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Poverty in America: New Directions and Debates

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Abstract

Reviewing recent research on poverty in the United States, we derive a conceptual framework with three main characteristics. First, poverty is multidimensional, compounding material hardship with human frailty, generational trauma, family and neighborhood violence, and broken institutions. Second, poverty is relational, produced through connections between the truly advantaged and the truly disadvantaged. Third, a component of this conceptual framework is transparently normative, applying empirical research to analyze poverty as a matter of justice, not just economics. Throughout, we discuss conceptual, methodological, and policy-relevant implications of this perspective on the study of extreme disadvantage in America.

INTRODUCTION

The United States is unique among advanced Western democracies for the depth and expanse of its poverty. Even as the nation has made impressive strides in other realms—for example, reductions in gender and racial inequality along with a national expansion of medical insurance—its poverty rate has remained stubbornly high for half a century (US Census Bur. 2017). America’s poor have recently contended with mounting obstacles to economic mobility and human vitality, including rising income volatility and stagnant wages (Western et al. 2016a), welfare reform and the return of extreme poverty (Edin & Shaefer 2015), soaring housing costs and evictions (Desmond 2016), and mass incarceration and intensive policing (Bayley & Shearing 1996). These developments have motivated a new generation of poverty research. This body of work is (a) multidimensional, embracing the complexity of deprivation; (b) relational, attuned to connections between the truly advantaged and the truly disadvantaged; and (c) grounded in values of justice and human dignity that shape empirical research and policy implications. The new poverty research is humanizing and public-facing, documenting the lives of people who have been made largely invisible in popular imagination, politics, and much of scholarship.

EARLY POVERTY RESEARCH

Until the late eighteenth century, poverty was considered not only self-inflicted but also desirable for economic growth. “Pauperism and progress were inseparable,” wrote Polanyi (1944, p. 108). For the dominant economic theory of mercantilism, hunger incentivized work and kept wages low. Poor aid was a matter of benevolence, not justice (Fleischacker 2004). By the end of the eighteenth century, however, Rousseau (1754) had distinguished natural inequality (e.g., differences in strength, intelligence) from artificial inequality resulting from unfair institutions, while Adam Smith [1976 (1776)] had upbraided the Mercantilists’ singular focus on trade, arguing that poverty reduction was a result of development. The Elizabethan Poor Laws in England prohibited begging and established poor relief in local parishes. A deserving poor entitled to relief were separated from the undeserving, who were forced by hardship into workhouses (Polanyi 1944). These early steps were halting and had their critics [e.g., Malthus 1890 (1798), Ricardo 1817], but they marked a transformation in Western thought. Poverty became viewed as a social ill, not a natural occurrence, and its amelioration as one of humanity’s great collective projects (Ravallion 2016). The emergence of state-funded poor relief by property taxation, not charity, consecrated poor aid as a matter of justice.

Poverty Research at the Turn of the Century

Research on economic and racial inequality flourished at the end of the nineteenth century in the face of rapid industrialization and, in the United States, mass migration. Booth, Addams, and Du Bois all challenged the idea that destitution resulted from laziness or immorality. Their analytical object was not poor people but the political economy that gave rise to widespread poverty (O’Connor 2001). In London, Booth (1903) and Rowntree (1902) popularized the idea of a poverty line. Drawing the line at 21 shillings a week, Booth estimated that one million Londoners—a third of the city’s population—lived in poverty, a jolting revelation to many readers.

Around this time, Jane Addams began mapping class and ethnic divisions and criticizing the turn-of-the-century labor market, which she saw as the main source of poverty and social suffering. Addams sought understanding through proximity, living shoulder to shoulder with those experiencing material hardship at Hull House, a settlement community she helped found in Chicago.

Addams established the Working People's Social Science Club, a mix of scholars, working people, and neighborhood residents. The club, Addams (1910, p. 110) later recalled, "convinced the residents that no one so poignantly realizes the failures in the social structure as the man at the bottom." Addams refused to artificially separate the trials of the poor from the fortunes of the rich. "Hull-House was soberly opened," she wrote, "on the theory that the dependence of classes on each other is reciprocal" (Addams 1910, p. 54).

In Philadelphia, Du Bois studied the effects of racism on the exploitation and deprivation of African Americans. His first book, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899), reported on a comprehensive survey of African-American households in Philadelphia, showing at once the diversity and uniqueness of the black urban experience. Du Bois connected the poverty among African-American households to the legacy of slavery and continued discrimination. "Emancipation and pauperism must ever go hand in hand," he wrote (Du Bois 1899, p. 269). He distinguished between "the respectable working-class," "the poor," and "the submerged tenth" and stressed the role that white racism played in thwarting black opportunity (p. 343).

The multidimensionality of poverty was an important theme for social analysts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sidney and Beatrice Webb (Webb & Webb 1909) described poverty as including "recurrent periods of underemployment and unemployment, and consequent hunger and starvation; food adulterated, air poisoned, water contaminated" as well as "a spiritual demoralization, a destruction of human personality itself" (Webb & Webb 1923, pp. 9–10). Addams (1910) used similar language, writing about poor houses and the spiritual needs of the destitute, the shortcomings of charity and kindness among the poor, absent fathers, and cruel working conditions that led to child neglect. For the early scholars, poverty was tied to degradation, dirt and squalor, early death, and a greedy stripping of humanity.

Joining empirical observation to an affirmation of values lent early poverty scholars' work a moral urgency. The Webbs insisted on a "national minimum of civilized life...open to all alike" (Webb 1948, p. 481). Addams (1899, p. 448) argued that "the public has a duty toward the weak and defenseless members of the community." Endorsing objectivity in the conduct of "cold-blooded scientific research," Du Bois (1899, p. 3) also believed that some findings demanded moral reflection. Just one generation after emancipation, he called discrimination "morally wrong, politically dangerous, industrially wasteful, and sociologically silly" (Du Bois 1899, p. 394).

Poverty Line Debates

By the 1960s, survey data were revolutionizing research and swelling interest in statistical studies of poverty measurement. Efforts to develop a federal poverty line followed Booth and Rowntree in aiming to measure deprivation with a subsistence-level food budget. Specifying an income at three times the cost of a minimally nutritious diet, Social Security Administration researcher Mollie Orshansky (1963, 1965) defined a US poverty line that aimed to identify families whose incomes could not cover basic necessities. In August 1969, the federal government's Budget Bureau introduced the poverty line as an official statistical series.

Almost immediately, however, the federal poverty concept came under scrutiny. The measure failed to account for the cost of living, which varied widely across the nation, and overlooked noncash benefits, particularly for health care and housing. By 1990, Congress asked the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to revisit the poverty measure. The NAS report recommended a broader definition that included spending on clothing and shelter as well as food (Citro & Michael 1995). In 2011, the Census Bureau began reporting a new supplemental poverty measure that indicated slightly higher poverty rates, especially among the elderly, and was better able to identify the effects of federal programs on poverty reduction.

More broadly, researchers have begun to question whether standard data collection adequately represents society's poorest. Survey estimates of the incidence of hardships, such as eviction or food scarcity, are often much lower than estimates from administrative data (Desmond 2016, Schwartz 1994). Relying on samples of residential addresses neglects the homeless and the institutionalized who are not living securely in traditional households (Pettit 2012, Western et al. 2016b), and the American Community Survey, now the primary source of national poverty data, has unsettlingly high margins of error at small geographic units (Spielman et al. 2014).

POVERTY IS MULTIDIMENSIONAL

Measurement debates are important, but they focus attention narrowly on poverty's income dimension. Yet poverty is also "the linked ecology of social maladies and broken institutions" (Desmond 2015, p. 3). For many, what researchers call poverty is better understood as something akin to correlated adversity that cuts across multiple dimensions (material, social, bodily, psychological) and institutions (schools, neighborhoods, prisons). A multidimensional conception of poverty shifts attention from counting the poor to documenting the lived experience of scarcity.

A multidimensional poverty concept was pioneered in the field of development economics. Sudhir Anand and Amartya Sen (1997, p. 5) proposed a measure that "involve[d] not only the lack of necessities of material well-being, but also the denial of opportunities of living a tolerable life." In the affluent West, researchers have suggested that deprivation is signaled less by material hardship and more by alienation from mainstream opportunities (Anand & Sen 1997). Disadvantage is what European researchers have called social exclusion (Silver 1994). Social exclusion describes separation from mainstream institutions (Levitas 2005), and its study involves seeking out remote and hidden places of those who live in a kind of statelessness.

Similarly, Wilson (1987) in *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* described the social isolation of America's poor urban blacks, who were cut off from mainstream opportunities and institutions and subjected to concentration effects. Wilson's work emphasized that disadvantage was particularly severe and enduring when different types of hardship accumulated within people's life histories and communities. Research on neighborhood effects further showed how poverty, segregation, and crime combine to form a virulent type of disadvantage that can take hold in a community for generations (Sampson 2012, Sharkey 2013). It is not so much that there are different dimensions of poverty but that social ills cluster together (Muller et al. 2018, Perkins & Sampson 2015). For example, the mutually reinforcing relationship between incarceration and poverty has spurred a burgeoning research program on mass incarceration (e.g., Wakefield & Wildeman 2014, Western 2006). The research indicates the ubiquity of violence, health problems, and chaos in the childhoods, homes, schools, and neighborhoods of the poor (Black 2009, Western 2015).

Conceptual and Methodological Implications and Challenges

These lines of research hold several implications for the study of extreme disadvantage. For one, compounding disadvantages often relate to physical and mental health and to antisocial activities. Poverty and poor health are closely related, and where addiction and mental illness go untreated, crime and incarceration can result. Poverty scholars must account for human frailty, including impaired mental health and cognitive functioning, as well as chronic pain wrought by the harms of destitution (Lupien et al. 2001, Mullainathan & Shafir 2013). In many cases, poverty and its related disadvantages are mutually determining. The close links between poverty, poor health,

violence, and incarceration point to a type of compounded disadvantage that grows out of a vast failure of social policy and state neglect (Western 2018).

Where disadvantages are highly correlated and mutually determining, a fixation on causal inference may be misplaced. The thought experiment of manipulating a single condition lacks realism. Social scientists cannot and should not control away that which society has stitched together. The challenge is to develop new methods for describing the very nature of poverty, avoiding the discipline's reductionist tendencies that sanitize a messy social problem. Where disadvantages cluster together, the causal priority of one over another may be less important (and impossible to determine) than the qualitatively distinct type of hardship that emerges from their assemblage. Descriptions of the intimate dynamics of disadvantage and how its many dimensions bunch together, coupled with historical explanations of its trends, may be the most effective way to write honestly about extreme poverty in America.

Conceptualizing poverty as correlated adversity raises questions about which aspects should be included and how they should be combined. Economists have answered the challenge with a focus on measurement, debating the merits of additive and interactive approaches (Atkinson 2003, Waglé 2007) and assigning different weights to different dimensions (Alkire & Foster 2011). These efforts often combine measures of material hardship (e.g., housing, sanitation, income) with measures of bodily well-being (e.g., nutrition, mortality). By itself, however, the idea that poverty has multiple indicators misses the mark. It is not simply that there are multiple forms of disadvantage, but when those multiple forms clump together they create a deep and enduring form of hardship. The analytical advantages of a more limited view of poverty come at the expense of its complex reality.

Bearing Witness to Extreme Poverty

Firsthand reports by journalists and sociologists provide stark accounts of the environment of poverty and its correlated adversities. Consider the constellation of disadvantages packed into a few sentences from *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx* (LeBlanc 2004, p. 16). “*Lourdes had to scramble again. No woman with four children could survive on welfare, and now Lourdes also had four grandchildren, another on the way, and a drug habit to support. Jessica and Lourdes fought ferociously and often. Both women wanted to be taken care of; neither wanted to baby-sit.*” Here, drug addiction, family complexity, interpersonal conflict, and paltry welfare combine with poverty to create a chaotic kind of home life in which children were neglected (see also Evans 2004).

Qualitative fieldwork is attuned to conveying the sheer trauma of poverty. Many low-income people chronicled by LeBlanc (2004), Desmond (2016), and Edin & Shaefer (2015), for example, experienced an array of adverse childhood experiences, including sexual abuse, violence, and homelessness. Other accounts focus on pervasive street violence that disproportionately affects young black and Latino youth. Sociological ethnographers, including Anderson (2000), Jones (2009), and Contreras (2013), have written extensively on the relationship between violence, poverty, and respect among poor inner-city residents; others, like Goffman (2014) and Rios (2011), have analyzed the prevalence of police brutality in disadvantaged communities.

Recently, ethnographers have turned to a topic they have long neglected: mental and physical illness and disability among the poor. Some have explored wounded life after episodes of violence, often characterized by disability and shame (Lee 2012, Ralph 2014) or how communities make space for the madness of grieving parents (Ralph 2015). These accounts suggest that it is wrongheaded and shallow to conceptualize the poor as “middle class people without money” (Sánchez-Jankowski 2008, p. 48); instead, researchers must strive to document the imprints poverty has left on the minds and bodies of its victims.

Some ethnographers have sought to chronicle the lives of those living in deep, abject poverty. Bourgois & Schonberg's (2009) photo-ethnography of an encampment of homeless heroin users examines how health problems, often linked to years of addiction, give poverty a bodily reality. Rotten teeth, open sores, and infections, piled on top of untreated addiction, mental illness, and homelessness, create conditions that threaten basic decency. Edin & Shaefer's (2015) interviews with parents living on no more than \$2 a day reveal the inhumane working conditions at the bottom of the labor market, including acute job insecurity, grueling hours, and hazardous conditions. Duneier's (1999) ethnography of homeless men in New York City focuses not only on how they stave off material hardship but also how they confront psychological assaults.

Ethnographers of extreme disadvantage face ethical and conceptual challenges. For one, the very poor have immediate and serious needs, and ethnographers must clarify how and when to offer help. Comfort et al. (2015) describe an innovative approach that combines ethnography and social work in a study of chronically homeless men living with HIV. Ethnographers who write about the very poor also risk reducing people to their hardships. Yet any full-bodied account of life far below the poverty line will always be open not only to pain and exhaustion but also resilience and creativity. To paraphrase Stack (1974), the ethnographer's job is not to apologize but to understand; to write with clarity but without judgment. "The hardships of these young people and their families are not unusual in their neighborhoods," LeBlanc (2004, p. 406) reflected. "Neither are their gifts."

POVERTY IS A RELATIONSHIP

If the previous section dealt with the nature of poverty (what it is), this section deals with the causes of poverty (why it is). Sociological theories of poverty fall into two broad camps. Individualistic approaches explain variation in economic standing by reference to variation in personal attributes, such as education and social background (e.g., Blau & Duncan 1967, Jencks et al. 1972). Structural approaches to poverty, by contrast, give explanatory primacy to large-scale economic dislocations or policy reforms, such as deindustrialization or civil rights reforms (Dahrendorf 1959, Wilson 1987).

Recently, however, a third perspective has increasingly gained traction among sociologists. A relational perspective recognizes that poverty is not simply the byproduct of one's attributes or historical outcomes but is also actively produced through unequal relationships between the financially secure and insecure. A relational perspective on inequality studies the bonds or transactions between actors or organizations occupying different positions in a social hierarchy, including landlords and tenants (Desmond 2016), city developers and slum dwellers (Sassen 2014), and police and citizens (Stuart 2016). By analyzing processes and transactions between connected groups that are unequal in power and capital, a relational perspective asserts that the drivers of poverty cannot be understood by studying the poor in isolation (Tilly 1998).

Exploiting the Poor

The most influential relational theorist of inequality was, of course, Marx. In his view, capitalist accumulation was the direct result of the exploitation of surplus labor power (Marx 1877). But what is exploitation, precisely? For contemporary researchers such as Wright (1997), exploitation occurs when (a) the material welfare of one group depends on the material deprivation of another; (b) the latter group is excluded from controlling certain productive resources, namely through property rights; and (c) property owners are enriched by appropriating the labor of workers. Sørensen (2000) retains a focus on structural access to rent-producing assets but

does not depend on a relationship of mutual dependence between exploiters and the exploited. Similarly, Tilly (1998, p. 10) believed exploitation occurs “when powerful connected people command resources from which they draw significantly increased returns by coordinating the effort of outsiders whom they exclude from the full value added by that effort.” Common to all these conceptions is a power relationship whereby the rich take advantage of the poor and profit from their vulnerability.

While sociological theories often emphasize power imbalances, relations of exploitation, and opportunity hoarding, the empirical application of these ideas remains underdeveloped (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt 2016). One reason for this disconnect may have to do with the popularity of survey data that encourage researchers to think in terms of individual attributes instead of relational bonds. In this way, many relational theories—about worker exploitation, cultural capital, and discrimination, for example—were reduced in empirical tests to measures of occupation, education, race, and gender.

Recently, however, a handful of labor market scholars have begun to measure and analyze exploitation. Conceptualizing exploitation as being underpaid relative to the value of what workers produce, Sakamoto and colleagues found that women and blue-collar workers are exploited at relatively high rates (Liu et al. 2010) and that growing inequality is associated with growing exploitation of low-wage workers (Sakamoto & Kim 2010). Avent-Holt & Tomaskovic-Devey (2010) point to exploitation as a source of within-firm wage inequality, driven by advantaged employees hoarding opportunity, while Naidu (2010) seeks to understand the institutional determinants of exploitation. Much work remains, but these studies signal the beginning of an empirical sociology of exploitation.

Another line of research recognizes that exploitation occurs not only when producing goods but also when consuming them. Caplovitz’s (1967) classic study showed that public housing residents pay more for durable goods than their middle-class peers, through installment credit and inflated prices. He concluded that the inability of the poor “to earn a decent living is only one side of their economic plight” and that they should be considered “exploited consumers” (pp. xv, xvi). More recent research has shown that the poor pay more for food (Chung & Myers 1999), housing (Desmond 2016, Rugh & Massey 2010), and other essential goods. Low-income families often rely on pawnshops, payday loan operations, and check cashing businesses to access cash and credit under unfair terms (Caskey 1994, Squires & O’Connor 1998).

Discrimination, Redistribution, and Violence

Poverty and inequality are produced by a variety of transactional mechanisms besides exploitation. Other modes of resource extraction include discrimination, policy redistribution, and violence. Sociologists have amassed a large body of work on discrimination based on race, gender, and other attributes (Pager & Shepherd 2008, Petersen & Morgan 1995). A meta-analysis of the American labor market found that while discrimination against Latinos has declined in recent years, the level of discrimination against black job-seekers has remained stubbornly consistent for the past three decades (Quillian et al. 2017). Unlike exploitation, where one group gains at the direct expense of another, discrimination denies to out-groups the opportunities and resources that privileged groups have historically hoarded, including housing in safe neighborhoods, excellent school systems, and fair wages.

Inequality can also be produced or ameliorated by public policy. Regressive tax systems that force the poor to pay more than their fair share or that disproportionately benefit middle- and upper-class households (Glaeser & Shapiro 2003, Newman & O’Brien 2011) as well as federal reforms to welfare and housing benefits that have frayed the safety net for the most vulnerable

(Edin & Shaefer 2015, Schwartz 2014) are examples of statecraft that either provides more to citizens who need it the least or places the poor on even more precarious footing.

Sociologists have also examined the social and economic costs of involvement in the criminal justice system. Wars on crime and drugs, mounted by state and federal administrations, concentrated policing and incarceration in poor communities of color (Sampson 2012, Western 2006). Focusing on the deep end of the criminal justice system, Wakefield & Uggen (2010) review research on the socioeconomic consequences of imprisonment. But even at the shallow end, those unable to post bail after an arrest are exposed to the humiliations and dangers of jail, which can cause them to lose employment, access to social services, and contact with their support network (Goff 2017). People convicted (and in some cases, merely accused) of crimes are often ordered to pay fines, restitution, or surcharges, which can strain household budgets and balloon legal debt (Harris et al. 2011, Harris 2016). Edelman (2018) has argued that the United States effectively criminalizes poverty through the development of legal technologies such as civil forfeiture, crime-free housing ordinances, and mandates against behavior associated with the homeless.

Last, the poor have been brought to heel through brute force. Accounts of poverty in the developing world often contain episodes of violent domination of marginalized communities through land grabs, slum clearance, or savage working conditions (Auyero & Swistun 2009). In the United States, the urban poor remain subjected to high rates of violence, including that inflicted by law enforcement officers (Desmond et al. 2016), and the historical legacies of white violence against blacks in the American South still reverberate today (Tolnay & Beck 1992).

POVERTY IS MORALLY URGENT

Since its origins in the late nineteenth century, research on poverty has had both a positive/empirical agenda and a normative/prescriptive agenda. The Progressive-Era researchers were vigorous advocates in public debates and were often closely involved in policymaking. The normative character of contemporary poverty research is clearly indicated by policy proposals that regularly follow empirical analysis (e.g., Kenworthy 2011, Wilson 1987). Although empirical findings shed light on what is, they offer limited guidance when it comes to articulating what ought to be. Unspoken in most research, value commitments are fundamental to providing the problem of poverty with moral urgency that can sway public opinion and policy. Turning from social science to normative theory, we explore two specific values—human dignity and justice—that offer fertile ground for research and policy.

Poverty as an Affront to Dignity

Multidimensional disadvantage that piles disability and insecurity on top of low income offends human dignity. Philosophers have argued that human dignity entails a core set of rights or standards of living to which all are entitled by virtue of their membership in a community. Nussbaum and Sen (1993) view the fulfillment of human welfare in terms of individual functionings and capabilities. Emphasizing “what people are actually able to do and be,” Nussbaum (2003, p. 40) proposes ten human capabilities that are intended to capture “a life that is worthy of. . .dignity.” These include life expectancy, health, safety, a mindfulness that includes imagination and thought, meaningful relationships, and compassion. Like poverty, human dignity is also multidimensional, relating not just to material well-being but also to one’s fulfillment and place in a community.

In sociology, the idea of a fundamental level of living that respects human dignity can be traced at least to T.H. Marshall’s concept of social rights that emerged with the modern welfare state. Marshall (1950, p. 56) writes, “What matters is that there is a general enrichment of the concrete

substance of civilized life, a general reduction of risk and insecurity, an equalization between the more or less fortunate at all levels.” Marshall insisted that modern citizenship be enlarged to incorporate not only legal rights but also community-based entitlements (Somers 1993). This meant that all members of a political community, including the poorest, should have access to “a modicum of economic welfare and security” as well as to “the right to share to the full in the social heritage” (Marshall 1950, p. 11). The poor, in other words, should be seen as fully belonging to a community, sharing not only in its material security but also in its history and mythology.

Legal theorists, who are concerned specifically with violence and the abuse of power, have also considered the value of human dignity. Simon (2017) traces the modern legal principle of human dignity to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that prohibits “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” Though often applied to episodes of mass violence or war crimes, the Declaration affirms humanity as a state of decency that should not be infringed. Henry (2010, p. 221) expands the idea from an individual’s status to include society’s collective virtue: “Instead of distinguishing one person from another. . . collective virtue as dignity refers to the excellence of the human species. When society treats people in ways that are in-humane, or when people engage in activities that are dehumanizing, collective virtue as dignity diminishes.” We disappoint collective virtue by mistreating the most disadvantaged, to whom we are all accountable.

Justice and Poverty

Closely related to the value of human dignity in the philosophy of egalitarianism is the concept of justice (e.g., Barry 2005, Wolf & de-Shalit 2007). For Rawls (1971), justice is an attribute of social institutions that assign rights, duties, and resources fairly and without regard to arbitrary distinctions among individuals. Rawls famously argued that, in a world designed by people unaware of their social standing, social and economic inequalities would be allowed only if they were supplemented by compensating benefits, particularly for the most disadvantaged.

Philosophical writing that draws a close connection between injustice and inequality proposes to remedy poverty by compensating the poor. But thinking of inequality relationally—where the rich have profited from the poor, where whites have profited from nonwhites—implies a parallel demand placed not on the victims but the beneficiaries of unjust systems. In practice, retributive ideas of justice have not greatly constrained the rich and powerful. Criminal sanctions tend to fall on the least powerful rather than the most (Garland 1991), as business interests have captured regulatory authorities not only in finance (Correia 2014) but also in medicine (Wazana 2000), public health (Freudenberg 2014), and other spheres of economic life. A retributive remedy for economic injustice, then, may do even less to move judges or policymakers than a Rawlsian idea of justice as fairness.

Rather than hold the powerful accountable, social scientists have advocated for antipoverty policies that align with so-called mainstream American values (Hecl 1997) or that are executed through universal programs with a hidden agenda (Wilson 1987), such as a public works initiative. Anything that offends the sensibilities of nonpoor people, not to mention their financial excesses, tends to be viewed as politically toxic or unrealistic. While the pragmatics of policymaking are critical to consider, it is equally important to recognize that consequential policy reform often comes before broad public consensus, not the other way around. For example, the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty was passed without the support of most Americans (Brauer 1982, Zarefsky 2005).

At the very least, justice asks that offenders acknowledge the harms they have inflicted on victims. The poor have long been blamed for their own miseries (Gans 1995). A normative-inflected relational approach to inequality, however, asks economically privileged people to accept

more responsibility for the persistence of hardship in a land of plenty. In a way, the relational perspective sees poverty as a crime of the rich against the poor.

The acknowledgment of harm in criminal justice settings often involves mediated meetings between victim and offender. While restorative justice aims to help victims, it is also intended to move offenders beyond their own trauma of the crime and help to reintegrate them into the community (Sherman & Strang 2007, Zehr 2002). Acknowledging harm may sound far-fetched when applied to the complex conditions of multidimensional disadvantage. Still, if poverty is truly relational, often involving the accrual of resources to one party at the direct expense of another, restorative justice offers one approach that could serve as a foundation for just repair.

Systematically engaging values closes the gap between research and policy. It also opens new lines of inquiry. Esteeming dignity encourages a humanizing social analysis, where researchers are sensitized to the capacity for love, creativity, and imagination in their subjects. The principle of human dignity also shifts the poverty debate away from income redistribution and asks: How can the most disadvantaged live with the dignity and security of full citizenship? The value of justice opens up a different set of questions. Esteeming justice, when poverty may result from exploitation, shifts moral scrutiny from the poor to the rich. Are the rich obeying the law? Are they acting with fairness and compassion? If not, what might be the solution or sanction? Instead of focusing narrowly on poor aid, or the behaviors of the disadvantaged, can the rich themselves be held to account? Poverty research has always had a normative thrust, but a clear consideration of the values of human dignity and justice provokes new styles of analysis and policy debates.

CONCLUSION

Using Progressive-Era research of the late nineteenth century as a touchstone, we have reviewed research that advances a new US poverty agenda. We recognize, first, that poverty is not just a marker of low income but instead describes the accumulation of multiple disadvantages across various dimensions and institutions. Often, poverty is also addiction, mental illness, violence, residential instability, poor health, and unsafe neighborhoods. Thinking of poverty as correlated adversity invites methodological pluralism, prioritizes the descriptive project of capturing the nature and dynamics of accumulated disadvantage over the causal project of isolating a single marker of poverty, and eschews one-dimensional, silver-bullet policy prescriptions.

Rather than conceiving of poverty as a trait that characterizes individuals and families, poverty is a relation. A relational perspective views poverty (and socioeconomic inequality more generally) as the outcome of power relations. Power is expressed through exploitation in housing and employment. Sometimes power is expressed through a political process that institutionalizes segregation and social closure; other times, it is enforced through terroristic violence or the confiscation of property. One implication is that poverty is not benign; many people benefit from it (Tilly 1998, Wright 1997). Modern capitalist democracies decide in countless ways who succeeds and who is allowed to fail. Poverty, in relational perspective, asks who has been hurt, by whom, why was help not forthcoming, and who profits from the status quo.

The sociology of poverty is at once an empirical and a normative project. The challenge of studying the origins of a multidimensional poverty in relations of exploitation, discrimination, or statecraft are formidable. But more than this, conceptualizing poverty as multidimensional and relational is fraught with moral urgency. For America's poor, the conditions of life are indecent and people live with something less than their full humanity, blunted from realizing their utmost potential. Poverty that is harsh, degrading, and indecent offends dignity. Unnecessary poverty, on the backs of the powerless and to the benefit of the powerful, is unjust. Research need not shrink from that honest judgment.

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