

## Communicating about Poverty-sample 1

In this part of the project, I chose to continue my work on the subject of poverty, which I focused on in Digital Project IV through my investigation of the way in which partisan values interact with the “bootstrap myth” of upward mobility. For this project, however, I decided to take a step back and examine the real perceptions of people regarding the state of poverty in America, as well as its causes. In doing so, I hoped to get a thermometer reading of some of the different views surrounding the issue, as well as to see what common misperceptions exist. To get to the root of these questions, I designed a survey that evaluated my subjects’ initial views of the prevalence and importance of poverty in the United States as opposed to other countries, and their thoughts on the societal issues that cause it.

In constructing the survey, I chose to use a written questionnaire with open-ended questions rather than a more traditional multiple choice format, since I wanted a way to get a real window into my subjects’ self-evaluation of their critical thinking skills as well as their true feelings/knowledge regarding the subject of poverty. With this goal in mind, I designed a completely free-response survey in order to avoid creating the “false dilemma” common in multiple choice surveys in which participants are forced to choose between answers that do not capture the nuances of their opinions.

Following the conduction of each survey, I then presented each subject with a brief overview of some of the facts regarding the issue of poverty in the United States and its causes. With both subjects, I focused on giving a broader view of the topic, since both subjects had views that were initially more narrow and needed more information in order to enable critical thinking. While the basic information presented in this stage was similar for each subject, I did tailor my verbal presentation of the plan slightly to address the distinctions between the initial survey responses. Following the presentation of this information, I had a brief, post-hoc discussion with each subject.

### Questionnaire

- *Do you think you are open minded?*
- *Do you let your pre-established political views get in the way of your stances on certain issues?*
- *When examining a question, do you typically consider all sides or form an opinion quickly?*
- *Are your beliefs influenced by those around you?*
  
- *Do you ever detect bias in your thinking?*
- *Are opposing viewpoints valid? Are they interesting to hear?*
- *Does thinking about controversial issues provoke an emotional response for you? When you think about critical issues are you detached from them or deeply invested?*
  
- *Do you believe that poverty is a widespread issue in the United States?*
- *Should poverty in a developed nation be a high priority, or should emphasis be placed on its instances in the Third World?*
- *Would you rank the United States as having more or less poverty than other developed nations?*

- *Are people's experiences of poverty better or worse in the US? Could Third World-level poverty exist in the United States or are we fundamentally different?*
- *Is poverty an important issue?*
- *Is poverty in the United States a pressing issue?*
- *What are some crucial factors that you think enable people to stay in a condition of poverty?*
- *What is the state of the American Dream? Is it achievable?*

#### Summary of Questionnaire Results- Subject 1

Subject 1 is a sophomore at Georgetown whose major is Science, Technology, and International Affairs. In order to better inform interpretation of the survey, I can also reveal, with her permission, that she is a person of color from a non-wealthy background. She provided lengthy survey answers.

- *On her own open-mindedness:* This subject made the admission in her survey that she does not consider herself to be particularly open-minded. As a reason she gave the fact that she feels her views are strongly influenced by those around her and her environment. She did say, however, that when evaluating a new issue she seeks to look at all sides of the argument in order to find the best information.
- *On her own critical thinking skills:* In terms of her critical thinking skills, this subject said that she does feel bias in her own thinking, particularly in favor of democratic political views. She said that she found herself to be biased against those on the opposite end of the political spectrum as well as their opinions. She also says that she gets passionately emotionally involved in political debates, and chooses to view them in the context of her own experience.
- *On poverty in the United States:* This subject identified poverty in the United States as an important issue. She did, however, say that she viewed it as being less pressing and less severe than poverty in Third World countries, and that conditions in the United States were not as bad as for the poor in the Third World. She also ranked poverty in the United States as being less prevalent and severe than other developed nations. In terms of upward mobility and the American Dream, she identified them as existing, but being incredibly difficult to achieve.
- *On the Causes of Poverty in the United States:* This subject identified racial discrimination against non-whites as the primary cause of poverty in the United States. She argued that the country and its institutions are designed to keep a homogenous upper class in power, and that people of other races are considered outsiders and not given a seat at the proverbial table.

#### Summary of Questionnaire Results-Subject 2

Subject 2 is a sophomore at a school other than Georgetown whose major is classical studies. In order to better inform interpretation of the survey, I can also reveal, with her permission, that she is a caucasian from a wealthy background. She provided shorter survey responses.

- *On her own open-mindedness:* This subject answered that she does consider herself to be open minded, and does not usually let pre-established political views affect her thoughts on controversial issues. She said that, when evaluating a new issue, she tries

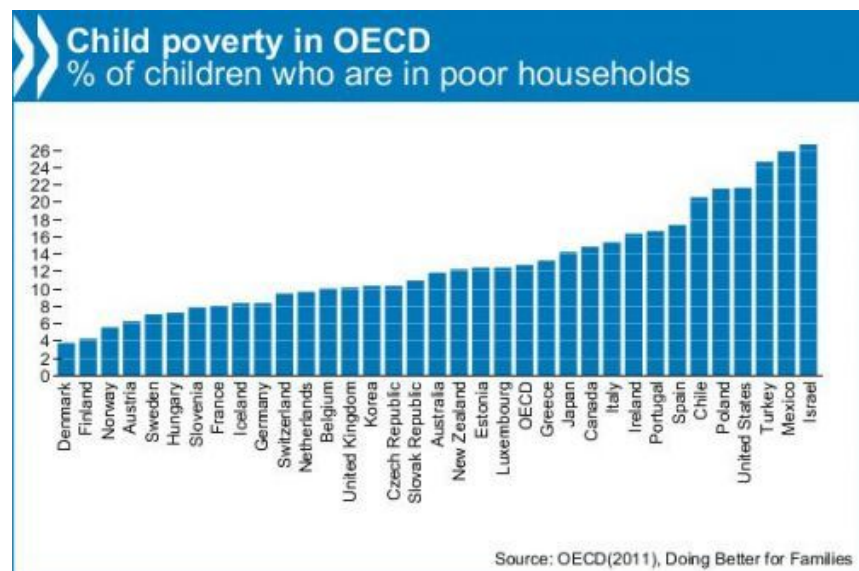
to examine all sides. Like subject one, she also admitted that her beliefs are influenced by those around her.

- *On her own critical thinking skills:* This subject said that she occasionally detects bias in her thinking, but did not indicate what factors tend to provoke it. She said that opposing viewpoints are valid and are interesting to hear. Finally, she said that she tries to be detached when looking at hotly debated topics, but is not always.
- *On poverty in the United States:* This subject also identified poverty as an issue in the United States, but said that it does not exist and could not exist on the same level as poverty in Third World countries. She identified the United States as having much less of a poverty issue than other developed nations, and said that other nations should be the focus of the fight against poverty, not the United States. Finally, she said that upward mobility and the American Dream exist and are easily attainable with work.
- *On the Causes of Poverty in the United States:* This subject identified lack of work as the primary cause of poverty in the United States. She said that most people in poverty are unemployed and could lift themselves out of it if they worked hard enough. She did say that education also played a role in why people stay in poverty, since people drop out of school or do not pursue higher education.

### Discussion Plan

While both participants had drastically different views on the issue of poverty and its causes, I found that their views had two common flaws which could benefit from more critical thinking: the belief that the United States is somehow exceptional in its situation regarding poverty, and a narrow definition of the causes of poverty. Even though both subjects clearly fall on opposite sides of the political spectrum in terms of this issue, they both shared the same misconceptions. Thus, my plan for addressing both subjects needed to result in a revision of their view that poverty in the United States is different than in other countries and a broadening of their definitions of the causes that perpetuate poverty. In designing my plan, I focused more on changing their views of

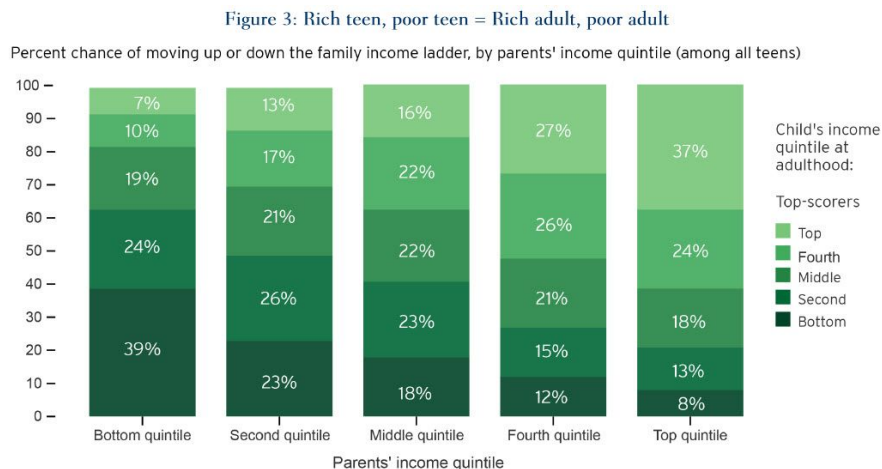
these two topics than on changing their thought processes as a whole, since I felt that, once given facts, the subjects would be able to see faults in their thinking independently. With both subjects, I implemented the plan through a verbal discussion, supported by graphical analysis and quotes because I thought hard data would be more compelling. With Subject 2, I conducted the discussion



virtually, but provided the supporting data and graphics via email.

In order to debunk the misperception held by both subjects that the United States is an exception among countries when it comes to poverty, I attempted to stress the numerical facts surrounding the prevalence of poverty in the United States. Specifically, I quoted from the UN Report that “about 40 million (in the United States live in poverty, 18.5 million in extreme poverty, and 5.3 million live in Third World conditions of absolute poverty.”<sup>24</sup> In providing these numbers, I hoped to provide a shocking and concrete numerical portrait of the facts of poverty in the United States. I supported this quote with another one from the same report stating that “it (the United States) has the highest youth poverty rate in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the highest infant mortality rates among comparable OECD States.”<sup>25</sup> Both of these quotes were included to demonstrate the extent of poverty in America, but also how it relates to poverty in other developed countries. Additionally, the fact that the first quote references the 5.3 million Americans that live in Third World-level poverty was designed to refute the view of both subjects that the conditions of poverty are more severe in the Third World. I also included a graphical representation of child poverty (shown above) in the United States relative to other developed countries, designed to drive the point home that the United States is not immune to poverty and its effects.<sup>26</sup>

Another element of the poverty situation in the United States that I felt both of my



subjects might want to reexamine was its causes. Subject 1 identified the main cause of poverty as racial discrimination, while subject 2 claimed that it was a lack of hard work. Thus, my goal for Subject 1 was that she would expand her view of the causes to see how race is just one important element of a bigger picture. My goal for subject 2, however, was

to debunk the “bootstrap” myth and show how poverty outcomes are increasingly predetermined in the United States. To support this viewpoint, I returned to some of the information I had gathered in Assignment 20. Specifically, I referenced a quote from the UN report stating that “the United States now has one of the lowest rates of intergenerational social mobility of any of the rich countries. Zip Codes, which are usually reliable proxies for race and wealth, are tragically reliable predictors of a child’s future employment and income prospects.”<sup>27</sup> In including this quote, I hoped to provide evidence of how other factors than race and work ethic

<sup>24</sup> United Nations Report on “Extreme Poverty” in the US, Critical Thinking Canvas Files, June-July 2018, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> “Child Poverty Rates in OECD,” digital image, Poverty in Households with Children Is Rising in Nearly All OECD Countries, April 27, 2011, [http://www.finfacts.ie/irishfinancenews/article\\_1022165.shtml](http://www.finfacts.ie/irishfinancenews/article_1022165.shtml).

<sup>27</sup> United Nations Report on “Extreme Poverty” in the US, Critical Thinking Canvas Files, June-July 2018, 5.

can influence poverty. To add to this portrait that poverty is caused by other factors, I also included statistics from a Planet Money podcast, stating that 29% of people without a high school diploma live in poverty, 7% of people without a college degree live in poverty, 1/3 African Americans live in poverty, more women than men live in poverty, and more children than adults live in poverty.<sup>28</sup> As a final component, I also included a graph (shown above) from Assignment 20 showing that parents' wealth has a significant determining effect on whether children grow up to live in poverty.<sup>29</sup>

### Reactions

Both subjects responded well to the discussions and supporting evidence. Subject 1 saw them as largely confirming her initial views, while Subject 2 felt that they contradicted her initial beliefs to a greater extent and was willing to accept the premises I had presented as factually accurate. I have transcribed notes of the reactions below:

#### Reactions- Subject 1

- *Reinforces my perspective, but broadens variables.*
- *Did not think poverty here was as bad as in Third World.*
- *Did not know that poverty here was worse than in other rich countries, but am not too surprised*
- *Adds to the argument of racial prejudice, by introducing the variables like place of birth. Makes sense because bad neighborhood leads to bad schooling, leads to lack of access to good colleges.*
- *Variable of education and degrees is particularly interesting, parent's education can shape outcomes through legacy admissions.*
- *People do not know what they're capable of in this system, are held down by their surroundings. The argument that you can do anything you want as long as you put your mind to it, allows those in power to stay in power because they can rationalize that they worked harder.*
- *It ties into a larger issue of race. "Bootstraps myth" is a an Ellis Island era thing that reflects only white western views.*
- *I previously viewed poverty as only racial prejudice. Now, think of it as class, education, and other societal factors that put people at the bottom regardless of whether they work hard.*
- *All tie in, has expanded my perspective by introducing how my initial view of race relates to other factors through the web of social oppression.*

#### Reactions- Subject 2

- *Different than what I expected.*
- *Interesting that poverty in the U.S. could be similar to in the Third World, but it cannot be really be as severe because of things like Social Security and food stamps.*
- *Didn't think that poverty was so common. 40 million people is more than 10% of the population.*

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<sup>28</sup> *A Snapshot of Poverty in America*, perf. Cardiff Garcia and Patty Hirsch, NPR: Planet Money (found through Course Website), October 16, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=657875561>.

<sup>29</sup> "Rich teen, poor ten=Rich adult, poor adult," Digital Image, The Brookings Institution <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2013/12/04/what-obama-gets-right-about-social-mobility-and-what-he-gets-wrong/>

- *Education impact confirms my initial view that dropping out of school causes poverty.*
- *Didn't think that race and parents' wealth would have a real effect, thought amount of work was the greater issue.*
- *Still think the American Dream is true for people who do enough or are lucky, even though there are clearly disadvantages for those who start lower.*
- *Scary that this is such an issue in the U.S.*

### Conclusions

One major takeaway I had from this study was the degree to which people's own self perception can influence their view on critical issues like poverty. My first subject, who was a person of color from a lower socioeconomic background, identified poverty as a major issue in the United States caused by racial discrimination. My second subject, who was a caucasian from a socioeconomically privileged background, felt that poverty was a less severe issue, and was largely caused by a lack of hard work on the part of the poor. These two contrasting opinions both support the idea that with poverty where you sit determines where you stand, and people are inclined to identify their own perceived life experiences as being true for the world as a whole. From a critical thinking perspective, this finding demonstrates the importance of learning to detach oneself from controversial issues in order to see the broader picture clearly.

One more political observation I noticed from the results of this survey is the clear need to draw attention to the reality of poverty in America. While both subjects acknowledged that poverty existed, both said that the United States had less poverty than other developed nations. Additionally, both participants argued that levels of poverty experienced in Third World countries are more severe in terms of deprivation than those in the United States, since American social programs mitigate the hardships of living in poverty. Both of these observations are contradicted by the UN report, which stresses that the United States has higher levels of poverty than other OECD nations and that Third World-level poverty does, in fact, exist in the United States.<sup>30</sup> The fact that these results came from two educated subjects on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum clearly demonstrates the need for greater public awareness on the issue of poverty in America, since it cannot and will not be addressed until people on all sides acknowledge it as a real problem.

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<sup>30</sup> United Nations Report on "Extreme Poverty" in the US, June-July 2018, 3.