ATD FOURTH WORLD

MODERN METHODS OF TACKLING POVERTY

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Poverty Research | Emergent Learning | Social Work Co-Training

Redefining Poverty with the People Who Live It Every Day

~ Maryann Broxton, Boston, MA

In a recent multi-year participatory research project conducted by ATD Fourth World and Oxford University, we looked at the way poverty is understood by the people who live it every day. To do this, people in poverty worked alongside academics and social workers as co-researchers in every step of the process, from designing the study, to conducting peer groups, and analyzing the results.

The project's final report, *Pushed to the Bottom: the Experience of Poverty in the U.S.,* presents a nuanced portrait of poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon. Poverty is seen here as the result of a process of subjugation which forces one part of society to live in disadvantaged areas where they lack access to basic resources, suffer ill health, struggle against work and employment-related hardships, have their voice silenced or ignored, live in exclusion and isolation, and endure stigma and shame. These different aspects of poverty are intimately intertwined with one another. As a result, life in poverty is a struggle: not just a struggle to make ends meet, **but a struggle against feelings of anger and shame as well as a struggle to resist and to overcome the injustice of poverty.**

This understanding has direct implications for how policy is developed. Recent proposed changes with regards to work requirements for people receiving SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program/food stamps) and Medicaid is the perfect example. Under the proposed law changes, people would need to work in order to qualify for benefits – yet people living in poverty know all too well that work, far from being a universal solution to the challenges of poverty, often creates new hardships that serve as a key dimension of poverty itself.

The problem is not whether people in poverty work or not, but rather that the work available to them rarely provides benefits or offers a living wage. Precarious work with unstable work hours, without benefits or opportunities for growth, is all too common. Things like zero-hour work – contracts that tie wages to hours worked but do not guarantee a minimum number of hours in a given week – mean that workers are ineligible for many social programs because they are employed, yet they often cannot know even a day in advance if their job will bring in any actual income.

Moreover, people living in poverty often do the most dangerous jobs that nobody else wants to do, jeopardizing their health and causing premature physical damage to their bodies. These jobs rarely have a lasting positive impact on life trajectories or provide access to social or professional networks. Trapped in these jobs, workers cannot realize their full potential, progress in a career or in life, or help open new opportunities for their children or families.

To suggest that people in poverty simply need to work to be deserving of support from the government is not just a misunderstanding of what life in poverty is like but an insult to the very idea of equal opportunity that once formed the basis of our society. No one should have to prove they work to be allowed to feed their family or see a doctor.

The truth is that 60 percent of people living in poverty who can work do work. The problem is not a lack of jobs but a lack of jobs that make a difference in people's lives. Rather than tacking work requirements onto existing social programs then, we need to radically re-imagine what work is at the bottom of the economic ladder, and to develop ways to support people in poverty who work. This is the kind of policy that can only be developed if we consult people living in poverty and include them as we develop solutions.

Emergent Learning -
The Seeds of Impactful Social Change

~ Karen Stornelli, Gallup, NM

Last year, Heidi Sparkes Guber from Fourth Quadrant Partners met with me to follow up on a case study of ATD Fourth World's Story Garden in Gallup, New Mexico, that she had carried out while researching the role of "emergence" in complex social change. I had shared the story of ATD Fourth World's presence at the Gallup flea market and the impact observed by community members. I mentioned our presence in Gamerco—a former coal mining community just outside of Gallup—and how we had more questions than answers about what approach would be most meaningful to that community. From Heidi's enthusiastic response, I understood that this space of thoughtful questions leading to experimentation is at the heart of Emergent Learning. This is the space where the seeds of impactful social change take root.

Emergence is a relatively new concept for me. In social change work, it's an approach that enables insights to emerge from a variety of individuals, leading to innovative and effective strategies that could not have been planned ahead of time. **Instead, these strategies grow out of a shared experience and call for shared ownership of efforts undertaken.** In many ways, this diverges from the conventional approach of formulating strategic plans that are meant to be followed for years and then evaluated. There is a growing realization that complex social change initiatives require a lot more elasticity and rapid-cycle learning than conventional approaches generally allow for.

Around the time of my conversation with Heidi, our team in New Mexico began Story Garden in a new neighborhood of Gamerco. We decided to frame this new step of building trust and joint ownership as a learning question: "What would it take for people to come together around children's talent and growth in Gamerco?" We gathered the insights we gained over the years. We put words on what we expected to see happen if we were present in a consistent, supportive way. We noted opportunities to test out this thinking along the way. With over a year of sustained presence through Story Garden, we are now seeing people rally around children's talents in many meaningful ways. This inspires us to consider the next step, and what additional learning questions might propel the work ahead.

ATD Fourth World was built on the concept of deep learning from and with people who experience extreme poverty and hardship. In this way, emergence has always been at the core of ATD Fourth World's approach. Reframing anti-poverty strategies as a partnership with people in poverty, drawing out their collective knowledge and building on their insights about how to tackle poverty, is not only the right thing to do ethically, it's also the effective thing to do. It's how real change happens.

Building Partnership Between Social Workers and Activists

~ Cristina Diez, New York, NY

With the echoes of the New York Pride parade still resonating in my ears, I think about a different pride — one that is not yet recognized and that doesn't have a colorful flag, because society deems that there is nothing to be proud of when you live in poverty. Yet people who were born in poverty have the right to be proud of their lives, their history, their struggle, and their hopes. ATD Fourth World believes we can end poverty, but only when people who now live in poverty define it, put words to their identity and their fight, and work with others toward finding creative solutions. If we want people living in poverty to define what poverty is, we need to be ready to listen and to let our own knowledge and our definitions be questioned.

Based on a recently published report, *Pushed to the Bottom; The Experience of Poverty in the US,"* the results of a three-year research project, ATD Fourth World is developing a training program for social work students and practitioners. It will include the voices and expertise of people with experience of living in poverty, who self- identify as activists. They will in fact be co-facilitators of the training. The training aims to prepare social workers and activists to become partners in contributing to **a teaching and learning culture that builds on the knowledge and experience of people who are usually seen only as "clients."**

During a workshop, an activist asked, "Is what social work students read in a college text book aligned with what is happening in reality? – Somehow there is a disconnect."

Using the Merging of Knowledge approach developed by ATD Fourth World in the 1990s, our project seeks to bridge this gap and to create conditions for a meaningful discussion between social workers and activists about social work research, practice, and policy.

Our research shows that poverty is a lived experience of oppression and subjugation; this project proposes a solution that lies in recognition of people living in poverty as the main actors of their liberation.