

Re-Thinking the War on Poverty

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Analysis in Chicago think hard about
the real enemy, the real casualties

A war is nearly impossible to win
when you don't know who you are fighting.

We claim to have been fighting a war on poverty in the U.S. since 1964, but poverty persists because those fighting the war have never been able to accurately identify the real enemy. With the wrong enemy in their sights, the generals in this war have launched a series of misguided assaults, leaving the real problems unharmed.

The prime mistake has been a too-narrow definition of what poverty is; the war has focused almost entirely on one brand of poverty, the financial kind. This type of poverty is only a symptom of the real problem. The real enemy is the compulsion of people to see what is different as being wrong. It is a lack of understanding that people live in thousands of different ways, and can choose their own path, even if it's different from what millions of others choose.

We could call the enemy poverty of understanding or poverty of perception.

These poverties often play a central role in keeping people with disabilities (and

others) from leaving financial poverty by denying them access to the tools they could use to help themselves.

One particular brand of poor perception and understanding leads people to talk about the hardship of providing accommodations for people with disabilities. The excuses are constant and familiar: it costs too much money; we can't give that much "special" attention; "these people" don't know what's best for them. And so some people are admitted into society while others are locked out.

Poverty of perception is blind to the fact that "accommodations" are a part of everyday life. After all, putting a door in a building is an accommodation, since the building probably would be cheaper and easier to build without it. But we put the doors in as an accommodation to those of us unable to walk through walls. This accommodation is based on a simple principle: a building with people inside it is more useful than an empty one. However,

due to poor understanding, we fail to take this idea to its reasonable conclusion: if some people in a building are good, then more people are better, because that will allow more individual talents and abilities to be put to use inside the building's walls. Improved perception tells us that if there was reason enough to make an accommodation to let some people in, there must also be reason to make it possible for all people to enter and join us.

Until people overcome their poor perception, and for as long as many continue to believe that it is too difficult and expensive to provide full access for all people, they force others into a state of financial poverty — with no way out.

Since the current war on poverty does not recognize where the true problems lie, it also misplaces the blame for financial poverty. In the terms of this war, financial poverty is the defining aspect of an individual's character. Never

mind what wealth people have in other areas (a wealth of talents, a wealth of ideas, a wealth of life); if they don't have money, they have done something seriously wrong. And they are not to be trusted.

Even when the current war spends money to help people in financial poverty, that money comes with miles of strings attached, making it clear how little trust is given to the financially poor.

People who already have resources make the real decisions, and can put restrictions on where financially poor people live, what jobs they have, who their friends are, and more, always more. After all, the thinking goes, if they were able to make these decisions themselves, they wouldn't be poor, would they?

That kind of thinking is poverty of perception and understanding run rampant.

It forces people living in financial poverty to forfeit power to those who helped push them into financial poverty in the first place. Unsurprisingly, this solves nothing.

A real war on poverty would recognize poverty of perception and understanding as the real enemies. It would focus on how these deficiencies have limited human opportunity, and make it clear that accommodations and self-determination are not luxuries but necessities. Such a war would recognize that people poor in money can be rich in other ways, and would allow them the opportunity to use their existing wealth, of whatever kind, to build financial wealth.

In order to target the right enemy, we need to understand the full wealth of gifts that people offer. Some people, for example, offer the gift of time, giving us a chance to change the pace of our everyday life and be more reflective.

People who are sick or even dying may seem to have no value (with the disastrous exception of those who lobby for assisted suicide to hasten their death), but they can give others in the community an intimation of their own mortality.

All these gifts, when recognized, have value. People

who offer them should be valued as well.

When we recognize such gifts, we will also recognize the harm caused when we construct a society without doors for all, keeping people with a variety of gifts from accessing community, culture, and jobs. The harm we do is not limited to people who cannot get inside, but touches all of us. When we are deprived of the contributions of anyone, we as a society are poorer. But if we correctly identify our enemies, and open every door, the war on poverty can make us all richer rather than poorer. ●

The Center for Economic Policy Analysis, perhaps best known for its study of poverty spending in Cook County, Illinois, researches other issues as well, such as how states spend their disability funding.

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