Nonprofits and Poverty: Working with the Poor to Change Lives in South Bend

Over the years, various nonprofit organizations have been founded in South Bend to assist low-income individuals and families with various needs, in more ways than generally known by the public. Their particular mission, structure, programs and policies vary. This project will examine how various nonprofits work to encourage self-sufficiency among their low-income clients, and how the nonprofits coordinate their activities with each other. This research will focus on the contrasts between their approaches, including how effective they are at meeting the nonprofits various goals. For instance, based on preliminary research, the nonprofits seems to have a range of policies and programs that range from “more directive” (more actively engaging clients to improve their situations) to “less directive” (focusing more on stability and community, and less on direct action to escape poverty). Some of these nonprofits have innovative programs that deserve to be noticed by the broader public. Nonprofits will also benefit by learning what other nonprofits are doing, and this research may enable nonprofits to better coordinate their assistance.

Methods:
Researchers will conduct participant observation by visiting these nonprofits, attending meetings and activities of these organizations, and interviewing staff, clients, volunteers, and community members. Researchers will also contact past clients of these organizations in order to discover the effectiveness of these programs. Surveys of clients will also be utilized, including standard feedback surveys evaluating programs and services, but also self-efficacy scales. Most interviews will be transcribed and analyzed. From 12-15 nonprofits are expected to be included in this research, all of whom have already been contacted.

Big questions and contributions to scholarship:
This research has implications not only for the local community, but for larger questions revolving around poverty. The issue of alleviating poverty remains as important as ever, and the unique role of nonprofits in this endeavor has been largely ignored by poverty scholars, in favor of examining government programs. This issue also engages important issues of culture, motivation and agency, particularly in how nonprofits work with the poor. What practices work best? How does one encourage change without alienating clients? What are the dynamics of the relationship between the nonprofits and those they serve? We believe this research can be a significant contribution to the national discussion of these issues, as the perspective of the nonprofits provides unique insight into these questions. Nonprofits have more freedom that government agencies to work with those in poverty, understand their lives and facilitate change. Some of these nonprofits are also faith-based, and the role of religion in change is also an important issue that will be examined here. We also believe South Bend can serve as a model for other communities, and further research could expand this survey to see how nonprofits work in other communities.

Timeframe: Ongoing; could be taken as a directed research for credit; also could apply for undergraduate research grant.

Contact:
Michael Jindra, Ph.D., Anthropology
mjindra@nd.edu