

# Communicating about Poverty-sample 2

## INTRODUCTION

Poverty in any part of the world is an issue that requires everyone's attention. Poverty is directly related to health conditions, education levels, living conditions, corruption, crime, etc. Because of the United States' status as the top economy in the world, people often oversee poverty being a problem, or even existing. Myths about poverty and inequality are prevalent in our society, especially among groups that are less exposed to the realities of poverty. There are disparities in the way poverty rates are measured and reported, what the underlying causes of poverty are, what effective solutions towards poverty are, and who is affected by poverty. This experiment aims to help Georgetown students think more critically about poverty in America. The experiment relies on a preliminary research through a questionnaire to understand the self-perception of open-mindedness, a self-report of critical thinking skills, and the knowledge about poverty in America of two Georgetown students. Building upon this information, the experiment tries to narrow the gap between the current level of critical thinking and understanding of poverty and those of an ideal critical thinker.

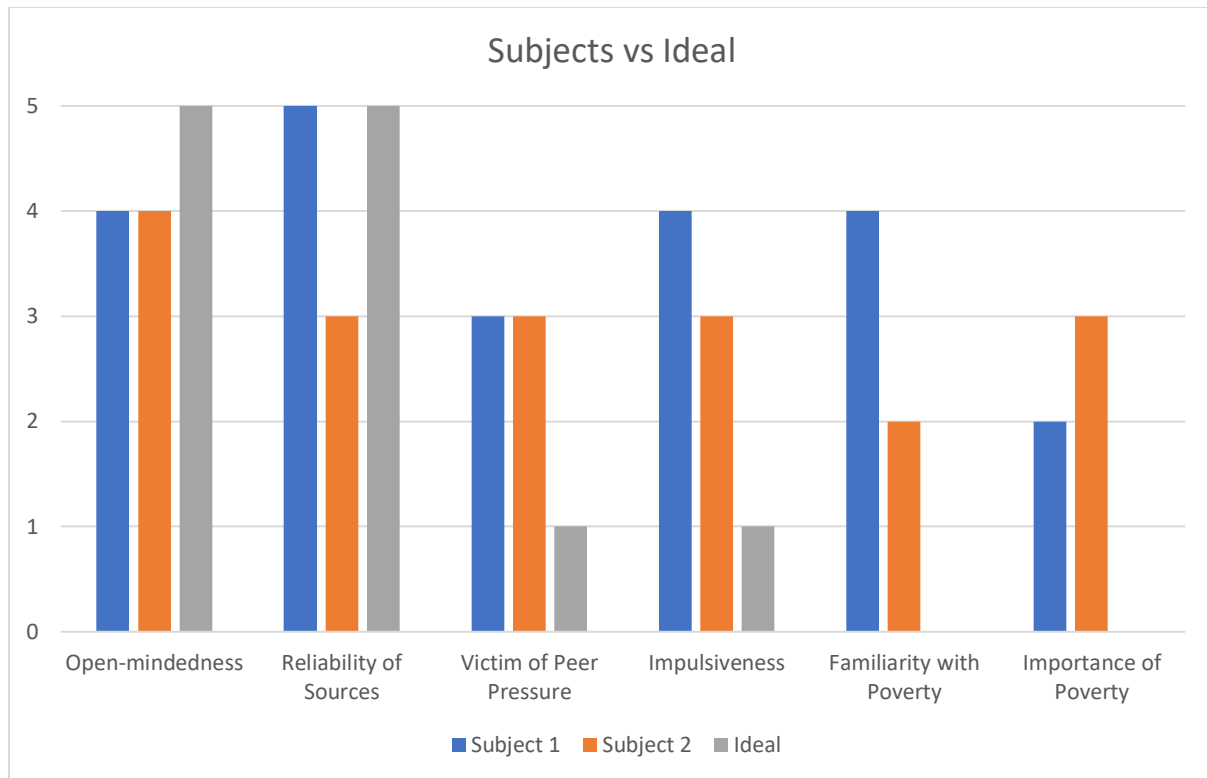
## RESEARCH METHODS

Two American Georgetown students from different backgrounds were willing and able to participate in this experiment. They will be referred to as Subject 1 and Subject 2, so as to make their appearances unapparent nor reasonably ascertainable. Subject 1 was a male, 21, Junior, white, conservative-leaning, studying Government. Subject 2 was a female, 22, Senior, white, liberal-leaning, studying Psychology. Both students were presented with a questionnaire with eight questions (Appendix) and asked to respond to the best of their knowledge without overthinking. To control for that variable, they were only given 40 seconds to complete the questionnaire. After that, the researcher collected the raw data, processed it, and compared it to the evaluation of an ideal critical thinker to determine how critically the students were thinking, or willing to think, and compared it to facts about poverty in America from reliable sources to understand their knowledge on the matter. Then, the examiner developed a plan to approach the subjects in the same way to evaluate the effectiveness of the approach against different people.

## FINDINGS

### Summary of Questionnaire Results

	Subject 1	Subject 2	Critical Ideal
Open-mindedness	4	4	5
Reliability of Sources	5	3	5
Victim of Peer Pressure	3	3	1
Impulsiveness	4	3	1
Familiarity with Poverty	4	2	N/A
Importance of Poverty	2	3	N/A
Test question 1	wrong	wrong	N/A
Test question 2	wrong	right	N/A



## Explanation of Results

The first four questions on the questionnaire were designed to test the open-mindedness, and self-perception of critical thinking skills of the subjects. They did not know what the ideal critical thinker embodied. I graphed and compared their results against what an ideal critical thinker would respond in each case: very open-minded (5), check the reliability of sources all of the time (5), hardly succumb to peer pressure (1), and is always conscious of his or her expressions (1).

Subject 1 and Subject 2 were similar on open-mindedness and peer pressure. They both scored 4/5 and 3/5, respectively. However, Subject 1 was more careful in checking the reliability of sources, and on managing his impulse.

The other two questions not shown on the graph and table asked for a self-evaluation on their familiarity with the topic of poverty and how important poverty was to them. Subject 1 claimed to have a high familiarity with the concept (4) and a low interest in the topic (2), whereas Subject 2 was the opposite; she was more modest about the familiarity with poverty (2) and cared more about it (3).

The last two questions on the questionnaire were not graphed because they were right/wrong answers. However, they were important to assess the accuracy of the subjects' self-perception. Both subjects were wrong about the level of poverty in America, and Subject 1 chose the only misconception listed in the available answers as the main cause for poverty. Despite Subject 1's confidence in being familiar with the subject, his answers to the last two questions suggest the

opposite. Subject 2 claimed that the main reason for poverty in America was the restricted access to education for poorer people. This is a valid answer.

From this preliminary information, the researcher found two main issues: i) Students could learn more about poverty in America, and ii) they could also hone their critical thinking skills.

## PLAN OF ACTION

Given the common characteristics in terms of nationality, race, education level, self-perception of open-mindedness, and *actual* knowledge about poverty, the researcher determined that the subjects would be fairly open to learn more about the topic. The focus of the experiment would be placed in increasing the subjects' familiarity with the topic. By doing so, the researcher hypothesized that the subjects would be able to dismiss their previously held myths and - especially in the case of Subject 1 due to his conservative-leaning political orientation - expand his open-mindedness and decrease his impulsiveness. (Fighting poverty has historically not been a main objective of the Republican Party.) Both subjects would spend 10-minutes with the researcher individually.

The researcher took into account the following methods for the execution of the experiment:

- *The Debunking Handbook*, Cook & Lewandowsky
  - o Effective myth-debunking requires three elements
    - The refutation must focus on core facts rather than the myth to avoid the misinformation becoming more familiar.
    - Any mention of a myth should be preceded by explicit warnings to notify the reader that the upcoming information is false.
    - The refutation should include an alternative explanation that accounts for important qualities in the original misinformation.
- Daniel Kahneman's *Anchoring Effect*: The *anchoring* effect is "considering a particular value (the anchor) for an unknown quantity before estimating that quantity." His experiments found that this happens for two reasons: on the one hand, there is a miscalculation in the effort of adjusting the answer off of the anchor, and on the other, there is a "priming" effect that induces the person to stay close to the anchor for a lack of cognitive effort.
- Professor Willer's approach to *moral reframing*: liberals and conservatives reject the other side of the aisle more and more making arguments in terms of their own values. For example, Republicans would allude to authority, moral purity, and religious sanctity. These values render an underlying sense of familiarity and worldview.

The following material was shown to the subjects:

- Informative website about poverty in the US by the United States Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB): <https://povertyusa.org/facts>
- First 3 minutes of video by Rutger Bregman on TED, "Poverty isn't a lack of character, it's a lack of cash." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydKcaIE6O1k>
- Video by PBS, "Reagan's attack on welfare and the poor: the myth of the welfare 'queen':" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDiwKiYQBNs>

- Select fragments from the UN Report on Extreme Poverty in America: Part IV. “Who are the poor?” and “An illusory emphasis on employment” and “Treatment of the Poor in the Criminal Justice System” from Part V: <http://undocs.org/A/HRC/38/33/ADD.1>

Reasons for the material selection:

- The variety of sources would allow the subject to cross-check the facts while at the same time validate the information that came from different sources, with different agendas. This was done to avoid the subject from using the Ad Hominem fallacy.
- Two videos were shown to keep the subjects interested
- One informative website was used to allow the subject to navigate on his/her own.
- Allow the subjects to identify more with at least one or more of the sources depending on his/her inherent biases and preferences

## **EXECUTION**

At the beginning of the experiment, the subjects were willing and able to sit down with the researcher for 10 minutes. They were told that they were discussing poverty and the researcher explained how the experiment would proceed. In order to make them intellectually humbler about the topic, they were told that they had answered the questions pertaining to poverty incorrectly.

Other than the presentation of the material to the subjects, there was no dialogue between the researcher and the subjects, so they could focus on the information. The presence of the researcher was necessary to ensure the subjects were adhering to the experiment’s plan.

The only material which was relatively burdensome on the subjects, judging from their facial expressions, was the UN report. At the end of the experiment, both subjects were asked for their comments.

Both subjects declared they were now better informed than before. Subject 1 mentioned how surprised he was that businesses, like Walmart (mentioned in the UN Report), are not able to provide their employees with sufficient funds for living without access to food stamps. He also indicated that his knowledge was not “up-to-date” when he stated how surprised he was that the inequality levels had grown in spite of the strength of the economy. Subject 2 mentioned she found interesting the myth of the woman who had deceived social services and how “incredible” it was that these myths could seep so far into policy-making and continue to be used for decades.

Both subjects concluded that they had learned about poverty from the experiment and Subject 1 added that it had been a “humbling exercise.”

## **REFLECTION**

The experiment was successful in the following ways:

- Using the same approach, I was able to teach two students about the updated facts and figures of poverty in America.

- I realized that the selection of my sources had been varied and entertaining enough to captivate the subjects' attention and interest, avoiding the backfire effects that Cook and Lewandowsky warn about in the handbook.
- The sources were reliable, and the subjects were convinced of their reliability and validity.

However, the experiment focused on increasing the subjects' familiarity with the topic in question and did not delve into exploring the different challenges of critical thinking. The researcher determined an experiment of such caliber was not able to work in such a short time slot. Moreover, I would like to apply the same method on a larger sample size in order to validate its effectiveness across different interest groups. Nevertheless, I would like to check back on these subjects to corroborate that they are continually receptive and intellectually humble about new information.

## Appendix:

### Questionnaire Subject 1:

1. How would you rate your open-mindedness? Rate 1-5 (1= Not persuadable)  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5
2. How often do you question the reliability of your sources of information?
  - a. Never
  - b. Sometimes
  - c. Half of the times
  - d. More often than not
  - e. All the time
3. How many times have you been a victim of peer pressure?
  - a. Never
  - b. Few times
  - c. Neither too many nor too few times
  - d. Many times
  - e. All the time
4. How often do you say things and then don't know why you said them?
  - a. Never
  - b. Sometimes
  - c. Neither too many nor too few times
  - d. More often than not
  - e. All the time
5. How familiar are you with the concept of poverty in America?
  - a. Don't know anything
  - b. I know something
  - c. Neither too little nor too much
  - d. I know a lot but not everything
  - e. I have studied it in detail
6. How important is poverty in America to you?
  - a. Not important
  - b. Somewhat important
  - c. Indifferent
  - d. Very important
  - e. One of the most important things
7. How many people in America are poor? [Correct Answer: C]
  - a. 0-5%
  - b. 5-10%
  - c. 10-15%
  - d. 15-20%
  - e. 20+%
8. What is the main reason for people being stuck in poverty? [Misconception: A]
  - a. Poor people are lazy
  - b. Poor people are too old or too young
  - c. Poor people have never gone to school
  - d. Poor people have criminal records
  - e. All of the above

**Questionnaire Subject 2:**

1. How would you rate your open-mindedness? Rate 1-5 (1= Not persuadable)  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5
2. How often do you question the reliability of your sources of information?
  - a. Never
  - b. Sometimes
  - c. Half of the times
  - d. More often than not
  - e. All the time
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