Nourishment for impoverished thinking

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Poverty is emotionally crushing, and stigma only adds to that burden. The poor are often disparaged as lazy and incompetent—unable or unwilling to improve their own lot. Why don't they go to school, eat more sensibly, and spend their money more wisely? In short, why don't they make better decisions for themselves?

It's true that the poor do make poor choices, but not because of any personal failings. Poverty breeds lousy decision making. Think about it: Good decisions require attention and reasoning and mental discipline. How do you muster those powers when you are preoccupied with, well, being poor? The constant reminders that you are impoverished and contemptible are so threatening that they deplete basic mental resources, leaving little brainpower for sound reasoning and decision making.

That's the worrisome conclusion of a recent study in the journal *Science*. But how do we as a society address this cognitive aspect of poverty? Poverty and stigma are not going away anytime soon, so how might the poor be helped to stay mentally strong in the face of persistent psychological threats?

A team of psychological scientists may offer some hope. Crystal Hall of the University of Washington, and her colleagues Jiaying Zhao of the University of British Columbia and Eldar Shafir of Princeton, have been exploring ways to lessen the mental toll of poverty, and their work suggests that self-affirmation may be a useful tool. The theory is that everyone is motivated to maintain a sense of value and integrity, and that affirming one's worth in some way—any way—makes people less defensive in the face of threat. Is it possible that helping the poor to remember their personal value—that this simple intervention might free up their mental power for better judgments and decisions?

The scientists tested this idea with a few simple experiments, all conducted in an urban soup kitchen in New Jersey. They recruited the poor themselves—middle-aged men and women who were living on about $8000 a year—and had half of them describe a personal experience that had made them feel successful or proud. The others described an everyday routine, and served as control subjects. Because many of the clients at the soup kitchen were illiterate, the scientists asked them to speak into a tape recorder.

Then all of them completed two cognitive tests. One measured fluid intelligence—the capacity to think logically, regardless of education or knowledge. The other measured an executive power called cognitive control—the ability to adapt quickly as rules and goals shift. Both of these cognitive powers are fundamental building blocks of attention, planning, memory and self-control, all skills that are crucial to success.

Hall and her colleagues expected that self-affirmation would boost mental performance, and it did, quite dramatically. Those who were primed to feel good about themselves—these subjects outperformed controls on both tests. Indeed, the difference was equivalent to the difference in mental performance

between a 45-year-old and a 55-year-old.

Is it possible that these subjects' cognitive boost was simply the result of feeling upbeat, as a result of the happy memory? The scientists ran another version of the experiment to rule out that explanation. They also ran a version to show that more affluent subjects—those earning close to six figures—got no comparable mental benefit from self-affirmation. The intervention appears to benefit only those living in poverty, presumably by diminishing psychological threat and distraction.

Do these cognitive improvements add up to better decision making? That's really the acid test, so the scientists designed a final experiment to simulate the kind of real-life choice the poor confront regularly. It's well known that poverty impinges on the poor's willingness to take advantage of social programs designed to help them—food stamps, for example. These programs themselves are stigmatized, and a further threat to self-worth. So in this study, when the self-affirmation was complete and the subjects were leaving the soup kitchen, they passed a table that offered fliers about tax credits and tax assistance for the poor. The scientists kept track of who stopped, and who took the fliers with them, which they used as a measure of sensible decision making.

Again, those who had affirmed their personal value subsequently made better decisions. As described in an article forthcoming in the journal *Psychological Science*, they were more likely to stop by the information table, and to leave with information. In other words, it appears that the intervention made them open to information that might otherwise have been threatening to them.

The first step for many of the poor is to step foot inside the office of a social service provider, yet paradoxically, this step is itself a threatening stigma. The very idea diminishes mental performance just when it is most needed, and may make the needy turn away. This simple and brief intervention might help the poor take that first difficult step.

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