

# Why doesn't Ruby Payne say more about race when she talks about poverty?

*by Ruby K. Payne, PhD*

Critics are sometimes bothered that I discuss economic diversity and class without saying much about racial or cultural diversity. In some circles I have even been labeled a racist because I seldom discuss race. Yet, among those same critics, racial and cultural diversity tend to be the focus to the exclusion of economic diversity. An African American colleague said to me recently, "I think one of the reasons, in addition to racism, that we have had such difficulty getting racial and cultural diversity understood is that we have not been willing to discuss economic diversity."

For the record, racial and cultural diversity are important, as a number of recent events in the United States have confirmed. But there also are many other factors I don't cover in depth in my presentations. For example, I don't spend much time discussing the relationships between gender and class (poverty tends to be feminized around the world), disability and poverty (very high correlation), age and poverty (54% of all children under age 5 in the U.S. receive WIC assistance), immigration and poverty, war/terrorism and poverty, mental illness and poverty (3% of adults in middle class are mentally ill compared with 7% of adults in poverty), addiction and poverty, or incarceration and poverty. The list goes on.

**First**, timeframes for speaking are limited, and when a group brings me to their location to speak, they expect me to use my allotted time to focus on my area of expertise: economic diversity and class issues.

**Second**, no single demographic group in the United States "owns" poverty. Workshop participants who argue that poverty is essentially a "minority" issue are often surprised to learn there are more white children (9,602,000—or nearly 62% of the 15,540,000 total) in poverty in the U.S. than any other racial group.

However, all U.S. minority groups except Asian Americans have a higher percentage of children in poverty than whites (see chart below).

	NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN POVERTY	PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN IN POVERTY
ALL RACES	15,540,000	21.1%
WHITE	9,602,000	17.9%
AFRICAN AMERICAN	4,090,000	37.1%
HISPANIC *	5,745,000	31.9%
ASIAN AMERICAN	524,000	14.0%
AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE **	250,244	35.7%
NATIVE HAWAIIAN AND OTHER PACIFIC ISLANDER **	38,545	27.5%

\* Hispanics may be of any race.

\*\* Data from U.S. Census Bureau, *2014 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates* (released Sept. 2015)

**Third**, depending on where we are in the United States, **the race that is equated with poverty is different AND the cause of that particular race being connected to poverty is different.** For example, many ascribe African American poverty to the legacy of slavery, to sharecropping, Jim Crow laws, miscegenation laws, and subsequent systemic discrimination (red-lining of areas by banks, segregated school systems, etc.).

Research indicates that Native American/indigenous poverty has as root causes the laws governing reservations (on most reservations you cannot own property, which is a wealth-creating system), impact of boarding schools and the abuse that

went with them, forced relocations (Trail of Tears, Trail of Death, etc.), introduction of alcohol, etc.

For Hispanic/Latino poverty, the cause tends to be twofold: language and immigration issues and status. And for some Hispanics/Latinos, it's also related to the forced mobility of being a migrant worker and the concomitant inaccessibility to schooling.

For whites, it's often about geographic isolation (Appalachia in particular), agrarian lifestyle and economics, declining employment opportunities in rural areas, etc.

If you are in Hawaii, poverty issues generally revolve around the bitter battle about government structure (monarchy versus statehood), consolidated ownership of plantations under corporations, and the struggle to maintain the native language.

In Alaska it's largely about hunting, fishing, and a way of life for the Aleut people. Alaska was first invaded by Russians, then it was purchased in 1867 by the United States. By the 1900s, the commercialization of whaling, along with seal and otter skins, had decimated food sources and many of the Aleuts' other lifestyle necessities (e.g., skins for boats).

Internationally, who is equated with poverty opens an even larger frame of race, culture, and religion. In China, poverty tends to be linked to anyone who is not a Han descendant. In India, it has much to do with religion and who is in the lowest caste (if you are Hindu). In Slovakia, it is often about Romas (gypsies). In Australia, poverty is centered on Aboriginals and poor whites. In New Zealand, it's usually related to being a Maori.

Because of the myriad causes, multiple variables, and limited time, we cannot address racial and cultural diversity in the workshop.

**Fourth, we define poverty and wealth as a set of resources and how resources impact your ability to navigate your environment.** The fewer your resources, the more unstable your reality is. Poverty by its very nature is an environmental condition, and it tends to destabilize environments. Environments force behaviors in order to survive and, over time, environments shape thinking.

Most institutions assume that a certain kind of thinking will be brought to the institution. I have found that individuals in every social class—poverty, middle class, and wealth—have hidden rules that govern their thinking and assumptions. When individuals from poverty don't know the institution's hidden rules (which are usually from the middle class), there is then a huge disconnect between the institution and the individual.

The focus in most of our workshops is understanding the thinking that occurs in poverty, middle class, and wealth based upon hidden rules and resources. Then we discuss the ways that institutions and their policies can be more effective, feature better interfaces, and create more success by understanding how economic-class experience has shaped the thinking of the people relating to that institution.

**Fifth**, race is a component of one of four major areas of research into what many experts agree causes stratification in society, including poverty. These four research bases are individual behaviors, absence of human and social capital, exploitation (including racism, sexism, predatory lending, etc.), and political/economic systems. Though you can read more about the causes of poverty in Appendix B of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, the majority of the work focuses on the socio-cognitive aspect of class and its impact on thinking.

**Sixth**, there are other individuals who have much more expertise than I when discussing race in particular. I think it's important that audiences and readers have access to the best expertise available.