

Exercise: Framing Questions

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This makes an especially good exercise for the opening day of a community psychology course, or for illustrating multiple levels of analysis.

Make up sheets with one of the following questions on each sheet (each sheet can be a different color paper).

- Why do some people become homeless?
- Why do so many people become homeless?
- Why do some students drop out of school?
- Why do some schools have such high drop out rates?

Pass out one question to each student, giving different questions to different students. Ask them to give a quick written response. You can assign each question to a group of students instead of individuals. You can indicate that different students are getting different questions, but don't mention the content.

Next, have the students who received a particular question (e.g., the "red question about the causes of homelessness") read their answers aloud; then ask those who received the paired question (the "blue question about the causes of homelessness") to read theirs. Record answers on the blackboard by color. Ask all students to comment on differences between responses, before revealing the difference in the questions.

The questions really pull for individual vs. social-systems explanations, and students pick this up readily. They are surprised that such small differences in wording pull for such different answers. If there's time, ask them about the policy solutions implied by each form of the question. Then ask them which is the right question for particular persons to be asking: e.g., a parent, teacher, director of a food cupboard or homeless shelter, city council or school board member, or state or national legislator. You can point out that psychologists usually ask the individual form of the question, without realizing that this biases our responses toward individual answers.