

## **LIFESTYLES OF THE POOR AND UNKNOWN**

### **DISCUSSION NOTES**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

*An IDIOT is a person without understanding or ordinary mental capacity, one who does not advance beyond the mental age of three years; distinguished from an imbecile, who is capable of some mental and physical education.*

*An IMBECILE is one who is congenitally weak-minded yet not incapable of education; a mental defective not advancing beyond the mental age of seven years.*

*A MORON is a feeble-minded person of higher grade than an imbecile, one who does not advance beyond the mental age of 12 years.*

*-- Stedman's Medical Dictionary.*

*An insane person, an idiot, or a feeble-minded person under commitment to an institution for the feeble-minded, to the custody or supervision of the department of mental health, or to an institution for mental defectives, shall be incapable of contracting marriage...*

*-- Chapter 207, Section 5, as amended, Commonwealth of Massachusetts*

*"They're sweet. They're kind. But they don't mentally advance at all."*

*-- Bill Maher on the late-night talk show Politically Incorrect (Maher later apologized for this comment, which compared retarded children to dogs).*

People with mild mental handicaps may suffer more than those who are more impaired – they stand on the cusp of “normal,” aware that they don’t quite “make the cut.” They want to be independent, yet they are vulnerable and under constant stress from lack of acceptance in the workforce, financial difficulties, rejection by others, stigmatization, and even harassment. They may know that some mothers choose to abort babies found to have Down’s syndrome and other abnormalities, and may even be aware of publicized “wrongful birth” lawsuits filed against doctors by parents of disabled children.

This population – representing the majority of the mentally handicapped – bears a variety of labels: mildly cognitively impaired, mildly (or borderline) mentally retarded, developmentally delayed (or disabled), brain injured, learning disabled. Many, but not all, people with mild mental handicaps have been in special education. Some appear “normal” and have “street smarts” that make their disabilities less apparent – indeed they often try to hide their disabilities.<sup>1</sup>

Often unemployed, mildly mentally handicapped people frequently live in poverty. For those eligible to receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI), these benefits in 2000 equaled only 18.5% of the median household income for one person.<sup>2</sup>

Many people with mild mental handicaps do not qualify for government-supported programs such as supported employment or sheltered workshops. Even when they do, waiting lists are long, and skills and abilities may erode in the meantime. Those who do receive services are often placed in sheltered workshops or activity centers, receiving below the minimum wage because the placements are presumed to constitute “rehabilitation.” Those who do get “real” jobs are often in low-paid entry-level positions with few opportunities for advancement.

#### **References:**

1. President's Committee on Mental Retardation. The Forgotten Generation: 1999 Report to the President. 120 pp.
2. Priced Out in 2000: The Crisis Continues (June 2001). Published by the Technical Assistance Collaborative (Boston, MA) and Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities Housing Task Force (Washington, DC). 40 pp.

## **THIS VIDEO AND WHY IT WAS MADE**

Mentally disabled people rarely speak for themselves in media portrayals, unless they're being shown as "cute," and rarely are their lives portrayed from the inside. This video is intended to give them a voice, to counter widely held stereotypes, and to portray them as complex people with very different personalities and attitudes, who are capable of deep thoughts.

*Lifestyles of the Poor and Unknown*, a video documentary, is an intimate, inside look at the world of people with mild mental handicaps, as personified by Marni and Kris Jamieson, a married couple who live and work in New York City, negotiating obstacles and tolerating the negative attitudes about them. Narration by a third party was consciously avoided to empower Marni and Kris to tell their own story.

As Marni advised young people with mental handicaps at one screening, "Be prepared to be judged."

## **USES OF THE VIDEO**

- Professional training: This video is an excellent tool for staff training for counselors, clinicians, and service providers of all kinds, as well as for special education teachers.
- Educational settings: In middle school and high school, the video can introduce students to the subject of disability awareness and tolerance. In college and graduate settings, it can be used in psychology, psychiatry, social work, counseling, and occupational/vocational therapy courses to explore the concepts of "intelligence," "normality," the psychology of disability, and the real-life contexts of clinical diagnoses.
- In the community and civic setting, the video is an excellent and entertaining way to dispel myths and raise public awareness and understanding about people with mental handicaps.
- Human resources professionals can use the video for staff diversity training.
- Parent groups, advocates, and self-advocates can show the video to legislators, community groups, and prospective employers as an educational tool.

## **NOTES TO THE DISCUSSION LEADER (if there is one):**

You may want to preview this tape before using it with a group. It's recommended that you not reveal your own reactions until group members have had a chance to discuss theirs. When the tape ends, there will usually be a silence while people collect their thoughts. This is particularly true if people have reacted emotionally to the story. Allow for the silence; there should be no rush to get people talking. Every audience is different. Ask open-ended questions and let the audience take the discussion where their interests lead them.

Some suggested topics and questions follow. Also included are quotes from the video, which may help elicit discussion.

## **POSSIBLE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

### **Before viewing the tape:**

What do you think about when characterizing people with developmental disabilities?  
What kind of supports do they need?  
To what extent can they be independent?

### **After viewing the tape:**

#### **Discussion openers:**

What were your impressions after viewing the video? What impact did it have on you?  
Was there anything you found surprising? Why?

#### **Views of the developmentally disabled:**

In what ways are Marni and Kris clearly disabled?  
In what ways are they “the same as you and me”?  
What did you observe about their personalities? What are their strengths and weaknesses?  
Which aspects of Marni and Kris fall into the popular stereotypes? Which don't?  
How does their story square with popular thinking about the mentally handicapped?  
What different coping strategies do they have?  
What do you see as their potential?  
How do Marni and Kris view their own disabilities? Which seems to be the healthier view?

#### **Discrimination and stigma**

When are you aware of the stigma and discrimination suffered by Marni and Kris?  
*(Examples: the vacation agent who won't take a check from them; the sister-in-law who assumes Marni is hurting her baby)*

What is “intelligence”?

#### **Independent Living**

What supports do Marni and Kris seem to have? What do they need?  
*(Note: They have more support than they reveal in the video. They live in a supported apartment with a counselor who checks in on them several times a week and helps them with grocery shopping. The family also provides support, as hinted at during the trip to the mall. Marni has a social worker, but her roles seems to be mainly as a listener.)*

How well do Marni and Kris appear to handle business and financial matters?

## **Love, marriage, family**

What did you observe about the couple's marriage and relationship? How is it similar/different to other couples' relationships?

Why did Marni and Kris decide not to have children? Do you agree with their decision? Do they seem to be of one mind in this decision?

What family interactions did you observe?

## **Employment and education**

When Marni tells her social worker that she wants to "spread her wings," how serious is she? Do you agree with her social worker that she's uncomfortable facing the prospect of getting a new job?

*(Note: Two years after the taping was completed, the social worker referred Marni to a vocational counselor who helped her enroll in a new job program. Marni attended group sessions of the program for about six months, but no good job opportunities arose. She stopped attending, in part because of a change in her placement at the sheltered workshop: she now is assigned to the clothing area, where she has steadier work and receives a higher wage (\$2/hour at this writing).*

What employment options can you envision for Marni and Kris?

To what do you attribute Kris's apparent success in his job?

*(Note: the manager shown in the video has left, and Kris's situation remains stagnant)*

What role does the school program play in Marni's life?

## **SOME QUOTES FROM THE VIDEO**

### **On employment:**

"We have our good days, when there's a lot of work to do, and we have our slow days, when there's not a lot to do. Meaning that some of us clients can get pretty bored."

"They pay you a dollar for every hour that you're working. So if you work for five hours, you can make five dollars in one day."

"I hate being off. I'd rather be working, sleeping is no fun. I'm very hyper, I'm always incredibly bored, I don't get paid to be home."

"Even though I knew I was not supposed to mop, I did anyway, but my intention was just to wipe up the spill, so that no one would fall. And I hit one of the female customers with a mop without meaning to. And I tried to explain that to my boss, after the customer had complained about me. And she fired me for that, because she said 'We've been over this.'"

"It's time for me to spread my wings, I think."

"She says that she wants a job, but I'm not sure that she's totally comfortable talking about it and facing it. I think that she has potential to do something richer than what she's doing now."

**On being disabled:**

“What used to bother me was that teachers always used to say, ‘Oh Marni’s so special’ and everything. And it would be hard to know if they meant you were special because you were handicapped, or if it was like an inside thing. Like you were special just because you were you.”

“Most people don’t even know I GOT a disability. Which suits me just fine, I just blend in with everybody else. Unless I hear myself on tape, I don’t really think about it. I’m treated just like everybody else. No problem whatsoever.”

“I used to feel like it was all my fault. And that my life was just one big mistake. Until I got older somewhere along the way. I suddenly realized, hey, my life wasn’t really a mistake. Because everybody’s here for one reason or another.”

**On relationships:**

“Throughout that commencement weekend, you kept calling me ‘genious,’ but after a while there was more of an edge to it. And it was almost sarcastic, so you were saying, ‘Oh, well let GENIUS do it.’”

“What do I love about Marni? Her smile, her blue eyes, her nice personality. She’s such a caring individual. If you tell her that you’re sick, she will pray to God around 10:00. She makes the best meatloaf in town, she’s easy to talk to, and she’s very funny.”

“You’re my world, Kris. Everything I do revolves around you, pretty much...I love you because you’re caring, I love you because you’re so strong, I love you because you’re funny, and you’re creative, and you’re original. You’re practical most of the time. And I love you because you love your family.”

“What makes a good marriage? Try to get along, don’t get on each other’s nerves. We fight too much, but we don’t mean to. And we love making up.”

“I would definitely throw in a sense of humor.”

**On financial matters:**

“Sometimes I have to be practical and say, ‘Kris, no, I don’t think we really need this,’ or ‘no, I don’t think you need that.’ As much as I don’t like to say the word ‘no,’ sometimes you have to.”

“If anyone would just tell me what the winning lottery number is, that would help.”