Guests

Karolina Lukasiewicz Karolina Lukasiewicz is a researcher and adjunct faculty in Silver School of Social Work at New York University. For the last five years, she has worked as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research at New York University. Her research is focused on poverty policies and experiences of various populations, including immigrants.

Author of “Feeling Less Than a Second Class Citizen—Examining the Emotional Consequences of Poverty in New York City.” Despite experiencing such debilitating emotions, participants formulated and used strategies to manage these feelings and situations. These findings point to the role of social and institutional practices in shaping emotions.

Alberto Minujin is a professor at The New School University, New York. He is founder and executive director of Equity for Children and Equidad para la Infacia in Latin America non-profit aimed at improving the living conditions of poor, marginalized children (www.equityforchildren.org).

His research and teaching concern child poverty reduction and equity, human rights, monitoring and evaluation, and social policy. He is a member of the Academic Committee of University of Bergen, Norway’s Comparative Research on Poverty (CROP). A UNICEF Senior Officer from 1990-2005.

Enrique Olaya has worked for almost thirty years in the social sciences, psychology, and the performing arts. He has been involved in sociocultural projects, psychosocial research, human services, public health education and human rights programs, college teaching, contemporary dance production and performance, participation in arts festivals and cultural events, and psychotherapy for individuals, families and groups.

Enrique has worked over fifteen years as a bilingual psychotherapist in a “mental health” clinic in Brooklyn where he has applied methods/techniques from his study and training in sound/percussion, dance/movement, and drama therapy. Enrique has made it his own personal project to turn this service into an open, mutually enriching educational process about social and human needs, incorporating the concerns, and interests of the individuals and families of this community.

Enrique holds a Master degree in Psychology from the New School for Social Research in New York. He took studies in Dance/Movement Therapy at a Masters level.

Introduction

Virginie Charvon (facilitator): Today’s theme is equality. We want to learn together how people are treated less than because they are poor, how we understand culture, the stereotypes. We gathered together to decide what to do on the theme; the focus on people who are poor is very aligned with our MAP research. In the US the key concept of the MAP report is subjugation. One of the activists described subjugation as: “when you live in poverty, you are always under somebody’s thumb.”

And, in the MAP report, we can read, “Poverty is not just a component of individual or family circumstances. It is a complex byproduct of how our society is organized. First and foremost, poverty in the United States is shaped by aspects of our culture and values that create a structural process of subjugation.” All the other dimensions of poverty (work, shame, stigma etc.) are possible because of subjugation.

One of our questions is: What does it mean to be truly equal?

How did we prepare? We met a couple months ago to share examples of how people are treated unequally, because they are poor. We had very interesting thoughts during that meeting. For example, am I treated differently because of prejudice, or is it because of the system? Or, “the system doesn’t work because it doesn’t listen to people like me.” Another said, “I have never felt equal.”

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1 [https://map.4thworldmovement.org](https://map.4thworldmovement.org)
Then, two weeks ago, we worked on a scale (see photo), that we will present to you. We invited people to write on papers what feels unequal, up to three papers max. And, then we asked what are we doing to bring equality and or what can be done? And then we put those papers on the scale.

What happened in the balance?

**Virginie:** Here we have more equality than inequality! Now to hear from you (our guests) how you react to one idea and how it resonates with what you work on, or we should improve. To really understand how our own experience and our own knowledge relate to your experience.

**Alberto:** It’s very impressive. Feeling less because you don’t have this or don’t have that—that’s the main (idea) of the things. It’s health, housing and other things that are more feelings, things you can’t see, especially in our kids. As for equality, there were some things, like taxation are important.

**Karolina:** Thank you for inviting me here. I will focus on one thing that struck me most: It was interesting to hear that to increase equality by training, by training by people who experience poverty. Also training social workers, and doing research with people who provide different services, structural things, like the system, people being underpaid. The bottom line is that there is a human being on the other side and there are many issues following that. If such a dialogue could be started that service providers could be

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*2 see appendix for list of the statements*
trained by their clients, especially with how their clients feel, how they feel dumb in some cases. To remember that clients are actual human beings is wonderful and very much needed.

**Enrique:** I come from the Psychology field. The level of what they bring is nothing like the level of what is being discussed here. What I mean is poverty is pathology-ized. The Business. I am taking a break from it to write about it. The moment I put it out they will say, you can’t work here anymore because it seems you are denouncing this. I have all the reasons why I stayed there because I turned this work into an educational process.

I’ve seen people come with a diagnosis, I say let’s talk about this. So that’s what came to me in listening. The education leads me to what some of the people said on the equality side. Taxation and the historical component of poverty, of how poverty shows up in this place. Reparations, and talking about wealth. Of course, the IRS sent me something I owe from three years ago as an independent contractor. I was upset. Those are the things I connect with, the need for historical perspective. That, this poverty doesn’t belong to me. It’s subjugation. I wrote a book, it’s called, *Choice, the Group*. Explaining the PTSD phenomenon; the PTSD goes back to Post traumatic slaves

**Virginie:** Thank you for your reactions. Frankly when we did the exercise I thought that equality would be the lighter side. But actually it shows that **we know the changes we want to see** and how to implement those ideas. For example, supporting each other, or for social workers to consider people they serve as human beings. It’s interesting to see that we all have the responsibility which makes it more doable, and less discouraging than fighting against the firms you mentioned.

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**Dialogue with guests and members**

**Stress of inequality and mental health**

**Alberto:** One question [to Enrique], have you seen more mental health things, from pressures? Now we experience more and more these things, like immigration, the pressure of the legal people that they will take you out. I know some of the organizations that work on this; they can see the stress on families. That’s something that is very strong. I would start with the crisis. Here we cannot talk about the crisis. Sometimes I think, why are people not more upset, more angry? Here inequality is so typical.

**Enrique:** Somehow, we are all kept from breaking through. Many are still at the bottom. We are at the point where ...a lot of other people, pharmaceuticals... and then medication comes in place to deal with the crisis. With the crisis they call the ambulance, and you get three police cars to take you...

**Participant:** We need to understand, the situation to be poor or homeless, you are unbalanced. You cannot think 100% like a human being like you used to be. When you ask for help, you don’t ask for more trouble! You don’t ask to get humiliated! You ask to be respected. We cannot buy food; we cannot afford to take care of our children. We are not different, poor or homeless, we are human beings. I will give you an example, any place you need help, you need to fill out papers. Think about somebody who has no address, no money, on the street. They ask you to fill out so many papers. And then, you have to wait 45 days! I got so much run down with my health because I am just a human being. We need to
change the system. First, we cannot be disrespected and violated all the time like that. Human rights and humiliation. We need to start with the practitioners, the social workers, and all the people supposed to be trained! They need to understand the impact; if you don’t know the impact and you cannot provide a little love and affection, we will not change anything.

Getting organized

Participant: It’s all about poverty, money, everything in the poverty bucket has to be contained. If it gets out, to the right person, it will blow up – if it’s not covered, like the Ebola virus. Everybody is trying to cover it up, unless it blows up. But some one may not try to shield it. Bad outburst like blowing up cars, violent ways...be better to take a stand in a nonviolent way.

Participant: I don’t know if you are aware that the New York City Public Housing Authority is under attack. What that means is 400,000 to one million people are going to be displaced and are going to lose their homes in the next 5 years. I am not even giving you 5 years, because just today before I got here I was with Alexandria Cortez and Bernie Sanders last weekend at Capitol Hill in Washington. There’s a limit to saving NYCHA. They are going to sell off NYCHA to private developers who are going to charge market rate for your apartment. This means 9 times out of ten you are not going to be able to afford it so you are going to be displaced and put yourself on the sidewalk! For me that is very disappointing to say the least. I am a resident of NYCHA and they are using psychological warfare as we speak, which sends those individuals to mental health crisis by putting people in deplorable conditions which leads to Post Traumatic Stress Disorders and on and on and on. I am really saddened by this. NYCHA residents have to wake up; they have become complacent, not mobilized, lack of hope. What I am going to do about it is to keep on mobilizing, knocking on doors, telling people, young people and everything. Now it’s at a state of emergency, we don’t have the time, we have tomorrow. I am glad you guys are here because I am hoping to take this stuff into colleges and wherever we have to take it, to tell social workers that when you look at people in poverty, you can’t look at us the way the textbook says we are, because that’s not the way we are.

And for the pharmaceutical company, I am with you [Enrique] one hundred percent. Because I think it’s unfair that when you reach out to get help with your situation and you are not getting any help. Because the pharmaceutical companies are making money. Not only are they making money, they are putting a Band-Aid on a wound. We really need to think about this as a community, as politicians, as academics, whoever, we need to work on it now! You can’t be part of the problem; you need to be part of the solution!

Powerless versus hopeless

Virginie: I’ve heard that people don’t fight anymore because they lack hope. Many of the people I know who live in poverty still have the hope that tomorrow will be better, that the life of their children will be better. That’s the question, are they really hopeless? I am wondering if that process, it’s not really about being powerless. I am thinking about the article you wrote Karolina, about feeling less than second class citizens. Did you address in the research the hope, the power, and how people keep on fighting? You [pointing at activists] are fighting so hard, fighting not only for yourselves, but for everybody.
Karolina: I wrote a paper based on the New York City Study about Social Capital. There are different research as to what reduces poverty, among the different factors or things that help reduce poverty, people talk about social capital, which among other things, means organizing. By organizing themselves, that’s something that can strengthen the community. One can speak out and eventually improve their situation. But the kind of vicious circle or the problem can’t get out with what we learned in New York City was that the most impoverished communities which are lacking so many resources, there are so many issues on housing, where people have to struggle day to day, daily basis to survive, it’s very hard to organize. When you use all your resources just to get through the day, it’s hard to have resources beyond just to survive. It’s hard to reach out to your neighbors, organize a gathering, a protest, advocate, or whatever. So I am very happy to hear that as a NYCHA resident you are thinking about doing something together because this is exactly what can help.

Children and poverty

Participant: [To Alberto] You work with children. I live in poverty, I raise my children a certain way. Do think my children will grow up different because they are in poverty?

Alberto: We work with adults, children. Mostly for poverty they refer to material things, health, housing. Children feel bored, you go to school. I ask my students to remember when they were a kid. They mostly remember the small things, like, “I don’t have a present to bring to the party.”

Enrique: I can relate to that. In my place we don’t work with only adults, we work mostly with children. When I got there 17 years ago, They received children from 6, 7 up. Then ten years ago, they started accepting children 3, 4 years. What you say about material things, there is nothing wrong with children. But the system says they are all collected. I work with the city, HRA, I wrote about child abuse. They weren’t really providing solutions besides taking children away.

Participant: They still do that. That’s a whole business in itself that I went through.

Participant: Right, I feel your pain. But let me explain. My husband lost his job, got a new one. He had to work that day when my daughter had to go to the hospital. ACS has this new thing, respite. I grew up in the system. I see that they are trying to give people a chance. I called ACS and explained I have nobody to take care of my kids while I go to the hospital with my daughter. I know what you’ve been through, and, I was scared they were going to take my children away. I decided to trust them. They said, bring your kids over. It was a flashback, to when I was in this building before. I already had stress, but the lady who met me sat down, we had a long conversation. She said, listen I understand your situation. This is a different side of ACS, you know the resources, this is respite. They are changing stuff. We know ACS as bad, but they are changing stuff; they are putting in services to help parents. You can use this service at any time, but there are guidelines. Everything had a rule: if you do not pick up your children, if you do not call, etc. They [my kids] were there for seven days, and when they left, I felt, wow they are really changing things.

Participant: Look at the demographics of the children in foster care. 75 percent are people of color! My kids were in foster care, so I know! That gave that lady $1,500 each for my kids, $4,500 dollars! I was taking care of six kids with $800! It’s a broken system. I don’t want you to sit here and believe that that’s not going to be a backfire. I created a respite program myself so I could do it the right way, because I
know it’s not being done the way it should be. I don’t want to go on and on, but that subject triggers me. 75% people of color, it’s awful; it’s just how it is.

**Enrique:** It’s a business, you know. I have never forgotten about that, she said that business was growing and more and more children were taken away and put into foster care. That is the agencies were growing.

**Can things change?**

**Virginie:** What do you think made this system change?

**Participant:** Well, it’s people complaining! There were no preventive services when I was in care. So, for them to have preventive and respite, there is a small change. I am being knowledgeable, open minded, because when I was in care I had a concept, oh this is going to be forever! This system is going to be forever, but there are steps (now). Someone is taking steps.

**Alberto:** It is very difficult to change this. They are, reluctantly. Foster care is a thing— they don’t work with the family, they take the kids, so changing a big institution is a difficult thing.

**Enrique:** It’s the pressure from the people. Structural change? I know preventative services have been there for a while now. But the mentality...
Participant: I am going to keep it real for you! I had preventive services before I went into the hospital. If it was preventive, I wouldn’t have had to go to the hospital. If it was optimally doing what it said, preventing, I wouldn’t have had to go to the hospital. I would have had the opportunity to prevent it. My understanding is to prevent something from happening. If you see me with 5 children on $800 a month, OK do the math, 5 children with special needs! Of course I was going to get overwhelmed at some point. They took that overwhelm to the extreme and blamed my mental capacity. Who’s going to implement the preventive?

Enrique: They need to make policies to make preventive...

Karolina: When I was listening to you, I thought about a couple of things, in class with my students this week, about the child welfare system. All those things you were talking about from your personal experience, I was backing up with statistics. Yes, the system is completely racial-izing people, it’s oppressive for non-white people disproportionately. It’s heartbreaking that this is how it operates. However, over the years, for example how many kids are taken away from their parents, that number is somewhat dropping. Another thing I thought about is case workers who are working in the system are missing the fact that their client is indeed a human being just like them, who have their feelings and all of that. You should sometimes think about the other side the same.

There are many systemic issues in child welfare, but then on the other hand there is always a person and individual who has a face, feelings and maybe you just came up to a better person, someone who has resistance to what the system makes out of people. I was working with some organization which provided mental health for asylum seekers. There is so much money for mental health in the US and working with this organization, I had the same thoughts you had. That is what is this mental health system serving, who is it serving? Obviously people who struggle who cannot make ends meet, to pay rent, of course, making their day to day needs addressed, the struggle with poverty they will be stressed, they will be frustrated, they might have mental health breakdown. What are we addressing here? We are addressing both ends of this equation.

Participant: In America, there is still space to speak, I feel that kind of hope. When I was at City Hall this week for example, we heard that they changed the Commissioner for the Administration of Children Services. Those things Rosetta mentioned ARE changing. There’s a great reduction in the numbers of people per year. But it’s still like 400 people a week. The City Council members to their credit asked, how do you handle this? How many social workers do you have? How do you handle 400 calls from anybody, teachers, domestic violence, the police, there’s so many calls that go to this State registry about child abuse. But once you call, the record stays there until the kid is 28! But, the testimonies from the families were saying they would like that reduced. And, to City Hall’s credit, that was one of the bills on the table. That they were going to reduce the amount of time that the people’s record stays because it impacts their whole career. The other dialogue about the shelter system, City Council said we have to change this. We got to have childcare in the shelter, because people want to work, have to work. Who’s going to watch the kids? It’s these little baby steps. And in the agency with thousands of people, one City Council asked, how are they trained? That relates to what people (here) were sharing, we need training, more understanding.

Enrique: Training for who?
**Participant:** For the people working in the agencies. I also believe in the education for people living in poverty about how to organize, how to speak up for yourself. Because if you are working three jobs, who has time to go to a community board meeting?

**Participant:** For everything about poverty, it is about time. What if they do give us the amount of resources? If they give us everything we need, to get out of poverty, can we sustain it? Everybody, not just people in poverty, people in general. If we had everything that we need would we still have poverty, would we have mental health? I’m just saying if we had everything we needed, a great house, all the money in the world, or substantial housing, or, we didn’t have any problems would there still be poverty?

**Participant:** We don’t have to get everything we want, but we should have equal opportunity to do so. We should have equal opportunity, equal housing rights, equal job rights, we are not given anything. That is our right to have public housing, it is not given to us. There are working people in those housing developments. We are not lazy, we are not gophers, we are not only receiving government assistance. We are; that is our human right!

**Participant:** Equality and inequality is about justice, injustice. It’s about redistribution, redistribution of resources, of opportunity. The way we redistribute is exactly what creates the problem of shame, so we try to design, more welfare system, society gives, the less you are! We have to think about what does that mean to be shame free? The redistributive system, what does that look like? In some countries in Europe they are thinking about universal basic income. It will be a basic income that everyone will have regardless of who you are. And, some in the US are thinking about that. That’s connected to our question.

**Participant:** That’s exactly what I am saying. There’s a lot of people you know that don’t live here have one basic income in their community. That’s my question, what if that happened here, this is a big, big place, if everybody had the same income, would everybody be fine? This is our life; it’s right here.

**Participant:** That’s not going to happen!

**Enrique:** That’s the question.

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**Conclusion: what will you take away?**

**When you arrive at work on Monday, how will what we just shared nourish you, help you think?**

**Karolina:** I will definitely come back to you on how to bring you (ATD FW) to our school and make our students listen to you. Future social workers. It will be wonderful to have the other side. Going back to the beginning on equality, I do think that people are drawn to people and opportunities for their kids. I believe it’s possible if you have this really equal start, accounting for people’s different traumas then
they end up in similar start in the future. I would like to go back and ask about the balloon (mentioned in the presentation). Ask, the good and bad thing we have in our mind when we think about equality.

I actually thought about one situation that is both good and bad. I have a three-year-old who is going to preschool; it’s a wonderful place that is consciously built to bring people that come from different backgrounds. In equal proportion and people can be included whether kids from low income backgrounds or have any other issues... they will bring outside therapists or anything else that is needed. All the kids finish preschool at a very similar point. But his place makes me very upset because I am aware of the statistics of the public school system in New York City. I know that these kids who are starting in this very similar point will be later on place into a very unequal, completely segregated and un-diverse system. Then, this starting place will in many cases be over. Really it’s very hard for them to keep this equal start. So I wish this system could look different, the system with the taxes that makes the school system unequal; I wish the school system could break the bubble.

**Alberto:** You said something about double standard; something that is almost permanent. We struggle with that, so, this is quite important for me being here. Something I will say to my students because many of them have ideas, but don’t...people become sort of blind, blind about in this situation of the double standard, people can see poverty or situation or homeless, in their daily life. Young people, it doesn’t happen to young people. So a way to remove something, open your eyes, look around, is there someone doing something there? This double standard is very complicated, so for me, my take-out is to try to take something with me to my students: This is poverty, see situations, their dignity, their life.

**Enrique:** I was thinking about treating people as less than because people are poor. It’s the mentality of the Preventative worker. It’s the exploitation in poverty...that poverty leads to all this [inequality]. But the system is so pervasive; I’m telling you there is a new social work mentality from university, they really believe that these people are mentally ill. Wow! I want to heal what they talk about. This [FWPU and changing the system] is an educational process!
Appendix

Presentations

Inequality

Resources, big companies and very wealthy individuals benefit from less taxes and have access to more resources from the government than people with less resources.

What feels unequal is to see homeless people in the streets, and I cannot help them.

For the past seven months, I have had trouble because I only get $192 dollars in food stamps to feed 5 people in my family. My son and I both receive SSI and I still wake up early to go see my case worker to go straight to go over the budget.

Women are paid less than men.

When you live in poverty, you have to (not clear).

When you are homeless there are two assumptions: what is wrong with you or what did you do wrong? They search your background looking for problems, and they do not receive the time it takes to solve them.

I see our youth, black children being targeted by white cops. They lock them up for little stuff. Slavery, black-spoilotation.

People with formal education are perceived as more honest, intelligent and hard working than people in poverty. Evidence shows that this is not true. DSS, for so many times, the staff is people who do not do what they are supposed to do (not clear).

People living in poverty do not have the same rights as other people in society.

What’s wrong with healthcare in this country is that people can’t afford it. It’s not fair that sick children cannot have healthcare. Too many issues like car fare, medication, contact with doctors, help if you are a single parent with other children. You shouldn’t have to over explain myself either.

What I find fascinating at the outset, is that we don’t get to choose where we are born, in a poor family or rich one, full body abled or disabled.

Subjugation the poorer you are the more you are under somebody’s thumb. People who have less are perceived as being less. And, people make decisions for them.

The poorer your community is the poorer your school system is. The poorest get the worst. Schools funded with money have resources and quality of education. Schools in poorer areas have less resources, resulting in children having less opportunities.
Equality
To live a life where meetings and experiences have more value than things.

Address how our society builds inequality. Is school a way to build equality or a way to maintain inequality?

Fight to stop building luxury skyscrapers, and build more affordable housing, but really affordable.

Demanding to be treated fairly.

Laws, write a new law to protect the poor and the homeless and assure the laws are enforced. To apply the Constitution from the USA for all. Fight for human rights for all.

Dialogue is important, to change our habits, laws and behaviors. Facing up to what people say is unequal and find ways and courage to get through change. Feeling supported to find your way to equality.

I feel to have equality is to find ways for people to support one another in troubled times. For example, the happy balloon week. Write what makes you sad on the balloon. Someone sees it, pop it and you face it with good spirit. Come to ATD or similar community where everyone is treated equal; to hear everyone’s story is the best way to fight stereotyping.

Social workers, health providers, officers, teachers training.

Better understanding with our youth and police officers.

Building respect for different people and knowing what respect means for both oneself and other cultures and communities.

Finding what is the case worker going to do for my situation for Food Stamps so I don't have to struggle anymore.

Access to work, jobs should not have to have applications, just skills (and have) programs for children. More work more opportunity, reflect your energy and willingness to use your background and network. Equal rights with your manager. Managers shouldn’t put you down or think they are better than you. What I think will make employment equal is don’t have arrests on the application.

Poverty, taxation and redistribution. Public schools have the same budget, but not the same fundraising. Advocates for poverty want progressive taxation, the more money you have, the more taxes taken from your income. Better redistribution policy, public spending better shared with those who need it most. Better advocacy for those who live in low income neighborhoods.

Elected political representatives who are closer to the community and the people.

More diversity in housing can change the system, less racist.