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The Explosive Nature of the Culture of Poverty: A Teaching Case Based on an Agency-Based Training Program

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ABSTRACT. This teaching case describes the contentious nature of discussions about the culture of poverty as reflected in a diversity training session in a social service organization. Due to the complex nature of poverty, the training session led to intense conflict between the trainer and a diverse group of participants. The fallout from the training session was so significant that special focus groups were formed to debrief the experience. The case concludes with a set of discussion questions. doi:10.1300/J137v16n01_11 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

This is a story of an explosion in a social service organization that led to a melt-down of a promising in-service training program. The event can be traced to three ingredients that individually would not have lead

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to such an extreme situation: the complex topic of poverty, an inadequately informed trainer, and a group of participants with a variety of views regarding the training. The fallout from this explosion was so substantial that special focus groups were formed to debrief the experience several weeks later. If you happened to have attended one of these focus groups, you would have heard angry staff members share how they were:

- Insulted that someone from outside of the state had the audacity to tell them about poverty and race as it exists in their own county and ethnic communities.
- Offended by a trainer who believed that being married to an African-American gave her the appropriate credentials to talk about African-American culture.
- Shocked that the trainer failed to demonstrate a grasp of the complexity of poverty and did not provide a glossary of terms that would capture the multiple definitions of poverty.
- Surprised that the trainer failed to provide a diverse set of readings on poverty, especially examples that reflected the views of African-American researchers like William Julius Wilson.
- Committed to the idea that poverty is an important topic and should be effectively addressed in future training programs, especially if the learning activities are structured in a manner that allow for open dialogue to draw upon the participant's personal experiences with poverty.

However, if you were to talk to the trainer after the training experience, you would hear a different story. The trainer would have told you that:

- She received little or no direction to orient her to the participants, the agency's organizational culture, or the agency's expectations of the training (see Notes 1 and 2).
- The participants misunderstood the material and took it personally, believing that she was targeting her examples towards specific ethnic groups, particularly African-Americans.
- They had a pre-conceived bias that because she was Caucasian and from the Midwest, she could not understand poverty, dismissing her from the beginning.

In order to understand how this melt-down might have been avoided, it is necessary to describe how the training program was developed

and what actually occurred during the 6-hour training experience. The case concludes with a set of discussion questions and detailed background notes.

The following is a description of the major actors in this drama:

- The Manager of Staff Development, an experienced practitioner, who wanted to expand a successful diversity training program into the area of understanding poverty and was unaware of the negative connotations of the dated terminology of “the culture of poverty.”
- The training consultant with many years of experience in diversity training who searched for a qualified trainer to deliver the training sessions on the culture of poverty because this topic was not part of his area of expertise.
- The trainer who had many years of training experience in the human services and had conducted training programs on the culture of poverty workshop in different parts of the country.
- The training program participants who were experienced agency staff sincerely interested in learning more about poverty by participating in a pilot program, and fully aware that if it went well, the program would be rolled out for other staff to attend.

BACKGROUND

In the wake of implementing welfare reform and experiencing the first 5 years of implementation (1998-2002), a West Coast county social service agency decided in 2003 to offer a training program on the culture of poverty. Upper management of the social service agency was concerned about the treatment of welfare-to-work program participants by line staff. There was a general sense that staff needed to be more sensitive to the needs of clients. Some of the staff had either come from poverty backgrounds themselves, were former welfare recipients, or had a personal history with the clients (e.g., gone to school together, lived in the same neighborhoods, belonged to the same church or community organizations). A few of the workers had articulated the following attitude to co-workers and clients: “If I made it (out of poverty), why can’t they (do the same)?” Upper management saw this attitude as a form of worker bias that could be transferred into working relationships with clients in the form of impatience and judgmental attitudes, unreturned phone calls, and long waiting periods before appointments. They saw a

need to help workers and staff become more empathetic and responsive to their clients.

Since the majority of clients who come to the agency were poor, managers felt that workers would benefit from a better understanding of client perspectives and lifestyles. In addition, managers wanted to remind employees of the mission and history of the agency and their tradition of serving the poor. They requested a poverty program that could be part of the diversity training series to allow for discussion about what poverty is and the clients served by framing the class as providing information that may not be known to workers about the impoverished populations.

The trainer-developed objectives for the 6-hour training program on the culture of poverty (previously implemented around the country) included:

- acquiring an understanding of the tenets and norms of poverty culture;
- acquiring a capacity to utilize poverty culture norms to help those in the culture;
- acquiring an understanding of the impact of economics on acculturation;
- acquiring insight into past, present, and future perspectives the culture of poverty and how they affect the thinking and actions of the poor, middle class, and the rich; and
- acquiring an understanding of how to assist impoverished customers in finding and keeping jobs that are congruent with their talents, interests, and goals.

These objectives were also translated into the following outcomes:

1. Participants would leave the program with a new or renewed sense of awareness about the differences between the middle and lower classes.
2. Participants would understand that the behaviors displayed by poor people in their own community as survival skills are often misunderstood in the middle-class agency workers.
3. Participants would acquire an expanded understanding about intergenerational poverty so that they would not judge/assess client behaviors through middle-class-value lens, especially in the context of the worker-client relationship.

The objectives were built upon a definition of the culture of poverty that included norms, traditions, behaviors, values, and survival skills

employed by the impoverished and the impact of generational poverty on behavior and thinking. The objectives were linked to the training content that was divided into three sections: (1) an introduction to what it means to live in poverty, (2) a description of the characteristics/behaviors of people living in a poverty culture, and (3) ways for helping those in poverty culture move towards self-sufficiency. The expectations of the agency were that these objectives would help address some of the worker-client issues by providing more information about the barriers faced by poor people (see Note 3).

TRAINER'S PERSPECTIVE OF TRAINING EVENT

While the trainer was unpacking her materials on the first morning of training, she was casually informed by a participant (who had arrived early) that she would be faced with a tough crowd of managers and administrators in the agency, some of whom were not happy about being encouraged to devote an entire day to training in this area. This took the trainer by surprise because she had expected to be presenting to a group of workers who would appreciate the content because they worked daily with poor clients (see Note 4).

As more people started to arrive, they were asked to sit wherever they liked at one of the round tables in groups of 4-6. It appeared by their conversations that, while a few people knew each other, the majority of participants did not know each other well, since most were from different units in the department.

After everyone was seated, the consultant introduced the trainer, describing her background. The trainer elaborated on the consultant's introduction by giving the group more details about her work and personal experience. She stated that she had witnessed poverty through her own daughter's lifestyle of poverty and substance abuse. She mentioned that she was married to an African-American man and had experienced poverty through the connections that he had within the African-American community. Her statements conveyed that, through her observations and experiences, she had a thorough knowledge of poverty and how poor people lived.

Following the introduction of each participant and the distribution of a packet of worksheets and materials for use in discussions, the trainer talked about the federal definitions of poverty-level income, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and a model for Catastrophic Expectations.

After this presentation, the trainer instructed the group to complete a brief self-assessment inventory on the skills and knowledge needed to survive in poverty, middle class, and wealth. For example, the social class inventory had statements related to poverty like, "I am very good at trading or bartering" or "I know what to do when I don't have money to pay the bills," while the middle-class section included items like "I know how to properly set a table" and "I know how to order in a nice restaurant." The section for the wealthy included such statements as "I have several favorite restaurants in different countries of the world" and "I support or buy the work of a particular artist." This inventory was meant to encourage participants to reflect on their own experiences with social class and related cultural characteristics. The results generated a fair amount of discussion and participation from the group, but also a growing sense of frustration with this apparent distraction from the topic of poverty.

The next part of the training focused specifically on the behavior and traits of people living in poverty (see Note 5). The trainer outlined some of the following common characteristics of generational poverty:

1. Importance of relationships (one often has favorites and has only people to rely on),
2. Ownership of people (people are possessions based on a fear about leaving your culture and "getting above your raisings"),
3. Survival orientation (a job is about making enough money to survive, not about career),
4. Polarized thinking (options are hardly ever examined and statements like "I quit" or "I can't" are common),
5. Life is lived in the moment (most of what happens is reactive and in the moment; little planning or goal-setting takes place).

The trainer also provided the following list of resources that poor people lacked: financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationship/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules.

She described different situations to demonstrate how poor people are often able to get the things done by trading services or bartering for things they need in order to survive, even if they received welfare. For instance, people may give rides to friends or neighbors because they own a car in exchange for childcare, haircuts, or appliance repair services. Households may hold rotating meals to ensure that families could get something to eat on a regular basis. One example involved a low-income woman who had gotten a job promotion that enabled her to move out of

the projects into a suburban neighborhood. When this woman moved, she was so happy that she wanted to invite all her friends and family over to celebrate. She held the party in their front yard and her guests parked all over the neighborhood, taking up spaces that were reserved for residents. Because entertainment is very important in poverty culture, the music was blasted loudly, and food and drinks were strewn everywhere. The neighbors in this middle-class suburb, not used to having so much noise and so many people hanging around in the streets, called the police who broke up the party. While the host and her guests did not see that she had done anything wrong, the neighbors protested because it went against their middle-class values.

In addition to the behaviors of the poor, she also noted that there are survival rules and norms in the culture of poverty. Just as ethnic groups have their own cultures, she suggested that poor people also have their own culture as illustrated by the metaphor “crabs in a bucket.” This refers to the idea that poor people are often unable to get ahead because of their peers. For example, if a woman receives money from her church to assist her during financial hardships, she is expected to share that money with other needy members of the church. If she does not, her community will turn its back on her during future times of need. By sharing her money, she is unable to get through her financial difficulties but is still accepted by her friends and peers.

Entering poverty neighborhoods provided another example of the metaphor. People from outside the neighborhood or who look like they do not belong are often viewed suspiciously and approached with caution by residents in poor neighborhoods. She used an example of an African-American neighborhood where she and her African-American husband owned low-income property. She would always use her husband’s car to collect rents because the residents would recognize the car as belonging to an African-American man, even though she is not African-American. As a result, residents would leave her alone and not hassle her.

She also made the case that some people choose to be on welfare when describing her relative as someone who wanted to be on welfare because it allowed her a lot free time and able to enjoy life better on welfare than if the relative was working. She noted that some welfare recipients even pity working people because they have to deal with traffic or be stuck in an office all day. Equipped with the understanding that some recipients are on welfare by choice, she suggested that workers are in a better position to tailor the case plans to the needs of their clients.

The purpose of these examples was to demonstrate that poor people have particular survival skills and generally do not hold the middle-class values as they are not needed to live in their environment. The goal was to present a strengths-based approach to understanding people in poverty, portraying the poor as being resourceful in finding ways to survive. The trainer wanted to convey that the people in poverty have alternative methods of self-sufficiency that should not be judged through middle-class lens.

While she was talking about these concepts, the trainer sensed a negative reaction from the group. Participants started to raise questions about the characteristics of generational poverty. Some people in the room stated that they had come from an impoverished background themselves, or had relatives who were still poor, and that the examples she cited were contrary to their experiences. Participants began to question her sources and demanded research data to support the assertions she made. Some began to get angry and emotional about the topic, claiming that she was falsely characterizing poor people. They said that it was not right to lump all poor people into one stereotype. They suggested that the type of poverty the trainer experienced in the Midwest was entirely different from the poverty people experienced in their county. By the time the group broke for lunch, the mood of the room had become hostile.

The remaining part of the day was designed to link the information from the morning with an afternoon session on how to use the concepts of the culture of poverty to help clients achieve self-sufficiency despite their impoverished environment. By observing, engaging, and encouraging clients living in a culture of poverty, participants were advised to point out what the poor person is doing well, explain where the poor person is falling short, and describe specifically what the poor person might do to improve. However, it became clear in the afternoon session that the trainer had lost most of the group to lack of engagement and negativity.

Even though the trainer was able to get through the entire training day, participants were still focused on their negative reactions to the information shared in the morning session. The participants became more candid in their criticism of her and the content by boldly disagreeing with her and the information she presented. They told her that she was "classist" (distinct from a racist) and that she used too many stereotypes of poor people. While she tried to explain that her comments were not stereotypes but rather skills that poor people use to survive in their social setting, many of the participants continued to demand facts and

figures about poverty, especially based on the data in their own county. They reminded her that she was from a small Midwestern town and was uninformed about urban poverty, especially in the light of her continued use of Midwestern examples that did not appear relevant to the population they served. The day ended with a lot of resentment, frustration, and anger against the trainer from the class. The trainer, who had presented the culture of poverty material many times prior to this group, was disturbed by the fact that the information was not well received. That night, she met with the consultant who gave her tips on how to improve her presentation. He suggested that she not use personal examples to explain concepts and that she stick to the curriculum of the course. In addition to his ideas, she did research on the internet to learn more about the demographics of the county and the population served by the agency.

By the next training day she was better prepared with information about the county and its demographics. She had a better understanding of the people in the agency and their expectations of the training program. As she presented the same information from the previous day, she had expected the same resistance as she received from the first group, but was surprised by the receptivity of the second group. According to the trainer, the second group of participants was not as hostile as the first group.

Overall, she felt that her experience with these participants was a negative one because this was the first time in her 20-year career that she had experienced such opposition to her material. She felt that the participants disliked her from the start of the training with negative comments overheard about her appearance, inappropriate affect, and seemingly irrelevant Midwestern roots.

Most importantly, she felt the participants thought that her description of behaviors displayed by those living in a culture of poverty was specifically referring to people of color, especially to the many African-Americans in the room. She felt that they took the content personally, as if she were talking about their ethnic culture in particular, and the perceived embarrassment about the way the participant's poor family members were characterized resulted in their negative view that she was stereotyping them. She thought that they failed to distinguish between their own poverty and generational poverty of their clients. In addition, she attributed some of the negative reaction to the predominance of middle-class managers in the group of participants because of their lack of daily contact with poor clients and their naïve understanding of what it was like to be poor in today's economy. She wanted the participants to understand the importance of social class (poverty is linked to socio-economic status

and that social class disparities differ from racial differences) and the use of middle-class values in the assessment of poor clients (people live according to the class in which they have been socialized). She tried to assert that though racial and ethnic cultures influence traditions and norms, class differences also influence the way people behave.

PARTICIPANTS' PERSPECTIVE OF TRAINING EVENT

The participants had varying responses to the program when it was first announced (see Note 6). Most expected to learn about the changing demographics and needs of their clients, as well as the nature of their client's cultures. They hoped that the training would provide helpful tools to better serve clients and improve service quality. Others thought that the training would focus more on the role of culture in society than on the behavioral aspects of poverty. They thought it would deal with varying aspects and layers of culture that individuals are exposed to in their work with clients as well as in their own cultures (definitions of culture and how culture influences the development of goals and values of individuals). Others had low expectations of the training because of their "on-the-job" and "in-the-hood" experiences with poverty and wanted to see if there was anything new to learn.

The first impression in the morning session was that the trainer was not only from out of the area, but she was from out of the state, and she was a white woman married to an African-American man. Another impression was related to her definition of poverty income; namely, that a family of four with an income of \$8,000 would be considered living in poverty while the same family of four with an income of \$35,000 would be considered middle class. From the participant's perspective, there was no way for a single person working full-time with an income of \$8,000 to survive in their urban community, much less a family of four. This illustration struck a nerve for some people in the room who felt that, although they held a full-time county job, they considered "themselves" poor because of the exorbitant living expenses in the county. Although this point did not present itself as too contentious at the time, it would later have an effect on how they responded to the trainer's presentation.

Additional sources of tension emerged when the trainer described some of the survival behaviors of people living in poverty. One example, about a single mother on welfare who had to sell drugs and braid hair on the side in order to support herself and her children, sparked a

strong reaction. Although the trainer did not state the ethnicity of the single mother, it was perceived by the group that she was referring to an African-American woman. As one of the participants explained in the follow-up interview, “Who else would braid hair?”

By the end of the morning session, the tension in the room was perceived by many of the participants as almost unbearable. The trainer had managed to either upset the participants or lose their interest. In any case, she alienated herself from most of the people in the room. If participants were not vocalizing their disagreement, their body language indicated that they were either hurt or disinterested in what the trainer had to say. Some people turned their chair so that their backs could be toward the trainer. Many people could be seen doodling on their worksheets or writing in their planners. One woman kept her head down for most of the presentation. She was so angry and upset that she could not look up at the trainer or anyone else. Another person left the room because she was disgusted with the presentation. Others sat passively, obviously not listening or paying attention to what was going on, but not participating in the discussion either. There was a lot of whispering and side conversations at the tables. Although no distinct comments could be heard from the whispering, it was obvious that they were talking about the trainer and the content. After a certain point, there was complete silence in the room aside from the trainer’s voice. There was no interaction between the participants and the trainer. Most people had tuned out, and by lunch time there was a quiet resentment in the room.

During the lunch break, many of the participants expressed their anger to one another regarding the trainer’s presentation. They discussed some of the topics that were covered, particularly what they felt were stereotypes of poor, “black” people. Since most of the participants were high-level, educated, African-American women, participants could not understand why the trainer continued to stereotype black people while being insensitive to her audience. Many people considered not returning for the afternoon session. Others, in fact, did leave.

Not much was remembered about the material covered after lunch. The participants who came back were mainly there to fulfill their commitment or because they did not want to return to work, not because they were interested in anything that the trainer had to say. The mood for the rest of the afternoon was sullen and resentful. They all concurred that the training was irrelevant to their county and was offensive due to the stereotyping of poor people as well as the inappropriate use of personal examples.

When asked about their reflections on the training, the majority of participants responded that it was a negative experience (while many of the participants did not remember whether they had attended the first or second training, the general consensus was that it was an inadequately conducted training program with simplistic and insulting materials). Almost all the participants identified the discussion of common characteristics of generational poverty and the lack of resources in poverty culture as being the pivotal point where the trainer really lost their interest. From then on, she was unable to engage them any further without provoking anger and frustration that was articulated by the more vocal participants.

The training was offensive to most people in the room for different reasons. The participants who thought of themselves as currently poor or coming from poor backgrounds were insulted because they felt that the trainer was stereotyping them and their families as being immoral and without goals and dreams. They felt she presented poor people as being without morals, untrustworthy cheaters and liars who would stoop to any level, even illegal activity to meet their needs. Many African-American participants were outraged because she linked the behaviors of poor people with stereotypes of ethnic people, especially African-Americans. Other participants who identified themselves as not being African-American expressed similar concerns about negative stereotypes of poor people. They agreed that most examples referred to African-American families, although they could not recall whether the trainer directly stated the ethnic identities in her use of examples.

Not only did the trainer use examples that stereotyped poor people, she also gave a one-sided view of her stories. The trainer used an example about how often people ran from her when she came around to collect rent from her tenants. Instead of explaining the reasons why they may have ran out on the rent or what financial hardships people faced, she simply used the example that they did not pay to demonstrate what poor people do when they are faced with such a situation.

Many participants expressed their frustration about the fact that the trainer did not bother to learn about her audience or about the demographics of their county. More than one participant stated that "she obviously did not do her homework before she began the training." Instead, she tried to generalize her experiences and observations from the Midwest in order to apply them to an urban area, not realizing that impoverished populations have different characteristics in different parts of the country. In addition, she did not have valid resources to back up her statements. When asked a question that she was unable to answer, she would defer it, change the topic, or quote the book by Payne (see Note 5).

The participants were also disappointed that they were not given an opportunity to share their own experiences with poverty. Many participants had experienced significant poverty at one point of their life, had family and friends who were in poverty, or considered themselves currently poor. Other people had different experiences working with poor people who did not exhibit the behaviors and values described by the trainer as being part of a culture of poverty. The trainer did not allow for a discussion about the participants' personal experiences, and instead tried to present a one-sided view of what poverty was like.

The lack of the trainer's visible sensitivity to the group's reaction to her presentations also annoyed the participants. They did not feel that she noticed their resistance to her or her content as she did not appear uncomfortable or phased by the comments or body language of the participants. If she was, she either hid it very well or did not know what to do but to continue on with her presentation, despite the fact that there was obvious tension in the room. The trainer did not do anything to acknowledge why things were going poorly for the participants or what she had done to lose the group. Instead, she continued with her curriculum throughout the rest of the day, ignoring the feelings of the participants.

The overwhelming majority of those interviewed agreed that the trainer excessively used inappropriate slang and personal examples to convey her message. She consistently referred to her African-American husband by his street name as if to gain credibility with the group. Stated one participant, "Her message early on was that she was married to a black man, and she had read a book about poor people, so she was the authority on blackness." If this was her intention, it backfired because participants not only found it excessive and unnecessary, they also felt that it was unprofessional of her to divulge so many irrelevant details about her life without relating it to the literature on poverty.

While most of the participants did not remember the content of the training, they did recall that it was a bad experience, a waste of time and a waste of money. However, a few participants thought that the training went well with interesting and useful information that could be applied in the field. Several participants, recognizing that there was conflict in the room, stated that they were perplexed as to why so many people had gotten angry. They said that they felt the tension in the room but were confused about why people were so upset. One person was embarrassed at the way her colleagues disrespectfully treated the trainer. Others felt that although the delivery of the content could have been improved, the general presentation and ideas represented in it were interesting and should be repeated with another trainer.

After a total of 2 day-long training sessions with different groups of participants, the majority consensus was that the training program contained offensive and questionable material that was delivered in an inappropriate manner. These factors hampered the participants' desire to listen to the trainer's presentation and the trainer's ability to engage the group. Due to the complex nature of poverty in terms of how it is presented and how it is perceived, neither the trainer's nor the participants' expectations were met.

Discussion Questions

1. How much of our understanding of poverty needs to be based on socio-economic factors (i.e., social class) and how much on racial/ethnic factors?
 - Does your answer change when you learn that people coping with poverty barely survive with incomes that are above the federal poverty line?
 - Does your answer change when you learn that the majority of the poor are Caucasian?
2. To what extent is the concept of inter-generational poverty a form of situational entrapment whereby urban poverty neighborhoods or rural impoverished villages lack the opportunities (economic, social, educational, medical, etc.) for upward mobility?
3. How much of the process of escaping from poverty is explained by motivational factors affected by limited family support (human behavior perspective) and how much can be attributed to the existence of a safety net of support (education, health care, crime prevention, job training, etc.) located in their community (social environment perspective)?
4. How might you have advised the trainer to improve her presentation, especially with regard to the use an array of social science concepts of poverty?

NOTES

1. *About the agency and the community*

This case study takes place in a public social service agency serving a diverse metropolitan county. This urban county has about 1.5 million residents, with ethnic minority groups making up roughly two-thirds of the population. Based on the federal poverty level, about 11% lived below the poverty line in 2003.

However, because of the high cost of living in this county, the federal poverty level is inappropriate for the people living there. Many people still live in relative poverty, even with stable employment. The agency serves 11.3% of the county's residents. Services are delivered through five departments: Agency Administration and Finance, Adult and Aging Services, Children and Family Services, Workforce and Benefit Administration, and the Policy Office.

2. *About the training director and consultant*

The agency's Manager of Staff Development contracted with a consulting firm that specialized in diversity training to provide the course. The contract was based on successful prior experiences with this local firm including on a working relationship that spanned many years (it was familiar with the agency's organizational culture and the demographic characteristics of the county). However, the firm did not have experience in providing training on the topic of poverty and therefore facilitated a sub-contract with an out-of-state trainer.

Only telephone contacts between the consultant and the trainer were used to discuss the previously designed training program in order to review the topics. The night before the first day of the training, the consultant met face-to-face with the out-of-state trainer to brief her on the culture of the agency and the demographics of the participant group, as well as the demographics of the population in the county. Because the agency had bought the training program after reviewing the standard outline, the trainer did not customize or tailor the content for the participants. Other than the phone conversations and the meeting, there was no other contact with the trainer. There was no direct communication between the trainer and the agency Manager of Staff Development prior to her arrival on the first day of the training.

3. *About the development of this teaching case*

The case is based on a general description of what happened during the 2 days of training from the perspective of the trainer, the training consultant, the manager of staff development, and the participants. These events were recalled 3 years later during a series of phone interviews. The length of time that passed between the training events and the interviews may have limited everyone's capacity to recall the exact details of training (although many of the interviewees reflect vivid and impassioned portrayals of the explosive events). Out of a total of 38 participants, twenty-three interviews were conducted. While the descriptions of the training experience do not represent everyone's perception of what happened, they represent the perceptions of the majority the respondents.

4. *About the trainer*

The trainer was from an Ohio-based consulting and training group. She had over 20 years of experience, providing training and consulting services in Social Service Agencies across the country. She had given over 300 trainings on the particular topic of poverty. Her personal experience with the poverty population included 250 interviews conducted with impoverished families in their homes while coaching Ohio Welfare-to-Work Caseworkers and Child Protective Caseworkers during home visits. She had strong references based on her previously designed workshop on the culture of poverty.

5. *About the origins of the term "culture of poverty"*

The concept of the "culture of poverty," first coined by Oscar Lewis in the 1950s, is historically associated with his 1959 ethnographic study of poor Mexican families (*Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*).

Lewis describes the values and behaviors of poor Mexicans as a way of explaining how poor people live in impoverished environments. He describes the attitudes and beliefs specific in poor families as a way of life learned at an early age and passed on from generation to generation in order to cope against poverty. Individuals living in the culture of poverty can exhibit behaviors that include sexual promiscuity resulting in out-of-wedlock births, strong feelings of marginality, helplessness, and dependency, lack of clear judgment, and experiences that reflect limited knowledge of personal troubles, local conditions, and their own way of life. While the subject of this study included only Mexican families, Lewis generalized these characteristics beyond both national borders and ethnic races.

Lewis' approach was used by *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (1998) by Ruby K. Payne, the book on which the trainer as being relied upon heavily for her information. Payne's working definition of poverty is "the extent to which an individual does without resources" (p. 16), which include financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationship/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules. The book includes such topics as the role of language and story, hidden rules among the classes, characteristics of generational poverty, and discipline to help primary school educators understand the environments and behaviors of impoverished students in order to better respond to their needs. There are vignettes and scenarios that attempt to explain how poor people live. The author focuses on people in generational poverty, which is defined as being in poverty for two generations or more. The trainer uses much of Payne's material, especially the characteristics of generational poverty, to focus on the absence of resources in a culture of poverty.

It was interesting to note that neither the trainers or staff development manager were aware of the degree to which the term "culture of poverty" had become outdated in the social science literature although some of the participants seemed to know that the term had been discredited in some circles due to its use by outsiders to implicitly "blame the victims" of poverty for perpetuating their condition.

6. *About the training program participants*

The training participants were organized into two groups of approximately 20 in each, with one group meeting on a Tuesday and the other on a Thursday. Both groups were comprised of predominantly African-American staff members who held supervisory and management positions along with a few who held direct service line worker positions. While the county has a long commitment to fostering diversity training given the diversity of its client population as well as staff (current agency director is African-American and his predecessor is Asian American), it is also a county beleaguered by years of budget cuts, labor-management problems, and continuously being asked "to do more with less" in their efforts to address the complexity of urban poverty by policy makers at all levels of government.