

A FRAMEWORK FOR

**UNDERSTANDING
POVERTY**

A COGNITIVE APPROACH

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A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach

5th Revised Edition

248 pp.

Bibliography pp. 207–230

ISBN 13: 978-1-938248-01-6

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Copy editing by Dan Shenk and Jesse Conrad

Book design by Paula Nicolella

Cover design by Dunn+Associates

Printed in the United States of America

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Introduction

It has been nearly two decades since the original “red book,” *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, was published in 1995. It is now time to rewrite it with the new information that has been learned in these years and with more current research. So while many parts of the original book are still here, a good portion of the original book is updated with the contemporary research citations, new case studies, and explanations. While some of this reference material is cited in the text itself, most of it can be found in this new edition’s extensive Endnotes.

In the intervening years, many practitioners have expanded on the ideas I introduced in 1995 and, in many cases, also have done their own original research. The work of countless scholars, researchers, and practitioners, along with the continuing work of my company, aha! Process, has contributed to greater understanding of children’s experience of poverty and the critical role schools can play in helping children and teens exit poverty—when those schools have the tools they need to understand and respond with care. In addition to education, I have been gratified by the way the work has expanded into other areas and arenas by those who understand and adapt the *Framework* concepts to their particular settings. These include businesses, healthcare providers, social service agencies, religious entities, higher education, and Bridges Out of Poverty communities.

I believe that this book is even more necessary now than it was in 1995. Due to economic conditions, childhood poverty is on the rise. We have more information than ever on the economic costs of poverty—not only to individuals, but to all of us. Since 2002, the U.S. federal government’s insistence on publishing student achievement data has shown just how great the achievement disparities are between economically disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers.

This work is not without its critics. Early in the new century, a group of social justice professors from higher education became quite vocal in their criticism of the work because it did not approach poverty as a systems or exploitation issue, nor did it delve into associated correlates to poverty, especially race and gender. (For a more in-depth discussion, see Appendix B on the multiple causes of poverty—and the roles that race and gender in particular play.) Addressing those issues was never the purpose of the book. Many researchers, particularly those in institutions of higher education, have presented their largely theoretical views. My approach to poverty is eminently practical: Having worked for many years in schools and school districts, I know firsthand that teachers need down-to-earth, relevant strategies in addition to theory. Their mission—and it is a critically important one—is to reach the children in their classrooms. They are on the front lines of social change, one student at a time.

The purpose of the book is to help those teachers, principals, district leaders, counselors, school nurses, and the many other educators who work with the poor to positively impact the opportunities of their students/clients by:

1. Naming the experience of generational poverty
2. Identifying the tools and resources necessary to become educated
3. Providing intervention strategies
4. Increasing the intergenerational transfer of knowledge
5. Understanding the thinking in generational poverty
6. Helping to understand the situated-learning reality of generational poverty so that individuals can successfully make the transition to the decontextualized world of school and work

The purpose of this book is *not* to explain all the causes of poverty, nor is it to examine all the correlates of poverty, which include race, gender, disability, illness, unemployment, addiction, drugs, crime, and systemic discrimination-over-time issues. Again, there are others who have done this important work, and these studies help inform this book. *However, this work takes a cognitive approach to class and, particularly, generational poverty*—based on the theoretical research of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, both affiliated with Columbia University in New York City.

Lave and Wenger have placed learning within social relationships. According to Mark Smith,

As William F. Hanks puts it in his introduction to their book [*Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*]: “Rather than asking what kind of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, they ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place” (1991: 14). It [is] not so much that learners acquire structures or models to understand the world, they participate in frameworks that ... have structure. Learning involves participation in a community of practice. And that participation “refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities.” (Wenger 1999: 4)¹

A Framework for Understanding Poverty examines and names the experiences of living in poverty, middle class, and wealth. Class, like race, is always experienced first at a very personal level where it impacts thinking. Lave and Wenger’s research concludes that all beginning learning is done in a “situated learning” environment which has relationships, context, tasks, and language. Initially, the individual participates at a “peripheral” level, depending on the relationships. When an individual moves to formal schooling, learning then becomes “decontextualized”; the relationships and context are taken away. One no longer reasons with stories but with rules. One must act on symbols, not situations.

SITUATED COGNITION

	Just plain folks	Student	Practicing individual or apprentice
Reason with	Casual stories	Laws	Casual models
Act on	Situations	Symbols	Conceptual situations
Resolve	Emergent problems and dilemmas	Well-defined problems	Ill-defined problems
Produce	Negotiable meaning and socially constructed understanding	Fixed meaning and immutable concepts	Negotiable meaning and socially constructed understanding

Source: “Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning” by J. S. Brown et al.

RESEARCH BASE OF THIS BOOK

This work is based on a naturalistic, longitudinal inquiry based on a convenience sample. I was closely involved with a neighborhood of generational poverty for 32 years. The neighborhood included 50–70 people (counts fluctuated over time based on situation, death, and mobility), mostly Caucasian. During this time I—coming from a middle-class upbringing—encountered the vast range of ways that the neighborhood’s understandings, actions, and responses differed from my own. I undertook an interdisciplinary analysis of the research to explain these differences. Additionally, I lived in Haiti for three and a half months to study poverty and engage in service while in college. Then I lived among the wealthy for six years while my former husband was working with the Chicago Board of Trade, which taught me much about wealth.

During and after these experiences, I took on the methodology of the anthropologist: I “went native” and then relied on research to explain these experiences. Subsequently, I have spoken with thousands of people in China, India, Australia, Canada, Trinidad and Tobago, Slovakia, Hungary, Great Britain, New Zealand, and the United States. The 2005 edition of the *Framework* book is being used in Jamaica and Korea. While every experience has unique elements, the commonalities and patterns within the experience of poverty—and the conflicts between children of poverty and middle-class schools—are much greater. (See Appendix C: “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?”)

MYTHS ABOUT POVERTY AND WEALTH

1. Poverty belongs to minorities. *Fact:* Sixty-seven percent of all individuals in poverty in the United States are white.²
2. Poverty is caused almost totally by the system and exploitation. *Fact:* In addition to systemic and exploitation causes, poverty is also caused by individual choices, addiction, illness, war, lack of education, lack of employment, mindsets, disabilities, and thinking.
3. People in poverty are lazy. *Fact:* Actually, people in poverty are often problem solvers with limited resources who may or may not have the knowledge bases, tools, bridging social capital, and transportation to be employed.

4. Wealthy people do not pay taxes. *Fact:* 67.9% of U.S. federal taxes were paid by the top 20% of households in 2009.³
5. Your IQ is lower if you are poor. *Fact:* IQ is largely a measure of acquired knowledge. If your environment does not provide that knowledge or vocabulary, you cannot show evidence of it on a test.
6. Poverty is about money. *Fact:* Poverty is about a combination of resources. See Chapter 1.
7. In wealth, assets are more important than income. *Fact:* Assets are important, but income is what allows one to live every day. If none of the assets is producing income (or insufficient income) to live, then you are in significant trouble.
8. Poverty is mostly an urban problem. *Fact:* Poverty is equally found in rural areas and, to a surprising degree, in suburban areas as well.

SOME KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

1. Poverty and wealth are relative to the environment in which you live. In Manhattan of New York City, \$1,000 is insignificant. In Haiti, \$1,000 will allow you to live for a long time.
2. Poverty occurs in all races and all countries.
3. Economic class is a continuous line, not a clear-cut distinction.
4. Resources in generational and situational poverty are different, just as in new money and old money.
5. This work is a cognitive study based on patterns, not on stereotypes. All patterns have exceptions. If this work is used to stereotype—i.e., indicating that everyone in a given group is a certain way—then the work is misunderstood.
6. Privilege is as much about the intergenerational transfer of knowledge as it is about money and social access.
7. An individual brings with him/her the hidden rules of the class in which he/she was raised.
8. Most schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of middle class.

9. For our students/clients to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school and work. “Code switching” is a term often used to describe this. We tell students that there are rules for basketball and rules for football. To use the football rules in a basketball game is to lose the game. We tell students that there are rules for school and rules for out of school, and they are not the same. You use the rules in the situation that will help you win in that situation.
10. We can neither excuse people nor scold them for not knowing; as educators we must teach the students and provide support, insistence, and high expectations.
11. To move from poverty to middle class or middle class to wealth, an individual must give up relationships for achievement (at least for some period of time). The issue is time; there is not enough *time* to have both.
12. Four things that move you out of poverty are employment, education, relationships of bridging social capital (people who are different from you), and/or a future story.
13. Four reasons one leaves poverty are: It’s too painful to stay, a vision or a goal, a special talent or skill, and/or a key relationship.

CURRENT STATISTICS

For statistics on poverty, please see Appendix D: “Poverty Statistics.” At aha! Process we update these on our webpage based on the timeline of information released by the United States Census Bureau: www.ahaprocess.com

CHAPTER 1

Resources, ‘Reality,’ and Interventions: How They Impact ‘Situated Learning’

To better understand students and adults from poverty, a working definition of poverty is “the extent to which an individual does without resources.”

Regardless of which country or race or gender, certain things happen when resources are in short supply. The fewer the resources, the more a person lives on the left-hand side of the chart. The greater the resources, the more a person lives on the right-hand side of the chart. Resources are always on a continuum and are not static. They fluctuate and may change over a lifetime.

RESOURCE CONTINUUM

UNDER-RESOURCED		RESOURCED
Instability/crisis	.....	Stability
Isolation	.....	Community
Dysfunction	.....	Functionality
Concrete reality	.....	Abstract, representational reality
Casual, oral language	.....	Formal, written language
Thought polarization	.....	Option seeking
Survival	.....	Abundance
Poverty	.....	Wealth
No work/ intermittent work	.....	Work/careers/ larger cause
Less educated	.....	More educated

Using resources as an analytical tool is a strength-based model and acknowledges the many strengths that students, including students from poverty, bring to school. The purpose of knowing the resources of a student is to know which interventions will work and which ones will not. Interventions will work only when the needed resources for that intervention are available. In other words, you have to work from strengths. These resources are the following:

FINANCIAL: Having the money to purchase goods and services.⁴

EMOTIONAL: Being able to choose and control emotional responses, particularly to negative situations, without engaging in self-destructive behavior. This is an internal resource and shows itself through stamina, perseverance, and choices.⁵

MENTAL/COGNITIVE: Having the mental abilities and acquired skills (reading, writing, computing) to deal effectively with daily life.⁶

SPIRITUAL: Believing in divine purpose and guidance.⁷

PHYSICAL: Having physical health and mobility.⁸

SUPPORT SYSTEMS: Having friends, family, and backup resources available to access in times of need. These are external resources.⁹

RELATIONSHIPS/ROLE MODELS: Having frequent access to individual(s) who are appropriate, who are nurturing, and who do not engage in self-destructive behavior.¹⁰

KNOWLEDGE OF HIDDEN RULES: Knowing the unspoken cues and habits of different groups.¹¹

LANGUAGE/FORMAL REGISTER: Having the vocabulary, language ability, and negotiation skills necessary to succeed in school and/or work settings.

Typically, poverty is thought of in terms of *financial resources* only. However, the reality is that financial resources, while very important, do not explain the differences in the success with which some individuals leave poverty nor the reasons that many stay in poverty.¹² The ability to leave poverty is more dependent on other resources than it is on financial resources. Each of these resources plays a vital role in the success of an individual.¹³

Emotional resources provide the stamina to withstand difficult and uncomfortable emotional situations and feelings. Emotional resources allow you to *not* engage in destructive behaviors—to others or yourself. Emotional resources may well be the most important of all resources because, when present, they allow the individual not to return to old patterns. In order to move from poverty to middle class or middle class to wealth, an individual must suspend his/her “emotional memory bank” because the situations and hidden rules are so unlike what he/she has experienced previously.¹⁴ Therefore, a certain level of persistence and an ability to stay with the situation until it can be learned (and therefore feel comfortable) are necessary. This persistence (i.e., staying with the situation) is evidence that emotional resources are present. Emotional resources come, at least in part, from role models.¹⁵

Mental/cognitive resources are simply being able to process information and use it in daily living. If an individual can read, write, and compute, he/she has a decided advantage. That person can access information from many different free sources, as well as be or become self-sufficient.

Spiritual resources are the beliefs that help can be obtained from a higher power, that there is a purpose for living, and that worth and love are gifts from God. This is a powerful resource because the individual does not see himself/herself as hopeless and useless, but rather as capable and having worth and value. Furthermore, spiritual resources provide a person with a “future story,” which gives him/her hope for the future.

Physical resources are having a body that works, that is capable and mobile. The individual can be self-sufficient.

Support systems are having friends, family, and backup resources to access in times of need. These are external resources. To whom does one go when help is needed? Those individuals who are available and will help are resources. When the child is sick and you have to be at work, who takes care of the child? Where do you go when money is tight and the baby needs medicine? Support systems are not just about meeting financial or emotional needs. They are about knowledge bases as well. How do you get into college? Who sits and listens when you get rejected? Who helps you negotiate the mountains of paper? Who assists you with your algebra homework when you don't know how to do it? These people all constitute support systems.

Relationships/role models are resources. All individuals have role models. The question is the extent to which the role model is nurturing or appropriate. Can the

role model parent? Work successfully? Provide a gender role for the individual? It is largely from role models that the person learns how to live life on an emotional level.¹⁶

*No significant learning occurs
without a significant relationship.*

–Dr. James Comer¹⁷

Knowledge of hidden rules, sometimes called mores, is crucial to whatever social group or class in which you wish to live.¹⁸ Hidden rules exist in poverty, in middle class, and in wealth, as well as in ethnic groups and other units of people. Hidden rules are about the salient, unspoken understandings that cue the members of the group that a given individual does or does not fit.¹⁹ For example, three of the hidden rules in poverty are the following: The noise level is high (the TV is almost always on, and everyone may talk at once), the most important information is nonverbal, and one of the main values of an individual to the group is an ability to entertain. There are also hidden rules about food, dress, decorum, etc. Generally, in order to successfully move from one class to the next, it is important to have a spouse or mentor from the class to which you wish to move to model and teach you the hidden rules.

Language/formal register is an acquired skill and constitutes the vocabulary and sentence structure necessary for navigating school and work.

CASE STUDIES

The following case studies have been supplied by educators across the United States. After each case study, identify the resources available to the student and those available to the adult. NOTE: Names have been changed, but the stories are true.

CASE STUDY #1: Alexa (from a mid-size town in southern Mississippi)

Background

Alexa is a 12-year-old Caucasian girl who recently moved with her mother to live with her maternal grandmother in a new city. Alexa's father committed suicide after Hurricane Katrina destroyed their home and drained their finances. The family's homeowner's insurance did not cover the destruction of the home because the damage was caused by flooding, which the policy didn't cover. The emotional stress of the hurricane combined with the financial losses proved too much for Alexa's father. Because he committed suicide, all life insurance policies became null and void. What little savings the family had were used to cover expenses from the hurricane and the subsequent move to a new city.

You are Alexa's mother, Sharon, a 32-year-old housewife who has been suddenly thrust back into the workforce because of your husband's death. It has been less than a month since your husband committed suicide, and you have had no time to grieve. The hurricane destroyed everything you had, and you and your daughter were left with nothing but a few sets of clothes, some family memorabilia, and important documents. You have no choice but to move in with your mother, who is disabled on a fixed income, while your disabled sister and two children also live with her. You must find employment to support yourself and child and to try to build a nest egg to start on your own. You have been a housewife since marrying your husband when you were 18. Your last job was a minimum-wage position in high school, and you have no formal training.

You find a minimum-wage position as a clerk in a convenience store during the day and as a receptionist overnight for a towing company. You have applied for food stamps and have begun secretarial training classes at the community job center. You work 16 hours a day, however, and have little time to improve your employment prospects, never mind spending time with your daughter. You spend virtually all your time working or sleeping in order to make ends meet—and to avoid an emotional breakdown from your recent trauma.

Current situation

Alexa is in the gifted program at her new school. Because she is new at the school, has been through a very traumatic experience, and is shy by nature, the school counselor has stressed the importance of Alexa's involvement in the gifted program. The counselor invites Alexa to take part in a weekly after-school volunteer program for gifted students at the local library. She says it would be a

great opportunity to get to know her fellow students, plus students are required to participate in order to stay in the gifted program. Alexa would be required to have transportation home from the library after school.

You have secretarial classes three nights a week from 4 to 6 p.m. If you don't take the classes, you likely will be stuck in minimum-wage jobs and not be able to support yourself and Alexa. On the other hand, your daughter is the most important part of your life and she has the chance to do something great with her academic ability. You know she needs to become part of a community and work through the issues of the past few months. But there is no way you can pick her up *and* take the classes at the job center. There is no public transportation, and no one in the family has transportation to pick her up. You want Alexa to have every opportunity to succeed and achieve great things, but in order to survive, you must work while improving your skills.

Using a scale of 0 to 4 (with 4 being high), how would you assess the resource base of Alexa and Sharon? Put a question mark if you are uncertain, if the information is not available, or if a response cannot be inferred.

Resource Assessment

Resource	Alexa (student)	Sharon (mother)
Financial		
Emotional		
Mental/cognitive		
Spiritual (future story)		
Physical		
Support systems		
Relationships/role models		
Knowledge of hidden rules at school and work		
Language/formal register		

[To compare your analysis of Alexa with the author's, please see Appendix A.]