

Extension and Poverty

**Many poor families are multiproblem families
but have a real desire to improve and a
willingness to make real effort**

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AN ATTEMPT will be made in this presentation to describe a study conducted among "disadvantaged" families, to present a few of the findings, and to suggest some program implications for Extension as the basis for stimulating thought on the possibilities. The implications identified are not intended as a recipe for all to follow.

We know that the poverty problem is acute and that many families in several segments of the population live in conditions of deprivation. The concentration is particularly high in the rural population and among Negro families. For example, according to the 1960 Census 70 per cent of *all* non-white families in North Carolina were living in poverty (using the official measure of family incomes less than \$3000). We have seen widespread displacement of workers by machines; this continues.

There are problems of unemployment and underemployment with the "disadvantaged" because of the growing scarcity of jobs calling for unskilled or semiskilled workers. The Negro who traditionally has been excluded from most skilled jobs is in an especially vulnerable position.¹ However, even among Negroes, stable employ-

¹However, while education is related to employment and to income among Negroes, the relationship is much lower than that among whites. Thus, Negroes with a college education in North Carolina in 1960 could expect lifetime earnings that were less than those that could be expected by whites with only eight grades of schooling. See Vivian Henderson, "The Economic Structure of Negroes in North Carolina and the South," in *Speeches and Reports of the Fourth Meeting, North Carolina Good Neighbor Council, A. and T. College, Greensboro, N.C.*, April, 1964 (mimeographed).

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ment is related to education and training, and with the lowering of racial barriers to employment, this will increasingly be the case. In recognition of this problem, more and more educational programs are being made available. Thus, the opportunities for basic education and vocational training for adults are increasing rapidly.

With this kind of situation, the decision was reached to conduct a special study with "disadvantaged" families.² The general purpose was to obtain data that would provide the Extension Service and other agencies with a sounder basis for developing programs which would have a real impact upon the problems of these families. Many agencies appear to be eager to develop programs that will assist low income families to move into the mainstream of American society. All need more adequate information upon which to base program decisions.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISADVANTAGED

With the help of representatives of the Federal Extension Service,³ a study was designed to obtain the following kinds of information: (1) basic data on the characteristics and status of families; (2) educational attainment; (3) employment history; (4) presence of disability limiting employment; (5) occupational aspirations and interest in additional training; (6) awareness of and contact with public programs and agencies; (7) access to transportation and to communication media; and (8) organizational participation and informal leadership programs.

The decision was also made to conduct the study on a community level in order that the effects of community norms and values might be taken into account. There is research evidence supporting the notion that attitudes and norms prevalent in a neighborhood affect many decisions.⁴ Thus, all families in 12 small rural neighborhoods were contacted. Two questionnaires were used: one to obtain basic information on the household, another to obtain data from all who were between 15 and 50 years of age and out of school. Data were

² For more information on the objectives, design, and findings of the study, see C. Paul Marsh and Minnie M. Brown, *North Carolina Training Needs Study, Preliminary Report Number 1: Interest in Training*, Extension Miscellaneous Publication No. 5 (Raleigh: North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service, 1965). The original impetus for this study came from R. E. Jones, State Agent, North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service, who has long been especially concerned with Extension's responsibility for work with the "disadvantaged."

³ Particular acknowledgement is due to Joseph L. Matthews and Irene Beavers for their help in planning and to J. Neil Raudabaugh and Ward Porter who helped supervise interviewing.

⁴ See C. Paul Marsh and A. Lee Coleman, "Group Influences and Agricultural Innovations, Some Tentative Findings and Hypotheses," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXI (May, 1956), 588-94.

obtained for 566 households and for 827 individuals within these households.

The results of this study indicate that these are *multiproblem* families and that no one agency or group *alone* is likely to have much impact upon them. The examples which follow illustrate that these problems are social, economic, educational, and psychological, and in a large measure interrelated.

1. This study shows that there is more "hard core" poverty among families in some rural communities than in others. For example, families with incomes less than \$1000 ranged from a low of 12 per cent in one community to a high of 65 per cent in another. For families with incomes less than \$2000, the range was from 25 per cent in one community to 85 per cent in another. Of the total sample, about three-fourths of all families reported incomes less than \$3000.

2. More than one-fourth (26 per cent) of all households had one or more members who were either totally or partially disabled. In one community alone, 46 per cent of all households reported one or more persons with a permanent or extended disability status. Both physical and mental illnesses and handicaps were reported. A closely associated problem was the fact that almost two-thirds of all households were occupied by four or more persons; and one-third, by seven or more. More than half of all homes had a room/person ratio of one or more; and in more than one-fourth of the homes, there were two or more persons per room. Thus, the potential problem of communicable disease is obvious.

3. Family mobility patterns varied by community. In one community 20 per cent of the families had lived in the community for less than two years; in another, only three per cent had lived there for less than two years. In one community half of the families had lived there for five years or more; while in another, 97 per cent of the families had lived there for five years or more.

4. This study provided some measures of the families' level of living. A standardized scale⁵ based on the families' possession of six items of convenience in the home was used (mechanical refrigerator, gas or electric range, running water in the home, bath or shower, kitchen sink, and vacuum cleaner). Of all households, 30 per cent reported no more than one of these conveniences, 41 per cent had less than four, and only 29 per cent reported four or more.

5. Many writers characterize "people of poverty" as having

⁵ See Seung G. Moon, *A Study of Factors in the Adjustment of Rural Families in Low Income Areas* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Rural Sociology, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, N.C., 1963).

strong feelings of hopelessness and despair. This study revealed a prevalence of such attitudes as determined by use of a standard anomia scale involving six different statements. With each statement, respondents indicated whether they agreed, disagreed, or didn't know. The more statements the respondent agreed with, the greater the feeling of despair was presumed to be. For example, more than three-fourths (78 per cent) of the respondents in one community agreed to the statement, "Nowadays a person has to live pretty much for today and let tomorrow take care of itself." Another example, 70 per cent in another community agreed that, "It's hardly fair to bring children into the world with the way things look for the future." Sixty per cent in another community agreed that, "Things have usually gone against me in life." All of these point toward a high degree of pessimism.

However, this apparent level of despair does not seem to reflect what is so often referred to as "poverty of the spirit"—that is, lack of aspiration, resistance to progress, lack of interest in children, etc. These same people showed high aspirations for their children and for themselves in certain areas. When asked, "What did you miss most in life that you would like for your children to have," almost three-fourths of the parents responded "education." (Almost three-fourths of the fathers and half of the mothers had less than eight grades of schooling.)

When asked, "What kind of work would you like for your oldest son (daughter) in school to do when he (she) is an adult," 8 out of 10 parents responded in terms of specific occupations or professions that they preferred for both sons and daughters. They preferred daughters to be teachers, clerical workers, or other professionals; they preferred sons to be other professional, managerial, and technical workers, and skilled trade or craftworkers. More than 80 per cent thought that both their sons' and daughters' chances of getting this kind of work were either "good" or "very good." (Incidentally, the present occupations of the majority of parents were those of farm operators, farm laborers, domestic or service workers, or other laborers.) Among the adults, as many who were *least* hopeful appeared to be interested in training as did those who were much more hopeful.⁶ These findings are surprising in light of the usual assumption about the relationship between despair, aspiration, and motivation.

Thus, this study confirms that many poor families are multi-problem families—made up of individuals with little education.

⁶ Marsh and Brown, *op. cit.*

with many health problems, living under crowded conditions, and very pessimistic about life. It suggests, however, that there is real desire for improvement and a willingness to make very real efforts to improve their situation.

IMPLICATIONS

The multiproblem situation of these families suggests that a multi-prong approach is most likely to have the greatest impact. Such an approach would of necessity involve increased coordination and communication among the existing network of educational and social agencies at the community, state, and national levels. Inasmuch as many of the problems are community-wide in dimension, the community itself must be viewed as a whole before action programs are set up.

In encouraging the use of a comprehensive approach to attack problems of poverty, however, possible limitations should be recognized. Based on experiences encountered in some of the present pilot projects in various stages, the Cahns⁷ point to the following:

1. *Limitations deriving from a professional service orientation.* Involved here is an enervating or weakening of existing leadership, failure to develop potential leadership, under-cutting incipient protest, and manipulating local organizations so that they become mere instruments of the comprehensive strategy. The donor/donee relationships which are established in many cases perpetuate dependency rather than eliminate it, especially when the need is determined by the professional rather than the target group. Effective involvement of the poor in decision-making processes will more likely result in breaking the chains of dependency in that such would tend to eradicate some of the attitude of "poverty of the spirit" (which may be more significant than providing material goods which meet the needs of the flesh).
2. *Limitations deriving from the coordinated community-wide structure.* The use of monopoly power or piecemeal competition of various agencies can be both wasteful and destructive, especially if they tend to operate at less than optimal efficiency. Insulation will very likely result in an incentive to stifle constructive criticism.
3. *Limitations deriving from an overall plan, phasing, and assignment of priorities.* This problem arises from difficulty in getting

⁷ Edgar S. Cahn and Jean C. Cahn, "The War on Poverty: A Civilian Perspective," *The Yale Law Journal*, LXXIII (July, 1964), 1321-29. This is an especially insightful article in which the authors recognize the need for coordinated efforts, but also point to a number of dangers of such an approach.

the poor themselves to be consulted and have an active say in the development and implementation of the overall plan (which results in the professional planners selecting token representatives of the poor who will listen and acquiesce rather than productively participate). Such however is most likely to happen when the target population lacks information, expertise, articulateness; also when they are neither prepared nor inclined to involve themselves in such a process due to fears or apathy.

Extension may have a wonderful opportunity to aid in increased leadership development which would tend to lessen some of the foregoing limitations where they exist. Suppose, for example, we attempt to visualize a coordinated program by such agencies as the Employment Security Commission, Public Health Department, the Department of Public Instruction (and local schools), the Area Redevelopment Administration, the Industrial Education Center, the Economic Opportunity Act, the Department of Public Welfare, and the Agricultural Extension Service. These agencies could offer extensive programs of basic education and retraining and concentrated efforts in identifying and relieving health problems. Under the Manpower Development Act, and in some counties under the Area Redevelopment Act, financial assistance for training might be made available. Extension could offer its traditional assistance in home economics and agriculture. However, could it not go much further?

With the possible exception of the Department of Public Instruction (through the PTA), no other educational nor social agency has such extensive contacts with lay leaders and local organizations as does the Agricultural Extension Service. Through home demonstration and 4-H Clubs, community development organizations, and other groups, Extension has contact with a massive network of lay community leaders. Programs aimed at bringing about change in individuals and families can succeed only to the extent that such individuals understand the program and see its relevance to their situation. Such programs, to be effective, must be thoroughly understood and supported throughout the community. We know from both research and experience that mass media have a very limited (though important) role in building such understanding and support. Mass media may create a general awareness of the existence of such a program, but widespread individual understanding and commitment needed is likely to come only as a result of a climate of opinion that encourages free discussion and evaluation by those involved.

Could Extension not make a major contribution by performing a type of informing, stimulating, motivating, and organizing role in an overall attack upon poverty and perform a liaison role between agencies and families? That is, might we not make our maximum contribution by using our contacts and know-how to assure widespread understanding of and involvement in such programs?

Suggested Objectives

If Extension, as an educational agency, should play primarily an informing, stimulating, motivating, and organizing role in an overall attack upon poverty, such program objectives as those listed below might serve as guidelines at the community level:

1. To create understanding of the education and training needed to qualify for employment that will make it possible for individuals and families to attain a reasonable level of living.
2. To create understanding of the educational and training opportunities available for adults as well as for youth.
3. To create understanding of the services available through such agencies as the Employment Security Commission, Public Health Service, Public Welfare Department, and other agencies.
4. To work with lay leaders and others in the community in developing an attitudinal climate that will encourage participation in educational and training programs and will encourage local people to seek appropriate assistance from all agencies.

At the state and county levels the Extension Service might have the following general objectives:

1. To develop among state and county agency personnel (including Extension) more understanding of the characteristics of low-income families—the employment status of family members, their educational attainment, occupational aspirations, willingness to participate in training, and their knowledge of the functions of various agencies.
2. To make other agencies aware of the role Extension feels it might play in a multi-agency effort to meet the needs of these families and to encourage the development of such a coordinated program with a clear definition of the role of each agency.

CONCLUSION

The complexity of such problems and the increasing interdependence of households and all segments of our society demand coordinated work. One cannot very well deal with the various components of poverty in isolation, changing this or that condition, by

leaving the basic structure intact. Thus, the most promising approach may be for the total community to begin vigorous efforts toward a better society by going to work on these multiple problems simultaneously. This means that some agency must be willing to concentrate upon informing families of the programs of all agencies and motivating them to make use of them. Likewise, someone must acquaint the different agencies of the kinds of problems which these families have. This community approach seems to be especially essential since the extent and intensity of these problems vary so widely from community to community. There are many resources in each of our communities' agencies and groups, both public and private, both agricultural and non-agricultural, whose objectives are complimentary from the standpoint of raising families' levels of living. Only as these agencies and groups are able to work together and with local people are their efforts likely to meet with much success.

YOUR MISSION is to solve the problem of poverty, to increase the measure of happiness, and to the universal love of country add the universal knowledge of comfort, and to harness the forces of all learning to be useful and needful in human society.

—SEAMAN A. KNAPP.

A FUNDAMENTAL VALID PRINCIPLE: Specific, definitive educational objectives rooted in the situation problem and needs and stated in terms of the identification of the clientele, change in behavior, and specific subject matter are a powerful directive tool for developing programs. Objectives are the end result of the deliberative process. A careful study of the situation, identified problems or needs, causative factors involved, and the subject matter available for solution in terms of the clientele do provide the base for specific objectives. The verbalizing of them is an intellectual process and no set of mechanical procedures will assure that this can be done effectively.

—H. G. ROUTH.

IN THE TRANSMISSION of ideals and of culture, in the building of character and the qualities needed in this changing world, the family of today must be the burden bearer and the path breaker. It recognizes children as being more important than things, ideas as more precious than gadgets, and personal worth the touchstone by which all other values are tested.

—*The Royal Bank of Canada Monthly Letter* (May, 1964).