Talent Cards: Tools for Stepping out of Poverty

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Objectives:
- Study the way disadvantaged people interact with social services and organizations
- Understand the needs of people in poverty and hypothesize what is required to help people climb out of poverty.

Regions of Study:
- Social Services agency in Atlanta, Georgia
- Technical job training center in eastern San Francisco Bay Area, California
- Homeless shelter in southern San Francisco Bay Area, California

Method:
- 2-hour, open-ended interviews at agencies (Bay Area) and participants’ houses (Atlanta)
- 10 participants in Atlanta, 4 from job placement agency, 4 from homeless shelter
- Interview participants included homeless, jobless, and others in poverty; single, married, parents; ages 20 to 60+
- One researcher asked questions, and one to two took notes and operated a video camera
- Questions focused on personal history, interaction with government services, and experiences with social services.
- Themes were extrapolated from interview notes and video using the grounded theory approach.

Themes Discussed
- Giving Back
  - “Even this interview is making me feel good – giving back. Maybe I can help someone else.”
  - “I am an empath.”
- Sense of Progress: tangible steps and results
  - “After hitting rock bottom, the first step I took had to be a big one… so I knew I wouldn’t go back.”
- Interpersonal Interaction
  - Mentor: communicate success stories
  - Long-term community of peers: demonstrate self-worth to others
- Case studies and the spiral-down theme

Many participants described or observed a cyclical pattern in their lives which we termed the “spiral-down model.”

Downward Spiral
- Spend money from savings
- Lose job, then housing
- Feel hopeless
- Do not think about future
- Feel more and more hopeless
- Engage in self-destruction
- Feel more and more hopeless

Low Point
- Feel they have no hope and no turning point may take five days or years
- “I have no future in my mind and dieing,” “I feel like there’s no escape,” “I feel like I’m going nowhere.”
- “I don’t want to live anymore.”
- “I don’t have any hope for the future.”
- “I feel like I’m going nowhere and I’m drowning.”
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Relapse
- Pre-spiral Bad Decision
  - Prove to another bad decision
  - “Younger brother fell, can’t carry my liquor to the hospital, couldn’t pay to go on a date, made a bad decision.”
  - “I’m in a crisis, I feel I have to do something stupid, make my friends and family hurt.”
  - “I feel so bad that I went out and did stupid things.”

Good Decision
- Have the means and support to continue to work towards goals in unfamiliar territory
- “I’m not sure how to do this, there’s no one I know who can help, I don’t know what to do.”
- “I’m just starting to try to figure this out.”
- “I’m starting to try to figure this out.”
- “I’m starting to try to figure this out.”

Scenarios of use:
- Scenario 1: Long-term unemployed
  - “I’ve had my fair share of it.”
  - “I’ve had my fair share of it.”
  - “I’ve had my fair share of it.”

Scenarios 3: Wendy has 200/month on food stamps, but has trouble making them last more than a week.
- How the Talent Cards would help
  - “I’m just trying to get through the day...”
  - “I’m just trying to get through the day...”
  - “I’m just trying to get through the day...”

Scenarios 4: James has a good job doing carpentry, and has been “clean” for a month because of a rehabilitation program mandated by police and wants to stay that way.
- Business card implementation
  - Business cards are a powerful tool of professionalism
  - “I’ve had my fair share of it...”
  - “I’ve had my fair share of it...”

Future Work:
- Conduct further ethnographic work on poverty in the US and abroad
- Next site: Bangladesh
- Iterate on prototype (talent agency, business cards) in the US
- Extend prototype to developing countries, starting in Bangladesh
- Evaluate portability of design from low-income communities in US to low-income communities abroad

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