Anti-Poverty Policy and Race
The need for policy to recognize the continuing significance of race

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, America is in an extended economic boom. In this time of unprecedented wealth, poverty persists. More alarming than the rate of poverty amidst the extreme wealth is the concentration of poverty among African Americans more than thirty years after the civil rights movement. Over 30 percent of black Americans live in poverty; 46 percent of black children live below the poverty line, compared to 17 percent of white children (Hartman, 1997). Poor, black neighborhoods are even more segregated than they were in the sixties, and conditions have worsened for these urban areas (Boger, 1996). The cause of this concentrated poverty is currently under debate. Some social scientists, such as William Julius Wilson, attribute the problem to class and economic problems, while others, such as Douglas Massey, claim that the problem is rooted in racial discrimination. The issue is most pertinent for government and non-profit policies. The focus of this paper is the latter.

For these organizations that work in the mostly African American urban ghettos, certain questions must be addressed: What causes poverty? Why are blacks disproportionately poor? What does it mean to be black in America? Should front-line poverty programs address race? And lastly, if poverty and race are inextricable, how should these programs deal with this problem?

Therefore, the goal of this paper is multifaceted. Through a historical examination of poverty and government response, some beliefs about the causes of and solutions to poverty will be explored. The paper will then turn to the concentration of poverty in the mostly black, inner-city ghettos. Class-based barriers have hindered progress, but race is equally important. While poverty clearly exists among white and
other non-white Americans, this paper addresses the question of whether dealing with African American poverty deserves distinct policy given historic and current discrimination. This discrimination runs deeper than prejudice tendencies towards poor African Americans. The extent to which racism plagues America and ways in which white privilege manifests itself and is maintained will be addressed. Then, through exploring two specific poverty programs and their respective recognition and willingness to deal with the fact that they serve a predominantly African American population, some insight on different approaches to race and poverty should be gained. Finally, this paper suggests how poverty and race should be approached in the future. Because the efforts of non-profit agencies should be to deal with causes and effects of poverty and because current black poverty can be attributed to both discrimination and racism, poverty policy must address the concordance of race and poverty.

**Historical context of race and poverty**

Current inequalities across racial lines are a consequence of past events. Government policies have attempted to right some of the historical wrongs, but often policy discriminated against the advancement of African Americans. Researchers have explored the ways in which current and historical discrimination has shaped government policy. Thomas Shapiro grew up in an affluent white community and has studied the ways historical decisions and political structures have benefited the white population. Melvin Oliver is a first-generation, college-educated African American whose work has concentrated on racial and urban inequality. Together they wrote *Black wealth – White wealth*, which analyzes ways in which racial inequalities have been maintained. According to Oliver and Shapiro (1995), “disparities in wealth between blacks and whites...
have been structured over many generations through the same systemic barriers that have hampered blacks throughout their history in American society: slavery, Jim Crow, so-called de jure discrimination, and institutionalized racism.”

At the end of slavery, four million former slaves were transformed to freedmen and provisions were made to begin incorporating them into American society. The Southern Homestead act of 1866 provided the legal basis for black land ownership. The Freedman’s Bureau administered the program, and there was reason to believe that a substantial part of the forty-six million acres of land used for settlement would help transform the slaves from farm laborers to farmers. (Oliver and Shapiro, 1995)

Certain factors assured that such a social and economic transformation would never occur. Oliver and Shapiro argue that, “features of the legislation worked against its use as a tool to empower blacks in their quest for land.” First, the legislation allowed for all persons who had not taken up arms against the union to apply for land; the result was that over three-quarters of the land applicants were white. More important, blacks had to face the extra burden of prejudice and discrimination. While slaves expected forty acres and a mule, they were met with the belief that if they owned land themselves, there would be nobody left to farm the land. Amidst ongoing racial prejudice, African Americans made major strides in the late eighteen hundreds. Government action in the twentieth century would, in part, assure that poor blacks would not reach full participation. (Oliver and Shapiro, 1995).

The two major expansions in public policy of the twentieth century were the New Deal and the War on Poverty. Jill Quadagno, whose book The Color of Welfare (1994) argues that racial segregation undermines national social programs, explores
shortcomings of both policies. The New Deal, Franklin Roosevelt's attempt to enact a new level of government intervention, had two main areas of policy that directly affected poor black Americans: the Social Security Act and the National Housing Act. The former was an attempt to establish some benefits (Aid to Dependent Children and Old Age Assistance) as earned rights.

While the Social Security act, the cornerstone of the New Deal, sought to protect the many against the abuses of the few, it did not extend to civil rights (Quadagno, 1994). Instead, Quadagno contends, "because of southern opposition, agricultural workers and domestic servants – most black men and women – were left out of the core programs of the Social Security Act." Without the protection of the Social Security Act, African Americans turned to the social assistance programs that were controlled by local authorities who refused to allow federal government to dictate standards or set benefit levels. While the motivation was in part economic, given the importance of cotton production and low-wage labor, the result was clear: local leaders wanted to control any program that might threaten white domination. (Quadagno, 1994)

The New Deal also reinforced patterns of racial segregation through housing policy. The National Housing Act of 1934 was enacted in an attempt to invigorate a depressed economy. Among other initiatives, it established the Federal Housing Authority. The FHA sought to assure that mortgages were economically sound, and it achieved this goal by redlining. Through drawing lines around economically risky areas, redlining, observes Quadagno, "meant that most black families were ineligible for federally insured loans." In fact, the FHA was instrumental in maintaining racial segregation because, "the most basic sentiment underlying the FHA’s concern was its
fear that property values would decline if rigid black and white segregation was not maintained" (Oliver and Shapiro, 1995).

Thirty years later, under the presidency of Lyndon Johnson, the War on Poverty addressed the issues of racial barriers and inequality that had already been firmly established. The goal of Johnson’s war was to extend political and social rights to African Americans, integrate them into local job and housing markets, and ultimately extend equal opportunity to them, thereby completing the task of democratizing American society (Quadagno, 1994). This goal was not achieved. The attempt to fully integrate poor blacks into American society was thwarted by three main factors: complaints from white political authorities, housing and district segregation, and developing stereotypes of the poor and of poor African Americans in particular. The negative response of mayors and city commissions, responding to programs that empowered the poor, caused the Johnson administration to cancel certain effective programs (Quadagno, 1994). Even without these programs, strides would have been difficult given the social isolation of blacks and growing assumptions made by whites.

While the War on Poverty successfully created black political leaders, these leaders have been unable to make significant progress because of persistent racial segregation and because of a lack of leverage in national politics (Quadagno, 1994). In an essay on the prospects of social justice for African Americans, David Stoesz (1996) discusses the effects of Johnson’s programs on the images of poor blacks. While his initiatives provided services to the poor, many of whom were African American, they also created an emerging stereotype of welfare. Because of the increasing number of single-mother welfare recipients, the public began to see welfare as being “for poor
African American women and their children without their father at home” (Stoesz, 1996).
The War on Poverty, then, shaped both how American’s viewed the poor and, according to Quadagno, how the poor viewed themselves:

[The belief was that] the cultural environment of the poor fostered self-defeating attitudes and behaviors. These included a strong present time orientation, a sense of fatalism and resignation, the belief in male superiority, improper speech patterns, incompetence in patterns of middle-class interpersonal communication, and low aspirations. Such traits imbued the poor with a sense of inferiority and conditioned them to accept their position in society. (Pg. 36).

It seems, then, that history’s legacy up to and during the civil rights movement was a society fragmented along class and race lines. Today, fragmentation persists. Current trends in research, however, have moved away from addressing race calling instead upon economic and class issues to explain the problem.

**Current Black poverty**

*The declining significance of race*

Historical racism has clearly put blacks at a disadvantage in American society and in the economy. Recent studies have shown that racist beliefs and assumptions have either been eliminated or hidden, resulting in fewer expressed racial biases in hiring, housing, and daily interactions. While the political climate is such that overt racism is rare and government policy has attempted to address the problem of poverty among African Americans, the problem persists. There are two schools of thought to explain this persistence.

William Julius Wilson, a black sociologist and one of the most influential writers on urban poverty, suggests that the problems are no longer primarily attributable to racial motivation. Instead, according to Wilson, economic and structural changes have shifted the problem from racial oppression to class subordination. Others disagree. Douglas
Massey, head of the sociology department at the University on Pennsylvania, contends that while overt racism no longer presents a major problem, subtle forms of internalized racism maintain segregation, which, in turn, maintains the fragmentation of American society.

The thrust of Wilson’s argument is that class subordination affects blacks, but it is their class, as opposed to their race, that needs to be addressed. He concludes:

Whereas the previous barriers were usually designed to control and restrict the entire black population, the new barriers create hardships essentially for the black underclass; whereas the old barriers were based explicitly on racial motivations derived from intergroup contact, the new barriers have racial significance only in their consequences, not in their origins. (Wilson, 1978, p. 2)

Wilson’s argument is based on three assumptions. First, significant economic and political changes have accompanied the modern industrial period. Second, these changes have not alleviated racial tension in America. Lastly, and most important, these changes have, “produced and facilitated a shift in racial conflict away from the industrial order to the sociopolitical order, a shift which has also increased the importance of economic class position, thereby decreasing the importance of race” (Wilson, 1978). Wilson maintains that while in the pre-industrial and industrial periods, racial oppression was a major concern, the current problems of subordination faced by certain segments of the black population are more directly associated with class.

He sights different facts to support his thesis. First, there is the increased wealth of the black middle class. “It would be difficult to explain the rapid economic improvement of the black elite by rigidly postulating the view that the traditional patterns of racial discrimination are still salient in the labor-market practices of today’s industries” (Wilson, 1978). While the black middle class has improved its economic situation, the
lower class blacks continue to struggle. This is not a consequence of their race. Instead, those in the black underclass find themselves isolated in low-paying jobs of non-corporate industries, jobs that are not in high demand, and do not produce racial strife among blacks and whites. As mentioned above, Wilson accepts that race is still important in some aspects of American society. In response to the argument that white resistance to residential integration, public school desegregation, and black control of central cities indicate the unyielding importance of race in America, he maintains that “such antagonism has far less effect on individual or group access to those opportunities and resources that are centrally important for life survival than antagonism in the economic sector.” In other words, yes, racial conflict still exists, but it is no longer a major economic problem. In so far as poverty is an economic problem we need to look beyond race as the central issue.

_The continuing significance of race_

Evidence to the contrary abounds. In response to the argument that black middle class improvement has been substantial, Oliver and Shapiro address the question of economic stability in the black middle class. Through an examination of the wealth, as opposed to the income, of black and white middle class, they conclude:

The economic foundation of the black middle class lacks one of the pillars that provide stability and security to middle-class whites – assets. The black middle-class position is precarious and fragile with insubstantial wealth resources. It is entirely premature to celebrate the rise of the black middle-class. (Pg. 7)

While middle-class blacks earn seventy-five cents for every dollar earned by middle-class whites, they have only fifteen cents for every dollar of wealth held by middle-class whites (Oliver and Shapiro, 1995). Their argument is not that racism causes this disparity, only that the issues of race must be addressed in discussions of inequality.
Douglas Massey, on the other hand, argues even more strongly that racism plays a role in the continuing struggle among African Americans. While Wilson contends that housing segregation is caused chiefly by class barriers, Massey disagrees. According to him, segregation has been caused by discriminatory practices in housing. This segregation has concentrated areas of black poverty and thereby reinforced negative stereotypes. The findings concerning the segregation caused by New Deal policies support this notion. The current issue is less the negative effects of segregation than the probable causes. Unlike Wilson, Douglas Massey, in his book written with Nancy Denton (1994), concludes,

African Americans continue to be denied full access to U.S. housing markets. Through a series of exclusionary tactics, realtors limit the likelihood of black entry into white neighborhoods and channel black demand for housing into areas that are within or near existing ghettos. White prejudice is such that when black entry into a neighborhood is achieved, that area becomes unattractive to further white settlement and whites begin departing at an accelerated rate. (Pg. 114)

Therefore, housing segregation cannot be seen as strictly economic- or class-based. The effects of isolation on the poor are significant, and the effects of racial discrimination on isolation are apparent. This alone is not necessarily a reason for anti-poverty programs to address racism, though. Racism runs deeper than residential segregation, and has consequences that exceed black isolation.

Racism

Poverty afflicts the entire nation; hence it receives national attention. For racial discrimination to receive equal attention, current racism must have consequences beyond those addressed by Massey and Denton. As Wachtel (1999) points out, "daily humiliations - from grown men being called 'boy' to being suspiciously followed in stores or being passed up by taxi drivers - have been a regular feature of the black
experience.” Just as slave-owners legitimized slavery through prejudice, today’s less severe systematic inequality can be attributed to a less severe form of prejudice.


Much of the ideological legitimization for the contemporary misery of African Americans derives from the historical legacy of slavery, which continues to assert its brutal presence in the untold suffering of millions of everyday black folk.

Some argue that the “race card” is played too often or that slavery ended a long time ago and that people who are still complaining about racism need to move on. Is it logical to believe that an inherently unequal society (based on legal separation by race) that existed just over one generation ago has no lingering effects today?

It has been widely noted that the effects of slavery and segregation went beyond the legal ramifications. With the end of slavery came a generation of black children whose parents were not human by American standards. Their children then learned that they would suffer from countless injustices based solely on their skin color. How can we assume that today, only a few generations later, the effects of racism have dissipated? In interactions with African Americans from different socioeconomic backgrounds, it has become apparent that racial assumptions that have plagued America have significant implications for individuals.

This past September I had the pleasure of getting to know Martin Jeffery, the head of the Roanoke NAACP. Mr. Jeffery is a charismatic young man who commented on the numerous “hats” he wore. During the week I spent in Roanoke I saw him as a community builder (working for Total Action Against Poverty), a political activist, a father, a comedian, a singer, and an influential media personality. We talked about racism in America. As opposed to some people I’ve asked, he was hesitant to attribute
problems in black communities to racism. He recognized that these communities needed to "empower themselves." Martin Jeffery appeared to be a perfect example of an African American who was not affected by the ills of a society infested with institutionalized racism.

One day we began discussing how our American experiences may have been shaped by our respective skin colors. Mr. Jeffery said that he has not gone through one day without recognizing that he is black. Then he told me a story about a debate in which he participated at Washington and Lee. He spoke of being on stage, looking out into a crowd of white students, and feeling inferior. He knew it was not rational, and was not sure if it was a feeling coming from the audience or from within. This is not debatable. This is one man telling another that, because of his skin color, he had a damagingly inaccurate sense of himself. This sentiment is not unique to Martin Jeffery.

Gloria Yamato (1995), a black woman, discusses the effect of having internalized racism. She claims that being treated with less respect is to be expected because she is black. Further, she says, "racism limits what I expect of myself. It results in my acceptance of mistreatment." Jenkins (1982) has explored similar themes. He makes the point that most of the psychological manifestations of racism are fleeting. They may surface only after an encounter with a prejudiced authority figure (he gives the story of a law-abiding black father being harassed by police officers). Yet, they do exist. Jenkins mentions feelings of self-doubt and a sense on inadequacy that result from such encounters. Jenkins suggests, "the impacts of racism have placed a psychological strain on the sense of self of the African American as a capably active agent." For these
individuals, the effects of racism are further reaching than housing segregation. They are not poor, yet the effects of racism continue. If a population is disproportionately poor, their poverty can be in part attributed to racial discrimination, and members of the population who are not poor still suffer from the negative effects of discrimination. Is this sufficient cause to address race in anti-poverty programming? A final aspect of racial segregation must be addressed: how does race affect white Americans?

White privilege

One time, in the heat of a discussion about a day in the life of a black American, the race debate was turned to me. I was asked what it means to be white. As I understood it then, the white experience was actually a lack of experience. This is in direct contradiction to the sentiments expressed by Mr. Jeffery. African Americans deal with their blackness on a daily basis, yet I never have to think about the fact that I am white. Peggy McIntosh (1995) attributes this to the fact that “whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege.” Being white in America affords itself certain privileges. According to Jones and Carter (1996), “Whites are taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage.” The thought process seems to end there; people who recognize racism as resulting in disadvantage do not readily accept that they may gain the advantage.

McIntosh describes different ways in which her being white affords her privileges that she would otherwise not experience. She concludes,

I’ve come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special

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1 William James, Charles Cooley, and George Mead have all done extensive work on the development of self as a social phenomenon, concluding that a sense of self is in large part determined by one’s ability to see oneself from the imagined perspective of society. For a summary of their work see The Myth of Self-Esteem (Hewitt, 1998).
provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, energy gear, and blank checks. (1995)

Even in establishing the list of advantages, she recognizes that until she wrote each one down, she forgot them. The cognitive dissonance that results from seeing white privilege and believing that one's life is "what one makes it" is significant. The result is a tendency to deny or forget white privilege. White privilege exists, however, and manifests itself in everything from schools to real estate and from police protection to the media (Kivel, 1996).

Being white in America confers power and dominance at some level. While the dominance has changed significantly from a time in which an entire race was enslaved, it has not been eliminated to the extent some would like to believe. Non-profit organizations are predominately run by middle class whites and serve predominately underclass blacks. Discrepancies in race are glaring in comparing employment, political representation, schooling, and other basic measures of group well being (Andersen and Collins, 1995). Returning to Massey, we see how white privilege shapes racial segregation. He contends that by confining blacks to segregated and often poor neighborhoods, whites insulate themselves from black poverty and the problems associated with it. How is white privilege relevant to black poverty? Bill Bradley's summary seems most fitting:

As long as white America remains blind to its own racial privilege, black Americans will feel that the focus falls too heavily on them. As long as white America believes that the race problem is primarily a black problem of meeting white standards to gain admittance to white society, things will never stabilize and endure. (Double Exposure, 1997, forward)

To this point, it seems that race and poverty are more closely related than William Julius Wilson accounts for, but this fact still may not be sufficient evidence to suggest that anti-
poverty policy should address race. Policy cannot expect to address every cause or effect of poverty. Addressing poverty itself is a formidable task. Turning to two anti-poverty programs, each of which accept that race is an issue, this paper seeks to provide insight into whether or not race needs to be addressed in poverty policy.

**Different Approaches to the same problem**

Armed with questions about race, poverty, and anti-poverty policy, I conducted two interviews with the directors of different anti-poverty programs. The first was with Randy Johnston of Uplift Inc. Uplift is based in Greensboro, North Carolina and works primarily with early head start (ages 3 and younger) children. It also addresses citywide issues of community building. The second interview was with Gwen Sarsfield, the program director of G.R.E.A.T. (Greater Richmond employment assistance team). G.R.E.A.T. is a welfare to work program in Richmond, Va. These two organizations were chosen based on the fact that both serve an almost entirely African American clientele but address the issue differently. While their programs are aimed at different aspects of poverty, each is on the front line of poverty policy, and each must choose to deal with or downplay the fact that its city has a poor population that is predominantly black.

For Uplift, the race issue is an important one. Randy finds the stark contradiction between the entirely white businessmen that he asks for money and the mostly black population that Uplift serves too disconcerting to ignore. Gwen, on the other hand, sees that race is an issue, but insists that Great has no major role in overcoming possible racism that her clients or staff may face. She equates the attention that Great gives to racism to the attention they give to bad nutrition: both may be a problem for her clientele,
but just as she cannot brush the teeth of poor people, she cannot expect to alleviate racism.

Randy began the interview by stating the most immediate goal of Uplift: “trying to find the most effective ways for communities to support low income children and families to help them improve their life situations.” This goal, for Uplift, is in part achieved through child development programs. These programs are not the end, however, they are a basis for the broader work. This broader work is an attempt to help low income people become part of the larger communities. According to Randy, “poverty is really rooted in the fragmentation of our society and our community. We allow and can tolerate really poor people in the same communities where there is a lot of wealth because people with wealth never see the poor people.” Uplift, then, strives to create more of a whole community by first reaffirming the “worth, dignity, and potential of everybody.”

I asked Randy if the goal of a non-profit ever changes because of the racial make-up of the clientele. He said no, that addressing poverty still comes first. Returning to his view of the root of poverty (the fragmentation of society), I found the role race plays in his mind. According to Randy, “the two dividing lines [across which we are fragmented] are economic and race. Until we learn how to bridge those and create more of a whole community we are going to keep producing poverty.” In other words, it would be ideal to be able to address poverty without addressing race, but it would be avoiding the reality. The reality, in Randy’s mind, is a grim one: “black people have always been disadvantaged. They’ve been out of power and out of privilege, and the myths have been

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2 All quotes attributed to Randy Johnston were taken from a phone interview conducted on March 20, 2000. Gwen Sarsfield’s quotes are from a March 27, 2000 interview. Both participants knew they were being recorded.
developed that they are less worthy than white people. That’s deeply imbedded in our society.” Randy feels that policy that does not address race misses the point. Because “race has been the defining source of who’s on top and who’s on bottom in America, if white people don’t get the race thing, they can’t get the economic thing.”

In response to the idea that we could improve the economic situation of poor black people without addressing race, Randy maintains, “race is such a part of who we are that we have to address it. It’s not just about helping poor black people get power. Through that process we have to address race. It’s part of people’s lives. It’s the way things are.”

Gwen Sarsfield recognizes that race is a part of people’s lives, but insists that her program does not need to address it at the level Uplift does. Gwen also began by describing Great’s immediate goals. She stressed that their role is to get people to work. They do training programs and help with various life skills; “everything is geared toward getting people to work.” Her core beliefs and her vision for the future are in line with Randy’s. Gwen thinks that we can start correcting some of the problems surrounding poverty, “only when we start seeing the dignity of all people, and treating people with respect.” She talks about encouraging diversity and celebrating differences and beyond that: “we are not mandated to educate beyond that.”

Great has identified a problem – people on welfare need jobs – and works toward alleviating it. Unlike Uplift, it holds that race does not play enough of a role in preventing the realization of that goal to be addressed. Like most non-profits, Great assumes that race is either out of its scope or (as Wilson argues) less significant than more immediate problems. Initially, I was hopeful that Gwen would provide a strong
argument for the relative unimportance of race. When asked the role that race plays in the fact that the people on welfare in Richmond are predominantly black, she responds, “Do we experience racism for the people that we serve? I’d have to say no. I don’t see it. Is there subtle stuff going on? Probably.” Gwen would not suggest that racism is a thing of the past. In the outset of the interview she describes the significant strides that have been made towards overcoming racism and the inclusive atmosphere that Great maintains. When asked if Great recognizes the structural racial oppression that Randy describes, Gwen responds: “we do only the training to [help welfare recipients] get a job and to succeed at a job. We help them with life skills. Everything is geared towards succeeding in the workplace.” According to Gwen, “economic power equals power. Period.”

This sentiment responds directly to Randy’s suggestion that only in understanding the role of race in poverty can one understand the economic aspects. It is a tempting idea. If Gwen, who works in poor black neighborhoods, does not see racism as an issue, than Randy may be drawing attention to problems that either only exist in certain neighborhoods or that do not exist at all. Later in the conversation, however, it was apparent that Gwen sees race as more of an issue than she originally suggested.

Immediately after insisting that achieving economic power would solve the problems for welfare recipients, Gwen’s tone became more serious: “although…I don’t know. I’d love to know what to do. I feel there is a real need for a real awareness of how insidious racism is and how pervasive it is.” And later, “is racism a big problem? Yes. The more you recognize it as a problem, the more you deal with it, the more aware you
become.” On some level, it seemed as though throughout the interview Gwen was going through the process of recognition leading to heightened awareness.

As long sighs and dismay increasingly broke her sentences, it was apparent that her initial comment about not seeing race as an important issue may not have been totally accurate. By the end of the interview she began sentences by insisting that what Great was doing was enough and ended them with the recognition that they needed to do something to address race. For example in response to the suggestion that poverty policy that ignores race is ineffective: “We pattern people to go to work...is that a strong thing? Yes...in that way I think we are making some headway, but then...I don’t know...what should I do...not many of us know how to deal with this [race issue]...what do we do?” She contends that she is not afraid of racism, but that she is doing all that she can. When asked if she thinks most people have internalized assumptions about race, Gwen responds, “I think that is clearly true. That is the basis for racism. Most people don’t examine it.” This is the premise for the work that Randy is doing in Greensboro. If assumptions about race have been internalized, they cannot, as Wilson suggests, be manifest politically but not economically. The fact that the program director of a frontline poverty program sees race as an issue and does not address it because she does not know how, is not reason for other policy to avoid it. As Randy said a week before, organizations that work with poor people need to be accountable to their clients. If they recognize that race is an issue, but are not doing anything as an organization, are they being accountable?
Towards racial and economic justice

Based on the research summarized above and the responses of Mrs. Sarsfield and Mr. Johnston, I believe that poverty policy must recognize that race is an issue. To what extent it should is debatable. While it may be the case that national programs insisting that individuals and organizations confront internalized beliefs and racial prejudices are effective, they are not politically viable. Randy found out that prefacing his program's objective with his beliefs about race almost took the organization down. If one program cannot openly address race as an issue, can we expect policy to effectively do so?

By taking the steps Randy has taken on a broader scale, improvements can be slowly made. First, he makes sure that his organization is dealing with the issue from the inside out. A seminar entitled "Undoing Racism" is now part of the training required for Uplift staff members. This seminar is not an attempt to get white people to understand how racist they are. It is directed at whites and blacks, and it focuses on helping individuals understand how systems of power and control have limited the potential of certain groups. These systems of control, coupled with historical racism, have led to the internalized assumptions people make about themselves and others and continuing inequality. Uplift has weekly meetings to discuss what they are doing to maintain progress and they quietly recruit friends and community activists to participate in the seminar. Members of the staff attend political functions, pressing pertinent issues. For example, last summer in the midst of a school redistricting process that many saw as racially biased, Randy, another Uplift employee, and a few other community leaders pressed the county commissioners to re-work the proposal. The proposal was re-worked.
Hopefully, through heightened awareness and the slow spread of these ideas, progress will be made.

Second, while Randy soft-pedals the race issue with political and financial supporters, he continues to foster discussions. Because he says, “most white people have not been engaged in this in a way in which they have to stop and think about it. What we’re doing is putting it out there objectively.” If twenty percent of the people he addresses respond with support and want to pursue these issues, he takes them to the next step. The simple fostering of discussion may seem insignificant, but progress has been made. Randy convinced the mayor, an elderly white woman, to attend the seminar, and subsequently she has successfully promoted it throughout city hall. More often than the mayor’s response, is one of indifference or disagreement. While race is a part of the equation, it may not yet be a part that everyone is willing to deal with. Ultimately, this has made Uplift’s efforts less productive than they could be. There is a fine line between what needs to be done and what can be done. Initially, Randy ignored the latter, insisting that people join his efforts, and the organization suffered. Now he is slowly attempting to move the fine line in the direction of what needs to be done. While slow and frustrating, the movement is taking place.

Repeatedly in my interview with Gwen, she asked what she could do. I suggested that she get in touch with the group that directs the “Undoing Racism” seminars. She insisted that I get them in touch with her. I will. Basically, she seemed to want to believe that their role was simply getting people a job, but she talked about economic justice. Justice is not achieved by getting people a job. It may not even be achieved in reaching “middle-class.” She wants to give her clients the tools to improve their lives and knows
that she cannot cure racism. Front-line programs should not be asked to fix such expansive problems. I do think that they must recognize the role race plays in the fragmentation of society. She said that she “was not scared” of the consequences of race, but did not know what to do about them. I think that Randy may be only one step away from feeling the same way. He’s not exactly sure what to do, but he knows he must try something. As he said, “the fascinating thing about this is, we’re making it up as we go. We don’t know exactly what it’s going to look like.” Currently they are in the process of developing a track for people to take once they show interest in these ideas, while maintaining organization in poor communities. It must be noted that as important as getting white communities to recognize privilege, is getting black communities to organize and empower themselves.

Therefore, a move towards economic justice must include a move towards racial justice. It is too early to expect large-scale changes in how policy addresses race. It is never too early to suggest that individuals and organizations begin to address race. It is unlikely that other poverty programs will share Gwen’s open response to the suggestion that her staff go through the seminar. It is not unlikely that in going through the seminar, Great changes its approach to poverty in black communities.

Conclusions

Racism does not cause poverty. This paper is not a suggestion that white people are to blame for black poverty. Nor is it a suggestion that poor black people are powerless against the controls of white America. In America, however, the historical legacy of racism cannot be overlooked. It would be difficult to argue that poor African Americans of the early twentieth century were poor for reasons other than racial
Race consciousness in anti-poverty policy

Sixty years later, could the argument be made? It seems that we have more quickly forgotten the legacy of racial discrimination than we have overcome that very legacy.

The dilemma we face as a nation is the same as the one Uplift faces as an organization. We need to do things that most people will not support. This lack of support from the majority is not sufficient cause for non-profit agencies like Uplift to abandon their policy. Through soft-pedaling, they have remained politically viable and through persistence in their beliefs, they have remained proactive. In part because they have refused to abandon what they believe to be true, improvements in and around Greensboro have begun to take place. As responses such as the Greensboro mayor’s and Gwen Sarsfield’s become more common, the understanding with which Uplift approaches poverty will spread to individuals and to other non-profits. As a realization of the interplay between race and poverty spreads, we can begin to address black poverty with a more constructive approach.
References


