

# Theory Doesn't Work in Praxis — A Voluntary Welfare Agency Looks at Poverty

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This article is presented in two parts, reflecting different approaches in the work of the Brotherhood of St Laurence.<sup>1</sup>

The first section was written by David Griffiths and Peter Hollingworth of the Social Issues Department and this includes the key ideas presented to the Poverty Inquiry.<sup>2</sup> This department, which is concerned with social action, community education and public debate seeks to change public attitudes to poverty.

The second section is by Concetta Benn and Michael Liffman of the Family Centre, a pilot demonstration project in involving 60 poor families. The Centre has sought to operationalise some of the concepts expressed by the Social Issues Department.

Taken together, the first section seeks to present a new perspective on poverty and challenge some of the current assumptions. The second section examines these propositions and refines them on the basis of research knowledge and participant observation.

## Section I: Some Basic Considerations Arising out of the Social Issues Department

### Categorising the Poor

Words like 'poverty', 'poor' and 'disadvantaged' have become convenient and sometimes dangerous shorthand devices used to categorise low-income groups. The word poverty describes people who exist at an inadequate level of consumption, who have insufficient food, clothing, shelter and other commodities regarded as necessary for living in reasonable comfort. However, poverty is also an emotive word which has been used to imply inferiority and failure. The poor are seen to have failed to attain an adequate level of consumption and they are regarded as a problem or a failure be-

1. The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a voluntary general welfare agency predominantly concerned with low income groups. Its headquarters are in the inner Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy.
2. In 1972 the Commonwealth Commission of Inquiry into Poverty was set up to undertake a two year investigation into poverty. The B.S.L. has made a submission to this Inquiry.

cause of this. Thus the use of words like poverty often leads people to confuse the consequence for the cause.

Some of the difficulties involved in using the term poverty arise because of the explicit and implicit assumptions behind it. To say that an individual or a family is poor is to make a judgment and invite a comparison which creates social distance between the poor and the non-poor. This relationship is often perceived in presumptuous terms — between 'us' who are comfortable, affluent and aware and 'them' who are deprived, unfortunate and ignorant.

Social distance between the poor and the non-poor is re-inforced and extended by the process William Ryan (1972) calls 'blaming the victim'. A crude version is the explanation which claims that the poor are different by nature, that they are responsible for their own poverty and that they have failed to take advantage of their opportunities. A more subtle and more modern view attributes the condition of poverty to environmental factors: the stigma of poverty remains a stigma, but is said to be acquired rather than genetic in origin.

To blame the victim is to ignore a whole set of structural and attitudinal factors which might otherwise be regarded as relevant — the unequal distribution of incomes, social stratification, political struggle, ethnic and racial group conflict, and inequality of power. Ryan argues that people 'blame the victim' because psychologically they need to reconcile their guilt over self interest and their humanitarian impulses. The more affluent cannot bring themselves to criticise a social or economic system from which they have benefited, yet they also want to express compassion. They would like to see something done about poverty but not at their expense. Coming to terms with this is difficult for it necessitates recognising that the social structure re-inforces poverty, inequality and powerlessness.

The dilemma is resolved by viewing problems as occurring to categories of persons. These problems are regarded as exceptions to the rule and they occur as a result of individual defect, accident, or unfortunate circumstances. Their solution lies in the development of particular policies tailored to individual cases. The traditional solution to poverty lies in helping individual poor people to adapt, conform and function better in the community. In a technologically advanced country like Australia the poor are a minority group and are designated as poor by the defining majority who are not poor. Non-poor people make policies for, create institutional structures for, and deliver services to people who are poor and who need help.

Until recently very little attention has been given to such matters as changing social structures to meet human need or to changing majority attitudes. It is essential to realise that the problem of poverty in an affluent society is not so much the problem of the individual poor person as a problem of society itself. The poor are part of our total society and are enmeshed in its policies, value systems, beliefs and structures. Judgmental and paternalistic attitudes of the non-poor often stem from a lack of first hand involvement in the problem and a lack of insight into its causes.

Poverty is a result of a constellation of interlocking structural factors. Inadequate health, education, housing, employment and income which all interlock to trap or reinforce poor people in poverty. In this respect it is appropriate to refer to a self-perpetuating 'poverty cycle' which is often passed on from generation to generation. However, poverty should not simply be viewed as 'problematical' or even 'cultural' but as 'structural'. The eradication of poverty requires structural reform, not merely personal adaptation.

French economist Andre Gorz has made a distinction between meaningful reforms and meaningless reforms. He defines a meaningful reform as 'one which is conceived not in terms of what is possible within the framework of a given system and administration, but in view of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands'. He defines a meaningless reform as 'one which subordinates its objectives to the criteria of rationality and practicability of a given system and policy' (1968: 7). Gorz then, is basically arguing that particular policies operate within a

social context and have a double-edged potential to liberate or restrict. Proposed policies should be examined with the following questions in mind:

What effect will the proposed policy have?

How is it intended to implement the policy?

Are there alternative policies?

What sacrifices will have to be made to ensure that the policy succeeds?

The major challenge is to develop meaningful policies that will not stigmatise a 'poor' group. Most poverty programmes tend to define and categorise the 'poor' and then classify their characteristics and circumstances. It is essential that researchers and service personnel alike avoid traditional scapegoating practices which first define a problem — poverty, and then a problem group — the poor.

#### The Consumer Context

Poverty must be understood within the context of a consumer society and the financial means of consumption. We have already suggested that poverty is primarily an inadequate level of consumption as experienced by those people who have insufficient food, clothing, shelter and other commodities regarded in a particular society as necessary for living in reasonable comfort. As our economy is based on money and the capacity to purchase consumer goods, inadequate levels of consumption are the direct result of an insufficient income. The initial approach to the solution of poverty must lie in the area of income security. Any consideration of income security must include three key factors — a sufficient amount of money, a regular amount of money and a government guarantee that both will be available.

It seems therefore essential to improve the financial circumstances of low-income people as a first step before any value judgments are made about their inability to handle credit or their lack of management skills. It is unreasonable to argue that poor people are bad planners or managers until they have first been given the financial resources with which to manage. This is not to say that an increased income is the sole solution but the first priority. Some poor people will function well with a simple increase in income while others may require further assistance in improving their overall personal functioning in areas such as family budgeting, household and credit management.

### The Institutionalisation of Need

There is a tendency to avoid personal responsibility and involvement by allowing governments, welfare organisations, professionals and experts to monopolise the definition of need whether it concerns the provision of geriatric services, special education for handicapped children or appropriate fees for medical practitioners. Government organisations and professional groups with a concern about the poor often express this concern in the interests of the disseminator rather than the receiver. Judgmental and paternalistic attitudes often shape the underlying philosophy of many statutory and voluntary organisations ranging across the broad fields of health, welfare, education, employment, housing and the law. These negative views are also embedded in the instruction manuals and operating procedures of the organisations concerned. Thus, institutional values of the service agencies themselves often work against the well-being and overall development of poor people.

We need to develop new ways of responding to individual needs other than such responses as creating commissions of enquiry, establishing welfare bureaucracies and hiring professionals. We need to look at ways of:

- (a) Encouraging individuals to release and utilise their own creative resources and insights in the resolution of problems.
- (b) Sharing skills, knowledge and experience so that people can participate equally in this problem resolution.
- (c) Opening access to organisations to enable individuals to understand the difficulties as well as the obstacles to necessary change.

The consumer society makes an objective definition of poverty even more difficult. Ivan Illich suggests that the definition of poverty is constantly being redefined by technocrats 'at will'. He argues that poverty 'refers to those who have fallen behind an advertised ideal of consumption in some important respect'. He argues that basic needs 'have been translated by a society into demands for scientifically produced commodities' that is, various organisations 'claim a professional, political, and financial monopoly over the social imagination, setting standards of what is feasible' (1971:3).

The argument, based on rising consumer aspirations and expectations within an over-

all social context, is that if certain commodities are accepted as necessary or normative, poor people have as much right of access to them as anyone else.

### Participation

It is stated with recurring frequency that poor people have no control over decision-making processes, no opportunity to participate in the programmes which are usually provided for them and no sense of being able to control their own future. The problem of powerlessness thus emerges as fundamental in any serious attempt to tackle poverty at its roots.

One of the major aims of the Brotherhood Family Centre is to tackle the problem of powerlessness. The major focus in the programme is to transfer more responsibility and power to the families themselves. The experience of our Family Centre is already showing that some low-income people have their own kind of verbal capacity to express ideas with coherence and force and are not without the ability to implement programmes in areas which are familiar to them. When it comes to the question of breaking new and unfamiliar ground, the involvement of professional people and additional resources might be important although it should be ensured that these do not dominate the initiatives of the people themselves. The purpose of external resources and professional staff in local groups should be to enhance the functioning of those groups, to assist in personal development, to improve communication between people and to build up resources which can be shared when a particular need arises. Welfare organisations need to be especially careful that they do not assume all the power and responsibility for new initiatives such as we see with the Australian Assistance Plan,<sup>3</sup> but do everything possible to involve new groups of people in the task of eliminating poverty.

### Accountability

Accountability goes hand in hand with participation. In the attempt to promote better policies, better legislation and better services, the notion of accountability plays a most important role. In limited terms this has been understood in the past to mean

3. 'The essential purpose of the Australian Assistance Plan is the establishment of autonomous community-based social planning units which will have the dual role of stimulating increased local involvement in social welfare activity and of complementing at the local level the statutory social planning function of public bodies' (Social Welfare Commission, 1974: 1).

that bodies receiving money from governments or from the public should be directly accountable to the givers as to how they spend their money and how programmes are developed.

There is however a wider meaning of the term accountability relating to such matters as the free access of all citizens to public information, the development of a system of appeals tribunals to deal with citizens' grievances and complaints, the development of social audit systems and the appointment of ombudsmen. The point behind these proposals is that people will feel encouraged to seek information, to develop their thoughts and ideas and mobilise groups into action for the improvement of social conditions.

Past experience with client groups within the Brotherhood indicates that many poor people have a deep seated fear of authority in relation to our major social institutions.

Our experience supports some of the views expressed by Oscar Lewis (1964) in his book *The Children of Sanchez* which revealed that people in poverty often viewed representatives of the dominant classes, the police, teachers, welfare workers, lawyers and clergy with mistrust and suspicion. Lewis has also referred to their feelings of helplessness, alienation, marginality, and their disengagement from most institutions. It is a moot point whether these responses are part of the 'culture of poverty' so much as structural alienation.

Thus it is imperative that our social institutions and their staff must be required to change. Such change will involve humane and accepting attitudes on the part of officials, and legislation and organisational practice aimed to assist the individual as a person. This will also include the development of smaller, flexible, less bureaucratic, and more accessible services.

## Section II: The Family Centre

The thrust of the discussion in Section I is that poverty is not an isolated factor arising out of an individual's behaviour, but a widespread condition, imposed and maintained by the basic structures and processes of contemporary society. The argument includes some suggestions (but not a developed analysis) as to the causes of poverty; in the original Submission to the Poverty Inquiry, on which this discussion was based, specific proposals for the eradication of poverty were also offered.

This general perspective on poverty is

probably shared by the staff of the Family Centre Project, and indeed the Project can be seen as a logical response to that view. The Family Centre is an experimental action/research project working with sixty poor families. It provides extensive resources, financial and other, to those families, 'blames' society, not the victim, and attempts a 'non-institutional' approach. The Project encourages the participation of the clients in decision-making within the Centre and aims to provide the families with 'power over decision-making', 'power over resources', 'power over relationships' and 'power over information'.

The experience of the Family Centre does, however, require comment to be made on some of the points made in Section I. Our concern is not to offer an overall critique of the whole discussion, but to suggest aspects of that argument which the experience of the Family Centre has shown require modification or more detailed consideration.

1. One issue arising out of Section I concerns the role of the Family Centre Project as an effective agent of change. Fundamental to the analysis of poverty which it presents is the proposition that poverty must be understood as reflecting fundamental power relationships within society. In this view, it is often necessary to be sceptical — and even suspicious — of many anti-poverty programmes which, in Gorz's (1968) terms, do not offer 'meaningful reforms'. However we must remember that Utopianism or self-indulgent, unsupported, revolutionary schemes may be equally meaningless.

It is important that the Family Centre Project be guided by an understanding of its place in the process of social change. The Third Report of the Family Centre Project (Benn, 1974: 18) discusses aspects of this issue: It explains that the Family Centre Project is a 'demonstration project', which is:

A small programme, funded for a definite period of time [its counterpart in industry is usually called a 'pilot project']. It has specific objectives and approaches which are subjected to critical scrutiny; it serves a select area and population with the fervent hope that the lessons it learns and 'demonstrates' through the rigours of scientific research, will somehow lead to large-scale adoption and major shifts in the aims, styles, resources, and effectiveness of major

social service organisations and programmes (Rein, 1970: 138).

The decision to set up a demonstration project reflects a particular view of the place of voluntary agencies in contemporary society:

The difference, of course between the old services and the Family Centre Project is the numbers of families involved. The issue here is whether it is better to give aid to 600 families without altering their social and economic condition or to give 60 families considerable resources to really change their own situations in the ways which they desire. The first alternative is tantamount to believing that a voluntary agency or a group of voluntary agencies can eliminate poverty in Australia. Despite years of well-intentioned effort poverty is still well entrenched in Australian society and will remain there until the issue is taken into the political arena. This means the solution to poverty lies in the hands of governments, and all that voluntary agencies can do is to demonstrate and test out the validity of ideas which claim to improve services and institutions, then to pressurise governments to formulate social policies based on well-trying successful initiatives, and to change the social institutions that produce, re-inforce and maintain poverty. (Benn, 1974: 19)

While the fundamental values and aims of the Project are conceived 'in view of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands' (Gorz, 1968: 7) the means by which it seeks to 'demonstrate' these notions are diverse and specific. As a respected and professional welfare agency, the Brotherhood is able to communicate its experiences extensively and with authority. For this reason, the Family Centre Project includes a substantial research component. As a Project whose central tenet is maximum client participation and involvement, 'direct action' (be it through personal contact, 'consciousness raising', welfare rights movements, the media, or demonstrations) is likely to become increasingly prominent. As a practised welfare lobby in the political arena, political means of social change can also be tapped by the Family Centre Project.

The approach to social change here is pragmatic rather than abstract. It is one which can be implemented, and one which seeks to avoid the apparently insoluble debate on reform and revolution.

2. Analyses of poverty frequently discuss two different explanations of poverty — the 'cultural' and the 'situational' models. The terms of the debate, and its overt implications for policy, are well known. In brief, the 'cultural' model argues that poverty and its disabilities have become embedded in a way of life, a 'culture', which is self-perpetuating and passed on from generation to generation and which, in fact, keeps poor people poor. So entrenched is this culture that a change in the immediate circumstances of the poor, such as a more adequate income, is insufficient to throw off the general syndrome of poverty. Accordingly, anti-poverty programmes must be directed at fundamentally changing those cultural patterns of the poor which prevent them from utilising new opportunities, by means of, for instance, compensatory education. In alleged contrast, the 'situational' model claims that the life styles of the poor are simply pragmatic and even ingenious responses to the deprived circumstances of poverty. A change in the circumstances of poverty, such as an adequate income, or improved housing, will, therefore, eliminate the needs for a distinctive life-style, and the poor will cease to be poor.

The debate, and its immediate policy implications, is relatively clear. Less clear are the uses which are made of this debate for political and academic purposes. Advocates of policies directed at removing the societal causes of poverty tend to support the situational view because it proposes a more direct relationship between social change and the relief of poverty and avoids the more conservative implications of the cultural view. The opening statement of the Social Issues Department, in its strong criticism of society's tendency to 'blame the poor' and in its emphasis on structural change, tends to the situational approach.

It is only occasionally stressed that the empirical differences between the two models are not clear or dramatic and that there are areas of overlap. (After how many years — or generations — does a 'situational' response become a 'cultural' one? What sort of factors constitute 'situational' change, as compared with 'cultural' change?)

Within the Family Centre Project an extensive and sophisticated longitudinal and comparative survey is being carried out, investigating, among other matters, these explanations of poverty.<sup>4</sup> Already though,

observation suggests that these all-embracing formulations do not adequately deal with reality and, in fact, even distort policy implications. It is quite apparent that there are different causes of poverty and that different sorts of disadvantage or disability may perpetuate themselves in different ways.

A single mother (unmarried, deserted, separated or widowed) living on her statutory entitlement is, almost literally, forced to be poor. As long as her income is inadequate, her life-style, culture, aspirations and so on are irrelevant. She is poor. From this initial disability, a range of other disadvantages are likely to be set in motion. Material deprivation, reduced personal resilience, educational and psychological disadvantage to children, are all possible. Only in a few, very specific areas (e.g., remedial education) will society aid, through compensatory means, such a woman whose poverty it perpetuates.

A poorly educated, unskilled labourer may work only occasionally, even at times of high employment. He will be poor because this society is reluctant to support an unwilling worker. His unwillingness to work may be due to the fact that the sort of employment available to such a person is arduous, unpleasant and unrewarding. He may come from an unstable, deprived background which did not provide him with the personal strength or motivation to work constantly. He may be alcoholic, asthmatic, psychopathic or (let it be admitted) lazy. He may, thoughtfully and conscientiously, question the work ethic. In each case, a range of identifiable factors, arising out of the structure, values and processes of society, operate to his disadvantage.

Again, a poorly-educated, unskilled labourer, in regular employment, but with a large family, is likely to be poor. In fact, if his family is unusually large, he is likely to be poorer on a wage than on Unemployment Benefit.

The Family Centre membership includes all these people. They are all poor due to interactions between a varied range of personal and social factors. In some areas, their circumstances and behaviour can be explained in terms of a cultural or a situational model. In some areas, neither apply clearly. Certainly, no one model explains the range of circumstances. Furthermore,

4. The bulk of this study is being undertaken by Gordon Ternowetsky, of LaTrobe University, Melbourne.

it is likely — although not inevitable — that the children of these families will continue to be poor. Their situation is even harder to characterise in cultural/situational terms.

The experience of the Family Centre Project, therefore, is of considerable relevance to theoretical enquiries into the nature of poverty. It suggests that the dichotomy between the cultural and situational models of poverty is empirically useful only at a crude level. It suggests that the casting of the debate in these terms is due, in part, to political rather than empirical reasons, and is unhelpful and unnecessary. In order to direct anti-poverty programmes at social rather than personal conditions, it is not necessary to opt for an all-embracing 'situational' explanation for poverty. In fact, the variety of social factors which cause and maintain poverty, and their implications for policy, can more readily be identified by the use of a less confining model.

The research programme of the Family Centre will provide some leads and is already showing directions for further research. There is a need for richer and more sensitive enquiries into the nature of poverty in Australian society and for more flexible conceptualisation. In particular, an understanding is needed of the different ways in which people are able to cope with the disadvantages of low-income living, and of the factors which result in, and from, only some poor people becoming caught up in the welfare network. Stringent empirical analyses of the 'culture' of poverty are needed in order to ascertain whether such a 'culture' exists, and can be identified (and whether it is not also to be found in non-poor populations).

3. The analysis of poverty, to which this discussion is a response, recognises that it encompasses a far-reaching critique of the materialist values of this society, and of the role of capitalistic structures and the media, in maintaining these values. It also acknowledges that it would be wrong to require that the poor be those who bear the brunt of an attack on that society by going without the material goods and values to which most people have access.

In fact, this type of critique often becomes the basis of a large-scale, integrated analysis of society, and one which carries with it considerable political implications. However, this analysis of our society, which to a considerable extent is the ex-

explicit value-base of the Project and is largely accepted by most of the staff, is by no means fully shared by the families. Some of the families are politically unimaginative, some politically conservative. The social action initiatives, which staff see as an essential aim of the Project, take time to develop and are not understood by all families.

There is, therefore, the danger, in a radical anti-poverty programme, that the clients may become the cannon-fodder for the staff's ideas and values. Thus the staff may criticise, and ultimately reject, the 'work ethic' in capitalist society, but it is the families who will have to accept the consequences of not working in a society based on that ethic. Similarly, education, or 'consciousness-raising', in the sense of providing understanding or clarifying alternatives so that people may make more meaningful decisions, has a vital role in such a Project; but it must not become a process of manipulation, nor slide into the somewhat totalitarian assumption that there is a 'correct' consciousness and a 'false' consciousness. The Family Centre is steadily evolving a theory of 'developmental' work which attempts to meet these difficulties, as an alternative to the more conventional approaches to social work.

4. The Family Centre Project is a direct attempt to provide an alternative to 'the institutionalisation of need' described in the opening discussion. 'Participation' and 'de-professionalisation' — both of which are basic to such an alternative — are among the main emphases of the Project and much attention is being paid to their documentation.

In this sense, the Family Centre is an arguing the needs for localised, accessible, community programmes, reflects the dramatic change in direction of radical thinking in recent years. Until recently, strong central government action was urged as the chief means of change; the heightened fear of bureaucracy and 'state capitalism' and the emphasis on participation, is expressed in the current upsurge of interest in local initiatives.

In this sense, the Family Centre is an unusually self-contained and participatory venture — even to the extent of offering

guaranteed income support to each family. At the same time, many of the social processes which most strongly affect the families are located in the basic structures of society and can only be modified by strong legislative action. Welfare provision, education, employment and the like are determined by highly centralised power relationships and, to be effective, local programmes will need to have a direct chain of access to that power. Isolated local ventures may be more romantic than realistic.

Decentralized programmes have their own potential difficulties. Parochialism, duplication, lack of uniformity, competitiveness may be the costs of such an approach. And it is true that local programmes may, in fact, leave the power arrangements where they have always been — with the more confident, verbal and trained middle-class groups.

#### Conclusion

This polemic is an attempt by the workers of the Brotherhood of St Laurence to state their current views about poverty. It should be evident from the discussion that the Brotherhood view of poverty is not rigid and static, but continually changing and developing in the light of its contact with poor people and its growing knowledge of the quality and nature of their lives. This knowledge together with the wide variety of backgrounds and experience of Brotherhood workers enables the dialectic to continue and to become a living part of the lives of all people associated with the Brotherhood — both the poor and its workers.

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