Poverty Today: Challenges & Opportunities

Hosted by
The Cabell Brand Center for Global Poverty and Resource Sustainability Studies
And
The Shepherd Program at Washington & Lee University
July 19th, 2013
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<td>Special Guest Dr. Keith Kilty</td>
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<td><em>Defining and Measuring Poverty in Social and Political Context</em></td>
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<td>9:45</td>
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<td>- Equal Opportunity and the Elderly</td>
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<td>- <em>Research-based Programmatic Innovations for Alleviating Neighborhood and Community Poverty: Four Concepts and Three Models</em></td>
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<td>- Poverty: The Latest Dirty Word You Can’t Say on Television</td>
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<td>Special Guest Dr. Mimi Abramovitz</td>
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<td><strong>Women in a Bind: The Decline of Marriage, Markets and the State</strong></td>
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<td>- <em>Challenges with access to drinking water in the rural Southeastern U.S.</em></td>
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<td>- <em>What are students’ perceptions of their postsecondary options in a rural Appalachian community?</em></td>
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<td>- Teachers—Deal makers or breakers for students in poverty</td>
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Special Guest Speakers

Dr. Keith Kilty

Dr. Keith Kilty is Professor Emeritus in the Ohio State University College of Social Work and held a joint appointment with the Dept. of African American and African Studies. For over thirty years, he has been an active member of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, where he served as Vice President and chaired the Poverty, Class, and Inequality Division. He is also a long-time member (and former Treasurer) of the Social Welfare Action Alliance (a national organization of progressive workers in social welfare). While a faculty member at Ohio State University, he was active with the Ohio State University chapter of the American Association of University Professors, including serving as Vice President, Secretary, and member of the Board. His research interests focused on poverty and inequality in the United States. Dr. Kilty is known for his recent film “Ain’t I a Person” which examines issues ranging from “What is poverty?” to “What it means to be poor” and dispels many of the myths and stereotypes associated with it. For over 40 years, he has been a political activist, particularly in the anti-war and civil rights movements.

Dr. Mimi Abramovitz

Mimi Abramovitz, DSW, Bertha Capen Reynolds Professor in Social Policy at Hunter School of Social Work, teaches in the Masters Program as well as the Ph.D. Program in Social Welfare at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. Dr. Abramovitz received her Master (MSW) and Doctorate (DSW) degrees from Columbia University School of Social Work. Dr. Abramovitz is widely recognized as a scholar and activist, she has written extensively about the issues of women, work, poverty, social welfare policy as well as the impact of public policy on the delivery of human services and the history of activism among low-income women. She is the author of four books and as well as numerous articles, book chapters, policy reports, and articles in the popular press. Dr. Abramovitz is currently writing book titled Gendered Obligations: The History of Activism Among Poor and Working Class Women in the US Since 1900. She is the recipient of seven prestigious awards from major professional associations for her overall contributions to social work and social policy. Her research has appeared in major academic journals within and outside of social work as well as the in and the popular press including Women's ENEWs, New York Times, Washington Post, MS Magazine and Women's Review of Books. Dr. Abramovitz is regularly invited to present papers on social policy at national and international conferences; serves on numerous policy making, foundation and community organization boards; and is frequently interviewed by the print and broadcast media.

“Kids should not have to leave their community to live, learn and earn in a better one.” — Stephen Ritz

“Where you live shouldn’t determine your chance for a healthy life.” - Kathleen Sebelius
“Poverty Today” Essay

This abstract serves as a summary of the essay which was inspirational in creating today’s event. Robert Giles, Jr. is the founder of Rural System, Inc. Please find the full article online on the Cabell Brand Center Events page. www.cabellbrandcenter.org

Rethinking Poverty
Robert Giles, Jr., Risa R. Pesapane, Tamim Younos

Introduction
Nationally, we have waged the “war on poverty” for nearly 50 years and yet conditions have improved little since it began. When Lynden B. Johnson sparked the quest to end poverty in the 1960’s 19% of Americans were poor. Now a dozen major initiatives and a half-century later, still 15% of Americans are poor. One in fifteen Americans (or 20.4 million people) live in deep poverty and nearly one in four children under the age of 18 are poor. Roughly 50% of U.S. jobs now pay under $34,000 annually and more than a quarter (25-28%) pay poverty-level wages. Waning support and ongoing criticism of the initiatives created to reduce poverty such as Head Start, Medicare, and Food Stamps is underscored by recent reductions in funding for these programs. Reflecting on the past 50 years now is the time to ask “why haven’t we made sufficient progress and how can we improve our planning for the future?” In this essay, we openly discuss the meaning of poverty in current society to achieve a deeper understanding of the challenges we face as well as novel opportunities for progress.

Critical Concepts
In trying to understand the meaning of poverty in today’s society, we generated eight underlying attributes that contribute to the challenges of poverty based on our personal experiences, study, and knowledge of social dynamics. We believe acknowledgement of the following concepts will be critical for a productive dialogue on poverty resolution.

1. **What’s in a name?** The words “poverty” and “poor” are subjective and lack clarity of definition subsequently making them almost useless in describing the problem. There are so many different types of “poverty” and each with its own cause and solution that it’s perhaps counterproductive to talk about them in a singular fashion. Compare the use of the word “poverty” to that of “shoes.” Saying 15% of Americans are in poverty is as informative as saying “15% of shoes are harmful for your feet.” What kind of shoes? What is meant by harmful? We need to ask these kinds of questions about “poverty.”

2. **Pandora’s Box.** There is no singular cause for poverty the reasons are multidimensional and complex. We know that poverty issues are related to birth conditions, parental care, housing, education, family ties, education, social linkages, sanitation, medical access, and the natural wealth of the land inhabited. As well, each person has a varying opinion of poverty based on personal experiences, economic well-being, religion, and laws which are influential in shaping the concept of poverty and its functional meaning.

3. **Misconceptions.** Poverty is the inability to acquire “basic needs” and most poor people are unemployed right? Wrong. “Basic needs” are ambiguous at best. Surely there is more to being “adequate” than food and housing. Very poor people have no time to waste because they must work tirelessly to escape the condition of poverty. It is often those hard working people, who live just above the poverty line, that fall behind for some reason which are pushed into poverty. What are those opportunities other than employment and conditions beyond basic needs that the “un-poor” possess?
4. **Paradigm Shift.** Alleviating poverty in society is viewed from a negative perspective: in other words, we think and speak of it as a burden and cost. In contrast to considering the negative costs of poverty today, it’s time for a reversal of thought to consider the benefits of alleviating poverty.

5. **All Suffering is Not Equal.** Not all poverty is “caused” in some cases it simply occurs. The very sick or very old without family support, the pregnant teenager without resources, or the seriously impaired mentally handicapped cannot cure or reconcile their situation. Those providing support for people in such conditions can suffer as well.

6. **A Familiar Story.** A common theme among those in poverty is a lack of contingency funds. Many people living just above the poverty line are thrust into poverty because of unexpected events and the inability to adequately prepare financial reserves. Addressing this could substantially reduce poverty.

7. **The Seemingly Impossible is Possible.** Escaping poverty is real. Some have done it very mindfully, directly, rapidly and alone and we applaud them. Others have done it with assistance and guidance, greatly benefiting from the programs available. Either way, we know it can be achieved.

8. **Reality Check.** Being that poverty is a complex issue we cannot expect 100% alleviation in a short period of time. We must appropriately define realistic benchmarks for achievement based on precise estimates and work incrementally toward our ultimate goals.

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**Needs Assessment**

Taking these attributes of the poverty challenge into consideration, we can begin thinking of areas for improvement and opportunities for progress in clarifying the nebulous problem of poverty. Some possible areas for improvement become immediately clear after discussing the above list.

First is the need for improved metrics for data collection and cost evaluation. Not only is data the key to unlocking mystery but equally important is the ability to organize and analyze that data. If we were able to collect data that could group like-situations and account for the temporal dimensions of poverty (brief, intermittent, long-term) we’d be able to develop major categories of poverty and prescribe assistance plans to suit each situation specifically. It’s also imperative that we understand the measurable benefits of alleviating poverty.

Second is the need for intentional and meaningful integration of technology to bridge the gap between the hard and soft sciences on issues relating to poverty. With the advent and mass adoption of social media and smart mobile devices, technology provides us with the opportunity to analyze complex human dynamics now more than ever. As well, there are now “apps” that can act as self-help resources. Engaging these new technologies could not only help us clarify the problem but their integration with existing programs could contribute to greater success.

Third is the need for a simplified but robust method for strategic planning. We suggest system thinking, or a “system approach,” which is a known strategy for dealing with complex problems to address the issue of poverty. A system approach allows us to juggle the multiple objectives of differing importance within “poverty” and create a framework for decision making.

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**Discussion**

We find that upon examining poverty through our looking glass, we see reflected in it people just like us. For most people in poverty they are ordinary, hard-working people who did not choose to be poor but are victims of unexpected circumstance. For others, perhaps they made poor choices which lead to greater consequences than we have suffered for our mistakes. Upon openly discussing poverty we also see that our definitions and perceptions of poverty are quite different than we expected. Poverty in fact affects us all in one way or another and therefore alleviating poverty can serve as a benefit to our society as a whole, improving the quality of life for all. However, only with prudent reevaluation of our current methodology can we create lasting, strategic programs for poverty reduction.
A film about being poor in America

Aint I A Person

*with apologies to Sojourner Truth

Directed by Keith M. Kilty

Another America At Last Productions
Ain’t I a Person*

*with apologies to Sojourner Truth

Directed by Keith M. Kilty

Produced by Keith M. Kilty and Alfred L. Joseph, Jr.

During the past quarter century, a myth has developed that poor people are lazy and that providing them with government assistance leads to dependency and a lack of personal responsibility. The reality is very different. The poverty rate dropped sharply in response to the War on Poverty programs, only to level off in the late 1970s when those programs started getting cut back, and increasing through the Reagan-Bush era attacks on social welfare. The slight drop in the late-1990s has already disappeared, and the poverty rate has skyrocketed during the so-called Great Recession. The plight of the poor has just gotten worse. While the accepted wisdom now is that public interventions do not work, that is a myth: the reality is that they have and still can.

What does it mean to be poor now, fifty years after Michael Harrington published The Other America? For 2012, the Department of Health and Human Service guidelines are an income $23,050 or less for a family of four (say, a two-parent household and two children). For a single earner, someone would have to earn over $11.00 an hour to be at the poverty threshold for a family of four, while the federal minimum wage is $7.25 an hour (a little higher in many states). In reality, how many families could pay all their bills in a typical urban area on a gross income of $1,257 a month?

Even at the height of the AFDC program, only about one-third of those falling below the official poverty line received public assistance. The myth of “welfare queens” driving Cadillacs is firmly entrenched but has virtually nothing to do with reality. So who are the poor? For the most part, they are working and struggling to pay their bills. They are the people we see as cashiers in stores, as receptionists and workers in offices. They are the people who clean buildings, who paint houses, who fix cars, who drive buses, and so on.

In order to bring back a sense of community and caring among people in this country, we need to put faces on those in poverty. We need to show the faces of people who are working but who cannot afford health insurance for their children. We need to show the faces of people who are working but cannot afford after-school programs for their children. We need to show the faces of people who mingle with the non-poor everyday – in stores, restaurants, schools, theaters, shopping malls – but who have become invisible.

The focus of this film is the stories of the poor (and near-poor) about how they manage their lives and families – finding decent housing, finding adequate jobs and pay, dealing with sick children and health problems, finding affordable and quality day care, dealing with the education of their children, getting help when needed – problems that most of us face in this society. How can we have empathy and compassion for the poor without being able to put ourselves into their shoes?
Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity, it is an act of JUSTICE.

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