

Gain a deeper understanding of the ideas presented in Mauricio L. Miller's "The Alternative" by using these discussion guide questions and engaging your peers in the suggested exercises offered below.

Part 1: Our Fundamentally Flawed System

The Deficit View: Themes as referenced in *Chapters 1 – 2*

How does the prevailing deficit view of low-income families hide the initiative, talent, and potential of those individuals and communities?	Pages 1-4
What strategies could you, your organization, or your community (i.e. hometown, work environment, family) deploy to highlight and attract investment in the strengths and talents already existing in the members of your community?	Page 37
The image that millions (~15%) of families are "stuck" in poverty, when in reality only 3% stay in poverty for more than 3 years, creates an image of helplessness. How does that image perpetuate racial and gender stereotypes across the political spectrum?	Pages 32-35
Personal reflections: Have you been personally affected by implicit bias—unconscious attitudes or stereotypes—that affect your actions and decisions? If not, why have you not experienced this bias?	Page 92

Race to the Bottom: Themes as referenced in *Chapters 3 – 5*

Under what circumstances is charity needed as a social safety net?	Pages 26, 35
Why does the book make a case that if assistance is only provided based on need, it creates a 'race to the bottom'?	Pages 65, 70-71
Personal reflections: Considering your own path, what role have your personal connections and networks played in creating opportunities for you?	Pages 50-51

Us and Them: Themes as referenced in *Chapters 6 – 7*

How does the language used to describe those who cycle in and out of poverty affect the prevailing perceptions of those individuals and limit available opportunities?	Page 81
How do our elected leaders, commentators, and experts—across the political spectrum—refer to low-income families and individuals facing poverty? How does their language and perspective add to the viewpoint that the families are to blame for their circumstance?	Pages 77-79
Why does society feel people are poor because of their own bad choices?	Pages 78-83
Personal reflections: How do our actions or language reinforce or counter the "us and them" complex? How does that keep us from trusting families to lead their own change?	Page 75

From Conversation to Action

This group exercise will compare the benefits of traditional social work models and the alternative approach that Mauricio introduces in Part 1.

Instructions: Split participants equally among two groups. One group will argue the benefits and advantages of traditional approaches to social work. The other group will argue for the benefits and advantages of the alternative strengths based approach that Mauricio's describes. Have each group present their model by answering the following prompts.

What are the basic principles of this approach? Who is the expert and why? What are the main values of this approach? How is this approach implemented within the field? What kind of organizations embody this approach? What benefits does each approach bring forward?

After each group presents, have an entire group discussion comparing the two models. Are there instances where one model works better than the other? What model you do personally favor?

Part 2: Putting Families in the Driver's Seat, The Alternative Approach

Positive Deviants—Following Peer Paths: Themes as referenced in *Chapters 8 - 9*

Americans value individualism. How does celebrating the leadership of individuals diminish the role of family, friends, and community in catalyzing and supporting positive change?	Page 119
Having change grow to scale is often thought to primarily happen through policy or program expansion. What case does the book make for going to scale organically to reach a tipping point? What have you seen go to scale as described in the book?	Pages 122-126, 139
Personal reflections: Who was a positive deviant in your community who served as a positive role model and inspiration for you or your extended family? How did you learn about their successful strategies?	Page 115

Control and Choice: Themes as referenced in *Chapter 10*

How can communities forge and apply collective identity, collective voice, and collective action?	Page 128
What informal structures (bartering, sharing, cash economy) exist organically or should exist in your community? What are the benefits and drawbacks to these systems?	Page 165
Personal reflections: Reflecting on your own family history, are there examples of your family members applying their own initiative and talent to persevere through adversity? How did your parents, extended family, and community impact your personal sense of pride, self-respect, and potential? Is the general stereotype of your "community" (racial, religious, class, etc.) positive or negative? When have changes in cultural norms preceded significant challenges or opportunities for your community?	Page 145

Data, Information, and Tools: Themes as referenced in *Chapters 11 - 12*

Imagine if funders, lenders, investors, service providers, and businesses had access to an <i>Initiative Score</i> that assessed the potential for positive contributions to one's community—instead of or in addition to a traditional credit score—when deciding whether to invest in the potential of an individual or family. How could that impact access to asset-building benefits and opportunities?	Page 158
How can technology and social media catalyze and foster self-organizing social networks? How has technology been used recently to organize protests or discussions?	Pages 153-155
Personal reflections: Do you have access to data, stories, and anecdotes reported <i>directly</i> by members of your community about how they are improving their lives and helping others? Are these indicators tracked over time to identify trends and examples of positive deviance?	Pages 178-183

Low-income Families as Contributors, Not Takers: Themes as referenced in *Chapters 12 - 13*

What informal structures (bartering, sharing, cash economy) exist organically or should exist in your community? What are the benefits and drawbacks to these informal systems?	Pages 166-168
Personal reflections: How can your community start or continue to invest in low-income families as contributors, not takers?	Pages 180-200

From Conversation to Action

Experience the alternative model by spending one week intentionally meeting and talking with people about how they've overcome their challenges, **what they have accomplished and what they aspire to**. Do the listening and take good notes.

Questions to pose: What actions helped you move beyond poverty? How have you been resourceful? What does community mean to you and what role does community play in your life? What do you aspire to and what resources or connections will you need?

After the interview, consider how the strategies the individual used align with the strategies outlined in Mauricio's book. What themes emerge? What did you learn?