

What Information Does *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* Have That Cannot Be Obtained Easily from Other Sources?

Why Do Critics Love to Hate It and Practitioners Love to Use It?

by Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D.

WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES *A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach* (Payne, 2013) so widely embraced and used by practitioners? Some critics attribute the popularity to the bias of the readers. But that hardly makes sense because so many educators are the first generation to be college-educated in their families. Many of their parents came from poverty, so the information resonates with them. Therefore, what actually does the work offer that individuals cannot get from other sources?

Most studies of class issues are statistical or descriptive and use one of four frames of reference to identify what causes class. These four frames are:

- Individual choices
- Resources of the community
- Racial/gender exploitation
- Economic/political systems and structures.

Most current studies describe poverty as a systemic problem involving racial/gender exploitation. Yes, this is a significant contributor to poverty. Such a *sole* approach, however, does not answer this question: If the system is to blame, why do some people make it out and others never do? Thirty percent of Americans born in the bottom quintile make it out of that quintile (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins, n.d.). And furthermore, why is it that the first waves of political refugees who have come to United States in abject poverty usually have re-created, within one generation, the asset base they left behind? They make it out because of

human capital. Ignorance is just as oppressive as any systemic barrier. Human capital is developed through education, employment, the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, and social bridging capital. Money makes human capital development easier, but money alone does not develop human capital. Furthermore, any system in the world will oppress you if you are uneducated and unemployed.

This analysis of class is a cognitive approach based upon a 32-year longitudinal study of living next to and in a poverty neighborhood of mostly whites. It examines the thinking that comes from the “situated learning” environment of generational poverty (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It is the accumulation of years of living with and next to this situated learning environment. The book does not assign moral value to the thinking or the behaviors but rather says, These are patterns that you see. These are why individuals use these patterns, and here is what you can do to help those individuals make the transition to the “decontextualized” environment of formal schooling, if they so desire to make that transition.



In 2014 *A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach* received the Revere Golden Lamp award for professional development from American Association of Publishers Pre K–12 Learning.

In the book *Change or Die*, Deutschman (2007) says that for people to change, three things must happen. They must relate, reframe, and repeat. And that is precisely what the *Framework* book does: It identifies what one must do to develop relationships, what must be reframed to go from poverty to the decontextualized world of formal schooling, and the skills and behaviors that must be repeated in order to do that. And whether one likes it or not, both schools and social agencies have as their bottom line: *change*. That is what they are getting paid to do.

Again, not everyone wants to change. The question is this: Do you have a choice not to live in poverty? If you are not educated or employed, then choice has been taken from you.

So what is it about the book that is so important to practitioners? Why do so many practitioners love to use it?

1. A language to talk about the experience of generational poverty

In order to reframe anything, one must have language to do that. You must have language to talk about your current experience and the experience to which you are moving. Class, just like race, is experienced at a very personal level first and impacts thinking (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The book explains the patterns in the situated learning environment of generational poverty and is very careful to say that not everyone will have those patterns. As one person who grew up in extreme poverty said to me, “Growing up in poverty is like growing up in a foreign country. No one explains to you what you do know, what you do not know, or what you could know.”

2. The resource base of themselves or other individuals used to negotiate an environment in order to know which interventions to use

Many professionals think poverty and wealth are related to money. They actually are much more

related to a set of resources to which one has access. Interventions work because the resources are there to make them work. If that basic concept is not understood, then any intervention will not be successful. For example, if a parent cannot read (mental resource), then there is no success in asking the parent to read to the child.

3. The basic patterns in the mindset differences between classes so that one can have social bridging capital

In order to relate to someone different than you, there must be enough understanding of that person’s reality to have a conversation. The “hidden rules” allow you to understand that there may be different thinking than yours. Members of a group that has the most people (dominant culture), the most money, or the most power tend to believe that their “hidden rules” are the best. In fact, hidden rules are often equated with intelligence. Knowing different sets of hidden rules allows one to negotiate more environments successfully. “Social bridging capital” (Putnam, 2000) are individuals you know who are different than you because they can impact your thinking if there is mutual respect. As we say to audiences, “Social bonding capital helps you get by; social bridging capital helps you get ahead.”

4. The key issues in transition

A huge issue for the secondary students and adults with whom we work is transition. If individuals desire to be better educated, make a change in their living situation, end addiction, have better health, or have a better job, then what is it that those individuals need to know in order to do that? We find that they must assess and develop a resource base, develop social bridging relationships, have a language to talk about their own experience and the one they are moving to, and live in a “decontextualized” world of paper/ computers. The book provides the understandings and tools to do this.

5. Key issues in the intergenerational transfer of knowledge

Part of human capital is a knowledge base. Knowledge bases are a form of privilege, just as social access and money are. Such knowledge bases also can be passed on intergenerationally. In an Australian study, which followed 8,556 children for 14 years, the researchers found they could predict with reasonable accuracy the verbal reasoning scores of 14-year-olds based on the maternal grandfather's occupation (Najman et al., 2004).

Part of the intergenerational transfer of knowledge is also vocabulary. Hart and Risley (1995) put tape recorders in homes by economic class and recorded the language that children have access to between the ages of 1 and 3. They found that a 3-year-old in a professional household has a larger vocabulary than an adult in a welfare household. In fact, by age 4, children in welfare households had heard 13 million words compared with 45 million words in a professional household. Vocabulary is key in negotiating situations and environments.

6. The abstract representational skills and procedural planning skills that one has to have in order to go from the situated learning of poverty to the decontextualized environment of formal schooling

Lave & Wenger (1991) indicate that beginning learning is always about a "situated environment" that has "people, relationships, context, tasks and language." They add that when an individual makes the transition to formal schooling, learning becomes decontextualized. The context is taken away, relationships are not considered in the learning, reasoning is not with stories but with laws and symbols (abstract representational systems). The research indicates that to make the transition between those two environments, one needs relationships and support systems.

Furthermore, in a study released in 2008 using EEG scans with poor and middle-class children, the researchers found that the prefrontal cortex of the brain (executive function) in poor children was undeveloped and resembled the brains of adults who have had strokes. The executive function of the brain handles impulse control, planning, and working memory (Kishiyama, Boyce, Jimenez, Perry, & Knight, in press, p. 1). The researchers went on to state that it is remediable, but there must be direct intervention. So teaching planning is critical for success in the decontextualized environment of school because it is not taught in the environment of generational poverty.

The book provides the tools to assist with this transition.

7. The necessity of relationships of mutual respect in learning

All learning is double coded—emotionally and cognitively (Greenspan & Benderly, 1997). The nature of the relationship makes a huge difference in how the information is coded emotionally and therefore received. In a study of 910 first-graders, even when the pedagogy of both teachers was excellent, at-risk students would not learn from a teacher if the students perceived the teacher as being "cold and uncaring" (Goleman, 1995).

In short, *Framework* provides the tools to give choice to people who do not want to live in poverty. It provides the tools for practitioners themselves to relate, reframe, and repeat.

Why do so many critics love to hate it?

In the last several years, critics have attacked the work, and almost all are connected with higher education in some manner (adjunct faculty, assistant professors, et al.). A large part of it appears to have to do with the nature of the role.

First of all, researchers ask questions and must have a clean methodology in order to publish. Researchers need to publish in order to get tenure and to keep their jobs. You cannot publish if your methodology is not clean, your details are not perfect, all the qualifiers are not included, and your definitions are not exact. Researchers are trained to critique ideas, details, theory, methodology, and findings but not to assess the practicality of the suggestions or situations. Furthermore, many researchers believe that “researched” information has much more value than information acquired through “practice.” In fact, Bohn (2006) asks, “How had someone so widely hailed in the public schools as an expert on poverty been ignored by national research institutes, higher education, and all the major, published authorities on the subject of poverty?” In other words, the information does not have value because it has not been acknowledged by higher education.

Practitioners, on the other hand, must have solutions to practical problems. Working with people involves a messy social ecology. To keep your job you must handle and solve problems quickly. If you are a teacher in a classroom with 30 students, then details are not the focus, patterns are; methodology is not considered; group well-being ensures safety of individuals; and the focus is on working with each student for high achievement results. Furthermore, there is simply not the time to document all the details or identify the theoretical frames of the situation. Practitioners deal with people and situations and must have a level of understanding about them in order to meet their needs. Change is one of the agendas of practitioners, so efforts focus on that as well.

Why do critics love to hate the work? Quite simply, the work breaks the rules of higher education around the issue of credibility.

1. *It does not document every detail with the source* (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008).
2. *It does not explain the information with details and qualifiers but rather in patterns or stereotyping* (Bohn, 2006; Bomer et al., 2008; Gorski, 2005).

3. *It does not reference systems issues or exploitation issues or racial or gender information and their roles in poverty. It does not address the macro-level issues* (Bohn, 2006; Bomer et al., 2008; Gorski, 2005).
4. *It does not have a clean methodology. It has a mixed methodology.*
5. *It looks at what students cannot do and what needs to be taught—deficit model* (Bomer et al., 2008; Gorski, 2005).
6. *It can be misused and misunderstood, so therefore it is dangerous* (Bohn, 2006).
7. *The writer self-published. The book is not peer-reviewed.* (It could be argued that selling 1.6 million copies is a form of peer review.)
8. *Race and class are not talked about together. Therefore, the work is racist* (Gorski, 2005). (As an aside, the book does not discuss gender and class either, and poverty tends to be feminized around the world.)

What seems to be an additional outrage in the criticism is the number of books that have been sold; almost every critic mentions it. Rather than asking why so many people would find the information helpful, the critics belittle the readers as not having enough intelligence to know their own biases (Bohn, 2006; Bomer et al., 2008; Gorski, 2005).

In defense of higher education, however, there is not a good research methodology for social ecologies. Neither quantitative nor qualitative methods address social ecologies very well. Norretranders (1991) explains that the research in entropy leads to the understandings of information technology. Perhaps fractal or chaos theory would provide a better theoretical model for researching social ecologies.

Does it work? Does it help make changes? Does it build human capital?

Unequivocally, yes. In some places more so than other places that use the work. Implementation is always messy and uneven. We have collected research against

a set of fidelity instruments for more than seven years in K–12 settings; these data have been compiled by Dr. William Swan and peer reviewed (Swan, n.d.).

A few key findings were ...

When using the normal distribution to determine expected frequencies and analyzing the observed versus the expected frequencies: In mathematics, there were twice as many positive findings as would be expected in a normal distribution (statistically significant at the .05 level); in literacy/language arts, there were three times as many positive results as would be expected in a normal distribution (statistically significant at the .001 level).

- These results led Swan to conclude, “The large number of statistically significant findings for the Payne School Model strongly supports the efficacy of the Model in improving student achievement in mathematics and English/reading/literacy/language arts.”
- Additionally, an external review of nine research reports on the Payne School Model, led by Dr. C. Thomas Holmes (n.d.), professor at the University of Georgia, was completed. Holmes, along with four other reviewers, concluded that the design employed in these studies was appropriate, the statistical tests were well-chosen and clearly reported, and the author’s conclusions followed directly from the obtained results.

We also have hard data about the impact on adults as well. Using *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World* by Phil DeVol, using concepts and tools in *Framework*, we are seeing phenomenal results. YWCA National named “Bridges out of Poverty/Getting Ahead” as a model program in December 2008. These are the results that the YWCA of Saint Joseph County, Indiana, is getting.

Increase in participants	Positive change in 3 months	Positive change in 6 months
Income	26%	84%
Education	36%	69%
Employment	32%	63%
Support systems	13%	84%

Conclusion

The book is about developing human capital through relationships and education at the micro level.

I am baffled why the discussion so often must be polarized; in other words, if one idea is right, then another idea must be wrong. Poverty is multifaceted. In fact, the subject is analogous to the six blind men and the elephant. If we are ever going to successfully address poverty, it will take all the ideas, as well as greater understandings than we have at present.

References

- Bohn, A. (2006). Rethinking schools online: A framework for understanding Ruby Payne. Retrieved April 27, 2009, from www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/21_02/fram212.shtml
- Bomer, R., Dworin, J., May, L., & Semingson, P. (2008). Miseducating teachers about the poor: A critical analysis of Ruby Payne’s claims about poverty. *Teachers College Record, 110*, 2497–2531.
- DeVol, P. E. (2004). *Getting ahead in a just-gettin’-by world: Building your resources for a better life* (2nd ed.). Highlands, TX: aha! Process.
- Deutschman, A. (2007). *Change or die: The three keys to change at work and in life*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

- Gorski, P. (2005). *Savage unrealities: Uncovering classism in Ruby Payne's framework* [Abridged version]. Retrieved April 27, 2009, from http://www.edchange.org/publications/Savage_Unrealities_abridged.pdf
- Greenspan, S. I., & Benderly, B. L. (1997). *The growth of the mind and the endangered origins of intelligence*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Holmes, C. T. (n.d.). Review of program evaluations. Retrieved April 27, 2009, from http://www.ahaprocess.com/files/R&D_School/ExternalReviewRevised.pdf
- Isaacs, J. B., Sawhill, I. V., & Haskins, R. (n.d.). Getting ahead or losing ground: Economic Mobility in America. Retrieved April 27, 2009, from http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Economic_Mobility/Economic_Mobility_in_America_Full.pdf
- Kishiyama, M. M., Boyce, W. T., Jimenez, A. M., Perry, L. M., & Knight, R. T. (in press). Socioeconomic disparities affect prefrontal function in children. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*. Available from <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/jocn.2009.21101>
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Najman, J. M., Aird, R., Bor, W., O'Callaghan, M., Williams, G., & Shuttlewood, G. (2004). The generational transmission of socioeconomic inequalities in child cognitive development and emotional health. *Social Science and Medicine*, 58, 1147–1158.
- Norretranders, T. (1991). *The user illusion: Cutting consciousness down to size*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Payne, R. K. (2005). *A framework for understanding poverty* (4th ed.). Highlands, TX: aha! Process.
- Payne, R. K. (2013). *A framework for understanding poverty: A cognitive approach* (5th rev. ed.). Highlands, TX: aha! Process.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Swan, W. (n.d.). The Payne school model's impact on student achievement—a national study. aha! Process. Retrieved from <https://www.ahaprocess.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Payne-School-Model-Impact-National-Study.pdf>

NOTES

- 1) This article is adapted from Chapter 11 in *From Understanding Poverty to Building Human Capacity* (2012) by Ruby K. Payne.
- 2) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach* (2013) is the fifth revised edition of Dr. Ruby K. Payne's 1996 work. Compared with the fourth revised edition (2005), it contains at least 30% new material, along with many updates throughout. In addition, the 2013 edition has six appendixes instead of one, a new seven-page section of 198 endnotes, a bibliography expanded from seven pages to 24, and an index that has tripled in length.