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# Bridges Out of Poverty as an Anti-Poverty Strategy in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania

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Bridges Out of Poverty as an Anti-Poverty Strategy in Kennett Square,  
Pennsylvania

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Student Name: Katlyn Uhler

Date: May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017

## Dedication

To the brave men and women who formed the first group of Getting Ahead graduates in Kennett Square. You are my inspiration for this project, and for all the work I do. Thank you for sharing your lives, your struggles, and your dreams with me over so many months.

And to my friends at 38 Chapin Street. Thank you for all you taught me about being a global citizen in this world, and for always believing that I was smarter, stronger, and braver than I did myself.

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## Abstract

This paper explores the initial results of the Bridges Out of Poverty (“Bridges”) community framework as implemented by the organization Kennett Area Community Service in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. The aim of this research is to provide perspective on Bridges Out of Poverty’s contribution to the understanding of poverty in the United States and its potential as an antipoverty intervention. It does so first through an exploration of the historical and current discussion on poverty and anti-poverty interventions in the United States, followed by research on the Bridges model itself and its implementation in Kennett Square. This latter research includes content analysis of Bridges publications, interviews with Bridges leaders across the United States, additional interviews with those involved in the initial Bridges programming in Kennett Square, and finally survey data collected by Kennett Area Community Service in the beginning stages of program implementation. The research finds that by situating the individual-level effects of poverty in structural context, Bridges has the potential to change the conversation on poverty in the communities engaging with its framework. While Bridges’ stated goals reach into the level of large-scale structural impact, I find that the change inspired by Bridges is primarily happening on the community level, and with bigger impacts happening as they “trickle up” from local contexts. I argue, therefore, that Bridges has potential as a set of tools to bring a critical analysis of poverty to circles where it is often overlooked, and in doing so to change mindsets and practices that address poverty at the local level.

## I. Introduction

“If we accepted that the problems are systemic, that millions of people would not be falling into the same patterns if the incentives weren’t there, if those paths weren’t cleared for them, if that wasn’t the way society ran...if we accepted that then we would have to accept our own complicity.”

- Linda Tirado, author of *Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America*

“One reason typical efforts to reduce poverty have not worked is that they failed to talk about and examine the realities of the impact that poverty has on people.”

- Phil DeVol, co-author of *Bridges Out of Poverty*

Reyna<sup>1</sup> is a middle-aged woman who has struggled essentially her entire life to get by. She is the mother of three boys, has lived for over 20 years in the United States, and she lives in poverty. Each year she receives financial assistance from Kennett Area Community Service (KACS) to heat her home, and most months she receives a food supplement from the same organization to help remediate the gaps in her budget. She has worked for many years in housekeeping for a local hotel, but her hours are sometimes unpredictable and she has no paid time off or other employee benefits. Some years ago, Reyna became a legal permanent resident of the U.S., but she only became eligible for government benefits such as Medicaid and SNAP (formerly “Food Stamps”) recently, as there is a five-year wait for eligibility based on immigration status for these programs. Reyna has some family support, but most of her siblings and children are also struggling financially and otherwise. She is used to getting by on what she has, but repeatedly falls into crisis when unexpected health or family emergencies take place. She has had to make some very difficult, and some would say, unfair, decisions in the past in order to make ends meet. What Reyna dreams about is a home of her own, safety and stability for her boys, and for her son to complete his college education. “I will take care of you mom,” he tells her, “and you won’t have to live like this anymore.” Though her options are limited, and the barriers are tall, she does not give up hope.

Reyna’s story is similar to that of many families accessing services for basic needs in Kennett Square, but it is certainly not unique to Southern Chester County, where KACS is located. There has never been a time in U.S. history when we have not grappled with poverty (Robinson, 2009; Edin, 2010; Gowan, 2010; Midgley, 1998; Glennerster, 2002; Openshaw, 2014). Though poverty has always existed in this country, we are now in a time when levels of inequality are growing rapidly, and vast swathes of the population are struggling, unable to secure access to basic resources for themselves and their families (Gladstone, 2016; Krugman, 2012). The debate on poverty and what to do about it has been waged in the public and private realms since before the time of Roosevelt’s New Deal, Johnson’s War on Poverty, Reagan’s “welfare queen,” or Clinton’s Welfare Reform bill (Gowan, 2010; Gladstone, 2016).

Our proposed solutions to the poverty problem depend on who or what we blame. Poverty scholar and author Teresa Gowan says our discussion about poverty in the U.S. tends to

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<sup>1</sup> Name has been changed to protect privacy

circle around three discourses: the poor as sinful, the poor as sick, or the poor as victims of the system. In other words, do we have the poor among us because of their personal deficiencies, because of their bad choices, or because of the system we live in? Consequently, do the poor need to be rehabilitated, punished, or liberated?" (2010). Such questions lead us to ask: who is responsible for poverty and who is responsible for doing something about it? What exactly should be done? Is it up to the government to solve poverty, or the private sector? Is poverty primarily the result of individual choice or structural factors? There have been as many interventions as there are questions in the poverty debate (Poppendieck, 1998; Openshaw, 2014; Midgley, 1998; Morazes, 2007; Gowan, 2010). The two quotes above describe one of the primary themes of my research: any effort to address poverty must take into account both the structural causes of poverty and the systems that support them ("our complicity") *and* address the prolonged effects that poverty has on the individual and community subject to it – what DeVol argues most traditional charity (typical efforts) fail to do.

My research focuses on one particular social intervention called "Bridges Out of Poverty," an under-researched framework that derives from a book of the same name and has been applied in over 200 communities across the United States and abroad. Bridges Out of Poverty is, in the words of its authors, an initiative, a framework, or a set of concepts for understanding and addressing poverty through the lens of economic class. It has been developed into an approach for addressing the causes and effects of poverty at the individual, community, and policy levels. The original ideas for Bridges emerged from a 1995 book by Dr. Ruby K. Payne by the name *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (DeVol, 2013). Dr. Payne's book presents an understanding of poverty through the lens of economic class and the effects of those class environments on the opportunities and barriers faced by the poor. It is based primarily on her experience as an educator and focuses on the public school environment and the interactions between educators and their students/student families. In 1999, Dr. Payne partnered with Phil DeVol and Terie Dreussi-Smith to publish the book *Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities*. DeVol and Dreussi-Smith became involved after reading Payne's Framework book and using it to make changes to their work with their individuals at an outpatient treatment center, which they realized was "operating on middle-class norms that weren't working well for [their] clients" (DeVol, 2013, p.4). When Payne heard about the work they were doing, she reached out and asked DeVol and Dreussi Smith to help her write a book for communities. The Bridges Out of Poverty book (2001) was written specifically for social, health, legal and other professionals as a tool for using this understanding of economic class realities to achieve better outcomes for those in poverty. After the book was published in 1999, DeVol and Dreussi Smith began to conduct training workshops on the Bridges material for individuals and communities interested in applying the concepts. DeVol describes the transition from that point to what is now the Bridges framework in his introduction to *Facilitator's Notes for Getting Ahead*:

Individuals and organizations began using our work to rethink the way they were interacting with people in poverty. Some organizations changed policies, procedures, and programs in order to alter their culture and outcomes. But we were doing what middle class people do so often: We were talking about, at, and for people in poverty, but very seldom were we

listening to them. (2013, p.4)

DeVol, with the help of others interested in the work, began to meet with small groups of individuals in poverty over the course of two years to gather their perceptions on Bridges Out of Poverty concepts. Out of these meetings grew the workbook for Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World, a workshop in which a small group of individuals in or near poverty discuss the Bridges concepts and provide concrete information on poverty and local conditions to their community. Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi-Smith began to offer “train the trainer” workshops for those who wished to train others in their community on the Bridges framework or facilitate a Getting Ahead workshop, and a learning community began to form among the multitude of localities implementing the Bridges concepts. It is the progression of ideas and practices that have formed out of this learning community, expressed in the continued publications and workshops by DeVol and other Bridges leadership, that make up what is now the Bridges Out of Poverty framework.

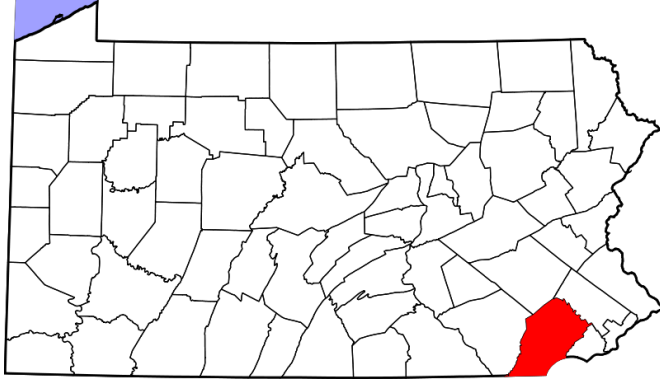
In this paper, I situate the Bridges Out of Poverty framework in the history of poverty and social services in the United States, and identify the theoretical assumptions that underpin its approach. Specifically, I examine the early implementation of this model by the nonprofit agency Kennett Area Community Service (KACS) in the community of Kennett Square, Pennsylvania (PA). Based on data from the case study, in the context of social service theory and local needs, I explore the following questions through my research: where does Bridges Out of Poverty fit into our understanding of and approach to poverty alleviation in this country? What does it offer to the discussion and what can it offer specifically to the Kennett Square community? I explore these questions through an examination of the local context, a thorough review of the literature on poverty and social service efforts of the past century in the United States, and by an examination of what the Bridges out of Poverty movement itself claims to offer in light of the previous two subjects. I also include research from my own interviews with Bridges Out of Poverty leaders, as well as interview and survey data from the early implementation of the framework in Kennett Square.

Based on my research, I argue the following: Bridges brings together big-picture ideas on poverty and economic class into a framework that organizations, individuals, and communities can use to improve their understanding of poverty. It does this by situating the real and prolonged effects of poverty within the context of community and societal structures. Though Bridges claims to address structural causes of poverty, I argue that it does so primarily through a “trickle up” effect: its efforts are heavily focused on changing individual mindsets. As individuals change their perspective about poverty, organizations are effected, new relationships are formed, and certain institutional changes can take place. Through my interviews and other research I will demonstrate how I and others implementing the Bridges framework have seen occur. As such, I conclude that Bridges is *a* tool for bringing about solutions to poverty, especially useful for those in the social service system, for whom daily practice often eclipses a critical analysis of poverty. Yet it should not be said that Bridges on its own is *the* solution to poverty, but rather a starting point for individuals and communities wishing to change the conversation and practices regarding poverty in their local contexts.

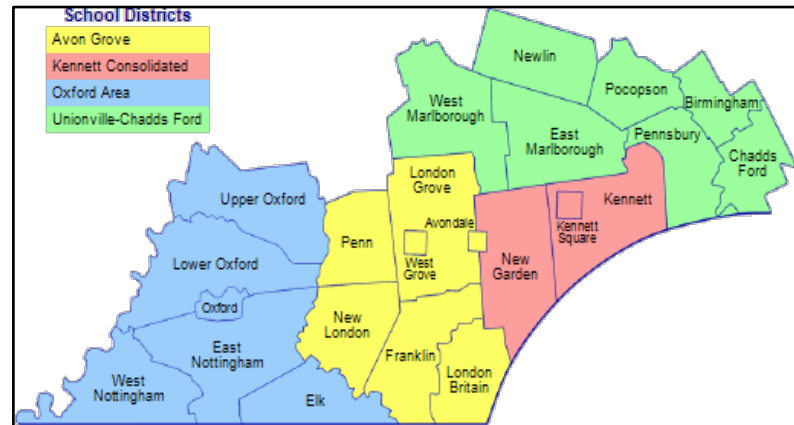


**A. Research site**

*i. Chester County*



*ii. Southern Chester County*



*iii. Kennett Square*



Chester County is located in Southeastern Pennsylvania about 40 miles southwest of Philadelphia. Southern Chester County, where Kennett Square is located, is an affluent area with a strong history of philanthropy. It is semi-rural, and is home to a successful mushroom industry, which produces the majority of the country's cultivated mushrooms. Largely because of this industry, a significant portion of the population is made up of immigrants from Central America, primarily from central Mexico, making their home in Southern Chester County. The population of Latino farm workers has been increasing since the 1980s, but continues to grow and is now primarily composed of families with children, many of whom have now been in the States for decades or are second generation (Matza, 2014). Many of the area's Latino residents live in poverty and face unique barriers and vulnerabilities to exploitation because of their national origin, immigration status, education and/or language. A 2013 study by the United Way of Southern Chester County reports the race composition of the area as 84% white, 5% black, 2% Asian, and 9% other, with 14.4% reporting Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, regardless of race (United Way of SCC, 2013). For the Kennett borough specifically, in 2010 48.8% of borough residents identified as Hispanic or Latino, while 42.8% identified as White non-Hispanic, 7.2% as Black or African-American, 3.3% as two or more races, and only 1.2% identified as any other group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The percentage of minority residents goes down in the townships surrounding the borough, while the median income and educational levels go up. Much of this difference is due to the high density of immigrant families living in the borough, many of whom are earning well below a living wage and have less than a high school education.

It should also be noted that between 1990 and 2013, the area's Hispanic population increased by 325.3%, while the non-Hispanic population increased by 45.6% (United Way of SCC, 2013). This is likely due both to an increase in immigration from Central America as well as a higher birth rate among the area's Hispanic families. While the United Way study did find that households headed by a single female parent were more likely to be in poverty than other household compositions, there is unfortunately no other data available that breaks down poverty by race and gender specifically for Southern Chester County. However, it is useful to note that the KACS food cupboard, which is rather ubiquitous in its reach across impoverished households in the area, serves a population that is about 55% Hispanic or Latino of any race, 34% White non-Hispanic, slightly less than 9% Black non-Hispanic, and 1% Other. While, as across the nation, it can be safely said that the poor in Southern Chester County are disproportionately women, children, and people of color, in the Kennett Area it is also starkly evident that the poor are disproportionately from the immigrant community.

Nevertheless, the Kennett area has an unusually mixed-income characteristic – those with incomes well above and well below the median level living, studying, and working in close proximity to one another. This is likely due to the presence of both very high-paying jobs, as well as a legacy of inherited wealth in the area, and very low-paying jobs – primarily in the agricultural, retail, and healthcare industries. The proximity of the poor to the rich makes the inequality even more stark, with upper-middle class neighborhoods situated in some areas just across the street from crowded row homes and farmworker barracks. Nationally, the federal government sets the poverty line for a family of four at \$24,300 – an impossibly low number for families living in Kennett Square (ASPE, 2016). Most social service or government assistance

agencies set the income limits for assistance somewhere between 150%-200% of the Federal Poverty Line (\$36,450-\$58,600 for a family of four). Several groups have attempted to come up with more realistic measures to estimate need, ones that take into account actual living expenses by region. One such measure, called the Self-Sufficiency Standard, calculates how much a family would need, county by county, to meet its basic needs without any outside assistance. For a family with 2 young children and two adults in Chester County, where Kennett Square is located, that estimate is \$71,296 per year (Pearce, 2010). What these numbers make clear is that as cost of living has skyrocketed and wages have remained largely stagnant, the working poor of Kennett Square are becoming more and more vulnerable to falling off an economic cliff with no safety net at the bottom.

The United Way of Southern Chester County estimates that between 2007 and 2011, poverty among area students increased by 51.1% in Kennett Consolidated, 59.4% in Avon Grove, and 39.8% in Unionville-Chadds Ford school districts (United Way of Southern Chester County, 2013). While the local economy has been steadily improving since the 2008 economic crisis, those standing on the edge of the poverty cliff are those who are hit hardest and take the longest to recover. Low family earnings and scarcity of affordable housing continue to be major barriers for those looking to stabilize their lives (Historic Kennett Square, 2016). The proliferation of nonprofits and the strong spirit of philanthropy present in Kennett helps to mitigate the gap in state-provided care, but the lack of necessary conditions for families to be self-sufficient remains while government entitlement programs and the minimum wage continue to lag behind actual costs of living.

Kennett Area Community Service (KACS) has spent over 60 years meeting the basic needs of the under-resourced residents of Kennett Square. What began as a small Christmas basket program run by local Rotary Club members in 1954 has grown to over 500 families per month in 2017. The Emergency Assistance program, which works to prevent and mitigate housing instability and homelessness among local families, has likewise seen enormous growth in need while resources such as affordable housing remain out of reach for most qualified families. The organization is well known in the community and widely supported for its work in helping the needy. But there came a point, around the time of the organization's first-ever strategic planning process, that leadership began to ask critical questions about its goals and mission. Though the organization had been in existence for some time, it had largely been operating as a volunteer-run community organization, and had only hired its first full-time staff member around 2010. Very few of its processes had been formalized or institutionalized in any way. At the time of the strategic planning process, the Food Cupboard and the Emergency Assistance Programs were serving more families than ever before. This was partially credited to the economic downturn following the 2008 recession, partially to the growing number of low-income families moving into the area, and partially to a growing awareness about the services that the organization provided. KACS realized that while it was largely successful in helping families avoid acute crisis – namely, hunger and homelessness – it was seeing very few of the families it served actually move out of poverty. As a result, staff were seeing many of the same individuals repeatedly for the same needs, often throughout multiple generations. While many charitable organizations may have seen their growing service numbers as a success, attributing

it to greater outreach or more effective programming, KACS saw it as a warning sign. Their short-term assistance was doing little to address the deeper issues keeping their clients in poverty.

### **B. Bridges Out of Poverty and KACS**

KACS began to think about potential changes in programming to focus on achieving longer-term stability for their client's lives. To do so would require a shift in focus, not only among staff but also among donors, volunteers, leadership, and the broader community that supported them. They needed to create a shared conviction that KACS and the larger community had a responsibility to do something about poverty beyond charity. When KACS discovered the Bridges framework at a local training, the leadership team began to consider how they might use some of the ideas and programming of Bridges to reach this goal. In 2015, KACS decided to launch the Bridges Out of Poverty initiative as part of its programming, in an attempt to move beyond crisis management and basic needs to a focus on more sustainable change. The organization's hope is to help clients build resources to improve their quality of life and to bring a new understanding of poverty to the community through collaborative dialogue and innovative solutions.

There were multiple aspects of Bridges that made it attractive to KACS. First, it offered a change in perspective on poverty – not as an individual fault or an inevitable reality, but as a lack of resources resulting from a multitude of factors that naturally lead to instability and need. The focus on building resources and stability at the individual level resonated with the change KACS wanted to see in its social service model. But it also offered a way to bring the entire community into the conversation, with those traditionally served by social service agencies at the table. In 2016, KACS began offering the first Bridges Out of Poverty trainings to the community: a half-day training for community members from any sector, and a full-day training for social service professionals. In the training, participants are exposed to the Bridges concepts regarding causes of poverty, norms of economic class, and building resources. At the end of 2016, it also began its first series of Getting Ahead, a 16-week workshop based on the Bridges concepts for individuals in or near poverty: one in English and one in Spanish.

My role in this effort began in June 2016, when I returned to Kennett Area Community Service for a 9-month period to help them launch the Bridges Out of Poverty initiative both internally and in the community. Previous to this role, I had worked at KACS for more than two and half years as Emergency Assistance Case Manager, working intensively with families experiencing housing instability to avoid homelessness and further crisis. My knowledge of the organization's goals and processes comes from my time in that role, as well as previous experience working in the same community, and finally in my latest position working on Bridges Out of Poverty. All insights or information provided in this paper, where not cited, comes directly from the multitude of conversations and observations I have made over the years through these roles.

It should be noted that my research, while based directly on the interviews and other data outlined below, is strongly informed by my own observations and understanding as a long-time community service worker personally invested in the work of poverty alleviation and social change in Kennett Square. My knowledge of the local context – both the geographic region and

the world of social service organizations – as well as my first-hand experience witnessing the implementation of Bridges in this and other communities – have provided me with a unique framework for understanding the meaning of my research results, and interpreting them here for this paper. Below I detail the specifics of my research methods and methodology, as well as the literature review that provides the backdrop for my own work.

## **II. Research Methodology**

My research is based in the methodological tradition of critical social work, which falls within the field of critical social theory. Critical social theory is a “multidisciplinary knowledge base” whose central goal is the “emancipatory function of knowledge” (Leonardo, 2004). It is characterized by a critical view of existing social institutions and an attention to dynamics of power and oppression. Critical social theory has been applied to the field of social work and taken the name of “critical social work” in its specific application to this field. Within critical social work, the theory focuses on bringing forward those dynamics within social work practice (often those of client – service professional) that involve some form of social power, especially as it relates to any intended influence on the part of the social service professional. As the Bridges model and my research itself involves the role of social workers and other professionals engaging with impoverished individuals on the topic of their poverty, the lens of critical social work theory could not be more appropriate.

This paper will be exploratory in nature, attempting to understand the preliminary outcomes of the Bridges Out of Poverty model in Kennett Square and its potential for future impact. As all data, gathered in the form of interviews, surveys, and content analysis, will be gathered within the first six to nine months of the model’s implementation, long-term impact is impossible to define, but the hope is that the results of my research will lay the groundwork for future implementation. The literature review, which forms the context for understanding Bridges, covers scholarly discussions not only on poverty interventions themselves, but on the history of attitudes, policies, and approaches to poverty that have dominated public thought since well before the modern era of “social services.” From there, my research will move to a content analysis of the Bridges Out of Poverty publications that form the basis of this model, analyzing its stated purposes, theories, and framework alongside current social work theory discussed in the literature review.

In light of my analysis of Bridges material, my research will turn to the case study of Kennett Square and the implementation of the Bridges Out of Poverty framework in this particular community. In my role working on Bridges Out of Poverty at KACS, I facilitated one of the “Getting Ahead” workshops and assisted in the facilitation of several Bridges community trainings. I gathered data on these workshops and trainings in order to assess their effects on the targeted population. My research methods took multiple forms. For the community trainings, I carried out two interviews with training participants in order to gather data on their experiences and perceived changes in attitudes or perceptions as a result of the training. The goal of these interviews was to explore if the community trainings might have an impact on the way the participants understand poverty and conceptualize their role in ending poverty.

I also conducted interviews with five different professionals who work in the development of the Bridges Out Poverty initiative. Three interviews were with individuals who

have a role in the development of the Bridges model in other communities and touch on their opinions of the purpose and success of Bridges in that particular area. The other interviews were with two of the authors of the Bridges Out of Poverty book and/or other publications, who are leaders in the development of Bridges as a community model. Those interviews similarly touch on their views on the purpose and end goal of Bridges and its role in ending poverty. The data from these Bridges Out of Poverty “professionals” are then used to inform my research on the stated purpose of Bridges as expressed by those directly involved in its implementation.

Finally, in order to analyze the Getting Ahead workshops, I carried out four interviews with workshop participants. My interview questions covered the participants’ experiences of the workshop and any changes they observed or foresaw in their lives as a result of the workshop. I also had access to data collected via survey by the sponsoring organization on workshop participants, and have analyzed these data as part of my research. The surveys gather information on participants’ resources, perceived well being, and changes in feelings of self-efficacy and stress. The goal of analyzing these data will be to explore any changes in the participants’ understanding of poverty, their current situations, and their capacity to change their circumstances.

As I mentioned, my research is exploratory in nature. The scope and time frame of my research in no way gives me the capacity to provide an exhaustive analysis of poverty, or even poverty in Kennett Square. Nor will I be attempting to provide a definitive conclusion on the uses of the Bridges model. Rather I will be providing a window on the intersection of the Bridges model with this particular community at a particular point in time, a case study in the context both of poverty and the ways that we understand and confront it. In the following sections of my paper, I will provide a context on the understanding of poverty that has shaped policy and social efforts in the United States, which I will use to analyze the results of my research and their implications.

### **III. The Poor Among Us – Poverty and the Bootstrap Nation**

It is first of all important to understand that the way we conceptualize and, by consequence, attempt to address poverty, is part of a larger narrative on poverty in the United States that itself has a strong foundation in historical trends, which I will discuss below (Gowan, 2010; Gladstone, 2016; Midgley & Livermore, 1998; Openshaw, McLane, Court, & Saxon, 2014; Coates, 2015; Kahl, 2005). I will first discuss the history of how poverty has been conceptualized since before colonial times up through President Johnson’s War on Poverty as a backdrop to what has followed. I will then discuss the influence of two very important scholars – Oscar Lewis with his “Culture of Poverty” concept, and D. Patrick Moynihan’s subsequent report on poverty and black urban families, both of which were published in the latter part of the 1960s. Both documents, and the reaction to them, are evidence of America’s attitude towards the poor and were enormously influential in policy and public opinion. I will then move on to the current research and debate on poverty, which has sought to move away from the victim-blaming of the Lewis and Moynihan generation to an understanding of systemic effects on individual outcomes. Finally, I will discuss the contribution of social work, especially the realm of critical social work, in understanding the role of social service interventions on poverty.

### **A. Because They Are Different – A Brief History**

The roots of our understanding of poverty go back well beyond the colonization of what is now the United States to Europe in the days before the Protestant Reformation (Gowan, 2010). In pre-Reformation Europe, where Catholicism was the ruling ideology, poverty and wealth were viewed as a consequence of divine destiny, the poor as near to God, and almsgiving as a manner of saving one's soul and becoming closer to God oneself. Following the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, that ideology changed – the role of choice became more dominant and poverty (and consequently, charity) was no longer seen as the way to God. Instead, hard work was the way to salvation, and with the role of fate fading into the background, poverty now represented failure and moral deficiency (Kahl, 2005; Gowan, 2010). This "Protestant work ethic" paved the way for the concept of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor that followed the first European settlers to North America in the early colonial period (Midgley & Livermore, 1998). The rise of Social Darwinism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century contributed to the idea of the poor as deficient, this time not only before God, but also before nature. For scholar of poverty, addiction, and homelessness, Teresa Gowan:

According to the *moral* construction of poverty, the miseries of the poor are the result of moral laxity. At best they give into laziness and hedonism; at worst they sell their souls to the devil. But whether demonic or merely disorderly, they willfully deviate from society's rules. (2010, p.28)

The ideologies of Social Darwinism and the Protestant work ethic became inexorably entwined with the concept of market liberalism, in which effort is rewarded with wealth and social promotion, while poverty results from lack of initiative and determination. Some scholars argue that it was this very conceptualization of the poor as criminal and/or deficient that allowed early Americans to build their wealth on the backs of marginalized groups (Gowan, 2010).

Nevertheless, the idea of misfortune as a cause of poverty was not completely absent from a society in which the inevitability of hardship was still a tangible part of life for most people (Midgley & Livermore, 1998). This idea, complemented by the common association of poverty with delinquency, gave birth to the divided understanding of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor mentioned earlier. The church and faith-based charities continued to be the main source of charitable relief for the needy, but the poor were laden with the burden of proving themselves poor or righteous enough to merit assistance. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as urbanization increased, institutionalization of the poor became the primary method for dealing with the masses of impoverished vagrants filling the cities (Gowan, 2010; Midgley & Livermore, 1998). Children were generally sent to orphanages, the mentally ill to asylums, and the able-bodied to the dreaded poorhouses and poor farms, where they were meant to be reformed into contributing members of society. At this point, the problem of poverty was still largely addressed at the local level by private citizens and institutions, and government intervention was largely unpopular (Gowan, 2010). Begging and "pauperism" were seen as signs of indigence and even criminality. Dependence on charity was considered a factor in the able-bodied poor's unwillingness to work for his or her bread (Midgley & Livermore, 1998).

With the rise of organized labor in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a focus on systemic reasons for poverty began to make its way into the dominant discourse (Gowan, 2010). The narrative of the

vagrant bum was challenged by the picture of insufficient, underpaid, or abusive employment advocated by workers' unions. But it was the advent of the Great Depression that really turned public opinion towards structural factors and made it nearly impossible to continue blaming poverty exclusively on individual causes or to make the argument that local interventions were enough. Theories of poverty related to economic and social structures became mainstream and government interventions to address poverty became more popular (Midgley & Livermore, 1998). The social programs implemented by the New Deal, followed by the prosperity of the post-WWII years, did a great deal to reduce levels of extreme poverty – although marginalized groups like African Americans were to a great extent left out of these new opportunities (Gowan, 2010; Gladstone, 2016; Pulido, 2001). Additional social programs were added as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty in the 1960s; these included programs such as Food Stamps (now known as SNAP, or the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program), and health insurance for the poor, elderly, and disabled (Medicaid and Medicare, respectively) as well as a host of local economic development initiatives (Midgley & Livermore, 1998; Gladstone, 2016). The Aid to Dependent Families (cash assistance) program expanded significantly, and the numbers of those in poverty, as measured by household income, dropped significantly (Glennerster, 2002).

By the end of the 1960s, however, public attention and funding for the War on Poverty had been diverted by the Vietnam War, and the steady increase in income that all economic brackets had enjoyed since the post-WWII years slowed dramatically. For decades the gap in wages between the rich and poor had been declining, but in the early 1970s that trend began to reverse itself (Glennerster, 2002). That trend has continued to this day (Gladstone, 2016). As New York Times columnist Paul Krugman writes, America, among developed nations, is “both especially unequal and has especially low [social] mobility” (2012). White flight from the cities coupled with a decline in urban manufacturing left many people of color stuck in cities that were losing their economic centers and tax base. They were largely excluded from homeownership and other opportunities for middle class status afforded by the government at that time, setting them up for prolonged residency in neighborhoods where economic mobility was nearly impossible (Gowan, 2010; Pulido, 2001). Amidst a declining economy, overall sympathy for the poor declined as well, resulting in a backlash that formed against the War on Poverty. The perception increased, especially among the white middle class, that they were “footing the bill” for services to the poor, that the War on Poverty supported (enabled) low-income urban minorities in particular, and that it wasn't actually ending poverty anyway (Naples, 1998).

### **B. Pathologies of the Poor - Culture of Poverty**

The early 1970s also saw the popularization of two publications that came to define the thinking on poverty in the following decades. The first of these was a study by anthropologist and ethnographer Oscar Lewis, in which he coined the concept of “Culture of Poverty,” a social theory based on his work with impoverished families in Mexico. Lewis' Culture of Poverty theory essentially made the case for a unique culture among the poor that helped to perpetuate their condition of poverty. Specifically, they were viewed as having “a design for living within the constraints of poverty passed down from generation to generation, thereby



achieving stability and persistence” (Mohan, 2010, p.65). Scholars and policymakers of Lewis’ time latched onto this concept and its implications, and it became enormously popular as a referent among those wishing to highlight the prominence of individual choices in the perpetuation of poverty. Given the political climate of the time, in which a struggling middle class was becoming increasingly resentful of those on public assistance and faith in government interventions was waning, the Culture of Poverty concept became enormously instrumental for critics of the War on Poverty (Small, Harding, & Lamont, 2010).

The second publication to emerge in this time was a report by scholar and statesman Daniel Patrick Moynihan, which came to be known as the “Moynihan Report” (1965, actually titled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action”) and was largely based on Oscar Lewis’ Culture of Poverty ideas. In it, Moynihan attempted to explain the deep roots of black poverty in America by attributing it to the collapse of the nuclear structure among black families – specifically poor, urban black families – and its consequences for economic and social well-being. While he traced the conditions of black families to a history of oppression and discrimination, his attribution of poor social outcomes to “ghetto culture” highlighted, like Lewis, the individual pathologies of the poor as responsible for their fate. Both men essentially held that

...although the burdens of poverty were systemic, and therefore imposed upon these members of society, they led to the formation of an autonomous subculture as children were socialized into behaviors and attitudes that perpetuated their inability to escape the underclass. (Mohan, 2010, p.68)

The influence of Moynihan and Lewis’ publications on poverty policy and theory cannot be understated. While both acknowledged the “burdens of poverty” as responsible for social conditions, their theorization of the poor’s “cultural adaptations” to their circumstances morphed into a “legacy of social science theory that cultural deficiencies breed bad behaviors and poverty persists on account of the unbearable pressures imposed by culture” (Mohan, 2010, p.65).

Moynihan believed that the state of the African American family was the result of “the incredible mistreatment to which it had been subjected over the last three centuries” and had numerous suggestions for what the government could do about it – namely jobs creation programs, a minimum wage, birth control, integration into the suburbs – but these policy recommendations were later left out of the report. When President Johnson responded to the report with a speech decrying the “long years of degradation and discrimination” at the hands of white America, it was not taken as a call for white responsibility and action, but as condemnation of “failure of the Negro family life” (Coates, 2015, pp.6-9). As Johnson’s speech was circulated throughout the press, it was portrayed as “an argument for leaving the black family to fend for itself” rather than as support for continued government action, as Moynihan intended (Coates, 2015, pp.9-10). While Moynihan and Johnson’s intentions, and sympathies, may have leaned in the right direction, their words fell on an America all too willing to “blame the victim” and absolve itself of all responsibility.

### **C. Our Policy Response – Welfare Reform and Beyond**

The “culture” and “pathologies” of poverty described by Lewis and Moynihan separated,

in the imagination of the public, the poor into a group with a cohesive “lifestyle” and values that differed from the rest of America. It was the poor who needed to change, not the social or economic structures, and they needed help to get there (Gowan, 2010; Coates, 2015). As America moved into the 1980s, the social safety net instituted by the New Deal and later the War on Poverty came under attack as a system that kept the poor trapped in the cycle of poverty by fostering dependency on public assistance. The message at this time became that federal government assistance was actually making poverty *worse* (Gladstone, 2016). The belief in the government’s responsibility and efficacy in ending poverty that characterized Roosevelt and Johnson’s years gave way to a new prevailing wisdom: welfare not only fails to alleviate poverty; it perpetuates poverty. The rise in neoliberal policies during the late Carter administration and particularly under the Reagan administration contributed the idea that “it is only when the market is permitted to operate free of government intervention that the economy will prosper and that employment and incomes will increase” (Midgley & Livermore, 1998). The economy did prosper and incomes did increase, but not for those at the bottom of the economic ladder (Monbiot, 2016). As income inequality grew, calls for welfare reform and the extradition of the federal government’s fumbling hands from social programs became louder and more widely supported. Ronald Reagan’s famous description of Chicago’s “welfare queen” – the indolent single black mother making herself rich off the government’s dollar – played to popular imagination and anger (Demby, 2013; Gladstone, 2016).

President Clinton campaigned on the promise of sweeping reforms to the welfare system. In 1996, he fulfilled that promise when he approved passage of the landmark Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), widely known as Welfare Reform. Welfare Reform was based on the premise that the only way to get people out of poverty was to get them off of cash assistance (the now-demonized AFDC program) and into the workforce (Gladstone, 2016; Edelman, 1997). It placed new lifetime limits on cash assistance, and required any family receiving this type of “welfare” to enroll in a welfare-to-work program – essentially a government-sponsored employment program meant to be an entryway into the workforce for the able-bodied poor. This type of “welfare” became known among scholars as “workfare,” and other benefits such as Food Stamps and Medicaid, were subject to major cutbacks (Institute for Women’s Research, 1997). Monies for public benefits were granted to State-level government in the form of block grants, which gave each State unprecedented discretion in how that money was actually spent. Block grant money did not have to be spent specifically on cash assistance at all, and States were free to contract services out to smaller entities, such as counties or private and religious organizations (Gladstone, 2016). Clinton’s Welfare Reform bill essentially dismantled the structure of government assistance to the poor that had existed since the New Deal, turning it into the decentralized and piecemeal approach to poverty alleviation that we see today (Edelman, 1997). The lack of consistency in the new welfare policy’s approach and inadequate supports for those returning to work – such as childcare subsidies and education programs – essentially guaranteed its inefficacy by pushing families towards independence from government assistance without providing the longer-term resources necessary to support them through the process (Gladstone, 2016).

The legacies of Lewis' "Culture of Poverty," Moynihan's infamous Report, and the Clinton administration's Welfare Reform Act are the inheritance of today's anti-poverty programs. They each spring from, and recreate, the majority America's understanding of, and action on, poverty from pre-colonial times until now. While it would be untrue to say that certain programs such as those implemented by the New Deal have done nothing to challenge poverty in the U.S., it must be stated that overall, our social welfare system (public and private) is both evidence and the product of our beliefs about the poor and what we should do with them (Midgely & Livermore, 1998; Small et al., 2010; Bourgois, 2001). The ideology on poverty in the U.S. continues to be dominated by what Robinson (2009) calls "unbridled Individualism," or the belief that poverty is primarily due to causes related to the individual (p.495). Unbridled Individualism, as he defines it, is characterized by a belief in the value and rewards of hard work in competition with others, as well as the belief that the existing social system rewards each person equally based on such efforts (Robinson, 2009). Midgely and Livermore (1998) found that "recent developments in social assistance have reinforced the view that poverty is caused by individual factors and particularly by low levels of education, poor work habits and negative social values, all of which are inimical to mainstream American beliefs about ambition, hard work and individual effort" (p.238).

While individualistic attributions are predominant, Robinson found that most Americans are really somewhere along a continuum between purely individualistic and purely structural beliefs about poverty, what he calls "compromise explanations for poverty causes" or "a view of the world that might be expressed as 'structural barriers to achievement do exist, but individual efforts can often overcome them.'" (Kluegel & Smith in Robinson, 2009, p.492). This conflicted view can be explained by a tendency to attribute different poverty causes to different subgroups among the poor – the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor of old – in essence, those who are poor by their own fault and those who are poor due to circumstance (Robinson, 2009, p.513). Those who are perceived as "able to work" or "taking advantage of the system" fall into the latter, category, and we have seen how certain groups – namely, urban people of color – have been largely grouped into this category (Coates, 2015). Openshaw, McLane, Court, & Saxon (2014) call this individualistic attribution "social selection" – the belief that individuals fail to climb the economic ladder because of personal attributes or abilities – and the structural attribution they call "social causation" – the belief that social and economic entities create barriers and opportunities that lead to poverty or wealth (p.9). Gowan (2010) calls it the difference between "sick talk" (the poor are deficient), "sin talk" (the poor make bad choices), and "system talk" (the poor are victims of the system). The point is two-fold: first, popular sentiment in the U.S. has always tended to favor assistance to the poor according to who is viewed as a victim of fortune, or the system, and who should be responsible for themselves; and second, race has always been a strong factor in determining who falls into the "deserving" and "undeserving" categories.

#### **D. The Post-Moynihan Syndrome – Understanding Poverty**

In the years since Lewis, Moynihan, and Welfare Reform, our understanding of and debate on poverty has been dominated by such classifications. Do we have the poor among us because of their personal deficiencies, because of their bad choices, or because of the system

we live in? Consequently, do the poor need to be rehabilitated, punished, or liberated (Gowan, 2010; Gladstone, 2016; Openshaw, 2014)? Lewis and Moynihan's ideas on the poor were instrumental in the justification of policy and theories focused on individual responsibility for poverty, both in public sentiment and on Capitol Hill. America's predisposition towards "unbridled Individualism" was given new ground to stand on (Coates, 2015). However, there was a strong critical response to Lewis and Moynihan's works among sociologists, social workers, and poverty scholars that created a different kind of legacy in the field. The "culture of poverty" concept was so vilified in these circles that any focus on the personal or cultural characteristics of the poor became synonymous with "blaming the victim" – with good reason, perhaps (Gowan, 2010; Bourgois, 2001). After all, Moynihan and Lewis themselves had not intended for their work to be interpreted (or employed) in the way that it was, yet they had "underestimated the weight of the country's history," its tendency to "scorn and fear those at the bottom of the social spectrum" (Gowan, 2010, p.21; Coates, 2015, p.76; Bourgois, 2001; Glennerster, 2002). In response, concerned scholars moved as far away as possible from placing the weight of poverty in any way on the individual, the community, and the people in poverty themselves. Gowan calls this the "post-Moynihan syndrome," in which scholars have "tied themselves in knots trying to undertake qualitative studies of poverty without giving cultural patterns any independent causal weight" (2010, p.19).

Some 50 years after Lewis and Moynihan first made waves, critics are now pointing out the problematic nature of both responses. They note the importance of recognizing the real and prolonged effects of poverty on its victims, and the role of such effects in perpetuating poverty (Roach & Gurslin, 1967; Gowan, 2010; Bourgois, 2001; Rodman, 1977; Adelman, 2008). These scholars conceive of culture differently – not as the values of the poor, but as a way to explain how people make sense of their experiences and options (Rodman, 1967; Small et al., 2010; Openshaw, 2014). Instead of implying that people would cease to be poor if they would only change their behaviors, the focus is on studying how people respond to poverty and cope with it, or try to escape it. People do not fall into, stay in, or escape poverty over generations independent of structural changes, and the vast evidence from the varied responses to impoverished environments among the poor defeats the idea of "hardened pathologies" common to the lower economic classes (Small et al., 2010).

A great deal of research has documented the effects of prolonged poverty on the behaviors, perspectives, and choices of the individual (England, 2016; Small, 2010; Heeb & Gutjahr, 2012; Edin & Kissane, 2010; Jindra & Jindra, 2016; Wahler, 2015), but scholarship that wishes to focus on structural factors is reclaiming this narrative from the "poverty culture" argument to highlight the destructive nature of sustained poverty on communities and individuals. Paula England (2016), for example, studied the instances of unplanned pregnancies and non-marital births among economically disadvantaged women in an attempt to explain how social constraints affect personal outcomes. She found strong connections between socioeconomic status and feelings of self-efficacy, which then affect self-regulation and one's time horizon for planning. Her conclusions are highly relevant to the debate on "causes of poverty" and individual versus structural explanations. England concludes, "[social] constraints change individuals' characteristics in a durable, although not necessarily permanent

way...personal characteristics [then] affect outcomes” (2016, p.5). In the same breath she argues, “I disagree with the claim that recognizing the role of personal characteristics in causing negative outcomes entails blaming victims for their personal characteristics and their outcomes” (p.7). Instead she points out the causal links between the numerous social factors that determine each person’s options and resources. Small et al. suggest that, instead of referring to these options and resources as “culture,” that we think of them instead as frames, repertoires, narratives, and cultural capital (2010).

Other researchers have looked at similar connections between socioeconomic conditions and individual outcomes in an attempt to understand how poverty is created and sustained over a person’s lifetime. Heeb & Gutjahr (2012) looked at individual trajectories of those in what they called “short-term poverty” (situational poverty) and “long-term poverty” (sustained poverty over a lifetime) to look for patterns, taking into account the effects of both societal and individual-level factors. They found poverty to be a “long-term process of deprivation,” in which disadvantages in the form of social exclusion, educational achievement, and employment opportunities form part of a process of “cumulative disadvantage” from which escape is difficult and unlikely (Heeb & Gutjahr, 2012). Edin & Kissane (2010), in a review of U.S. poverty between 2000 and 2010, cite the strong connection between economic hardship and the psychological stress it brings with poorer educational, social, and physical/mental health outcomes. In his book *The Working Poor*, David K. Shipler suggests that escaping poverty is much more complex than a job offer or a regular paycheck:

Breaking away and moving a comfortable distance from poverty seems to require a perfect lineup of favorable conditions. A set of skills, a good starting wage, and a job with a likelihood of promotion are prerequisites. But so are clarity of purpose, courageous self-esteem, a lack of substantial debt, the freedom from illness or addiction, a functional family, a network of upstanding friends, and the right help from private or governmental agencies. Any gap in that array is an entry point for trouble, because being poor means being unprotected. You might as well try playing quarterback with no helmet, no padding, no training, and no experience, behind a line of hundred-pound weakling. (2005, p.5)

But who will provide for the gap in these less measurable resources, or even recognize them? The federal government’s definition of poverty is and has been, for several decades, based on household income alone, defining poverty exclusively as a financial value. This definition also fails to capture the real lived experience of sustained poverty. Even as a numerical value this measure ceased some time ago to really define need, as it has steadily lost value relative to actual living costs since its creation in the 1960s. It has no provision for the variables of living expenses by region and certainly does nothing to measure what poverty actually means for a person’s well being and participation in society (Glennerster, 2002). Again, Shipler:

“Poverty” is an unsatisfying term, for poverty is not a category that can be delineated merely by the government’s dollar limits on annual income. In real life, it is an unmarked area along a continuum, a broader region of hardship than the society usually recognizes” (2005, p.x).

Morazes & Pintak (2007) discuss the difference between absolute poverty – the lack of indispensable commodities for survival, and relative poverty – those resources necessary for a given context (2007). According to their research, poverty in Europe is generally understood as the inability to participate fully in society; that is, the degree of social exclusion from opportunities and resources available to others (Morazes & Pintak, 2007; Glennerster, 2002). This understanding is evident on the policy level – eligibility for government services in Europe is universal rather than selective. When poverty is primarily understood as a fault of the system, it is the system that is expected to change if any change is to be seen in personal outcomes. The burden of proof is not on the individual to prove their worth for such benefits but on the state to make up for the deficiencies in its own system (Morazes & Pintak, 2007). The import of this alternative definition is in its recognition of poverty as a deprivation and an exclusion that cannot be defined by financial measures alone. A comprehensive assessment of poverty need also take into account its affect on the well being of the poor across the spectrum of needs, including social participation.

Welfare reform was based in part on the false assumption that the poor do not share in mainstream values regarding work and that the answer was to push them into the workforce and off government dependence (Edelman, 1997). Given that the provisions meant to help such families get back into the workforce and become self-sufficient were so meager and full of holes, very few saw real improvements in well being (Edin & Kissane, 2010). On the contrary, after welfare reform, when tangible benefits for poor families were cut back, the number of families suffering immediate material deprivation increased significantly. Such material deprivation then became the foundation for the more deep-seated effects of poverty (Gladstone, 2016). In noting this, Edin and Kissane (2010) point out here the need to move beyond correlations to causations – the different outcomes we see among the poor are due not to their hardened pathologies but to the real results of hardship caused by lived experiences of prolonged poverty.

Matthew Desmond, author of *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, spent several years living among the urban poor of Milwaukee, observing the extreme hardships and instability of their lives. In an interview with WNYC's *On the Media* program he said "There are two ways to dehumanize people: one is to cleanse them of all virtue. The other is to remove all sin from their lives" (Gladstone, 2016). Desmond's point is that the poor, like everyone else, are neither at fault for their poverty nor devoid of responsibility for the choices they have made. They should be neither vilified nor victimized but understood as human beings. Poverty, as England points out, affects one's ability to *make* choices that might lead to better outcomes. It is our tendency to focus exclusively on either systemic or personal causes (and effects) of poverty that has prompted scholars to call for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the issue.

### **E. Social Work, Critical Social Work, and the Poverty Industry**

Our responses to poverty are very much a cultural product and result directly from the way we define and understand need (Small et al., 2010). Moreover, our policies and attitudes inevitably give expression to the underlying ideas about the nature and origins of the poverty problem (Midgley & Livermore, 1998). In the U.S., we now have a State that provides minimal

benefits to a fraction of the eligible population, given that they can find out about the services and prove their level of need (Stoesz, 2007). Our current welfare benefits themselves are “subpoverty-level”; that is, the cumulative economic advantage they confer in no way lifts families out of poverty (Gladstone, 2016; Glennerster, 2002; Stoesz, 2007). The millions of families with one or more full-time wage earners who are still eligible for state benefits is evidence enough that welfare does not sustain anyone and that simply getting families back to work is certainly no guaranteed solution to poverty. Moreover, families surpass the income eligibility guidelines for government assistance well before approximating anything like a self-sufficiency wage for their area (Stoesz, 2007; Pearce, 2012).

Our popular response to this insufficiency, especially since Welfare Reform, has been to try and fill in the gaps in our economic and political system with private charity. Beginning under Reagan and expanding under H.W. Bush, Clinton and G.W. Bush, private organizations have taken over much of what the State supplies, often meeting needs such as food and shelter by way of government contracts. We now have what some refer to as a “nonprofit industrial complex” – an enormous and tangled web of 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organizations functioning in the role of the 1<sup>st</sup> sector, the government (Joseph, 2003; Stoesz, 2007; Poppendieck, 1998; Gowan, 2010; van den Berk-Clark & Pyles, 2012). The problem with this approach is that it puts the nonprofit sector in the position of making up for the gaps in an economic system that continues to leave vast swathes of the population behind. It takes the focus off the government’s role in providing for the basic needs of its citizens and places that responsibility on the private sector, where recipients are “clients” – who typically do not participate in making decisions about their needs – instead of citizens to whom the government is answerable (Joseph, 2003).

The resurgence of the charity sector, like the rollback of government intervention in poverty, is entwined with the American understanding of poverty – and what we should do about it. We are a bootstrap society – one that believes in the power of the individual to overcome adverse circumstances (Openshaw et al., 2014; Morazes & Pintak, 2007; Midgely & Livermore, 1998). We may believe that there are those who cannot help themselves, or who have hit hard luck, but for those we have a social safety net supplemented by private charity. The rest are responsible for taking advantage of the same opportunities provided to the rest of us to get ahead in life – or so we believe (Gladstone, 2016). The growing inequality we have seen over the last four decades, coupled with the burgeoning caseloads of social service agencies belies the idea that our economic system is taking care of our poverty problem (Gladstone, 2016; Joseph, 2003; Edin & Kissane, 2010). What we have now is a public-private partnership that has agreed to clean up the worst of the mess while we wait for the poor to clean themselves up and ride the coattails of economic growth into prosperity. In the meantime, the business of the social service sector, whether public or private, has become that of managing poverty and alleviating its symptoms rather than targeting its structures – whether systemic or personal.

“I have found the world kinder than I expected, but less just,” Samuel Johnson is said to have remarked. The same might be said of the popular response to poverty and hunger in America.” (Poppendieck, 1998, p.4). Critics argue that as our system of poverty alleviation developed into an institution in itself, the “systemic discourse of human rights violated,” has

become lost in a “sea of practices” focused primarily on meeting immediate needs (Gowan, 2010, p.41). There is no simple definition of poverty. Any discussion of poverty must include the structures that create inequalities, the effects on the individual of a life lived in deprivation, the failing safety net, *and* the ecosystem of programs we have created to deal with the problem. If our focus remains primarily on the individual deficits and symptoms, as it has done, then our solutions will continue to be primarily those of alleviation, rehabilitation, and punishment. The very practice of feeding people, counseling them, or imprisoning them has so occupied our consciousness that we have forgotten to ask why they need to be fed, counseled, or imprisoned. Our system has become that of giving micro-solutions to macro-level problems (Gowan, 2010; Poppendieck, 1998; van den Berk-Clark & Pyles, 2012; Joseph, 2003).

The field of social work, which is a very practice-oriented discipline, tends to focus on the development of the individual for overcoming personal and community obstacles (Rossiter, 2008). Those in social work, and social services, by nature of their work interface with individuals and families in situations of immediate and sometimes urgent needs. Recent social work theory has focused on areas such as social and human capital development – that of helping individuals to build assets and strong community ties in order to escape poverty. Empowerment theories similarly focus on finding and developing the strengths of individuals and communities rather than simply alleviating deficits (van den Berk-Clark & Pyles, 2012; Himmelheber, 2014).

Critical Social Work attempts to combine critical social theory with the human development aspect of the social work field, bringing questions of power and social justice into practice (Rossiter, 2008; MacKinnon, 2009; Finn & Jacobson, 2003). It criticizes the split view that social work has on sociology versus psychology, the structural versus the individual, calling instead for what it calls “critical empathy”: relating the concrete reality of poverty to its social production (Rossiter, 2008). It calls attention to the context of social problems and relations of power, domination, and inequality that shape our knowledge of the world and decide whose viewpoint counts in the production of meaning (Finn & Jacobson, 2003). It calls the field of social work to self-reflection, acknowledging that those who typically seek to access its services do so because of their position in existing social structures (Rossiter, 2008). Furthermore, it asks those involved in social work not to forget their role in maintaining or challenging the systems that make meaning out of poverty while elevating the voice of the poor in defining their own situation (Finn & Jacobson, 2003; MacKinnon, 2009). It is an attempt to shape the practice of direct service to the poor in the consciousness of current structures that are older than our country itself. While recognizing the needs of the poor, it also recognizes that its services for the poor would be largely unnecessary if economic and social stratification were not supported at the systemic level (van den Berk-Clark & Pyles, 2012).

#### **F. Research on Bridges**

Any attempt to understand and assist the poor must take place with an eye on such systems, and with an understanding of the power and the history that colors any solution we may devise. It must also acknowledge the real and concrete experience of the poor, including them as the basis for the understanding of individual and community conditions (Bourgeois, 2001). Bridges Out of Poverty is a framework that attempts to answer some of the



contradictions in the way we have understood and addressed poverty in the past and into the present. Very little has been done to study Bridges, or Getting Ahead, which has only been around in some form for about 20 years. Only two studies have been undertaken to evaluate the results of Bridges, primarily of Getting Ahead, and I present their findings here before going into the results from my own research. The first, by Indiana University social work professor Elizabeth Wahler, studied results from 19 Getting Ahead sites across the country, using mail-in surveys completed by 215 Getting Ahead participants. The surveys used various scales to measure psychosocial improvements, overall functioning, and poverty-related knowledge among respondents. In the introduction to her study, Wahler begins by discussing the interplay of structural and individual barriers in perpetuating poverty. "Poverty is perpetuated in the United States due to structural barriers affecting individuals with low incomes and resources," notably "decreased opportunity" for quality housing, healthcare, transportation, and education, she says (2016, p.1). At the same time, many in poverty are afflicted by mental or physical health problems, chemical dependency, learning disabilities, or low educational attainment but lack the resources to properly address these challenges. "Macrobarriers," Wahler says, "often worsen or facilitate the maintenance of microlevel problems, and microlevel problems prohibit overcoming macrolevel challenges" (2016, p.2). Living in poverty, Wahler argues, has been shown to be predictive of such negative consequences as "increased stress, reduced self-efficacy, smaller social support networks, and problems with health and overall functioning" (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003; Dahling, Melloy, & Thompson, 2013; Catell, 2001 in Wahler, 2016, p.2). Thus, while she argues for the existence of social interventions to address structural problems, she adds:

Because of the negative consequences of poverty and the systemic and individual barriers to economic mobility that exist, effective interventions for improving the quality of life, increasing knowledge of poverty, and ultimately increasing capacity for raising economic status are also important...interventions that address these factors could help improve an individual's chances of exiting poverty or at minimum, reduce time living in poverty or severity of poverty experienced. (p.2)

Wahler points to the usefulness of group interventions among the poor for raising consciousness and improving feelings of social support and empowerment. Getting Ahead, she says:

Emphasizes and educates on the systemic explanations for poverty, so participants are aware of the many outside factors that contribute to the perpetuation of poverty, yet tries to instill hope and understanding of concrete individual strategies for improving the possibility of rising in economic class. (2016, p.4)

Wahler's study found significant psychosocial improvements among respondents, evidence, she says, that Getting Ahead "appears to facilitate at least short-term improvements" in mental, emotional, and social well-being (2016, p.11). Respondents also reported increased knowledge about poverty and "motivation to bring about social change" (2016, p.11). Importantly, however, Wahler points out that more research needs to be done to examine whether these psychosocial improvements actually help participants overcome the personal barriers discussed above. Moreover, how do such potential changes stand up against the structural barriers those

in poverty face? Without additional access and support, Wahler argues, participants in the workshop will continue to find it impossible to “get ahead.” Organizations providing the workshop, therefore, must look for ways to provide these supports over the long-term.

The second study is by Ines Jindra & Michael Jindra, professors of social work and anthropology, respectively. It discusses how Bridges “fosters reflexivity” among participants and in doing so connects “discursive culture to practical conscience” (2016, p.3). The authors discuss the importance of personal agency in overcoming poverty, a factor affected by noncognitive influences from the “networks that people are socialized into” – their cultural and social capital. The Getting Ahead experience, they argue, fosters reflexivity and “practical consciousness” among participants that allows them to frame aspects of their economic class experience “that they may only be dimly aware of” (2016, p.9). During the course of the workshop, Jindra & Jindra say, participants learn about and practice “new models for dealing with life situations” – the “hidden rules” of middle class culture by which the majority of social institutions in the U.S. operate.

The authors studied the “success” of a group of 39 Getting Ahead participants, defining “success” as the degree to which the participants achieved the goals that they had set for themselves upon completion of the class – goals such as finding a new job, going back to school, and improving their savings habits or their credit score. Of the 39 participants, 18 were deemed “successful,” 17 “moderately successful,” and 4 “not successful.” Jindra & Jindra found that the “success” of workshop participants depended on several factors: whether they came from “situational” or “generational” poverty (those from “situational” poverty were more successful), and the amount of social support and personal resources – such as optimism, self-efficacy, and self-reflexivity – that participants had going into the workshop. The authors noted, similarly to Wahler, “in most cases, even what we called ‘successful’ involves improvements that are modest, which is partly due to the huge barriers people face when they want to improve their social class standing” (2016, p.9). They finish their study by arguing that top-down policies that focus on individual development – such as training and education programs – would have more of an impact “if combined with larger efforts that address noncognitive skills” – such as human, social, and cultural capital. A top-down view of addressing poverty and inequality, they say, “often ignores or underestimates the challenges presented by the life situations” of those who have not been socialized into middle class. They argue “changing structures or offering opportunities does little to help people if they find it hard to take advantage of those opportunities” (2016, p.19). Bridges, they argue, is one such program that helps to break down barriers between economic classes and focuses on building that social, human, and cultural capital among the poor so that they *can* take advantage of opportunities (2016, p.19).

In the next segment of this paper, I will discuss the stated purposes of Bridges according to its authors and publications. I will also present Bridges in practice through the viewpoints of some of its practitioners. Finally, I will examine the Bridges programs through the experience of social service practitioners and clients in the Kennett Square area. I ask: what does Bridges offer to communities attempting to address poverty in our current context as presented above? What could it offer Kennett Square?

#### IV. Research Methods

As previously mentioned, my research for this paper is based on the implementation of the Bridges Out of Poverty framework in the community of Kennett Square, Pennsylvania through the initiative of the community organization Kennett Area Community Service. The purpose of my research was to investigate how Bridges Out of Poverty understands poverty and proposes to address it, and then to examine its early outcomes in the Kennett Square community. I began my research with a content analysis of the literature on Bridges Out of Poverty, including the various books, articles, and supplementary materials published by its authors in order to understand its major tenets and priorities as stated in this material. I then carried out a number of interviews, beginning with two leaders of Bridges at the national level. The first of these is Phil DeVol, who co-authored the original Bridges Out of Poverty book (2001) and who has since authored many of the publications put out by Bridges nationally. My other “national leadership” interviewee, “Sara<sup>2</sup>,” is a national consultant with Bridges who helps communities implement Bridges at the local level. In these interviews, I asked them questions related to their understanding of the goals of Bridges, what they see as Bridges’ primary role in ending poverty, and whether or not they believe Bridges is achieving its goals.

My research also includes three interviews with local leaders implementing the Bridges framework in their communities. With these leaders, I asked a similar question related to how they understand the goals of Bridges. I also asked them about their experience with Bridges, and how it may have affected the way they do their work. I began with Chuck Holt, Executive Director of Factory Ministries in Paradise, Pennsylvania. Factory Ministries is a community service organization whose programs include a youth center, a food cupboard, and emergency financial assistance ([www.thefactoryministries.com](http://www.thefactoryministries.com)). Several years ago, Holt discovered the Bridges Out of Poverty framework and began using it to change the way his organization addresses poverty. He now uses the phrase “no betterment without development” to describe his organization’s commitment to helping individuals build resources to move out of poverty instead of only meeting basic needs. Factory Ministries programs now include trainings, assessments, and resource-building workshops aimed at helping their clients and their community make lasting changes in reducing poverty.

My next interview was with Tammy Schoonover, Director of Community Services at Bucks County Opportunity Council (BCOC) in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Bucks County Opportunity Council is a Community Action Agency (a community development structure from Johnson’s War on Poverty) and offers a variety of poverty alleviation programs, including a food pantry, emergency housing assistance, energy assistance, and tax preparation. In the mid-1990s, BCOC decided to start an “Economic Self-Sufficiency Program,” with the goal of helping families transition out of poverty permanently, instead of merely helping them manage emergency situations. The program provides participants with up to 3-5 years of social and financial support while they pursue educational and employment goals. Several years ago, they began discussions on the Bridges framework in their community and started implementing Bridges

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<sup>2</sup> All names marked by quotations have been changed to protect privacy

into their Economic Self-Sufficiency Program

In a nearby community, “Allison” directs another program similar to the one offered at BCOC. This particular program is also built around the Getting Ahead curriculum and is designed to support participants, called “leaders,” over the long-term as they work on reaching their goals and increase their resources. The program consists of weekly meetings with other program participants and “allies” – volunteers who typically are not from poverty and who can offer social support and connections for program participants. The weekly meetings include workshops, discussion, and planning. Participants can attend for as long as they wish and often do so for years. The program is part of a larger Bridges effort in the community to not only help individuals in poverty gain resources, but also to bring together people across class lines for meaningful relationships and mutual learning.

The next part of my research moves on to the specific case study of Kennett Square, where leadership at Kennett Area Community Service (KACS) recently began to look at how to bring the Bridges framework into their organization and community. My research includes interviews I held with two individuals who attended the first local Bridges training for social service professionals in December 2017. The training covered the major themes of Bridges, including economic class environments and “hidden rules,” the “four causes of poverty,” and the themes of building resources and stability. It encouraged attendees to take these concepts back to their spheres of influence and start thinking about how they could use them to change the way they do their work. My first interviewee, “Jason,” is a licensed social worker and works on issues of homelessness and education with local families. My other interviewee, “Carol<sup>4</sup>,” works directly with clients in a program that provides supplemental food and financial assistance to families and individuals in need. Carol has experienced poverty herself, and was originally a client of the program before becoming a volunteer and then a paid staff member. With Carol and Jason, I asked specifically about their experience with the training, if they felt it had been helpful in any way, and how they might see what they learned in the training affecting their work. I then situate their responses in light of their roles in the community.

The next part of my research focused on a key component of the Bridges’ programming, the Getting Ahead workshops. As was previously mentioned, Getting Ahead is a 16-week workshop for individuals in or near poverty based on the Bridges framework. Its purpose is to use the Bridges concepts and the workshop experience to help participants “build resources for a better life” in order to “transition out of poverty” (DeVol, 2013, cover). The workshop covers the Bridges concepts in a small-group discussion format, led by a trained Getting Ahead facilitator. Typically a former graduate of the workshop joins as a second facilitator after the first set of workshops has ended. The workshop is designed to be a form of “consciousness raising” among participants about poverty and their role in ending it, both at the individual and the community level. In the Facilitator’s Guide to Getting Ahead, DeVol quotes Richard Shaul’s foreword to Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, likening Getting Ahead to “the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (2013, p.5). Getting Ahead is meant to be a

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“kitchen table” learning experience led by participants (DeVol, 2013, p.6). It is meant to move participants from the concrete issues of their everyday lives to the abstract conceptualization of poverty and its solutions through discussion, learning, and activities. It covers topics such as personal and community conditions, the “hidden rules” and “eleven resources” defined by Bridges, inequality and causes of poverty, and concrete action steps for moving forward (DeVol, 2015). Upon graduating from Getting Ahead, participants are encouraged to join people from other economic classes and sectors at larger community conversations on poverty and change. These conversations and the relationships that develop from them are meant to be the impetus for both large and small-scale changes on factors influencing poverty in that community and beyond (DeVol, 2010).

My research comes directly from the first Getting Ahead workshops offered by Kennett Area Community Service over the course of a four-month period, from October 2016 through January 2017. The first group, which I facilitated, was held in English and the second group, facilitated by my coworker, took place in Spanish. The demographic breakdown of the English-language group was as follows:

	Started GA	Finished GA
Gender	7 women; 2 men	5 women; 2 men
Race/Ethnicity	White, Non-Hispanic: 2 White, Hispanic: 1 Black, Non-Hispanic: 4 Black, Hispanic: 2	White, Non-Hispanic: 2 White, Hispanic: 1 Black, Non-Hispanic: 4 Black, Hispanic: 2
Age	18-30: 1 31-45: 5 45+: 3	18-30: 1 31-45: 3 45+: 3
Education Level	< High school: 4 High school or GED: 4 Post-secondary: 1	< High school: 3 High school or GED: 4 Post-secondary: none

The Spanish-language group was comprised entirely of women, all of whom were first-generation immigrants from central Mexico – this latter demographic reflects the majority of the Spanish-speaking population in the Kennett area. All identified as Hispanic, no race indicated. Below is a breakdown of other relevant demographics among them (it is worth noting that 6<sup>th</sup> grade is the minimum required education level by law in Mexico – only 1 participant completed any part of her education in the United States):

	Started GA	Finished GA
Age	18-30: 1 31-45: 8 45+: 3	18-30: none 31-45: 7 45+: 3

Education Level	< 6 <sup>th</sup> grade: 7 6 <sup>th</sup> – 11 <sup>th</sup> grade: 3 High school diploma: 2 Post-secondary: none	< 6 <sup>th</sup> grade: 7 6 <sup>th</sup> – 9 <sup>th</sup> grade: 2 High school diploma: 1 Post-secondary: none
Years living in the U.S.	0-5 years: none 6-10 years: 1 > 10 years: 11	0-5 years: none 6-10 years: none > 10 years: 10

All participants in the workshop had at some point in time received services in the form of food or emergency financial assistance from Kennett Area Community Service, and were known to be low-income. Participants came from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences with economic class – some had grown up in poverty, others had grown up with a middle-class lifestyle and had fallen into poverty through life events. Some were very close to acute financial crisis during the workshop, while others were relatively stable. Participants were invited to participate in the workshop by the sponsoring organization, and the diversity of experience and demographics was partially purposeful and partially unknown to KACS before the workshop began. As was previously mentioned, my research on the workshop consists of interviews with four Getting Ahead graduates: “Anne”, “Xavier” (from the English-language group), “Carmen” and “Cassandra” (from the Spanish-language group), as well as surveys carried out by Kennett Area Community Service with the participants. The purpose of this research was to gather information both on the experience of the workshop participants and to measure any material changes in their psychosocial and/or material wellbeing over the course of the sixteen weeks. The sponsoring organization will also be gathering follow-up data on workshop graduates at 6 months and 12 months post-graduation, but this data is not yet available for collection.

## V. Analysis

So, how does the Bridges understanding of poverty fit into the narrative of poverty in the U.S. over the last few centuries? What can it offer to a community seeking to address poverty? I use the responses to my interview questions, as well as statements about Bridges in their publications, to explore these questions and relate them back to the literature. In my interview responses, I was also looking for how Bridges had influenced the *perception* of and *action* on poverty in local communities. I begin with a content analysis of Bridges based on my interviews with Bridges leadership and their publications. Through my analysis I will situate the Bridges’ narrative on poverty and poverty alleviation in the critical poverty literature.

I argue from this analysis that Bridges’ understanding of poverty aligns with the “critical empathy” promoted by the tradition of Critical Social Work – that is, it is a framework for understanding the long-term effects of poverty and addressing them in the context of structural barriers. Nevertheless, its work is primarily focused on changes at the individual level, with larger changes “trickling up” from there to affect local communities. I then move onto my interviews with social service professionals implementing Bridges, the first social service Bridges trainees in Kennett, and the first group of individuals to finish the Getting Ahead workshop for those in poverty. Based on the results, I argue the following: (1) Bridges is a tool

for social service professionals to move their work beyond a focus on meeting basic needs to focus on building resources for those in poverty; (2) Bridges has the potential to help communities become more aware of how economic environments affect people, encouraging them to examine how poverty is reproduced and include those in poverty at the decision-making table; and (3) The Getting Ahead workshop, by raising consciousness about poverty and the circumstances of impoverished participants, increases their sense of self-efficacy. Responses indicate that participants gain a sense of their own capacity to make changes in their lives and to get involved in making changes in their communities. Whether these changes result in more effective action on poverty and changes *in* poverty over the long term is yet to be determined.

#### **A. Analysis of the Bridges Discourse:**

As Gowan points out, poverty has historically been seen in the United States as a personal deficiency, an individual problem. Such a belief has been used as justification to absolve those not in poverty of responsibility for the fate of the poor and even link the perpetuation of poverty to private and public generosity. But as other scholars such as England and Desmond have noted, a failure to recognize and address the impact of poverty on the outcomes of the poor not only minimizes their experience; it ignores reality and precludes us from making the connection between those outcomes and their structural bases. The Bridges framework for understanding poverty aligns with Critical Social Work in that it brings together an understanding of how poverty affects the individual within a structural context. While citing structural change as a goal, its practice is strongly based in change at the individual and community level, with larger changes happening as they move up from grassroots efforts.

Bridges has a set of concepts that it uses to bring together its views on poverty into applicable frameworks for those using its model. I first describe four of these concepts, which form the basis of the Bridges overall framework for understanding and addressing poverty. These are the “hidden rules” of economic class, the “tyranny of the moment” concept, the “11 resources,” and the “four causes” of poverty concept. I then discuss how Bridges leadership understands Bridges’ role in ending poverty: as a framework to be used by communities to create new understanding, conversations, and collaborations on poverty. My discussion is interwoven with an analysis of what I saw and heard based on themes delineated in my literature review.

##### *i. Hidden Rules of Economic Class*

The Bridges model is based on economic class environments and how they affect the way people interact with and understand the world. These are the “**hidden rules**” of the Bridges framework, “the unspoken cues and habits of a group” created by the “great divide between the rich and the poor” in America (Payne et al., 2001; DeVol, 2015). In other words, they are the norms of economic class created by the realities of economic environments as experienced over multiple generations. The Bridges “hidden rules” framework in this way reflects that of Rodman, Small, & Openshaw in seeking to understand how the poor respond to and cope with their environment, rather than attributing behaviors to hardened pathologies. Bridges differentiates between “situational” and “generational” poverty - the first being those who did not necessarily grow up in poverty but who fell into it later in life through sudden

catastrophe and the latter being those who have experienced an environment of poverty for 2 or more generations. According to Bridges, we carry around the “hidden rules” of the class in which we are raised and they are often a stumbling block in our understanding of those from other economic classes as well as our ability to dialogue with them. Moreover, Bridges posits, most social institutions (schools, employers, government, etc.) in the United States operate on middle class norms, making it difficult for those in poverty to succeed in those environments. (DeVol, 2015). The Getting Ahead program is partially designed to help those in poverty understand these “hidden rules” in order to increase chances of success in these institutions (Jindra & Jindra, 2016).

The Bridges materials call for the middle class and the generationally wealthy to acknowledge their own class backgrounds and to suspend judgment on any differing norms those who live in poverty may have. It also tries to orient those in poverty, through the Getting Ahead workshop, to middle class norms, which typically dominate social institutions, so that they may have better outcomes in their interactions with employers, educators, social service agencies, etc. This is the first goal of Bridges, for author Phil DeVol – to change mindsets, push individuals to first examine themselves, and understand how they got to where they are “instead of marveling at the other person and wondering why they do what they do” (interview with DeVol, December 15, 2016). I see here the opportunity for Bridges to challenge the public discourse described by Robinson, Openshaw, and Gowan – that which primarily attributes the reproduction of poverty to issues on the individual level. The ideas presented by Bridges help people to reframe the ideas they have about poverty (as I have seen in my trainings), but it is the interactions with those in poverty around these issues that Bridges communities report as the most impactful part of the change process. Bridges focuses on bringing those from every economic class and every sector of the community together with a common language to work together on making their communities a place where “everyone can live well” (DeVol, 2014). This is in contrast to a community where the needs of the poor are dealt with in a piecemeal service approach without changing any of the underlying community structures. In doing this, it sees itself as an alternative to frameworks and programs that offer micro-solutions to macro-level problems, as Poppendieck and Gowan discuss, and address poverty while excluding those in poverty from the decision-making process.

*ii. Tyranny of the Moment*

Bridges describes the instability that comes with poverty as “the **tyranny of the moment.**” The tyranny of the moment, it says, is the condition by which the continuous, urgent needs of living in an unstable environment rob an individual or community of the capacity for future-thinking. “Tyranny of the moment” is based on the same concept that Paula England described in her study on unplanned pregnancies: the relationship between poverty, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and the capacity for future planning. The solution, according to Bridges, is for individuals, institutions, and communities to “build stability and resources” at the individual and community levels, supported by changes in policies and structures that create barriers and remove opportunities for the poor (DeVol, 2014). DeVol says, “...if you are living in a really unstable and under-resourced environment, in order to get out you need to stabilize that environment. You can make changes a whole lot more easily when you’re stable. And the



next thing is to build resources.” Wahler discussed this in emphasizing the importance of accompanying structural change with interventions that address those individual-level barriers to exiting poverty. Jindra & Jindra also mentioned the importance of efforts that address human, social, and cultural capital in order that those in poverty may be enabled to take advantage of opportunities provided by more top-down efforts. The Bridges idea of “resources” (see next section) is essentially that: individual and community-level capital that increases chances of wellbeing and economic mobility. Bridges is therefore another voice in the field trying get people to recognize those causal links between socioeconomic environments and a person’s options, resources, and subsequent choices.

### iii. Eleven Resources

The Bridges definition of poverty is “the extent to which an individual or community does without **resources**” (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi Smith, 2001). The focus on resources has a two-fold purpose: to understand the multifaceted deprivations caused by poverty, and to give communities a starting point to address these deprivations. It identifies 11 resources, including financial resources but extending to the following additional areas: emotional, mental, language, physical, and spiritual resources as well as social capital and integrity & trust. The Getting Ahead curriculum adds three more to the list: motivation & persistence, relationships/role models, and knowledge of “hidden rules”. Below is a graphic describing the 9 primary “resources” defined by Bridges:



Retrieved from <http://www.ahaprocess.com/solutions/community/>

Financial poverty, according to Bridges, both contributes to and may be caused by a lack of resources in these other areas (DeVol, 2015). This broader definition mirrors that discussed by Morazes & Pintak, as well as Glennerster, in calling for a more nuanced understanding of poverty’s deprivations. What Bridges attempts to do, in defining poverty as a lack of resources, is acknowledge the correlation between material deprivation and outcomes related to social

support, psychosocial wellbeing, physical health, and other factors. It recognizes how difficult the instability created by poverty makes it for a person to focus on the future, and how sustained deprivation and social exclusion can dampen motivation and persistence in reaching goals.

Bridges differentiates between “Getting By” and “Getting Ahead” resources – the former being the safety net that helps individuals or communities survive each day in poverty, and the latter being the “ladder” that helps those same groups transition out of poverty (DeVol, 2015). It asks communities to think about whether they are providing both a safety net and opportunities for upward mobility in each of the 11 resource areas it identifies.

DeVol criticizes the use of the Federal Poverty Level as a definition of poverty, and the myriad of social programs that use it as a measure of need, saying:

This simplistic definition of poverty cannot address the complex causes of poverty, the lack of social coherence, or the balance between a safety net and opportunities for upward mobility. The current approach has devolved into cliff effects that destabilize people just when they most need stability. And many programs have fallen into a pattern of providing for people with just enough resources to maintain them in poverty” (2014, p.14)

This is where the Bridges idea of “building resources” to transition out of poverty comes from. Communities and institutions using Bridges concepts are asked to focus on moving from providing charity as a weak stop-gap measure to helping those in poverty build the resources they need to move beyond the point of needing outside help. They call this “stabilizing the economic environment” so that a person can look towards and make plans for the future, thereby escaping the “tyranny of the moment” caused by constant instability.

#### *iv. Causes of Poverty Model*

The Bridges philosophy has a framework to help communities identify areas of action that, according to its model, are comprehensive and address “all areas of poverty.” It presents four categories for the “**causes of poverty**” and emphasizes the importance of addressing all four causes at once, rather than picking and choosing those that are easiest or most popular to address. These four categories are “Individual Behavior” (causes and barriers at the individual level), “Human and Social Capital in the Community” (opportunities in the local environment), “Exploitation” (of the poor by institutions and those in power), and “Political/Economic Structures” (policies and larger systems). Bridges then posits that each of these causes be addressed at the levels of Individual Action, Organizational Action, Community Action, and Policy (DeVol, 2014). The Bridges model calls for action in these four areas to include all levels, sectors, and classes in the community in the process (DeVol, 2014; Devol, 2015).

These “four causes” are organized into what Bridges calls a “Community Sustainability Grid,” a tool for communities to look at the “four causes of poverty” defined by Bridges and develop action steps to address them locally across multiple levels. The idea of this model is to move communities away from understanding and addressing poverty exclusively at the individual level; which, as we have seen, is where anti-poverty programming tends to focus in the U.S. Below is a representation of the Community Sustainability Grid with examples of action from the Kennett Community.

*Community Sustainability Grid*

	Individual Behaviors & Circumstances	Community Conditions	Exploitation	Political/Economic Structures
Individual Action	Taking GED classes	Signing of petition for more accountability of landlords	Volunteering for local anti-trafficking group	Meeting with local representatives and municipal officials
Organizational Action	Getting Ahead workshops	Education of local supporters on community needs	KACS compiles list of tenant complaints on local landlords & submits to legal aid group.	Hold workshop for participants on legal rights and avenues of action.
Community Action	Support of shelters for those in recovery from addiction	Neighborhood watch	Tenant group submitting letter of complaint to the borough	Community demonstrations (these happen regularly)
Policy Changes	Eliminating barriers for benefits applications	Designation of more land for affordable housing.	Stricter enforcement of housing code by Kennett borough	Creation of Latino advisory council for borough (already done)

Through the community sustainability grid, Bridges is trying to make the way in which communities address poverty more comprehensive - moving beyond the exclusive focus on cause and effect at the individual level. Like the other Bridges concepts, it is a framework for communities to use as they take action on poverty – a tool to translate ideas into action across the spectrum.

*v. Bridges in Practice – Areas of Impact*

Regarding its practice, Bridges repeatedly emphasizes that it is not a program, but rather *a framework* for understanding and addressing poverty to be used at the level of policy, programming, and mindsets. Again, DeVol:

Poverty is a complex problem that demands a comprehensive approach. And therein lies the challenge. Poverty is not resolved with a single program or even set of programs, because there are so many variables. Bridges is not a program. It is a set of constructs that can be applied in many settings and in many ways (2014, pp. 1-2).

It believes that real, impactful solutions will come out of the conversations communities have based on these principles, and that these solutions will move up from the individual and community level to impact the level of system and policy (Payne et al., 2001). DeVol says that “no significant change occurs without a significant relationship” and that it is these relationships built through Bridges that create change. Institutional change, according to DeVol, happens when individuals or organizations take Bridges concepts back to their sector and use them to make innovative changes to help bring down barriers for those in poverty. From there,

the different institutions and sectors in a community begin to collaborate above their “silos” – their own narrow focus – to address those barriers at the community level. In the long run, the goal of these efforts is to impact policy.

Nevertheless, DeVol names policy change as his longer-term vision for Bridges. He says the Bridges idea of building resources can inform policy decisions by prompting the question “does this policy stabilize or destabilize the bottom 50% and does it make it easier for them to build resources?” (interview, December 15, 2016). DeVol named in our interview instances of such changes at local levels. He spoke specifically of a community in Muskogee, Oklahoma which he calls a “shockingly red” State, where the relationship between a woman in poverty and her local government created through the Bridges community there paved the way for her to advocate for the elimination of water service fees for the poor in her area. DeVol also referenced a community in Oklahoma where two “returning citizens” and Getting Ahead graduates (those who have completed the Getting Ahead workshop) advocated for a local jail to change its practice of charging entry and exit fees to low-income individuals held at their facility, reducing debt and collection activity. Bridges offers examples of other communities, such as Schenectady, New York, where employers have started offering in-house loan programs to employees to build credit and avoid predatory lenders.

The communities of practice that have come out of the Bridges framework have therefore begun to make headway on certain structural changes for their communities – from what seem to be a combination of education and expanded collaborations between groups whose relationships and goals were previously severed. The premise of this process is that changed mindsets at the individual level will lead to institutional change within local organizations, structural changes at the community level, and that these changes will begin to affect the policy level.

Below is another “mental model” used by Bridges to describe this concept, what they call the “triple lens” model:



*Adapted from J. Pfarr Consulting*

Bridges believes that precisely because it is a framework, a set of concepts for understanding poverty, and not a program, that it has the potential to change the way programs and policies are made as it is adopted into the thinking of those in positions of power

and influence. It does not propose policy changes itself at the national level because it believes that change should come out of the communities where it is implemented, through local conversations informed by the experiences of those in poverty. Although the Bridges Out of Poverty book was published more than 15 years ago, the development of Bridges as a framework has been happening since then through the community of practice. As more people are trained and begin implementing Bridges tools in their local contexts, Bridges has developed into a national network of people using it to make changes in their communities. As such, Bridges as a community model is still developing and moving up from the organizational and community level. DeVol says that he has stopped using the term “ending poverty” when it comes to Bridges and (in the U.S. at least) prefers to use the phrase “create communities where everyone can live well,” which is perhaps a recognition that Bridges is not a silver bullet for ending poverty but rather a tool for improving the way poverty is understood and addressed.

“Sara”, another Bridges leader at the national level, also said that the changes Bridges brings about start with a paradigm shift, when people become open to recognizing how economic class has impacted them, and how it affects others. She says that there are a lot of initiatives that bring people together across class lines, but they fail to create this paradigm shift that allows people to work together and make shared decisions with those in poverty. This means including the poor in the decisions on what to do about poverty, but not before each individual and institution examines their own middle class perspective and the barriers they may be erecting for those from poverty. Sara works with multiple communities across the country who are in the process of applying the Bridges framework to their local context. These are communities who have created a critical mass of those trained in the Bridges concepts (and Getting Ahead graduates) who have begun to meet on a regular basis and create action plans based on barriers and opportunities they have identified. Sara told me that every “Bridges community” where she works looks different; some consist of an entire city or multi-county region, while others are based out of a neighborhood association or a single city block. This variety of application, Sara said, is possible because Bridges is a “framework,” not a program, part of its success is its adaptability to these different environments (interview, December 21, 2016).

Everyone who I spoke to about Bridges said that they had seen Bridges bring about changes in their communities – in outcomes for the poor, in collaboration across sectors, and in structures the community developed to increase access to opportunities for those in poverty. As we have seen in the literature review, it is the way we conceptualize poverty as a society that largely shapes what we believe should be done to help the poor – punishment, rehabilitation, or liberation. If Bridges has the capacity to help people reframe the way they understand poverty, and in doing so to move away from purely individualistic attributions, then I think it could have the capacity to bring about positive change in these communities.

Chuck Holt, director of Factory Ministries in Paradise, PA, has been using Bridges in his organization for several years and recently became a national consultant for Bridges. He says that because Bridges provides a framework for understanding economic class, and a structure for bringing those in poverty into the conversation, it creates the opportunity for new collaborations that can lead to changes in policy. Holt claims that change becomes possible

when we can get those from wealth (who make policy), and those in middle class (who enforce it) to rub shoulders with those in poverty to ask about how to generate solutions. Here, again, it is bringing back the importance of new relationships that shift paradigms and that are possible through the heightened consciousness that Bridges brings about. When asked why Bridges doesn't propose any specific policy changes itself, Holt said:

I think it's by design, not by accident. Anytime someone comes in and says, "we have the answer, do it this way," it becomes a program, it becomes a movement. Movements come and go. Movements are reactive. [Bridges] is a framework with which you can address poverty and it's gonna look different all over the country. (interview, December 20, 2016)

The Bridges framework does not directly criticize any economic system or political policy but it points out the hypocrisy and inadequacy of focusing on alleviating poverty instead of creating sustainable situations for the individual and community. It is very critical of the traditional charity model by which public and private institutions provide for basic needs on a continuous, and incomplete, basis. DeVol believes that Bridges has the potential to supersede political divides precisely because it addresses both sides of the debate on poverty – individual and structural causes – and everything in between. He says that Bridges works because it attracts those from both sides of the political aisle; this, he says, is due to Bridges' "both/and" strategy to addressing poverty. That is, its "four causes" theory that addressing individual factors, political & economic systems, and everything in between is essential to ending poverty.

Bridges certainly does include these "four causes" in its dialogue, but that is not to say that it is not single-handedly tackling all these issues. It's asking communities to *include* all of them in their local discussions of poverty. It should be said that Bridges is not, in practice, a policy advocacy program. It was born out of practice – educational and social work practice. It resulted from the frustrations of professionals in those fields in trying to reach positive outcomes with clients in poverty, and running up against barriers to achieving change. In practice, Bridges has just begun to break into the realm of policy change. Structural changes are still happening largely at the community and organizational levels, which makes sense – the Bridges model starts with changing individual mindsets and creating community collaborations; any higher-level change will take time and will come from the grassroots-level – the trickle-up effect I mentioned previously. Bridges believes that its "thinking tools": primarily, the 11 resources, the 4-fold causes of poverty, and an understanding of "hidden rules" of economic class, can help people "replace judgment with understanding," do "thorough work," and find effective solutions with people in poverty at the table (DeVol, 2014).

Bridges is using these thinking tools to try and expand the discussion on poverty in the communities where it is implemented. My results are largely based on the experience of those who have started or used Bridges in their practice, and their assessment of its effectiveness in their interviews with me. I indeed have seen these thinking tools expressly presented in the Bridges material – I myself participated in presenting it to large groups of community members and social service professionals, as well as to the group of Getting Ahead participants. For Below I will present the reactions of these groups to the Bridges concepts and my analysis of them.

### **B. Moving from traditional charity to resource-building**

My second finding is that Bridges encourages social service professionals to move beyond a traditional charity model by focusing on building resources that address the more long-term deprivations of poverty. Speaking from the perspective of a social service agency, we are still within a system in which the government provides people with “just enough resources for people to stay in poverty.” That is, the safety net we have for the poor is nowhere near sufficient to provide a strong and adequate bridge to self-sufficiency. Families are disqualified for government supports based on their income well before meeting income guidelines for self-sufficiency in their area. Working families are still poor and families receiving government assistance are still experiencing real material deprivation. Moreover, the network of public and private assistance programs are incredibly difficult for those in need to navigate and access. Clients need the help of social service programs to access other social service programs – the maze of paperwork, qualifications, and eligibility requirements. The local Department of Public Welfare, which is perhaps the most inaccessible, unorganized, and inefficient entity I have ever encountered in my work, contracts out to nonprofit providers to help potential clients apply for benefits and navigate their system – a result of underfunding and decentralization of state services.

Many nonprofits shy away from government money because of the web of red tape and requirements tied up with their grants – decisions made at the federal level about what constitutes success and how monies should be applied that often translate into ineffective programs at the local level. In Kennett Square, there is an overwhelming number of private nonprofit organizations competing for limited funding to serve their clientele. Each serves a specific segment of the population for specific services, and many clients receive services from multiple organizations on a regular basis. Ineffective communication between organizations can create overlap and frustration for the clients as they must repeat their information over and over again, and spend hours of their day trying to access services. Moreover, the immediate needs that social service nonprofits see on a daily basis can create a sort of tunnel vision, in which the alleviation of those needs replaces a vision for larger and more permanent change.

Given the context, a model like Bridges has the potential to break new ground by focusing on the reasons behind poverty instead of merely on the poverty itself. Poppendieck argues that the rise of such solutions has made the world “kinder but less just” and Gowan argues that such kindness has become institutionalized to the degree that its validity remains unquestioned. The work of Bridges is trying to interrupt that practice through its resource-building model, which pulls on the empowerment and human development models of the social work field. On the individual level, this is about moving people beyond the need for continued assistance and achieving a higher level of wellbeing.

I found through my research that those social service professionals using Bridges found in it a tool for moving the focus of their organizations away from alleviation of basic needs and towards more sustainable change for those seeking their services. Chuck Holt of Factory Ministries expressed this frustration with the current system in place for addressing poverty used by most social service programs. He said that programs typically have a certain niche wherein they address one specific symptom of poverty. Holt insists that we need to get away from sacrificing change at the system level for alleviation at the symptom level. Bridges, he

says, is designed to address all causes of poverty at the same time, to create systems that offer people access to the resources they need to thrive. That is the goal of Bridges, he says, “to create a community where everyone cannot just survive but thrive” (interview, December 20, 2016). He says that most poverty programs focus on easing the pain of poverty without looking towards long-term, sustainable change. Holt believes in the necessity of personal choice in getting out of poverty, but only in conjunction with changes at the system level. People need the opportunity to build resources and make decisions that will improve their lives, he says. Organizations that meet basic needs without offering those “getting ahead” resources are doing nothing to move the needle on poverty (interview, December 20, 2016). When asked how Bridges has affected the work that his organization does, Holt stated:

It's made such a transformational difference. It has fundamentally changed everything we do. It's the lens with which we view every single thing we do. Both as an organization and more and more as a community. I grew up in poverty, and so I was the recipient of a lot of well-meaning churches and programs. My family was very dysfunctional; went from a two-parent home to a single mom raising two of us, then abandoned by her and then a man took me in and raised me...I've been the recipient of a system that, all it did was fix that day. It did give us hope for that day and we made it through that day because of that. But my mom, she didn't have a skill set to make it through to tomorrow, so we had to keep coming back to the well. And when the well dried up, we'd have to go find another well. So for me, it was an “aha!” moment, like “this is how we deal with systemic change, this is how we get to the root of the issue because we're addressing all causes of poverty at the same time, a lack of resources, not just financial, but all resources at the same time, we're bringing all sectors of the community together at the same time.” It's a very comprehensive way to address poverty. (interview, December 20, 2016)

Holt's point is that Bridges helped his organization move away from what he sees as a dysfunctional system – one that reacts to emergency needs based a charity model, but neglects the bigger picture. His organization is now very strongly based in the Bridges resource-building model – one of his mottos is “no betterment without development.” This means that while the organization still offers assistance with basic needs, the primary focus of their work is on helping individuals build more longer-term resources. They use the Bridges model of eleven resources to identify needs across the spectrum for those seeking their services and focus on offering support and building collaborations based on those needs. Tammy Schoonover of Bucks County Opportunity Council had a similar perspective on Bridges and how it differs from typical assistance programs:

Most poverty programs and social service efforts are “getting by” resources. They're putting a stop-gap on one thing and not getting people ahead. They're not giving them power and their own space and their own decisions...it's easier for helping people to say “well, here's what I can do, here's a bag of food, the other stuff is too much, I can't touch that”...so we resonate with that stop-gap stuff because at least I felt like I did something. (interview, November 11, 2016)

Allison, who oversees another Bridges-based program, talked about the Bridges model as



addressing “long-term stability and long-term change” as opposed to “the band-aid fixes, the quick fixes,” offered by many charitable institutions. She said that the work Bridges does is “looking at digging deep as opposed to digging wide...creating that long-term change in [a person’s] trajectory, as opposed to creating a fix that’ll get them through this week, this month” (interview, December 12, 2016). Allison, Schoonover, and Holt believe that Bridges has become the path for their organizations to focus on longer-term issues instead of temporary solutions for those accessing their services. Schoonover’s program in Bucks County has collaborated with a local community college to make their programs more accessible to low-income students – so much so that the college now has a specific scholarship to cover the cost of books and other miscellaneous expenses for students from her program. The Bucks County organization reports significant increases in employment, education, and income levels for graduates, which provides financial and social support to individuals in poverty over the course of multiple years as they pursue economic self-sufficiency, including filling in gaps in lost public benefits as program members see their wages increase. Schoonover credits the success of this program on the long-term resource-building model of Bridges, which she says has helped her program go beyond meeting basic needs, and set an example for others in the community to do so. On the following page is a flyer put out by her organization, the Bucks County Opportunity Council, reporting on program outcomes:

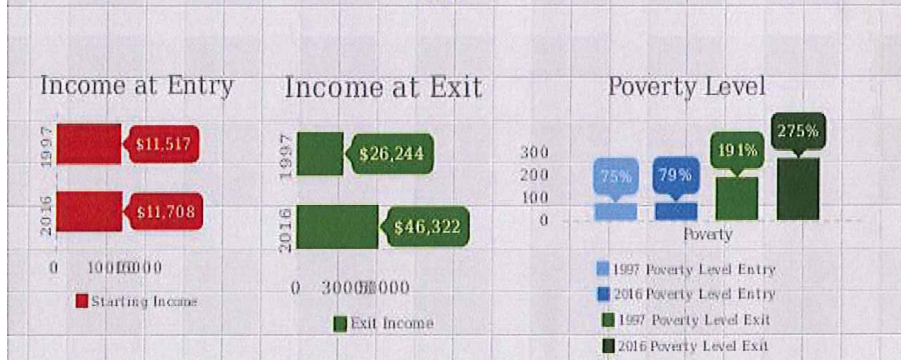
**Bucks County**  
**OPPORTUNITY COUNCIL**  
Connecting people with resources to thrive

Today, 41,406 people are living in poverty - on less than \$24,300 for a family of 4

BUCKS COUNTY,

6.6%

of Bucks County residents live in poverty



Bridges out of Poverty research shows that the way out of poverty is through education and employment

Certified Nurse Aide - 18  
Licensed Practical Nurse - 48  
Registered Nurse - 27  
Information Technology Specialist - 5  
Retail Sales Associate - 12  
Office Manager - 7  
Social Worker - 7

Customer Service Rep - 14  
Teacher - 7  
Medical Assistant - 12  
Accounting Assistant - 6  
Case Manager - 6  
Custodian - 4  
Home Health Aide - 3

Auto Technician - 4  
Housekeeper/ Cleaner - 4  
Administrative Assistant - 8  
Food Service Manager - 3  
Pharmacy Technician - 3  
Hairdresser - 2  
Chef - 2  
And many more career choices

Data Source:  
<http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/42017>

BCOC has therefore seen great success in their program helping families to move up the economic and social ladder – success that Tammy Schoonover attributes largely to Bridges, which has changed the focus of both the case management and financial support pieces of their programs.

### **C. Understanding of economic environments & their impact**

Bridges has the potential to help communities become more aware of how economic environments affect people, encouraging people to examine how poverty is reproduced and include those in poverty at the decision-making table. The interviews that I carried out included two groups of social service professionals – those who have been using Bridges for several years in their organization, and those who recently attended a training on Bridges concepts in Kennett Square. From those who have been working with Bridges for a long period of time, I found a shared sentiment that Bridges had been instrumental in changing mindsets both within and outside their organizations about poverty. Those recently trained on the Bridges model in Kennett Square expressed that the training had given them a framework for understanding the circumstances of those accessing their services beyond the individual level, which they felt would make them more effective at their jobs and in advocating for change in wider contexts.

The Bridges community model involves setting up some kind of structure for the community to have conversations about how to address poverty, based on the “common language” provided by the Bridges mental models. These conversations are meant to include those from every economic class – poverty, middle class, and wealth – as well as people from every sector of – employment, law enforcement, education, social services. The Bridges trainings for community members and professionals are meant to orient those who are not from poverty on the same concepts, so that they are equipped to sit down at the table with those from poverty to discuss these issues. Allison and Tammy, both social service professionals who have been working with Bridges for several years, said that the understanding generated by Bridges about economic environments has helped move people away from judgments on the poor and given them a space to form relationships with them as problem solvers. Allison expressed that she sees the primary role of Bridges in “eradicating poverty” is to change mindsets. According to her, Bridges “opens your mind to a lot of the misconceptions people have about poverty, which is one of the biggest barriers when it comes to...people working [with those] in poverty.” This shift in viewpoint, leading to new relationships and collaborations, is where Allison says she has seen real change take place within her programming, and what she believes to be her role in fighting poverty (interview, December 12, 2016).

Schoonover, from Bucks County Opportunity Council, sees Bridges (and the Getting Ahead workshop, as part of it) as turning the tables on the usual social work paradigm by asking those in poverty to make their own decisions about what they need in order to get ahead, instead of forcing people into “goal plans” mandated by the organization. She calls Bridges “the most profound, energizing work I have had in 30 years of social work practice,” saying:

[Bridges] provides a foundation for understanding of poverty that makes sense...an understanding of how economic environments impact people and the decisions that they

make...and once understanding is generated, for all parties, that's the beauty of it. We're all on the same page with language, with our understanding. (interview, November 11, 2016) Schoonover goes on to say that what Bridges does is ask people to live in the tension of the complex answers, that it allows people to foster relationships across economic class so that they can really listen to one another's experiences. Bridges, she says, is "turning boxes upside down, it's tearing them open," by challenging people's preconceptions, prejudgments, of what causes poverty. It allows people to understand, she says, that not everyone is dealt the same cards in life, and focuses on building those cards so that everyone can play in the same game. (interview, November 11, 2016).

Those social service professionals who attended Kennett's first Bridges training reported similar observations. Both of my interviewees said the training gave them a better framework for situating the struggles of those in poverty in a larger context. Jason, who holds a master's degree in social work, expressed that though he had an understanding of structural factors affecting poverty, the social work field is very focused on individual practice, and the larger picture can get lost in addressing poverty's immediate effects. He told me that the training had given him concrete information on the many factors influencing poverty, information he could use both in his interactions with clients and in advocating for their needs at higher levels. He said:

I felt like a lot of that information was so compelling because, [the training facilitators] sort of talked about a lot of individuals...assume that poverty comes mostly from the individual, the reasons why someone might be in poverty are so much more personal, individualistic, and they miss out on those other three categories of social policy and things like that that could be impacting someone's ability to get out of poverty. And so seeing all of those other statistics about what causes someone to get into and not be able to pull themselves out of poverty was so impactful and I think it really does help you remind yourself...re-center, you know, this is what people are up against. (interview, December 9, 2016)

As a social worker, Jason described how this awareness of what families are dealing with on multiple levels could give him a "better starting point" for working with families in crisis. He also talked about taking the language he was given in the training to conversations about larger issues affecting his clients, "bringing that to the different personnel that are at the conversations around what's happening at a local, at a community, at a regional, at a state level, with this problem." Jason sees this about creating awareness, opening the conversation to include issues behind the individual crises he sees on a daily basis (interview, December 9, 2016).

Carol, another training attendee, also believes that the training gave her a better understanding of poverty to take with her into her work. She recently started working for a local community service agency and until recently was experiencing poverty herself. She does not have a background as a social worker and said that many of the concepts in the training were presented in a way she never thought about before. She said that the training helped her get a different perspective on where the individuals she works with are coming from, both in terms of their concrete situations and their frame of mind, saying:

Yes, well, the training was very helpful for me because it let me know a lot about how I can

not only approach people who are in poverty to help them but also to let them know, you know, there's nothing to be ashamed of. And also to let people know who are not in poverty, let them know, okay well, being in poverty is not always a choice. Cause that was one of the things that I remember you said in the training; it's not always a choice...a lot of times you don't think of that. (interview, December 20, 2016)

Carol understands poverty as both a factor outside of someone's control – in the sense of life events or structural barriers – and inside a person's control – in their decision to make steps toward changing their circumstances. According to her, the Bridges Out of Poverty training helped her gain a better perspective on both saying it will help her learn to meet her clients "where they are" as she helps them discern what their choices and options might be, as opposed to applying a "one-size-fits-all" solution to their challenges. She talked about understanding the "mindframe they are in" when they walk in the door and helping them see possibilities for improving their situations (interview, December 20, 2016).

#### **D. Impact of Getting Ahead**

The work of Bridges in changing consciousness about poverty is no less profound in the experience of the Getting Ahead participants. I found strong evidence that the workshop helped to empower participants with an increased sense of self-efficacy and social support. The change in perspective generated for these individuals on their own experiences and opportunities was the most profound change I saw come out of the Getting Ahead workshops. Like Wahler, I found among participants that the concrete understanding of the causes of poverty presented in Getting Ahead, causes *beyond* themselves, made participants feel empowered to make personal changes. The idea of Getting Ahead is to empower participants with the awareness, knowledge, and confidence to see themselves as leaders in the community conversation about poverty. Getting Ahead is explicit with participants about its dual purpose – decide what resources you need to build to "get ahead," and identify what resources the community needs to build to help you get there. Repeatedly throughout the course of the workshop, participants investigate community issues and are reminded that their voices are primary in advocating for change. "Investigators," as the Getting Ahead participants are called, expressed the following themes in their interviews with me: an awareness of how poverty has affected their life, a clearer vision for the changes they want and how to achieve them, a renewed determination to rise above their circumstances (and belief that they could), an awareness of how poverty has affected their life, and encouragement to move ahead in the form of social capital formed with other group members.

For one participant, "Anne," the workshop caused significant changes in how she deals with the factors that she sees as holding her back – specifically negative relationships causing turmoil in her home and work life. She discussed the different perspective the workshop had given her on her own circumstances, as well as her feelings about herself. She explained that when she started the workshop, she had been between two "dead-end" jobs, and was spending a great deal of her time and energy focused on family members whose negative decisions were affecting her own life. When I asked what she might take with her from Getting Ahead, she said:

[The workshop] made me think more about myself and the decisions that I've made in

the last 2 months. Right now, I'm just focusing on myself, where as before I wasn't. I was worried about my son...and if I hadn't come to this workshop, like I said, I'd probably still be working at [former workplace], making the money, living paycheck to paycheck, and worrying about everybody else...you know, I'm thinking of myself now, and I'm making a lot of changes for myself...you know, I now look better, feel better about myself...I'm gonna keep going forward... (interview, January 31, 2017).

When I asked her specifically about how the experience with the group may have had an effect on her outlook, she shared:

I mean I've heard a lot of stories in there, between everybody, you know, and a lot of the stories hit me, because I was down, before I even moved in here...and I've learned a lot. Just being there listening to other people, you know, everybody has baggage...I've been up and down and up and down for the longest time, but, I'm goin up now. I'm gonna focus on keep goin up that ladder. (interview, January 31, 2017)

Anne said that she credits the workshop with pushing her to take the risk of leaving her former job for a new, more promising opportunity, and to continue pushing through certain difficulties she is facing at home, which she knows will eventually result in a better living situation for herself (interview, January 31, 2017).

Another participant, "Xavier," spoke specifically about how the group experience had helped him decide on concrete steps to reach his long-term goals, and how social support from the group helped him move forward. He expressed that coming into the group, he had felt very uncertain, uncomfortable sharing his personal experiences with other people. As the weeks went on, however, he said he began to feel more comfortable with expressing himself and the experience "became helpful, it became very helpful" (interview, January 31, 2017). He discussed goals he has related to moving up economically, including purchasing a house, building his credit, and securing a higher-paying job. When I asked him if he had had those goals before starting the workshop, he shared that he had, but that the workshop had given him information and tools to achieve them. When asked what specifically had been helpful, he mentioned the group experience, "[knowing] I'm not the only one going through this," and the content in the coursework on subjects such planning, resources, and change:

I have goals and now I know what steps, it's kinda laid out in the [Getting Ahead workbook], what steps I need to take, as far as resources, and information, community resources. Reachin out, yes...I'm more confident now knowing I can achieve those goals. You know...it's something I know I can do. Just based on the book, it's pretty simple; you just gotta make the effort. (interview, January 31, 2017)

Like Anne, Xavier credits the group with opening his eyes to new opportunities, both through the concrete information discussed in the workshop, and the experience of sharing and hearing other participants' stories (interview, January 31, 2017). Both expressed a desire to apply their experience to goals they had before the workshop began, and a new positivity in their perceived ability to achieve them.

Another workshop participant, "Cassandra," expressed that the group helped her become conscious of resources and opportunities she hadn't accessed before, and more confident in her abilities to move forward. She is a first-generation U.S. citizen from Mexico

who completed her high school education in the States, one of the only members of this group to do so. She shared that for some time before coming to the workshop, she had wanted to enroll in college and earn a degree, but it was not until participating in Getting Ahead that she made that step. "I had it in mind," she said, "but I didn't want to go forward with it because I was afraid. And I felt like I couldn't do it...but it was like the class gave me motivation" (interview, February 3, 2017). She credits this to the workshop experience, and to her workshop facilitator, who is also a student, an immigrant from Mexico, and a mother of young children: "She told me, 'you can do it, you can do it,' and she also has children and she keeps going and keeps going and moving forward. And I said, if she can do it, why can't I?" (interview, February 3, 2017). She said that she noticed similar changes in other group members, two of whom started taking English classes, a goal they had held for a long time but never taken action on. "I think that there are a lot of opportunities around us," she said, "but we don't know how to take advantage of them. And sometimes we don't even know that they're there. And you learn about things [in Getting Ahead] that you didn't even know about" (interview, February 3, 2017).

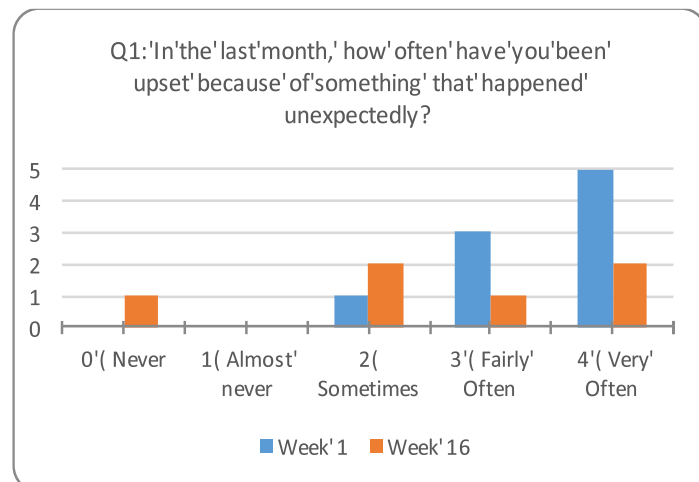
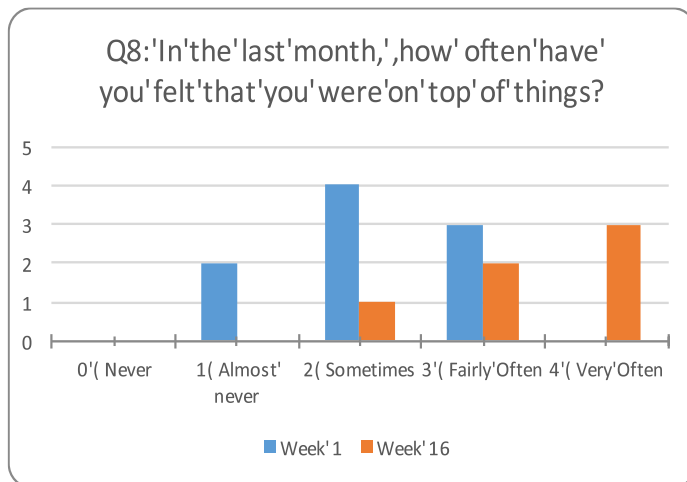
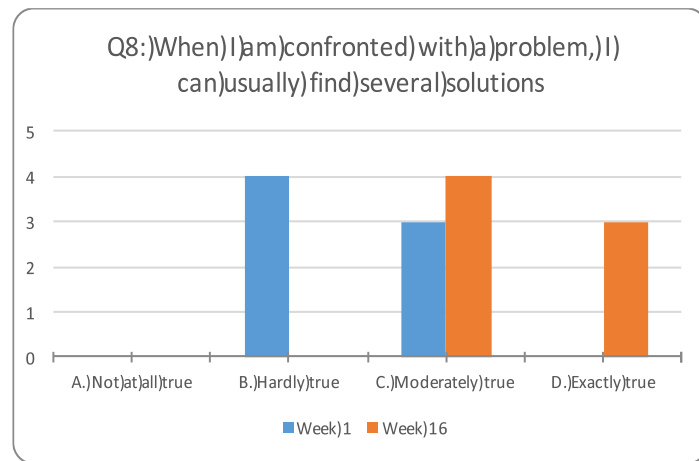
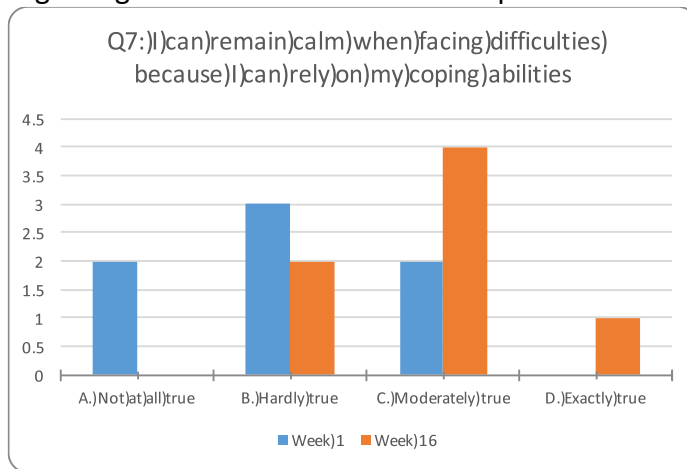
My final interviewee, "Carmen," believes that the workshop helped her to see her own circumstances with a wider lens, which gave her courage to take new steps. Carmen has been living in the United States for more than 20 years, but has not had the same educational opportunities as Cassandra. She said, of the group:

We started to become more conscious of the world that we're living in, in the current moment we're living...it's been very difficult to get ahead, because of ignorance or not having the courage to face things out of fear, because we don't know, because we're not ready, and I think that we've arrived at a point now where we can do it...there [in the class] are the questions and answers that we didn't know about. Or maybe we knew that they existed but we weren't sure about them and so we didn't try. And now that we are looking at the economic level that we live in...I think we can try to reach another level. (interview, January 27, 2017)

Carmen is now planning on looking for opportunities to obtain a better job, one that offers higher pay and benefits, and learning English so that she can have more options. She shared that realizing there were other people out there with the same needs as her who are moving forward "motivates me to also think I can do it" For her, the social support and encouragement from the group was enormous in changing her perception of her circumstances. She talked about the impact of having a regular time to step back from their daily lives and share with one another, something most of the women in the group – mostly working mother living in poverty – are rarely able to access (interview, January 27, 2017). In speaking of the specific impact this experience had on her, Carmen's answer seemed to reflect what I had been hearing from the other Getting Ahead participants:

What I have most learned is that we all have the right and the opportunity to overcome, but I also understand that sometimes there are obstacles in the way that don't allow for it, and that is why you have to sort of prepare yourself. So, I think that is what has become clear to me, that even though I have the need or desire to overcome, I have to go first through what I'm going through in order to get there and if I can't do it, I tried...at least I tried. (interview, January 27, 2017)

Overall, my Getting Ahead interviews indicate a new hope for participants in the changes they envisioned for their lives. The changes they envisioned were concrete, and most had some idea of what they wanted for their lives before attending the workshop; the workshop they credited with offering them tools, information, and support to take steps toward those changes. Apart from the anecdotal evidence and interview results, we saw evidence in our survey results of somewhat elevated levels of self-efficacy and diminished levels of stress among participants in the workshop. Due to the small sample size and the uncontrolled variables present in each participant’s life, it was difficult to draw definitive conclusions from this data. Below are examples of some survey questions where we saw significant change in answers from the beginning and the end of the workshop.



Combined with individual conversations with each participant, as well as thoughts they expressed in the workshop, the survey results provide some indication of possible changes in self-efficacy and stress levels among participants. The work of Getting Ahead is largely focused on consciousness and promoting change at the individual level – community and system-level issues are addressed, but in the context of raising awareness and involvement of the poor in



larger issues affecting them (DeVol, 2015). The evidence from my research is that, at least in the immediate aftermath of the experience, the workshop is achieving these goals. Participants very strongly expressed the benefits that they had seen in their own outlook and hopes for the future – long-term change for themselves, as well as for the community as a result of their involvement, will have to be determined at a later point in time.

## **VI. Discussion**

Based on my research and experience, I have argued that Bridges has the potential to help communities and individuals find solutions to poverty, based in their local contexts. Bridges provides a framework for situating the real lived effects of poverty in structural bases, and a model for bringing diverse sectors of a community together to discuss solutions. In doing so, it creates an opportunity for discussion and action in circles that may have given little thought to poverty alleviation beyond a charity-based model. My Kennett Square interviews indicate some of this change in mindset among those involved with Bridges, and my interviews with other Bridges practitioners and leadership evidence a belief that such change has occurred in their contexts. In light of these results, I see three potential areas where Bridges Out of Poverty could help Kennett Square (and Kennett Area Community Service) move into more effective action on poverty.

First, and most importantly, I think that Bridges could help move the focus of poverty alleviation in Kennett away from the simple dispensation of services and towards structures that frustrate or facilitate the upward mobility of the poor. Much of the services offered by both public and private agencies in Kennett Square are “safety net” measures – that is, they focus on meeting basic needs but not necessarily on development of the person or the community. Such a focus is the traditional “charity” approach to poverty alleviation popular not only among social service agencies but also donors, volunteers, and other community partners. I think that the “four causes of poverty” model of Bridges has the potential to open minds and spark interest and conversation on larger issues. I have already seen this happening among training participants, but also within the Getting Ahead workshop, where many of my participants thought of poverty for the first time as something beyond themselves. Realizing that poverty was not “all their fault” made them feel empowered and encouraged to pursue their goals. On a more local level, if Kennett Square can use Bridges to identify barriers to upward mobility for those in poverty, local actors could focus on building structures to provide greater access to such opportunities. In short, it could help shift the conversation from managing the symptoms poverty on the front end, to addressing the sources of instability and deprivation, at least on a local level.

Secondly, and in a related manner, I believe that Bridges has the potential to change the way that members of the Kennett community understand poverty. As we have seen, our focus in the United States tends to be in the individual causes for and effects of poverty – putting both the blame and the solutions at the individual level. As voiced by England, Desmond, and a host of others, the poor are not so different from the rest of us; they are human beings with deficiencies and strengths as well as the capacity for decision-making and change. Like every other human being, however, their choices, deficiencies, and strengths are shaped by their environment. If we fail to look at the structural causes that create those environments, we will

continue to blame the victims of those systems for their behavior and outcomes. I believe a greater understanding of these factors among social service professionals (as well as employers, educators, and anyone else who works with those in poverty) could encourage them away from judgments on the poor and to a focus on changing those environments rather than an exclusive focus on changing the person. Bridges brings in an understanding of economic class environments shaped by social structures – and then asks us to consider how those environments affect the way a person thinks, speaks, and acts. In doing this it is ascribing personal behaviors to social factors, a concept that could be a significant paradigm shift for those coming to the Bridges trainings – people from every sector of the community, some of whom have never had experienced a training or discussion on poverty before. Kennett is in the process of setting up a structure for Getting Ahead graduates to join Bridges trainees in a discussion of next steps for the community. If this is done well, I believe that the potential for paradigm shifts on both sides could be great, and if people are willing to take action, innovative solutions could be reached. The snowball effect of such collaborations could be a community that is forced to rethink its engagement with poverty and poverty alleviation.

Finally, I think that Bridges has the potential to help social service agencies in the Kennett Area come together across their organizational silos to work on issues beyond their immediate scope of action. Conversations have already begun in Kennett Square about streamlining services between major community service hubs to reduce barriers and overlap, in order to make them easier to access and more efficient for clients. If Bridges can help to create a common vision, language, and purpose for such organizations, it could be a tool for creating services that meet actual needs more effectively and moving the conversation onto collaborations for larger change. Feedback and guidance from those who have accessed these services will be crucial for keeping these conversations grounded and honest. Now that the first group of Getting Ahead participants has graduated in Kennett, KACS and other community leaders are in the process of planning the first community meeting to determine next steps for the Bridges initiative. The Bridges “planning committee,” which has been meeting for several months, made the decision that no other meetings about Bridges can happen without Getting Ahead graduates at the table.

Bringing together individuals who have traditionally been recipients of social service programs with those who manage them and those who fund them is an intimidating process for all involved. Those experiencing poverty face constant urgent demands on their time and resources, making it difficult to dedicate time and effort on a community issues presents its own challenges. I have seen Bridges already changing mindsets, however, on both ends of the spectrum – among the middle class and wealthy by making listening to those in poverty their first priority, and among the Getting Ahead graduates, who expressed a confidence and desire to make their voices heard that they had not felt before. The value I see for the Bridges model in Kennett is precisely this: that the process of interacting and working together on community issues will change the way each group thinks about themselves and the others around them. I believe that model Bridges provides for understanding and addressing poverty in a community can provide a framework for beginning these conversations.

In closing, I must add a word of caution. Bridges is an approach, a framework that

combines several large-picture ideas on poverty and development that are not necessarily new in and of themselves. The differing norms of economic class environments, the impact of poverty on individual outcomes, and the structural bases for inequality are themes that Bridges pulls from much larger discussions on poverty. What I see with Bridges is an approach for bringing these large concepts down to the individual and community level and encouraging grassroots changes by shifting the conversation – both what is said and who is at the table. Bridges addresses racism, inequality, and unjust practices only indirectly, through the grassroots locally-led efforts of the communities that adopt its model. Because Bridges is grassroots-led, it is meant to be adaptable to the local context; what this means, in practice, is that every community where Bridges exists has implemented the model differently. Given this flexibility, it is important that as a community implements Bridges it does not pick and choose those aspects of the framework that fit most neatly with its pre-existing understanding of poverty. Bridges does focus heavily on economic class environments and resource-building for individuals in poverty. As we have seen from the example of Moynihan and Lewis, discussions of the effects of poverty on the poor have historically been taken out of context and used to blame and/or vilify the poor rather than acknowledge our complicity in their fate. While Bridges places the causes of poverty across a spectrum and warns against focusing on only one area, it also emphasizes the role of personal choice and the necessity of individual change in order for a person to “transition out of poverty.” In the context of *Getting Ahead*, where individuals in poverty are focusing on their own experiences and options, such language may be appropriate; but taken out of context in a larger discussion, it could fit all too easily into a “blaming the victim” discourse.

Those who work in social services especially are accustomed to understanding and dealing with poverty on an individual level, but if Bridges becomes just another way to deal with the effects of poverty and not its causes, then it will not go beyond any other existing approach to poverty alleviation. And while I believe that the Bridges model has potential to bring discussion on systemic change to circles that have perhaps never considered such issues before, Bridges does not replace other efforts to end inequality and poverty. It is indeed *an* approach to understanding and addressing poverty, not necessarily *the* approach. Those who adopt Bridges must not do what Poppendieck cautions against in her work *Sweet Charity*; which is to implement a program for the poor, and say “we have done enough.” Let Bridges be used to “grapple in meaningful ways with poverty,” not augment a culture of charity that seeks merely to relieve the immediate suffering of the poor (p.4).

## **VII. Conclusions & Recommendations for Further Research**

No meaningful attempt to address poverty in the United States can or should be done without an understanding of how we have shaped our ideas about poverty and its solutions over time. The current system we have for addressing poverty has its basis in popular ideologies about the poor that go back to pre-colonial times. Those ideologies primarily point to the behaviors and circumstances of the individual as the source for the perpetuation of poverty and its solution. Our network of public and private interventions to deal with and/or solve poverty are also a historical product and, as we have seen, are culturally produced. The piecemeal

system we currently have for addressing the effects of poverty is primarily based on mitigating the outcomes of poverty in the lives of individuals, and not changing the structures that produce those outcomes. Bridges is an approach based in social work practice that takes into account big-picture themes in the discussion on poverty – individual needs, community practices, and political-economic structures. It attempts to bring an understanding of poverty informed by these themes into local discussions on how to end poverty for individuals and communities and create systems that support equality of access and opportunity.

In its roughly 15 years of existence as a community framework, Bridges has seen some success in changing local practices and mindsets, improving outcomes for individuals in poverty, and has even begun to effect policy discussions in some areas. My research suggests that Bridges has potential to help communities create better support systems for individuals who are living in poverty, and to encourage local actors to work on eliminating barriers so that the playing field is more equitable to begin with. It does not, however, eliminate the need for more top-down solutions or advocacy measures. Moreover, neither its theories nor its results have been examined enough by experts and outside practitioners to make any definitive third-party claims about its success. That is work yet to be done. In the meantime, in the hands of well-informed individuals, I believe that it can be a useful tool for discussion and action. Kennett Square, I believe, is ready for such discussion and, I hope, action. Only time, research, and intentional evaluation will determine if Bridges could be a roadmap by which Kennett can indeed make its community more of a place where everyone can live well and thrive.

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