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NATIONAL ENERGY & UTILITY AFFORDABILITY COALITION



# Communications within the Culture of Poverty

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# Our Own Bias

How do you feel when you run into a person panhandling on the corner? Does it make you uncomfortable?

How about someone who comes in for financial help but has the latest I phone or their nails done professionally? Your phone is a couple of years old, and you have not had a manicure in a few years.

How about when someone comes in who has dirty clothes on?

Poverty makes us uncomfortable. So it is important to recognize and talk about our own bias.

## Question...True or false

The majority of American's believe poverty is caused by people's behavior and bad choices.

# True

Because we have a strong belief in America that everyone has the same chance of making it, and because **people are uneducated about the realities that people in poverty face**, poverty causes are attributed to behavior and choices. A child born into homelessness, hunger, and illiteracy is believed to have the same opportunities as the child born into privilege. We do not take into consideration the **impact of environment** on behavior and choices. People facing the crisis of poverty are not likely to "behave" and respond in the same way as someone without those stresses. **Do you respond the same when you are stressed as when you are not?** Your circumstance may not always allow you to be "good" and plan ahead for your future. Most people in poverty do what they have to do to get basic survival needs and to help those they love who are also in crisis. It is hard to think about having a future when your family is hungry today.

# Today's Discussion

- Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs
- Social and Economic Class Distinctions
- Hidden Rules
- Oral and Print Culture
- Language
- Poverty Crisis
- Tools

# MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

ABRAHAM MASLOW



MORALITY,  
CREATIVITY,  
SPONTANEITY,  
PROBLEM SOLVING,  
LACK OF PREJUDICE,  
ACCEPTANCE OF FACTS

## SELF-ACTUALIZATION

SELF-ESTEEM, CONFIDENCE,  
ACHIEVEMENT, RESPECT OF  
OTHERS, RESPECT BY OTHERS

## ESTEEM

FRIENDSHIP, FAMILY,  
SEXUAL INTIMACY

## LOVE/BELONGING

SECURITY OF BODY, OF EMPLOYMENT, OF  
RESOURCES, OF MORALITY, OF THE FAMILY,  
OF HEALTH, OF PROPERTY

## SAFETY

BREATHING, FOOD, WATER, SEX, SLEEP,  
HOMEOSTASIS, EXCRETION

## PHYSIOLOGICAL

**Abraham Harold Maslow** (April 1, 1908 - June 8, 1970) was a psychologist who studied positive human qualities and the lives of exemplary people. In 1954, Maslow created the Hierarchy of Human Needs and expressed his theories in his book, Motivation and Personality.

**Self-Actualization** - A person's motivation to reach his or her full potential. As shown in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a person's basic needs must be met before self-actualization can be achieved.



# Social and Economic Class Distinctions

## Generational Poverty

- Focus is on the day
- Highly mobile
- Education – not a lot family history
- Jobs – unstable, lack promotion opportunities
- Property – rarely owned
- Higher rates of illiteracy
- Stays in the moment

# Social and Economic Class Distinctions

## Working Class Poverty

- Social Status through work
- Working, but no money for extras
- Property – most do not own/ rent
- Health care – few with access
- Living paycheck to paycheck
- Focus is making it to next check
- Poverty seen as a person deficiency



# Social and Economic Class Distinctions

## Middle Class

- ◉ Degree of economic independence, but little social capital/power
- ◉ Breadwinners usually have higher education / skills
- ◉ Concerned about property values
- ◉ Disposable income for entertainment
- ◉ Upper middle class – hire people to care for children

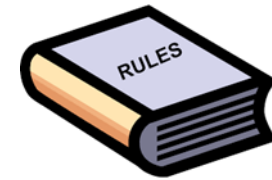
Taken from Amy Yardley's poverty presentation

# Social and Economic Class Distinctions

## Owning Class Rich

- Assets provide income – work not necessary
- Featured as “model citizens”
- Owns more than one home
- Gives parties for celebrities, politicians and supports charities

# Within each class there is a hidden set of rules.



Cultural Rules	Poverty Class	Middle Class	Wealthy Class
Possessions	People	Things	One of a kind, legacies, pedigrees
Money	To be used, spent	To be managed	To be conserved, invested
Food	Quantity - is there enough	Quality is important	Presentation
Clothing	Personal style, expression	Quality and acceptance in middle class norms, label important	Artistic sense, designer
Education	Valued as abstract	Critical for success	Tradition for making and maintaining connections
Driving Forces	Survival, relationships, entertainment	Work, achievement	Financial, political, social connection
Family Structure	Tends to be matriarchal	Tends to be patriarchal	Depends on who has the money
Humor	People and sex	Situations	Social faux pas

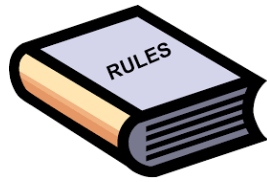
# Membership in a Social Class



Membership in a social class is determined by the individuals ability to identify and respond to a complex set of expectations shaped by value, beliefs and habit of it's members.

We associate with people with whom we identify with because everyone has the same social and cultural expectations.





In moving between classes it can be challenging to know what the unwritten social rules and expectations are.

What are the hidden rules for

Your place of work?

For your home?

For this training?

## Question... True or false

People earning minimum wage  
are able to afford  
a modest, two bedroom  
apartment in America?

# True

In one tiny town in Georgia, a person earning minimum wage can afford a modest two bedroom apartment, but **FALSE** in the rest of America. HUD reports that with the exception of the tiny Georgia town, a person earning minimum wage will pay the bulk of their income for shelter and have little or no resources for food, electricity, health care and other basic needs.

# Oral vs Print culture



# Oral Culture

- Relationships are at the heart of everything
- Spontaneous – strong desire for variety
- Repetitive story telling
- Everything learned within context of story
- Comfortable with emotions /express when felt
- Present orientated – here and now
- Interruptions in conversation normal /expected
- Lots of self disclosure / oversharing / TMI
- Look to emotions, facial expressions, gestures from as indicator of caring and connection
- Entertainment is often a strong motivator / priority
- Primary sense organ is the ear

# Print Culture

- Linear thought process, first this than this
- Time based, future focused
- Analytical / abstract thinking skills
- Ability to separate and disconnect from emotions
- Things learned outside of personal experience
- Self disciplined / focus long term goals / one idea at a time
- Ability to delay gratification
- Takes turns in communications
- Primary sense organ is the eye

# What is your communication style?

Any revelations about your style?



When we get stressed or busy we tend to revert back to our **DEFAULT** communication style.

Be aware of your own communication style and conscious of when you need to adapt that style to meet the needs of the clients.

One communication style isn't better than another...it is just different.

# Crisis Thinking

- Primal brain function
- Can't reason
- Can't think things through
- Only see what is right in front of you

TIP: Picture a visor

# Language

## Formal Register

- There is a standard sentence syntax and word choice used in school and work.
- Complete sentences and specific word choices are utilized
- The pattern is to get to the point

## Casual Register

- Language used between friends and is characterized by a limited word choice (400-800 words)
- Conversation is dependent on non-verbal assists
- Sentence syntax is often incomplete
- The pattern is to go around and around

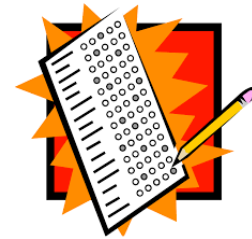
## Some Facts

The ability to use the Formal Register is a hidden rule of the middle class.



The majority of minorities and poor students do not have access to the formal register at home.

All state test given at school are in the formal register.



The paperwork we use to serve our clients is in the formal register.

# Tools / Strategies

- Adapt your approach to the clients culture
- Slow down and listen to the story
- Understand that people who are poor may have fears or negative attitudes about workers – work to give them a new frame of reference
- Don't get frustrated by TMI, interruptions, not getting to the point, hearing the same story over and over or jumping from one topic to the next
- Don't talk down or condescending to the customer / client
- Use simple, familiar words, examples people can relate to
- Give information verbally, manageable steps
- Make eye contact
- Focus on building relationships
- Improve communications through using stories
- Allow time and flexibility for spontaneity
- Allow for connecting and relating to emotions
- Understand the immediacy of poverty

# The Voices of Poverty

“It’s feeling that normal daily challenges are magnified one hundred times more because I am that many more times powerless”



# The Voices of Poverty

“Not being able to support my family on my income level. I grew up this way and thought it would be better for my family”

# The Voices of Poverty

“Being poor means not getting the same chances and needing to fight for everything”

# The Voices of Poverty

“Being without what the middle class take for granted”

# The Voices of Poverty

“It feels like you are being looked down upon, regardless of the reason for poverty”

# The Voices of Poverty

“Being poor means living is harder and quitting is easier”

# The Voices of Poverty

“On TV, life is seen as a workable situation. In reality it is a struggle just to put food on the table and pay for the necessities of life”

# The Voices of Poverty

“People with high paying jobs don’t understand your problems”

# The Voices of Poverty

“Being poor in America means working till you hurt and always coming up short”

Catholic Campaign for Human Development  
Poverty in America Survey, 2001



# Continuing the Learning

- Book by Ruby Payne “Bridges Out of Poverty”
- Ted Talks – “The Brain on Poverty”
- Poverty Facts [www.povertyusa.org](http://www.povertyusa.org)