



## LOCAL CRITERIA FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIAL ASSISTANCE OUTCOMES A Practical Application to Local Research on Attitudes to Poverty

Poverty Free Kitchener Waterloo Action Group Review  
June 2013

### Background

On May 28, 2013, Opportunities Waterloo Region hosted a Community Conversations on the topic: [\*Shifting Society Attitudes towards Poverty\*](#). This presentation was on a research project done jointly with Opportunities Waterloo Region and researchers from Wilfrid Laurier University<sup>1</sup>. The following are summary notes of the presentation taken by Poverty Free K-W Action Group members. These notes provided the basis for the Group's review using the [\*Successful Social Assistance Outcomes Criteria framework \(SSAOC\)\*](#)<sup>2</sup>. The reflection and action presented in the final section are based on Action Group member discussions.

### Notes of the Presentation on the Research Project

Junior and senior undergraduate students in community psychology courses participated in a series of personality tests to be combined with a Thematic Apperception Tests – they were shown 10 photographs of people living in poverty (direct or relative poverty, range of genders, ages, ethnicity), and they were asked to write short narratives of:

- Who these people were? – tapping into assumptions about poverty
- What led up to the event? – tapping into beliefs about how people become poor
- How students felt about them? – tapping into feelings and emotional responses
- What happens next? – tapping into attitudes about how people come out of poverty

### Highlights of the Research Results

Most narratives displayed negative attitudes towards people living in poverty:

- Poverty was invisible for many students, or it was the individual not the social injustice that was the cause of poverty.
- Through the emotional responses it was revealed that even the external causes of poverty gave students a sense of 'conditional empathy' revealing their beliefs that it is individual responsibility to get out of poverty and stay out of poverty.
- Ways out were mostly of the 'fairy tale' kind; e.g., women marrying men who will take care of them and their children.

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<sup>1</sup> MacKeigan, M., Mitchell, T., Wiese, J., Stovold, A., & Loomis, C. (2013). *It's not a Canadian Thing: Researching attitudes toward poverty*. <http://www.owr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/SSATalkMayCCSFinalNoNotes.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Poverty Free Kitchener Waterloo Action Group (2013). *Resolution for 2013 – Poverty Free Ontario*. Web published by the Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo [www.waterlooregion.org](http://www.waterlooregion.org)

## ***Table discussion - What Surprised us in Research Results?***

### *Collective Hopelessness*

This research confirms there is a pervasiveness of prejudice being transmitted between generations. The particularly unsettling is that the students studies in the research did not see ways out for people in the photographs, and seeking responses to, what we called, collective hopelessness, would be an important part of working against stereotypes. There was a lack of personal sense of ability to end conditions keeping people in poverty, or sense of political means to prevent pushing people into poverty.

### *Invisibility of Poverty*

We talked about many divisions in the social and physical spaces we all grow up and live in, that are not talked about often enough (school yards, neighbourhoods in the cities, parks and public spaces, etc.) but allow poverty to remain invisible through segregation and isolation.

### *Gender Inequality Awareness*

Marriage was seen as a solution to women living in poverty, at the same time that the experience of sexual violence by their partners is pushing them into poverty – a proof of the complexities of a society where gender inequality is still pervasive.

## **Applying the SSAOC Framework**

The SSAOC framework includes the importance of changing attitudes in the service delivery systems and of changing underlying assumptions about poverty guiding the transformation of income security systems:

### ***Criteria: People are treated with dignity and respect in the process***

Creating social and emotional distance from people experiencing poverty allows for blame and justifies inequality. Normalization of social hierarchy leads to “conditional empathy” where even people that are seen as victims of external circumstances, are still viewed incapable of taking the pathways out of poverty.

It is important for us to learn more about the ways in which prejudice affect the delivery of social assistance supports.



***Criteria: Underlying assumptions and philosophy of system plans and reforms are not blaming or punitive***

Stigmatization justifies status quo in policy making and perpetuates normalization of poverty “poverty will always be there”. It blames individuals and maintains punitive measures focusing on fraud, instead of looking into more equitable distribution of resources and investment in equalizing power of income systems.

It is important for us to understand the language of documents guiding the transformation of the social assistance system in order to influence the way we talk and act to increase the quality of life for all.

### **Reflection and Action**

Poverty Free Kitchener Waterloo Action Group would benefit from continuing to work locally with people from different groups and walks of life. We could focus on finding potential spots of collective hopefulness or individual/collective ability to reduce poverty.

One of the ways would be working with people with lived experience of being poor, developing language to talk about the ways prejudice impact service delivery and ensure they have tools to talk about their experience.