

Preface

The tendency to attribute blame to the unfortunate is very common in the case of people living in poverty (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Rice, 2015). Historically, economic status was perceived by many to be reflective of the individual's ability and industry, and many still believe this to be true. Others believe poverty to be caused by economic unfairness and discrimination. In editing this book, we were aware of the possibility that readers might take much of the content—substance use, unemployment, and violence—to be indicative that the poor participants in our study were in some way responsible for their plight. In an effort to contextualize these topics in the chapters, we asked authors to start each chapter with a sociohistorical description of how current conditions came to be and to end with a section on policy recommendations.

One personal factor that has been studied as a contributor to people's tendencies to attribute blame to the unfortunate generally and the poor specifically is the “just world” hypothesis (Lerner, 1970). This refers to the belief that the world is just and people get what they deserve. It is a specific example of the “fundamental attribution error” marked by a tendency to attribute one's own fate to external factors and those of others to internal traits (Ross, 1977). This belief system is believed to be motivated by fear that the person themselves may fall prey to the same misfortune if causes are seen as being random or systemically caused (as US poverty, by and large, is). The notion that people are responsible for their own fates is a major impediment to economic redistribution and the creation of services and “safety nets” for the disadvantaged (Lane, 2001).

A substantial body of research has documented people's tendencies to apply the just world hypothesis to victims of misfortune. These include victims of sexual assault (Patel, 2009), economic inequality following Hurricane Katrina (Belle, 2006), as well as poverty (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Shapiro, 2003). Further, individuals who believe in a just world have been shown to have more negative attitudes toward poverty and the poor (Shapiro, 2003). Interventions have been developed that attempt to reduce these attitudes (Ioannou, Kouta, & Andreou, 2015).

These attitudes however are not, in and of themselves, a slight on the character of those who believe them; in fact, they are emblematic of the challenges of living in a diverse nation, a nation where, in order to achieve equity for all citizens, we can have no room for assumptions about the lived experiences and the status of the well-being of others. It is about competence, not character. Many Americans will never be given the opportunity to understand the crippling angst and stress that poverty manifests in the daily lives of the impoverished. Moreover, socioeconomic status is oftentimes further complicated at the intersections of other marginal identities, gender, and race most specifically. Complicated by our nation's challenges with knowledgeably engaging in and navigating racial and gendered dynamics is a racial and gendered illiteracy (Stevenson, 2013). It is at these identity intersections that we can see the synergy of multiple levels of systemic oppression and insufficient public policy, policy which orients itself toward a capitalist brand of efficiency rather than a politic of humanity.

In twenty-first century America, from gentrification to water contamination and discrimination to congressional obstruction, the poor are often the victims of displacement, insecurity, and state-sponsored violence at all levels. These factors create a perfect storm of isolation and stress which is neatly tucked away from the American consciousness. This text should serve as a way to engage the narratives of those who are often left voiceless, hearing both their traumas and their triumphs. Acknowledging the resilience of their humanity and spirit despite their conditions will be instrumental in order to develop a desire to understand further the lives lived by those who are in poverty.

In the face of tragic events, "conspiracy theories" are often voiced. However, sometimes conspiracy theories have truth to them. For example, many people believe that crack cocaine—a drug that decimated inner cities in the late 1980s and early 1990s—was intentionally distributed within inner cities (where it still exists today). Cheap and highly addicting, this form of cocaine was associated with extreme behavior (for extensive descriptions of the lifestyles of women who were addicted to crack, see Sharpe, 2005; Sterk, 1999). In fact, an investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice revealed that the anti-Sandinista Contras had been smuggling crack cocaine from Central America into the Los Angeles area and returned the cash profits to pay for automatic weapons. While the role of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) in this situation remains controversial, the explosion of crack cocaine in the urban USA is believed to have been sparked by this process (U.S. Department of Justice, 1997).

It is our hope that this book will have the effect of preventing blaming of the victims described here by increasing awareness of the life conditions experienced by many poor women and that they will come to life for readers with their verbatim quotes. We hope that the book will be read by people who have little experience with poverty and may not realize the degree to which Americans suffer hunger, violence, addiction, and other factors that are topics of these chapters. We hope that educating the public in this way about the suffering caused by poverty will increase empathy and with it the desire to reform harmful policies and practices.

Beyond the narratives shared in this volume, developing this empathy will require that readers look both reflexively and introspectively at the conditions of poverty in relation to their own lives. For many, especially those who have little personal experience with poverty, it is very easy and quite compelling to overestimate the validity the assumptions made about opportunity, access, and ability in America. Despite this ease, we cannot neglect the emotional and psychological ramifications of poverty, wounds that can never truly be healed. We encourage our readers to probe more deeply, beyond “bootstrap” and “American Dream” narratives. We ask you to stand face to face with the historical and contemporary realities of our nation surrounding the dehumanization of our fellow citizens in our quest for wealth and power. We encourage our readers to vicariously engage with the trauma of intergenerational social exclusion, systemic inequity, and status quo deficitization that has shaped life trajectories of the poor and the common perspectives many have of their conditions.

Moreover, developing this empathy will require that readers confront the concrete realities of the vast racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities in the domains of health, education, justice, and employment that affect the lived experiences of those who live in poverty. By taking a systemic and life course view of poverty, we can see that poverty is not a moment in time but is being shaped and made at all times, shaped and made by failing schools with underqualified teachers, schools which prioritize neoliberal labor-market educational aims over the concerted preparation of students to thrive in an ever-changing world. The same schools contribute most egregiously to the school to prison pipeline and school-related trauma (Nasir, 2011). Poverty results from being embedded in communities where over-policing and over-incarceration tear apart households and limits family earning potential (Alexander, 2012). It affects both the psychological and corporal experience of those in its grasp at every moment of every day.

We encourage our readers to endeavor to question their own assumptions about the nature of American life, survival, and opportunity. Are the conditions as they seem? If not, how can we even begin to blame the victim? Napier, Mandisodza, Andersen, and Jost (2006), in their analysis of reactions to the victims of Hurricane Katrina, invite us to consider where and why we attribute blame for issues which are at their root systemic. The authors note that in the wake of one of the most devastating environmental disasters of the twenty-first century, people blamed the victims of the hurricane, despite the many failures of the local and national government to respond adequately to the warnings. Ask yourself what role these “victim-blaming attributions” (p. 64) play for us psychologically and emotionally? Do we engage them as a way to cope in an inequitable world? Do we lean on them to avoid grappling with the reality of our nation’s multisystemic challenges? How do we consider the role of systems and institutions in constructing and maintaining systems of poverty? These are the questions we must wrestle with. In this spirit, we also challenge our readers to look for sites of transformation in the systems which facilitate the attitudes, narratives, and policies that facilitate the conditions of poverty. It is at these sites that we will find possibility for transformation, the impetus for rehumanization, and paths out of poverty.

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