Boosting Self-Worth Can Counteract Cognitive Effects of Poverty

December 17, 2013

For people in poverty, remembering better times — such as past success — improves cognitive functioning by several IQ points and increases their willingness to seek help from crucial aid services, a study finds.

The findings suggest that reconnecting the poor with feelings of self-worth reduces the powerful stigma and psychological barriers that make it harder for low-income individuals to make good decisions or access the very assistance services that can help them get back on their feet.

"This study shows that surprisingly simple acts of self-affirmation improve the cognitive function and behavioral outcomes of people in poverty," says study co-author and University of British Columbia professor Jiaying Zhao. The study will be published this month in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

The main experiments took place in a New Jersey soup kitchen over two years. Nearly 150 study participants were asked to privately record a personal story with a tape recorder before doing a variety of problem-solving tests.

Compared to a control group, participants randomly assigned to "self-affirm" — to recount a proud moment or past achievement — performed dramatically better on the tests, equivalent to a ten-point increase in IQ. They were also more likely to seek out information on aid services from the local government.

While previous studies have successfully seen self-affirmation improve test scores in two other marginalized groups — African-American students and female math students — this is the first study to show it in the poor, and the first to use oral self-affirmation techniques due to participants' low literacy levels.

The study has important policy implications, including the potential to improve enrollment in government or charity assistance programs (health care, food stamps, tax rebates), which are used by only a fraction of eligible participants.

Zhao and co-authors Eldar Shafir of Princeton University and Crystal Hall of University of Washington theorize that self-affirmation alleviates the mentally overwhelming stigma and cognitive threats of poverty, which can impair reasoning, cause bad decisions and perpetuate financial woes.

This study builds on previous research by Zhao and colleagues from Princeton, Harvard and University of Warwick, which found that poverty consumes so much mental energy that those in poor circumstances have little remaining brainpower to concentrate on other areas of life.

As a result, less "mental bandwidth" remains for education, training, time-management, assistance programs and other steps that could help break out of the cycles of poverty.