are workers for government or non-profit who “live on the backs of the poor.”
 - How would you counter this charge?

Employment Counselling and Poverty

- Should only local people help others especially in poor neighbourhoods?
- Should local people have priority when helping agencies are hiring?

Personal Reflections

1. Reflect on your reasons for wanting to become a career practitioner. What are your expectations about your role? How does this vision fit with working with marginalized and stigmatized populations?
2. Given the challenges in negotiating systems and advocating on behalf of clients, how will you keep yourself healthy when working within this environment?

Career Practitioner Role

1. Over the course of two weeks, as a class, collect from the Web or newspaper articles that highlight issues related to poverty and employment. What are some of the themes that emerge?
2. You will sometimes hear that career practitioners become over-involved with clients and some may suggest that it is important to keep a distance. What limits do you think career practitioners should set in their relationship with clients? Does having limits mean that you do not care about your clients? Refer to ethical guidelines about practitioner-client relationships. How might current ethical guidelines form a barrier in working with marginalized populations?

Activities

Stepping Out of Your Comfort Zone

Visit several of your local community services in a lower income part of your town or city:

- What do these services look like and feel like? Do they feel safe, welcoming, and respectful? What is your feeling at first contact?
- Visit your local social assistance/welfare office. What does it look like, and feel like? How are people treated?
- Where do poor people congregate in your town or city? Visit and observe.
- What surprised you most about your experiences?

Welfare in Your Province (Research Activity)

- What is the social assistance/welfare rate in your province?
- How much is dedicated to shelter and how much to other supports?
- Can someone on assistance earn any money without it being cut dollar for dollar from their support cheque?
- How many people (not a percentage) depend on welfare in your province or local community?

- Is there sufficient housing in your town or city, and do the rates match the shelter portion of the welfare cheque?
- Now that you have explored social assistance in your province, cross-compare to other provinces.

Case Studies

To explore case studies, read the publication by Seth Klein and Jane Pulkingham (2008), entitled *Living on Welfare in BC: Experiences of Longer-Term “Expected to Work” recipients*. Available at <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/BC_Office_Pubs/bc_2008/bc_LoW_summary_web.pdf>.

Read the cases of John and Lorraine. Choose one to explore.

1. What are three central issues that need to be addressed?
2. What theoretical approach might you draw on in working with this client?
3. As a career practitioner what would you do? Why?
4. What types of information/resources do you think would benefit this client?
5. What kinds of employment might be suitable?
6. What are other, more counselling-related (mental health) issues that could be addressed?

Explore Some Alternatives to Regular Employment in Your Neighbourhood.

These do not have to be top-heavy, ponderous operations. Their success is based on small startup costs and the requirement of few human and other resources.

- With your classmates, brainstorm possible alternative employment initiatives.
- How would you go about starting up such an initiative? How would this initiative assist those who live in poverty?
- Perhaps it's time to gather some friends together and start an alternative employment opportunity.

Strategies and Interventions

“A low-income senior citizen on a fixed income experiences different barriers to economic self-sufficiency than a young person that struggles to obtain a well-paying, steady job. Similarly, the strategies used to reduce poverty among homeless residents will differ markedly from those used to improve the circumstances of people working in low paying jobs” (Cabaj, 2004, p. 1).

Brainstorm strategies you might use with the different groups. What are the similarities and differences in strategies/interventions? Information on using a poverty matrix can be found at the following link: <http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/tools/poverty_matrix2e.pdf>.

Resources and Readings

Resources

Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD)

CCSD has the most thorough statistics on urban poverty, broken down by demographic group as well as by employment status. Retrieved from <http://www.ccsd.ca/facts.html>.

Statistics Canada

Many Canadian communities have created local consortiums to purchase Statistics Canada census data in order to produce more detailed local profiles of poverty than the general urban profiles created by the Canadian Council on Social Development. They generally use this information to break down the frequency and depth of poverty for different demographic groups and neighbourhoods. <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/profil01/PlaceSearchForm1.cfm>.

Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI)

Communities accessing federal SCPI funds will have completed research on the number of homeless in their city, often broken down by demographic group. http://www21.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/home/index_e.asp.

Videos

CBC radio and TV archives have an excellent collection of pieces on employment, unemployment, social policy, and more. Especially recommended is one on “The Exhaustees” about people who have run out of Employment Insurance, and one on “The Pogey Police.” Pogey is a uniquely Canadian term for Employment Insurance.

- Economy & Business: employment http://archives.cbc.ca/economy_business/employment/.
- Gainfully Unemployed <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/economy-business/employment/on-the-dole-employment-insurance-in-canada/gainfully-unemployed.html>.
- CBC Radio One: A special edition on Poverty in Canada. We are the 10%: Poverty in Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/thecurrent/episode/2011/12/02/a-special-edition-on-poverty-in-canada/>.
- CBC Radio One: The Current, a CBC morning radio program of ideas and perspectives that often concern social issues. Episode segments are available as podcasts <http://www.cbc.ca/thecurrent/episode/>.

Supplementary Readings

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