



Connecting People

Communication
Across Barriers

About Lynda

Lynda Coates is an associate of Communication Across Barriers, a poverty consulting firm owned by Dr. Donna Beegle. She is an authentic voice of poverty who grew up homeless. Through the support of mentors, such as Donna and others, she earned a master's degree from Portland State University and has been speaking and training in the Portland area for more than two years. As a writer, curriculum developer and researcher, she has produced several tools for trainings, including an online Student Retention Relationship Tool (SRRT) for adults who work with at-risk students.



Lynda Coates
Communication &
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Lynda's background includes being born into generational poverty. The family of eight moved from city-to-city every couple of months, sleeping in their vehicle at truck stops, casinos, gas stations, and campgrounds throughout Nevada and California. The father was a kind and honest man, but self-employed and struggled with alcoholism and depression; the mother, while nurturing, was completely illiterate and unable to home-school the kids. The six kids attended school only sporadically. At 15 years old, Lynda came to Portland, Oregon to live with her cousin who was also struggling with poverty as a single mom. With the stability of living in one city, she was able to find mentors and became the first and only person in three generations of her family to graduate from high school. However, her academic skills were below college level and she spent four years at Mt. Hood Community College learning to read and write. Later she was accepted to the University of Portland where she learned to fit into the middle class world, expanded her social network, studied abroad, and completed a Bachelor's Degree in Communication. After five years of working in various jobs throughout Portland, including television news, event management, and a children's media firm, she returned to college and completed a Master's Degree in Communication at Portland State University. For the last five years she has been working with Dr. Donna Beegle, National Poverty Consultant. Lynda is available for workshops, curriculum development, organizational development and planning, and inspirational keynote presentations.

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Breaking Barriers: Concrete Communication Tools for Working with People in Poverty

What does living in poverty teach? What does it mean to be poor in wealthy America? Presented by someone who was born into generational poverty, this workshop will shatter common myths and provide research-based theories and strategies for serving people in poverty and helping them move forward, as highlighted in national poverty expert Dr. Donna Beegle's new book, *See Poverty, Be the Difference*.

Communication is complex even when we have the same background. When you add in issues of poverty, the likelihood of misunderstandings increases. How we

get our information to live our daily lives shapes how we relate to one another and how we experience the world. People in poverty overwhelmingly report that they get their information "word of mouth" or through verbal communication, not print. Those who get their information verbally or by asking someone, have an "oral" culture communication style. Others who gain their information from reading develop a "print" culture communication style. Understanding these different communication styles can help professionals improve communication with people in poverty.



Learning Objectives:

1. Discuss the context of growing up in poverty in the United States and its impact on meanings of words, worldview, interpersonal relationships, communication and learning.
2. Describe five kinds of lived experiences of poverty in the U.S.
3. Explain the real and perceived barriers faced by people in poverty when receiving service from health care providers.
4. Discover the different communication styles based on socio-economic status (SES): oral and print communication.
5. Obtain techniques for understanding and valuing oral and print culture styles.
6. Understand how to implement changes in communication styles to reduce conflict and motivate people in poverty.
7. Learn how to connect in meaningful ways to improve relationships and communication.
8. Know how to frame goals from the perspective of people from poverty.
9. Understand how to focus and build on the assets of oral culture people instead of only seeing problems.
10. Discuss how to reach those struggling with the effects of poverty to increase their success in moving out of poverty.

Defining Poverty

Generational Poverty

- Family has never owned land
- Never knew anyone who benefited from education
- Never knew anyone who moved up or was respected in a job
- Highly mobile
- High family illiteracy
- Focus is on making it through the day

Working-Class Poverty

- Working, but rarely have money for any extras
- Most do not own property
- Live paycheck to paycheck
- Few have health care
- Focus on making it two weeks or through the month
- Poverty seen as personal deficiency

Immigrant Poverty

- Have little or no resources
- Language & culture barriers
- Seem to do better than those born into poverty in America
- Poverty viewed as a system problem

Depression Era Poverty

- A time when the societal message was, "We are all in this together."
- Poverty seen as society problem

Middle-Class Temporary/Situational Poverty

- Person grows up in stable environment
- Surrounded by people who are educated or able to earn a living wage
- Attends school regularly
- Has health care
- Has a crisis (health, Divorce, etc.) and income drops
- Generally is able to make it back to middle class
- Has not internalized the poverty as their own fault



Concepts that Living in Poverty Teaches

Success - Generally unattainable, limited to people who have a lot of luck

Failure - Inevitable, no hope to overcome inherent deficiencies

Job - Does not pay in respect or a living wage; takes you away from your family

Emotions - Emotions are made to be expressed, publicly or privately

Future - Difficult and painful to envision, so live for now

Money - To be used before it gets away, not enough anyway

Police/Courts - Hurt people, the enemy, unfriendly, out to get us and should be avoided

Education - For “those” people, not people like me, takes you away from your family and causes additional stresses because you don’t have the status symbols to belong (right clothes, shoes, food, car, house, etc.)

Teachers - The enemy, don’t like people like me, make me feel unwanted, not cared about and stupid because I don’t know things that others seem to have mastered

Health - Care non existent, if very sick go to emergency room, share prescription medicine, glasses, remedies

Doctors - Stay away and they can’t tell you bad news, not seen as advocates or caring, are seen as “knowing everything”

Dentists - Fear! People we know don’t go to the dentist. When they do go, tremendous hassle to find access and then a great deal of pain. Brushing and flossing are some rules “those” people made up, won’t help me, other things more pressing than my teeth

Nutrition & Exercise - Not words we use, for people who have too much time and money on their hands, whatever is going to happen to your body will happen no matter what you do

Fate - Life happens, you have no power to change it, only to react to it



Characteristics of Oral Culture



- ❑ Relationships are at the heart of everything and are first priority.
- ❑ Spontaneous - Strong desire for variety-Great abilities to “go with the flow” or jump from subject to subject
- ❑ Repetitive - Storytelling and repeating the same over and over are important for maintaining the knowledge.
- ❑ Holistic - Focus on the “BIG picture” tendency to take everything that is going on around them.
- ❑ Comfort with Emotions - Shows emotion readily in most any situation.
- ❑ Present Oriented - Highly in-tune with the here-and-now.
- ❑ Agonistic - More physical.

If you are more Oral Culture

- Relationships are more important than anything
- It is normal to interrupt and to have multiple conversations at once
- Re-telling the same stories helps you in your understanding
- Sharing your personal experiences and stories is your way of connecting with others
- You are comfortable jumping from subject to subject
- You like to focus on lots of ideas at once
- It is normal to show emotions/feelings
- You are very physical and expect physical responses
- You focus on what is going on around you right now
- You focus on the big picture, not the details
- When you need information, you ask those around you

Characteristics of Print Culture



- ❑ Linear - Organizes thought and actions by “first this then this” thought process.
- ❑ Time - Is at the heart of everything and has high priority in daily activities.
- ❑ Analytic/Abstract - Knowledge is outside of self--ability to step back from a situation and separate and disconnect self from what is going on.
- ❑ Self-disciplined/Focus - Strong ability to shut out sense data and focus on one idea at a time.
- ❑ Ability to delay gratification - Strong understanding of relationships between parts.
- ❑ Ability to strategize, plan ahead, set goals, and focus on the future - Abilities to break things into parts promotes abilities to connect small efforts to end desires.

If you are more Print Culture

- You are most comfortable focusing on one idea at a time
- You believe a plan is essential and your goal is to stay on task
- It is important to think abstractly about situations and analyze them carefully, detail by detail before reacting
- You like things in order...first this, than this etc.
- You approach tasks by breaking them into parts
- You sort and categorize information
- Time is crucial and you are rigid about it
- You do not show emotions or physical affection unless you know someone really well and you do not share personal stories
- When you need information, you look for a book on the subject

If you are Balanced

You have the ability to maintain both the characteristics of Oral culture, which keeps you connected and spontaneous, and the characteristics of Print culture, which allows you to set goals, plan ahead, analyze and stay focused.

Practice Oral Culture Communication

- Pay attention to intuition
- Focus on how you feel
- Practice active listening to build better relationships
- Practice empathy to gain insights

Practice Print Culture Communication

- Model reading as a primary resource for gaining important daily life information
- Create lists, sort and categorize
- Practice outlining important concepts
- Break instructions down into smaller parts and state the steps necessary to be successful

Strengths-based Approach to Working with People in Poverty

Organizational Culture and Change: A Strengths Foundation: The following theories are the foundation of a “strengths-based approach” to serving people in poverty. When put into practice, these theories help professionals improve their communication with people in poverty, enhance their efforts to improve lives and make a real difference for those they serve.

Build relationships with people based on identification. Kenneth Burke’s (1990) *“Identification Theory”* asserts that relationship building needs to be based on the principle of finding common ground. Human beings tend to seek out and accept information for how to live their lives from someone they trust and identify with. For many people, to learn new information and new ways of thinking and behaving, they need to identify with someone who is making it, someone who is practicing the new behavior and providing encouragement that they can also do it.

Practice looking for the strengths and skills. The *“Strengths Perspective”* approach is based on recognizing and focusing on the strengths that each person brings and developing individualized plans to build on those strengths (Saleebey, 1997). The theory proposes that every person should be treated as if their potential is unknown. The core ideas of the strengths perspective are empowerment, membership, regeneration and healing within two-way dialogue and collaboration.

Give people positive feedback to help build resiliency. *“Resiliency Theory”* is defined as the capacity to bounce back, withstand hardship, and repair oneself (Wolin and Wolin, 1993). Early resiliency studies asserted that you are either born resilient or you were not. More recent studies show this to be inaccurate. Saleebey (1997) and other researchers claim that people develop resiliency through interactions with others who help them see their strengths. Bottom line: focusing on people’s strengths builds their resiliency.

Help people build a network of support. *“Assets Theory”* is defined as the array of talents, skills and social contacts that a person possesses that can be harnessed to multiply one’s power and effectiveness to better solve problems and meet needs (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). There is a strong and consistent relationship between the number of assets or resources present in a person’s life and the degree to which he or she develops in positive and healthful ways. Introducing people to other “people” is far more powerful than giving someone a list of “agencies” to contact.

Communication: A Tool for Mentoring

You do not have to commit to an organized mentoring program to be a mentor. Every professional who comes into contact with people in poverty has the power to positively influence that person's day or even life in a mere two second interaction. Our research at Communication Across Barriers shows that there are four levels of levels of communication that can have a powerful impact on people in poverty. As you read through each level, identify which level of communication you have with the people you serve. To have the most impact, strive to reach the fourth level of relationship.

Levels of Communication and Impact

- 1. Impacting comments:** You have one or two conversations with a person in poverty who you do not know well and you may never see again. You give them information, instructions, and advice, but you do not know if you had any impact on their life. Even though you never see the person again, they may have followed your instructions right away, or perhaps years later when they remember what you said.
- 2. One-way relationship:** You provide services to a person in poverty who you see on regular basis. They reveal very little information about them self and ask very few questions. You do not get to know the person well and do not know what kind of impact you are having on them. Like level one, they may follow your advice right away, or will remember what you said years later and take action then.
- 3. Two-way relationship:** You provide services to someone you see on regular basis. The person reveals information about them self, is comfortable asking questions, appears responsive and attempts to follow instructions and advice. You likely see positive results, or at least an effort improve their economic situation.
- 4. Relay Relationship:** The person you are serving is no longer under your care because of relocating to a new area or other reasons. You connect (relay) the client to other people and community services by introducing them to others who can assist them.

Characteristics of Successful Mentors

Researchers have identified characteristics that make mentors successful in helping people move out of poverty. The following is a list of these characteristics (for more detailed information, see Beegle (2000) and Levine and Nidiffer (1996):

- 1. Believe in the person's potential**
- 2. Know there is a way out of poverty**
- 3. Understand causes of poverty**
- 4. Open their personal network and help make connections**
- 5. Teach people in poverty to build a network**

Recommended Reading

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