

Poverty Research Flash

Highlighting New Poverty Research

by Crystal C. Hall, Jiaying Zhao and Eldar Shafir

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The West Coast Poverty Center's **POVERTY RESEARCH FLASH** highlights new research by faculty affiliates and others on causes, consequences, and effective policy responses to poverty, with an emphasis on changing labor markets, demographic shifts, family structure, and social and economic inequality.

The West Coast Poverty Center at the University of Washington serves as a hub for research, education, and policy analysis leading to greater understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and effective approaches to reducing it in the west coast states.

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Self-Affirmation Among the Poor: Cognitive and Behavioral Implications

Background. In addition to material deprivation, researchers have been exploring various ways in which poverty can exert a psychological toll. Individuals living in poverty may face stigma and stereotypical beliefs about their attitudes and behavior. The stigma of poverty might include the feeling of being viewed as lazy, unmotivated, and a societal burden. Research suggests that the experience and the expectation of poverty-related stigma may consume mental resources and impair cognitive performance. Wanting to avoid confirming or invoking stereotypical expectations, or the psychological stress associated with doing so, could also be a reason that some low-income individuals forego means-tested public benefits for which they qualify.

Neutralizing the effects of these negative cognitive processes could be a way for public and nonprofit providers to mitigate the stigma of poverty, subsequently relieving cognitive stress and increasing take-up of benefit programs. One promising intervention involves self-affirmation, a theory based on the premise that individuals are motivated to maintain their self-integrity, which has been found to counteract effects of other negative stereotypes.

Methods. In a series of randomized field experiments, WCPC Affiliate Crystal Hall and colleagues Jiaying Zhao and Eldar Shafir tested the effects of an oral self-affirmation activity among poor adult clients at an urban New Jersey soup kitchen. In the first experiment, 80 poor adults were randomly assigned to an affirmative or neutral condition. Those in the affirmative condition were asked to spend several minutes talking about a personal experience that made them feel successful and proud; subjects in the neutral condition were asked to talk about their daily meal routine. In both conditions, subjects then completed two tests to measure cognitive performance and cognitive control. A second experiment involving 60 clients at the same food bank tested whether any effects could be attributed to a positive mood rather than to the effects of self-affirmation in mitigating stigma. A third experiment tested for similar effects among wealthier individuals. A final experiment tested whether subjects who performed the self-affirmation task would be more receptive to information about benefits programs than subjects who performed the neutral task.

Findings. Participants who engaged in self-affirmation scored higher on both cognitive tests, suggesting less immediate mental stress due to the stigma of poverty. In the second experiment, those who performed the self-affirmation performed better than those who engaged in a mood-enhancing activity, suggesting that self-affirmation's effects cannot be generalized as inducing a positive mood. In the third experiment, which repeated the initial experiment with higher-income individuals in a library setting, there was no difference between the two conditions in performance on the cognitive tests. Because the higher-income individuals are not in a stigmatized context, the self-affirmation task had no effect. In the final experiment, far more of the affirmed participants (46% compared to 15% of neutral participants) took informational fliers about the Earned Income Tax Credit and free tax preparation assistance.

This series of experiments provides evidence that quick and non-intrusive self-affirmation interventions can have a positive impact on very low-income individuals' cognitive performance and can increase their openness to information about benefits programs, which might be one step toward increasing participation in those programs. More research is needed to understand the best contexts and timing for effective self-affirmation interventions as well as when these interventions promote the longest lasting effects.