

Talking About Poverty: Narratives, Counter-Narratives, and Telling Effective Stories

September 2021

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Introduction

We are surrounded by stories about poverty. They are in the news, in politics, in entertainment media like TV and film, and in the conversations we have with family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. These stories are highly patterned and advance a set of overarching ideas about the world and the people in it. Following widespread usage in the social change space, we call these patterns and ideas *narratives*.

Specific stories about poverty—for example, a recent news article about **families facing food insecurity during the pandemic**¹ or a TV show that centers on a family living in poverty (e.g., *The Middle*)²—draw from and reinforce these narratives, creating a cycle of familiarity. The more prominent these narratives are in our media, the more prominent they become in our thinking, and in turn, the more likely they are to appear in our media. In American society, we are all familiar with stories of people living in poverty pulling themselves up and overcoming the odds through hard work, willpower, and grit. Each of these stories reinforces a broader idea that individual effort, drive, and discipline explain someone’s success in life and whether or not someone experiences poverty. All of these stories bubble up and reinforce a broader *Bootstraps* narrative.

Our society’s narratives about poverty shape how we think about the causes of poverty, who we blame for poverty, who we think is responsible for addressing it, and what, if anything, we think should be done about it. Activists and advocates have long recognized that our most dominant narratives about poverty thwart changes to policy that would reduce poverty and undermine support for social safety net programs fundamental to economic mobility and opportunity. These narratives lead us to blame and stigmatize people in poverty, reinforce racial stereotypes, and undermine support for systemic solutions. This recognition has prompted extensive research on poverty narratives.

Over the past few years, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has spearheaded a multi-pronged, multi-organization initiative to better understand existing narratives around poverty and economic mobility and pilot new narratives capable of shifting attitudes and building support for economic mobility efforts. This Gates-sponsored research complements a large body of existing academic and applied research on narratives around poverty. Viewed together, this

research points to a clear set of poverty narratives that are dominant in American society. The research is also starting to identify alternative narratives that might be able to counter the toxic effects of dominant narratives.

This report, sponsored by the Gates Foundation as part of their initiative, offers advocates, activists, communications professionals, and creatives a synthesis of this large and complex body of research.³ In the report, we sketch out the major existing narratives around poverty identified by the research. We also describe the counter-narratives that researchers have proposed and offer practical advice about how to use these narratives to create better stories.

We focus here on synthesizing and distilling the research rather than engaging all of its nuances and methodological details. We do note issues where there is disagreement among studies or outstanding questions. In these cases, we offer suggestions for how to make sense of uncertainties. We include references throughout, for those interested in reading more about the specific studies we have reviewed.

What We Did:

- *Identify literature to review.* FrameWorks researchers began by making a list of relevant studies on poverty narratives in the United States—both existing narratives and possible counter-narratives. This list was generated by FrameWorks in consultation with experts that the Gates Foundation has enlisted as advisors on narrative change work for their Economic Mobility and Opportunity portfolio.
- *Initial literature review and expansion of the list.* FrameWorks researchers used this initial list as a means to identify additional literature to review. By following up on relevant references, researchers identified additional works to consult and arrived at a final, expanded list, which includes applied research as well as academic studies in media studies, literary criticism, history, narrative and discourse analysis, politics and policy, and social commentary.
- *Comprehensive review.* Researchers proceeded to review all works identified, asking the following questions for each:
 - What are the narratives about poverty identified by the source?
 - Does the source discuss race and/or ethnicity, and how are these issues incorporated within poverty narratives?
 - Does the source provide a *descriptive* analysis of poverty narratives—that is, does it analyze and describe current narratives?
 - Does the source provide a *prescriptive* analysis of poverty narratives—that is, does it analyze what can be done to change existing narratives and/or what alternative narratives could be used?
 - What evidence does the source provide for its claims? How strong is this evidence?
- *Comparison and synthesis.* FrameWorks researchers concluded the process by identifying common findings across sources as well as differences. Researchers then synthesized findings across sources to identify a set of existing narratives and counter-narratives to report. In places where there were differences among studies, FrameWorks researchers assessed the strength of relative evidence to determine what to say about them.

In order for communicators, activists, advocates, and content creators to understand what kinds of stories they should be telling about poverty, they need first to understand what existing narratives they're up against. We begin by laying out these existing narratives.

Existing Poverty Narratives

The research converges around three overarching narratives about poverty in the United States today: the *Individual Drive* narrative, the *Pathology of Black Urban Poverty* narrative, and the *Unfair System* narrative. These narratives are conceptually discrete and distinct—they say different things about poverty, why it exists, who is to blame, and what should be done about it. While most specific stories about poverty fit neatly under one of the narratives, there are stories that pull on multiple narratives, weaving together elements of different narratives.

There are different variants of the narratives described below. These variants follow the general pattern of the narrative but include specific ideas that are not present in other versions of the same narrative. These variants derive their cultural currency from the broader narrative and reprise the major notes of the narrative, which is why we classify them as variants rather than simply as separate narratives. Nonetheless, as we discuss, different versions of common narratives can have quite different social and political implications. Most notably, *Unfair System* stories tend to promote more just systems, but when injected with the “white victim” trope, they actually reinforce racist policies.

Key Terms⁴

- **Narratives:** Patterns of meaning that cut across and tie together specific stories. Narratives are common ideas or arcs that can be thought of as both emerging *from* a set of stories and as providing templates *for* specific stories.
- **Variants:** Particular versions of a narrative. Variants have the general contours or shape of the more general narrative but include particular aspects that are not shared among all stories that draw on that narrative.
- **Stories:** Tales about particular events and people. Stories can be thought of as both giving rise *to* and drawing *from* narratives.

Below, we describe these three narratives and their variants and discuss how they reflect and reinforce particular understandings of poverty.

The *Individual Drive* Narrative

The most dominant narrative about poverty in the United States centers on individual willpower and drive. This narrative portrays individuals' life outcomes as the direct and exclusive result of their choices and effort. According to this narrative, with enough hard work, anyone can and will succeed. In this narrative, individuals are in control of how well they do and thus responsible for their lot in life. People living in poverty are poor because of their own “bad” choices, lack of work ethic, and deficient values. They are blamed for their own situations and held responsible for getting themselves out of poverty.

The *Individual Drive* narrative is frequently interwoven with another existing narrative—the *Pathology of Black Urban Poverty* narrative, which is discussed below. By attributing poverty to lack of effort or “bad” values, the *Individual Drive* narrative opens the door for racist ideas and stereotypes. We offer examples below of how these narratives are interwoven.

There are two slightly different but closely related variants of this *Individual Drive* narrative: a *Meritocracy* version and a *Bootstraps* version.

The *Meritocracy* Version

The starting point of this narrative is that American society is a level playing field where everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed economically. This narrative is closely intertwined with the idea of the American Dream—that anyone can achieve their hopes and dreams if they put in the effort and have the talent. In this narrative, American society is depicted as a true meritocracy—anyone who works hard can achieve economic success, and we all have the same chances.⁵

In the *Meritocracy* narrative, poverty is positioned as the result of failure to take advantage of opportunities. Because everyone has the chance to succeed, if people *don't* succeed, this must be the result of a lack of hard work or effort.

This narrative is frequently present in the news, entertainment media, and pop culture.⁶ The *Meritocracy* narrative is particularly salient among political conservatives and moderates and is embraced across racial and ethnic groups.⁷

The *Meritocracy* narrative is related to and reinforced by stories of charity. As the Narrative Observatory Project from Harmony Labs notes, some stories about poverty locate the “solution” to poverty in the United States in individual acts of charity to “the poor.”⁸ These “feel-good” stories of successful people giving wealth or resources to “help out” people living in poverty portray poverty as an individual problem—when individuals don't have what it takes to succeed, they must rely on the benevolence of those who do.

Harmony Labs notes that narratives like this are popular among a “tough cookie” audience that values “playing by the rules,” family values, and hard work.⁹ By portraying support for people experiencing poverty as a generous choice at the discretion of society’s winners, stories of charity go along with and reinforce this group’s underlying adherence to the narrative of *Meritocracy*.

Examples of *Meritocracy* Stories

The *Meritocracy* narrative is seen in aspirational stories about individuals achieving economic success through sheer hard work. Music and television are full of stories about “getting rich” through individual hard work or “hustle,” like Cardi B’s music, which often talks about her work ethic and accumulating wealth.¹⁰

This narrative is also found in our history and literature, from Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography, which tells his life story as one of individual determination and success, to contemporary portraits of purportedly “self-made men” like Larry Page and Sergey Brin (the reference to “men” is no accident here and reflects both who our society enables to succeed and who we allow to be the protagonists of such hero stories).^{11 12} These stories play out the narrative of *Meritocracy* in individual cases and are used to justify the positions of wealthy people in society.

The *Bootstraps* Version

The *Bootstraps* version of the *Individual Drive* narrative is about overcoming challenges. According to this variant of the narrative, it is up to individuals to metaphorically “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps” to get out of poverty. In contrast to *Meritocracy* stories, *Bootstraps* stories start from the acknowledgement, explicitly or implicitly, that American society does *not* provide everyone with equal opportunities. But according to this narrative, individuals can overcome the odds and succeed if they have enough determination and grit.

While grit and willpower are features of both variants of the *Individual Drive* narrative, they are emphasized especially strongly in the *Bootstraps* version—it takes real strength of character and will to overcome the odds.¹³ This focus on individual character leads to more blaming and shaming of people living in poverty—they are “morally deficient” because they *aren’t* strong enough.¹⁴

This narrative is widely held in the US and is particularly salient with political conservatives.^{15 16 17}

Examples of *Bootstraps* Stories

Bootstraps stories focus on the “strength” of will of some people to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and the “weakness” (or laziness) of others who lack the capability to do so. A classic example is James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which—although praised for its documentation of poor tenant farmers during the Great Depression—describes some people in poverty as being ethically deficient and having “lapsed into moral and emotional apathy,” suggesting that this is why they are in and will remain in poverty.¹⁸ Portrayals of “lazy” people who are too “weak” to pull themselves out of poverty often take on racialized undertones. These include portrayals of white rural people in poverty, referred to as “white trash” and seen as “backward” hillbillies, and white blue-collar workers who are “irresponsible slackers,” such as Homer Simpson. Characterizations of Black people as lazy “welfare queens” or “welfare bums” draw on the *Bootstraps* narrative as well—these people are depicted as lacking the determination and moral integrity to earn their success—though these characterizations are most strongly influenced by the *Pathology of Black Urban Poverty* narrative described below.¹⁹

Portrayals of “successful” stories of bootstrappers are also common in American popular culture. For example, in *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), a homeless man overcomes financial hardships and becomes a stockbroker through personal strength and determination. In *Cinderella Man* (2005), an impoverished dockworker ascends to international success in heavyweight boxing through his hard work and determination, eventually using his income to “pay back” government benefits he once received while unemployed. More recently, the fictional heads of the Lyon family in the show *Empire* (2015–2020) start off as drug dealers in Philadelphia but eventually become the wealthy CEOs of a multi-million-dollar record label through strength of will.

What Does the *Individual Drive* Narrative Do?

The *Individual Drive* narrative is pernicious, blaming people in poverty for their situations and denying the reality or importance of the systemic and structural causes of economic inequality and poverty.

The *Meritocracy* narrative actively denies the reality that our society distributes opportunity *unequally* and systemically oppresses Black and Indigenous people, people of color, women, LGBTQ+ people, and immigrants, among others. In turn, the narrative undermines the need for systemic changes.

By making poverty about the character of individuals, the *Bootstraps* narrative licenses societal indifference toward people in poverty: nothing should be done for people who are too “weak” or “lazy” to pull themselves out of poverty. And by blaming and shaming those who have experienced poverty, this narrative leads to the dehumanization or “otherizing” of people living in poverty, making it easier for people to see poverty as a distant problem that doesn’t affect them.²⁰

The Pathology of Black Urban Poverty Narrative

This narrative depicts Black people as having a homogenous “culture” that normalizes attitudes, norms, and behavior that drive “them” into poverty and keep them there.²¹ The narrative centers on urban, “inner city” Black communities where poverty supposedly exists because of a pathological “culture” perpetuated through dysfunctional family dynamics, living arrangements, unemployment, and involvement in crime.²²

In addition to treating Black people as a monolithic group and drawing on racist stereotypes, it conflates “Black” and “poor,”²³ reflecting and reinforcing the racist assumptions that all Black people are poor and that low-income people are Black.²⁴

When stories employing this narrative focus on solutions, they tend to fatalistically conclude that anti-poverty measures such as welfare won’t work for Black people, due to their “cultural” norms that make them “lazy,” “greedy,” or “self-destructive.”²⁵

This narrative has roots in the long and deep history of dehumanization of Black people in American culture and is rooted in the history of racial-settler capitalism.²⁶ While the *Pathology of Black Urban Poverty* narrative draws upon longstanding racist tropes, this specific narrative gained traction in the 1960s and 1970s as a way of talking about Black neighborhoods of concentrated poverty that were created through racist laws and policies in the postwar period. The narrative gained traction with policy pieces like *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Drafted in 1965 by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and more commonly known as the Moynihan Report, it attributed Black poverty to nonnormative family structures rather than hundreds of years of racial oppression. This framing paved the way for a range of racist tropes about Black Americans, including the “welfare queen” (see below), which was promulgated a decade later by Ronald Reagan. The narrative was widely used in subsequent discussions of welfare and figured centrally in the case for welfare reform in the 1990s.²⁷

Examples of Pathology of Black Urban Poverty Stories

The stories that employ and evoke this narrative talk about unemployment, “broken” families, and social welfare dependency as the norm for Black people, weaving implicit and explicit references to purported cultural deficits or defects throughout.²⁸ In unscripted entertainment, Black women are often depicted as angry, loud, licentious, and uneducated.²⁹ For example, in the reality TV show *Love & Hip Hop: Atlanta*, many of the main Black female characters came from poverty, and their portrayals center on their past involvement in sex work, their histories of and continuing struggles with alcoholism and crack addiction, and their violent outbursts.³⁰ In the news, images about poverty tend to reinforce the idea that people in poverty are Black, including visuals of Black people “milling around streets, frequently pictured with police officers.”^{31 32} News stories also tend to equate Black people with criminality. In New York City,

for example, studies show that local news overrepresents Black suspects of crimes—the percentage of Black suspects in news coverage is well above the percentage of Black people who are actually arrested for crimes.³³

News media coverage of programs such as Medicare and Social Security overwhelmingly tends to portray white recipients positively while portraying Black recipients in negative, unsympathetic terms.³⁴ Moreover, Black recipients are overrepresented in these stories, thereby reinforcing the narrative’s conflation of Black people with poverty.

The Mythical Character of the “Welfare Queen”

The “welfare queen”—a low-income Black woman who abuses the welfare system—became a stock character in *Pathology of Black Urban Poverty* stories starting in the 1960s. This mythical character was fabricated in reaction to Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty social programs³⁵ and further amplified in the 1980s with Ronald Reagan’s punitive welfare reforms and War on Drugs.³⁶

The “welfare queen” is portrayed as a pathologically greedy, lawbreaking, deviant, lazy, promiscuous, and “Cadillac-driving” Black woman who cheats the system and defrauds the American people. The character of the “welfare queen” was injected into the American “collective memory” of welfare as a central image of its supposed failure.³⁷ The “welfare queen,” with her supposedly ill-gotten wealth, represents a threat to the American way of life.³⁸ Over time, depictions of this character shifted away from purported fraud and focused more generally on “welfare dependency.” The typical portrait involves a single Black mother who, due to lack of self-control and bad morals, has given birth out of wedlock and now must depend on the state to support herself and her children.³⁹ This version of the character, combining dehumanizing depictions of Black people with misogynistic tropes of women as “sexually irresponsible,”⁴⁰ portrays the “welfare queen” as a fundamental threat to the social order because she rejects core American values of self-discipline and family and passes this on to her children.

While this mythical character originated decades ago, it persists in news and popular culture today. Portrayals of Black mothers on welfare are not only common in news but retain many of the traits of the “welfare queen” character.⁴¹ The character is also still present in entertainment media, such as in the 2009 film *Precious*, which, although it includes empathetic performances, portrays the Black mother of the titular character as “greedy, violent, abusive, and cheat[ing] the welfare system.”^{42 43} Similarly, the film *The Blind Side* (2009), a fictionalized account of football player Michael Oher’s childhood and eventual NFL career, depicts Michael’s mother as a drug addict who lives in public housing, survives off of welfare, and is incapable of caring for her many children. Her presence on screen is minimal, and when she does appear, she is nearly always intoxicated.

What Does the *Pathology of Black Urban Poverty* Narrative Do?

This narrative draws from and perpetuates white supremacist ideology. It otherizes and dehumanizes Black individuals and communities. It also perpetuates the idea of Black dependency on and misuse of the system and the idea that poverty among Black people is intractable.

While the narrative is racist at its core, this is obscured by talk of “cultural” differences rather than explicit talk of natural inferiority. *Pathology of Black Urban Poverty* stories generally purport to deny they are making racist claims of Black inferiority while they, in fact, repeat white supremacist tropes and stereotypes. The character of the “welfare queen” similarly perpetuates misogyny and the demonization of Black women in particular.

In pointing to individual character and community culture as the source of poverty, this narrative, like the *Individual Drive* narrative, obscures the role of historical and structural barriers. The narrative pushes structural racism out of view and the ways in which racist laws and policies have pushed some Black people into neighborhoods of concentrated poverty in urban areas.

This narrative stokes racialized fears and *Us vs. Them* thinking. It can be exploited to disrupt class solidarity by turning working people and people living in poverty from different racial or ethnic groups against each other.⁴⁴

The *Unfair System* Narrative

In this narrative, an unfair economic system is depicted as the main driver of poverty in the United States. According to this narrative, the system has been rigged to unfairly benefit some people over others, which leads to inequality and poverty. It is the system that “fails” people living in poverty, not—as in the other narratives—people in poverty who fail themselves.⁴⁵ Poverty is, in this narrative, a “human-made phenomenon”—and one made at the collective rather than the individual level.⁴⁶

The *Unfair System* narrative highlights both economic and racial inequalities. This narrative talks about how inequality has increased over time and explains this as the result of collective choices.⁴⁷ The narrative also talks about how racial inequalities and systemic discrimination against the Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) community contribute to higher rates of poverty among some groups.

While stories that advance the *Unfair System* narrative attribute poverty and inequality to a rigged system, they don’t consistently explain *how* the system is rigged or what precisely can be done about it. In its current form, the narrative gestures toward elites who pull the

strings of society without providing detail about how policy choices and decisions about how our institutions are set up have led to inequality nor how alternative choices could lead to greater equality.

The *Unfair System* narrative is not dominant but is becoming more prevalent. This is likely due to changing economic conditions, including rising inequality over the past few decades, as well as social movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter that have highlighted economic and racial systemic injustices.^{48 49} This narrative is more frequently endorsed by political liberals and progressives as well as by women and younger people.^{50 51} Interestingly, Harmony Labs has found this narrative (they call it the “equity narrative”) to be the distinctive narrative for their “if you say so” audience (in other words, this narrative is overrepresented in the stories consumed by this audience).⁵² This audience is highly cynical about American politics and assumes that politicians are liars and cheaters. The *Unfair Narrative* system resonates with this audience—who thinks the system is broken but also assumes that the system can’t actually be fixed. This audience’s mix of cynicism and openness to this narrative highlights that, in its current form, the narrative is about the problem, not the solution.

Examples of *Unfair System* Stories

In entertainment, *Unfair System* stories often depict the unfairness of US economic and social systems by showing how badly designed systems hurt people in poverty. The Hulu series *Little Fires Everywhere* (2020) draws explicit connections between poverty and racial bias in the storylines of Bebe, an immigrant Chinese character who is living in poverty and is forced to give up her infant, and Mia, the Black main character who is an artist but becomes a maid for a wealthy white family to pay the bills. In an argument between Mia and her white employer, she states, “You didn’t make good choices; you *had* good choices. Options that being rich and white and entitled gave you.”⁵³ While the *Unfair System* narrative has become more prevalent in recent years, stories that draw on this narrative have existed in entertainment for decades. For example, the film *Claudine* (1974), which tells the story of a Black mother on welfare, shows how the practice of surprise home visits (from Claudine’s white welfare worker) can be predatory and malicious acts of surveillance, especially of Black women, and how seemingly arbitrary rules of the system operate as barriers to aid.⁵⁴ While these types of stories highlight the *effects* of unfair systems, they do not typically discuss systemic solutions to these problems and may undermine people’s motivation to engage with and support the kinds of reforms that are needed.

The *Unfair System* narrative is also employed in stories that focus on the growing divide between the rich and poor and the failure of trickle-down economics to benefit anyone but the wealthy.^{55 56} These stories argue that the economic system, rather than individual or group flaws, are to blame for poverty and unemployment.⁵⁷ For example, the TV series *Atlanta* (FX) portrays the main character as a former Princeton student who, no matter how hard he works to become a music producer, is unable to make ends meet, is evicted, and struggles with

homelessness.⁵⁸ Similarly, in the TV series *Shameless* (US), one of the main characters excels in school and receives a college scholarship but struggles to keep up academically because he is forced to work at the school cafeteria and provide childcare for his siblings, which eventually contributes to his alcoholism and his expulsion from college.⁵⁹ While these stories often expose inequalities in opportunity and undermine the myth that individual willpower and effort is sufficient for success, they frequently don't illuminate the policy choices that led to this situation or the ones that need to be pursued to address it.

There are, to be sure, some cases—particularly in news media but also in entertainment media (e.g., *The Wire*)—where *Unfair System* stories go upstream to explain the policy and institutional choices that led to inequality. These stories often focus on specific issues, like employment, education, and housing. For example, news media stories that focus on the causes of homelessness sometimes discuss discriminatory housing policies (e.g., redlining) and welfare reform as sources of homelessness.⁶⁰ As we discuss below, these are the kinds of stories that need to be told more widely and frequently.

The *White Victim* Hybrid Narrative

The *Unfair Systems* narrative typically focuses on inequalities faced by groups that have been historically disadvantaged by systems. However, this narrative is sometimes employed in combination with the *Pathology of Black Urban Poverty* to depict white people living in poverty as the “true” victims of our systems. According to stories that combine these narratives in this way, our system has been rigged to *help* Black people, immigrants and women at the expense of poor white people—especially white men—who have been left behind as our systems have been changed to provide these groups with advantages. Such stories cast Black people as undeserving recipients of government largesse and poor white people as blameless victims of an unfair economic system that has stolen from them a meaningful chance to succeed.⁶¹ These stories are popular in conservative news outlets such as Fox News that depict white people in poverty as justifiably angry because they have been robbed of economic opportunities given to Black people, who are equated with “murderers, rapists, drug dealers, pimps, carjackers, and home-invasion robbers.”⁶² At other times, Latinx immigrants are portrayed as the villains within this narrative, as people who purportedly threaten “our” (read: white people’s) safety and take “our” jobs. This *White Victim* hybrid narrative not only reinforces racist narratives and obscures the historical and ongoing oppression that BIPOC communities experience but also undermines the multiracial solidarity needed to reform an unjust economic system.

This narrative sometimes draws upon anti-government language and appeals to individual liberty, but at base this narrative doesn't challenge government spending and support generally—it challenges government support for BIPOC communities. This narrative is not truly libertarian but rather a narrative about who deserves support from the system.⁶³

What Does the *Unfair System* Narrative Do?

By underscoring the institutions, policies, and structures that create and perpetuate inequality in the United States, the *Unfair System* narrative fosters a deeper and more accurate understanding of the causes of poverty. Of existing narratives about poverty, it is generally the most productive, although, as we note above, it can be combined with the *Pathology of Black Urban Poverty* narrative and mobilized in racist ways.

Even when the *Unfair System* narrative is not used in this way, it does, in its typical form, have limitations. As noted above, it highlights that the system has been rigged, but stories that evoke this narrative rarely offer detailed explanations of how—the specific ways that political and corporate elites have shaped institutions and policies to create and perpetuate economic and racial inequality. This makes it hard to envision alternatives—how the system could be reformed to combat economic inequality and poverty. Additionally, this narrative may create a sense of fatalism, particularly among people living in poverty, who are portrayed as “helpless victims of a larger socioeconomic system in which they have no agency.”⁶⁴ While the narrative more accurately describes the systemic causes of poverty, it does not create a clear picture of what can be done to fix things.⁶⁵

Common Thread: The Deserving vs. Undeserving Poor

All three of these narratives make a distinction between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor. The “deserving” poor are depicted as worthy of social assistance because they are poor through no fault of their own, while the “undeserving” poor are seen as to blame for their situation and, in turn, as less deserving of support.^{66,67} Who is portrayed as deserving or undeserving depends on the narrative being used. A story drawing on the *Meritocracy* narrative might blame parents for their situation but hold children—especially white children—“blameless” and portray them as deserving.⁶⁸ An *Unfair Systems* story is more likely to depict most people in poverty as deserving, though stories using the “white victim” trope depict white people in poverty as deserving and Black and brown people as undeserving.⁶⁹ The categories of “deserving” and “undeserving” assume and reinforce one another—stories that discuss the “deserving” poor imply that some people are “undeserving” of assistance, even when this is not explicitly mentioned.⁷⁰

These categories are often racialized.⁷¹ White people in poverty are often depicted as “deserving” while people of color, particularly Black people, are often seen as “undeserving.” This is particularly true of stories employing the *Pathology of Black Urban Poverty* narrative and the “welfare queen” trope, but racial stereotypes are used across narratives. For example, *Bootstraps* stories might spotlight white people who pulled themselves out of poverty and Black people who failed due to supposed lack of drive.⁷²

A Romantic Narrative?

Research suggests signs of a possible fourth narrative—a *Romantic* narrative. This is only occasionally mentioned in the literature, but there seems to be a recessive narrative that depicts poverty as “romantic” or “bohemian,” a “pure” life full of simple pleasure and joy. These portrayals gesture toward the “nobility” of struggling in poverty—suggesting that it is “satisfying” to “work day and night to put food on [the] table.”⁷³

In film, romanticized portrayals of poverty are sometimes seen in stories about the wealthy “slumming it” to find freedom from the constraints of upper-class life. For example, in the film *Aladdin*, lower-class Aladdin is an instrument for Princess Jasmine’s liberation. Children’s movies often romanticize poverty, such as the portrayals of “happy” servants in *Beauty and the Beast*.⁷⁴ Poverty is also often romanticized in depictions of a “simpler” rural life. In the film *The Glass Castle* (2017), which tells the story of a white woman overcoming poverty to become a successful writer, poverty is portrayed as something that can teach people about individual happiness and fulfillment and is connected with the “charms” of a simple, rural life away from the “pollution” and chaos of the cities where “rich people” live. Similarly, poverty, and especially rural poverty, is often romanticized in country music through lyrics that discuss the “good life” of living off the land and enjoying the “simple things” (an “ice cold beer,” a “few dollars in a coffee can.”)⁷⁵ In such stories, living in poverty purportedly offers social freedom and appreciation of the things that matter.

While the romantic poverty narrative and the stories that instantiate it provide more positive depictions of people in poverty, they do so in a way that undermines concern about poverty (making it a desired state) or that treats people in poverty as means for others’ growth, rather than as subjects who deserve attention and respect in their own right.

Existing Narratives on Poverty

What the narrative says or signals

	Why does poverty exist?	Who is to blame for it?	What should be done?	Example
Meritocracy	Lack of effort by people in poverty	The individual in poverty	Individuals need to take advantage of opportunities that exist	<i>Cardi B on the value of “hustle”</i>
Bootstraps	Personal weakness and lack of grit among people in poverty	The individual in poverty	Individuals need to dig in and overcome their challenges	<i>The Pursuit of Happyness</i>
Pathology of Black Urban Poverty	The “bad culture” of urban Black communities	Black people	Low-income Black communities need to take responsibility for their own situations	<i>Love & Hip Hop: Atlanta</i>
Unfair System	Our economic system unfairly benefits some while failing others	Elites who rigged the system, or the source of poverty is unspecified	Fix the system—somehow (specific solutions are unclear)	<i>Atlanta</i>
Romantic (recessive)	Poverty is a natural part of society	No one. It’s just the way things are	Nothing	<i>Aladdin</i>

Counter-Narratives and Strategies for Shifting Poverty Narratives

Most of the existing narratives described above blame people in poverty for their condition, reinforce racial and gender stereotypes, undermine support for needed anti-poverty programs and policies—or do all of these things. Creating a context for social change requires changing these narratives.

Yet it is not immediately clear what these narratives would, ideally, be replaced *with*. The literature on poverty narratives offers some directions—counter-narratives and strategies that have been or are currently being developed by communicators, change makers, and researchers.

While the research on existing narratives has established consensus about the contours of existing poverty narratives and their implications, there is less consensus around counter-narratives. In part, this is because there is less research that has tested how new narratives affect people’s perceptions of poverty and people living in poverty and support for anti-poverty programs and policies.

Below, we describe three counter-narratives that have been proposed by the field. We discuss what is known about their effectiveness and raise issues about these approaches that we think are important for communicators and narrative practitioners to consider. For each, we offer provisional ideas about how the narratives could be put into practice and used to generate content.

The Systems Narrative

Some researchers and practitioners advocate for strategies that take the most productive existing narrative—*Unfair System*—and expand it to more fully explain the collective choices that cause and perpetuate poverty and the systemic solutions that are needed to address it.

The core of the *Systems* narrative is a more comprehensive account of the role of systems in causes and solving poverty:

Poverty is a product of our choices as a society. Through our collective decisions, we have designed an economic system that produces poverty. By changing policies and institutions, we can redesign the system, change the outcomes it produces, and solve poverty.

Different organizations have provided advice that can inform the *Systems* narrative. Some advice is focused on communicating more clearly about systemic *causes* of poverty. For example, GOOD Corps recommends using data to illustrate economic and racial inequalities.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, Spitfire Strategies recommends portraying systemic inequality, rather than individuals living in poverty, as the “villain” in the story.⁷⁷ Our own work on reframing poverty and the economy in the United Kingdom found that it is not enough to simply assert that the causes of poverty are systemic but that these causes must be *explained* through devices like explanatory metaphors.⁷⁸

Other organizations focus on developing better ways of explaining systemic *solutions*. These are attempts to address what’s missing in the existing *Unfair Systems* narrative. Opportunity Agenda advises that communicators highlight specific anti-poverty policies and programs that have had “demonstrable positive results.”⁷⁹ Some suggest recasting the *Unfair Systems* narrative into one of systemic social progress—encouraging people to “leave those [unequal] systems in the dustbin of history and make something better.”⁸⁰ Our work on poverty and the economy in the United Kingdom found that explaining, through metaphor and step-by-step explanations, how the economy can be redesigned to meet the needs of everyone is a particularly effective way of building support for needed policies and programs.⁸¹

Some organizations working on poverty narratives focus on how individuals can be effectively brought into the *Systems* narrative. Some advice around this emergent *Systems* narrative stays at the level of systems (e.g., Spitfire’s notion of systems as the villain shifts focus *away* from individuals to focus solely on systems). By contrast, Olson Zaltman recommends a navigation metaphor as a way of situating individuals within systems: People in poverty can maneuver through a difficult system to get out of poverty. Those who work on entertainment media get even more concrete. If narratives are to provide templates for stories about particular events or people—the kinds of stories that might appear in entertainment media—then it’s critical to find ways of building individual characters into the *Systems* narrative. As the Norman Lear Center has noted, given the needs of entertainment media, the question isn’t whether to focus on individual or systems but rather how to embed individual stories within the *Systems* narrative.⁸² One approach the Lear Center suggests is telling stories of successful collective action against economic injustices, as in some recent portrayals of collective organizing in TV and film.⁸³ These stories focus on changing systems but are built around compelling characters. The TV series *Pose* offers a powerful example. In the series, characters engage in collective action to resist racism, systemic poverty, sexual discrimination, and other forms of oppression. The story

shows their involvement in ACT UP, a real activist organization, and the ways they use tactics learned from this engagement to engage in other collective actions, including resisting an unjust landlord.⁸⁴

Finding ways of embedding individual stories within a *Systems* narrative seems important for their effectiveness. Stories that are *only* about systems are less likely to be motivating as they don't connect with people emotionally in the same way as individual stories. In addition, pure systems stories can generate fatalism. If the causes of poverty are huge social and economic systems and structures, change can seem impossible and out of reach—which may be de-motivating. Telling individual stories while highlighting systemic context is, potentially, a better way to connect with an audience and leave room for individual agency in taking steps to address the problem. FrameWorks research on housing and homelessness, for example, indicates that stories about individuals who are housing insecure that *also* explain the role of housing policies and programs build a balanced view of what causes poverty and what can be done to address it, highlighting the role that both individuals and institutions can play in changing systems.⁸⁵

What Does This Counter-Narrative Do?

Telling stories that advance a *Systems* narrative makes sense. Such narratives push back on the *Individual Drive* narrative and counter Americans' tendency to see poverty as an individual problem that individuals must solve. Explaining the systemic sources of poverty and possible systemic solutions is likely to generate a more collective understanding of poverty and help people see that changing our economic and social systems is possible and would reduce inequality and poverty.^{86 87}

Building individual stories into a *Systems* narrative is a potential way of motivating engagement on the issue and creating a sense of agency, helping people see how they can take action to combat poverty. As the Lear Center suggests, versions of the narrative that center on individuals who come together to resist and change systems are well-suited to entertainment media, making this version of the narrative easier to disseminate.

The danger with versions of the narrative that center on individuals is that unless very carefully framed, they may accidentally reinforce individualistic understandings. Because people are used to focusing on individuals and tend not to have an eye out for systems, there is a danger that, in hearing, reading, or watching stories that place individuals in systemic context, people will pay attention to the individual part of the story but tune out the systems part. Moreover, by focusing attention on characteristics of particular people, this version of the narrative may leave room for people to apply familiar, unproductive categories like “deserving” vs. “undeserving” in relation to people in poverty—the reader, hearer, or viewer may conclude that the individual person who is the object of *this* story may not be responsible for their situation, but this doesn't mean that most people in poverty aren't.⁸⁸

How Can Communicators Use This Narrative In Practice?

There are open, unresolved questions about how best to deploy the *Systems* narrative. Specifically: What is the best way to explain systems? What are the most effective ways of harnessing the engaging dimensions of individual stories without undermining the systems focus? And how can solutions be introduced so that systemic problems don't seem too big to fix and elicit fatalism?

While further research is needed to answer these questions, there are some credible hypotheses that yield tentative ideas about how communicators can use a *Systems* narrative in practice:

- **Trace the history of systems.** Telling the story of how our economic systems came about as a result of decisions made shows that they are the product of design, not rules or nature or commandments from God. Moreover, by tracing how our existing systems were created to serve the interests of white, land-owning, Christian men, we expose how and why systems oppress Black and brown people, women, and people who don't inherit wealth.⁸⁹ By exposing the history of systems, the narrative can increase understanding of their designed nature and the possibility of changing them by making different decisions.⁹⁰
- **Build in collective resistance to authority.** Telling stories of collective action to resist power and change systems can potentially foster efficacy and a recognition of collective agency. Moreover, stories of resistance and overcoming injustice are an extant part of American culture and are likely to strike a chord and create engaging, emotional stories.
- **Highlight specific programs, policies, and institutions that need to change.** The current *Unfair System* narrative reinforces the idea that “the system” is rigged, but absent a clear sense of which policies and institutions are responsible for our current state, people are left without a clear sense of what needs to change. Being concrete and specific about what solutions are needed and what would change if they were implemented can fill this gap.

The *Humanity* Narrative

Researchers and practitioners sometimes suggest basing a counter-narrative on the experiences and the humanity of people who are experiencing poverty. This narrative counters the stereotypes embedded in the *Pathology of Black Urban Poverty* narrative and counters the depictions of people in poverty as lazy or weak that stem from the *Individual Drive* narrative. By providing rounded, diverse, and compassionate portraits of people in poverty, it counters the ways in which these narratives flatten and belittle people in poverty and limit people's understanding of who experiences poverty.

The core of the *Humanity* narrative is a three-dimensional depiction of individuals living in poverty:

People experiencing poverty are real people who confront enormous challenges with grit, creativity, love, and humor. They are elders and children, veterans and the disabled ... they are our family, friends, and neighbors. Faced with difficult choices and operating under unfair constraints, they do remarkable, inspiring things.

Some organizations have suggested that sharing stories about the breadth and range of people who experience poverty is a way of destigmatizing people in poverty and fostering greater identification with people in poverty. These individual stories—often told by people experiencing poverty themselves—aim to “change the face of poverty” by spotlighting diversity and lived experience. To humanize poverty and build empathy, Olson Zaltman recommends highlighting the experiences of veterans, older people, children, and local community members.⁹¹ An example of this is the “*Poverty Next Door*” project, which showcases individual stories of people with lived experience of poverty from diverse geographic regions, racial/ethnic groups, ages, and gender identities and sexual orientations.⁹² This approach looks to build common concern by helping people identify more closely with people in poverty—by showing that people experiencing poverty are “us,” not “them.”

Others, like GOOD Corps, recommend a different variant of this narrative that turns on the argument that “poverty can happen to anyone.”⁹³ This approach seeks to build empathy and a sense of poverty as a common problem by highlighting common risk and getting people to see poverty as something they too could experience. As Olson Zaltman notes, stories that describe people of all backgrounds experiencing poverty also aim to disrupt the idea that poverty is an individual “trait” by showing how people can move in and out of poverty.⁹⁴

It is possible to invoke our common humanity not only implicitly, through stories about the lived experience of poverty, but through the use of explicit values that highlight everyone’s right to respect and dignity. Making this value explicit can potentially strengthen the narrative. FrameWorks research on homelessness and housing insecurity in the United Kingdom found that using the value of common humanity to set up first-person stories of people experiencing homelessness is highly effective.⁹⁵

What Does This Counter-Narrative Do?

By emphasizing lived experience and providing a three-dimensional portrait of people in poverty, this counter-narrative aims to disrupt *Us vs. Them* thinking—the otherizing of people in poverty—and to combat stereotypes and misunderstandings about who is in poverty and why. And by appealing to empathy and our common humanity, the narrative has the potential to foster a sense of collective concern and responsibility. Well-rounded portraits of people in poverty have the potential to transport people—to help people see what life is like from

the perspective of people in poverty and to empathize with them. In doing so, these portraits enable people to step back from their preconceptions and reconsider how they think about poverty and people in poverty.⁹⁶

There are, however, reasons to think that the *Humanity* narrative—or at least some instantiations of it—might have limitations. Research on “episodic framing” has found that individual stories, when not placed in systemic context, often fail to shift people’s view of a group. If the individual case doesn’t fit people’s preconceptions about the issue or group, people are likely to explain away the person’s experiences as an exception to the rule rather than as a reason to change their views.⁹⁷ A substantial body of research, however, suggests that counter-stereotypical depictions that offer three-dimensional portraits of people can lead to shifts in people’s perceptions of groups.⁹⁸ Even in this case, however, it’s important to recognize that this narrative is designed to shift perceptions of people in poverty rather than to build an understanding of the systemic causes of poverty or support for needed programs or policies. Shifting perceptions of people in poverty is likely to make people more open to these solutions, but the narrative isn’t designed to help people see what kinds of solution are needed.

How Can Communicators Use This Narrative In Practice?

As with the *Systems* narrative, there are unresolved questions about how best to deploy the *Humanity* narrative. Specifically, there are questions about *whose* stories should be foregrounded, how these stories should be characterized (e.g., as examples of what could happen to anyone or as consequences of inequitable social systems), and how they should be set up (e.g., with values).

These questions can and should animate future research. In the meantime, here are ideas, based on existing hypotheses, about how communicators can use a *Humanity* narrative in practice:

- **Tell stories about individuals from every group and social background.** Highlighting the diversity of people experiencing poverty may help combat stereotypes.
- **Offer well-rounded portraits of people in poverty.** Showing the complexity of people’s character, the range of emotions they experience, the scope of their ambitions, and the richness of their relationships may help counter the ways in which existing narratives flatten and dehumanize people experiencing poverty.⁹⁹
- **Connect individual stories to broader trends.** Specifically noting that individual stories are representative of many other people’s experiences as well may help prevent people from explaining away these cases as exceptions to the rule.

- **Make a moral appeal to common humanity.** Stories within this narrative make a moral claim upon their audience, but this may or may not be explicitly articulated. Coupling stories about the humanity of people in poverty with a values-based appeal to recognize their right to dignity and respect may be helpful in increasing a sense of collective responsibility for addressing poverty.

The Solidarity Narrative

This counter-narrative integrates ideas of racial and economic inequalities with appeals to solidarity across racial difference as an animating source of systemic change. With its focus on how economic systems and racism are intertwined, this narrative directly counters the *Pathology of Black Urban Poverty* narrative. And by exposing the systems that produce economic inequality and poverty, it also helps to counter the *Individual Drive* narrative.

At its core, the *Solidarity* narrative spotlights the racism at the heart of our economic system and calls for a united response:

We need to join together across racial differences and stand up against systemic injustices. Working people—whether Black, white, or brown—are hurt by systems that only help the rich. By coming together and not letting them divide us, we can achieve a better future.

The narrative, exemplified by Demos’s [Race-Class Narrative Project](#), focuses explicitly on race and racism. The Lear Center argues for a similar strategy, recommending stories that bring race to the forefront and that highlight systemic racial and economic injustices.¹⁰⁰ The key concept in this counter-narrative is discussing, explaining, and advocating for *racial justice* alongside economic justice—to, as Color of Change describes, not only “make the facts about race present but [make] the movement for racial justice powerful.”¹⁰¹ Rather than omitting discussions of race, which is a common tactic used to avoid activating unproductive racial biases,¹⁰² this counter-narrative highlights the role of systemic racism in poverty, economic inequality, and political division.

Demos points this narrative in a populist direction, arguing that communicators should “frame racism as a tool to divide and thus harm all of us” and blame “wealthy elites” for racial and economic injustices.¹⁰³ This version of the narrative highlights a common enemy as a way of building solidarity across racial groups in support of progressive economic and racial policies, creating common cause across racial difference.

What Does This Counter-Narrative Do?

Talking about racism is critical in dismantling it. The way people think about race and racism won't change if communicators, activists, and advocates don't take the issue on directly. And because racism and poverty in the United States *are* intertwined, it is impossible to foster a real understanding of the issue—and support for changes to programs and policies that advance economic justice—without addressing racism. It is—simply put—a mistake to orient a narrative change strategy around appeasing regressive white people, as this requires conceding the bounds of existing discourse rather than stretching and changing our current narratives. Moreover, by highlighting the systems that produce economic and racial inequities, this narrative, like the *System* narrative, counters stereotypes of all people in poverty and of Black and brown people specifically.

There are, however, some open questions about the *Solidarity* narrative. Most notably, arguments for a *Solidarity* narrative often leave the details of such a narrative sketchy, beyond the idea that we must address race and racism head on and link racial and economic justice. This leaves questions about *how* to most effectively execute this narrative.

There is evidence from Demos that a populist version of a *Solidarity* narrative can motivate progressives and immediately persuadable groups to vote and engage in political action.¹⁰⁴ It is less clear whether the narrative they recommend, which asserts rather than explains the link between racial and economic injustice, truly deepens understanding of these issues. This difference between moving persuadables to vote and changing cultural beliefs and mindsets is significant. We suspect that changing mindsets requires more explanation of both the structural and institutional aspects of racism and the ways in which policy choices structure the economy and create inequality. In addition, it is possible that blaming economic and political elites is effective in mobilizing voters but that it has longer-term downsides (e.g., *Us vs. Them* thinking, once activated, could spill over to encompass other groups, like immigrants, as part of “them”).

In addition, existing recommendations around a *Solidarity* narrative typically focus on racial and economic inequality generally rather than poverty specifically. While these issues are tightly connected, members of the public who are not experiencing poverty often see themselves as affected by inequality even as they distance and distinguish themselves from people in poverty. There are, thus, questions about how a *Solidarity* narrative applies to stories about poverty specifically—for example, does bringing poverty to the fore make it more difficult to use the narrative to create cross-cutting solidarity? Distinguishing between people experiencing poverty and others experiencing the effects of structural racism and economic inequality may make it harder to create common cause across economic groups.

How Can Communicators Use This Narrative In Practice?

Further research is needed to understand how the *Solidarity* narrative can be most effectively used as a way of shifting deep assumptions about racism and poverty rather than as a way of talking about racism and economic inequality with a more immediate focus on moving voters. In addition, it's not immediately clear how the narrative could be used to tell individual stories in entertainment media or pop culture.

While more work is needed to flesh out the narrative, here are some ideas about how communicators can use a *Solidarity* narrative in practice, based on existing research and hypotheses:

- **Blame political and economic elites.** Highlighting the role of politicians and corporate elites in creating racial and economic inequality—and poverty—can potentially help unite people across races. By making “them” those in power, the narrative generates a multiracial “us” calling for change. This kind of populist strategy may have downsides. It could fuel polarization, and any time *Us vs. Them* thinking is activated, there's a danger that it gets applied in ways different than intended (e.g., otherizing immigrants as part of “them”). That said, the Race-Class Narrative project findings suggest that this strategy can potentially be powerful.¹⁰⁵ But this strategy doesn't mean focusing only on the problem—talking about the possibility of change is critical, as the next point highlights.
- **Emphasize hope and aspiration—what can be achieved by coming together.** The power of the *Solidarity* narrative lies in its potential to help people envision a more inclusive form of unity that makes change conceivable. It's important to foreground the hope for a better future and the possibility of overcoming current divisions.
- **Offer examples of racial solidarity.** Telling stories about people who build relationships and common cause across racial lines will likely make it easier for people to imagine themselves in such relationships and help people see what multiracial solidarity involves in concrete terms.
- **Link racial justice and economic justice.** While more research is needed to identify the best ways of doing this, communicators should explicitly connect racial and economic justice to help people see that in order to address poverty, we have to tackle both racial and economic injustices.

Debunking Myths

Some organizations recommend or engage in myth-busting—an attempt to explicitly debunk incorrect beliefs about poverty. This is mainly suggested as a strategy to counter the *Meritocracy* narrative. GOOD Corps, for example, advises explaining why the American Dream is a “myth,”¹⁰⁶ while others suggest debunking “rags to riches” stories and the “deserving” vs. “undeserving poor” categories—an approach the 2016 *Busted: America’s Poverty Myths* podcast series employed.¹⁰⁷ This strategy of myth-busting is also sometimes applied to specific stories about the economy, such as the myth that jobs are both available to job seekers and sufficient to lift people out of poverty.¹⁰⁸

There is substantial research indicating that, generally speaking, myth-busting ends up reinforcing the very ideas it is meant to debunk. By intentionally bringing to mind the beliefs it is trying to rebut, myth-busting inadvertently ends up strengthening them.¹⁰⁹ The strategy of debunking myths of the “American Dream” or “rags to riches” stories may end up reinforcing the very picture of American society it is trying to disrupt. Counter-narratives and strategies that paint a different picture of American society, rather than focusing on the vision they are trying to disprove, are more likely to shift perceptions of poverty in the right direction.

Counter-Narratives on Poverty

What the narrative says or signals

	Why does poverty exist?	Who is to blame for it?	What should be done?
Systems	Our economic system unfairly benefits some while failing others	Specific policies and collective choices that have shaped systems	Specific policy changes and collective choices to fix the system
Humanity	Unaddressed by this narrative	Not people in poverty, who are human beings whose dignity should be respected	We must recognize the reality of the experience of poverty and make it a priority to address it
Solidarity	Systems of economic and racial inequality shape our whole society	Wealthy elites who perpetuate economic and racial injustice and engage in a deliberate strategy of racial division	People need to work across differences and build common cause to achieve racial and economic justice

Outstanding Questions and Areas for Further Research

As we note above, research on existing narratives about poverty is stronger than research on counter-narratives. In general, more work is needed to test these counter-narratives to determine how they affect people's thinking and how they should be used. There are some specific areas that warrant exploration in future research:

1. **How should counter-narratives talk about gender and poverty?** While existing research has touched on gender at points, there has been limited exploration of how to address gender effectively in poverty counter-narratives. For example, how should narratives address the effects of gender on income and wealth? Should narratives trace the historical roots of the exploitation of women's labor? Should they spotlight how sectors engaged in "women's work" are paid less? Should they highlight workplace dynamics that enable and reproduce the exploitation of women? How can narratives effectively tackle the intersection of gender and race and address the distinctive forms of oppression that women of color experiencing poverty face (particularly Black women, in light of the prevalence of the "welfare queen" trope)?
2. **How can counter-narratives engage effectively with audiences who deny the role of racism in America today?** Above, we discuss strategies, especially those from the Race-Class Narrative, for talking about racism and economic inequality, but these strategies are designed primarily for persuadables. How can people who are difficult to persuade in the immediate term be reached and moved over the long term? Reaching persuadables may be the priority in the short term, but shifting culture broadly requires strategies for reaching everyone eventually.
3. **How can counter-narratives speak to the experiences of different racial and ethnic groups?** While the *Solidarity* narrative is explicitly about multiracial coalitions, it doesn't suggest specific ways of talking about the experiences of particular groups. The *Humanity* narrative can encompass these experiences, but at this point there aren't clear recommendations for countering specific stereotypes within this narrative, such as stereotypes of Black people living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty or recent Latinx immigrants experiencing poverty. While there is a relatively new body of research

about ways of countering specific stereotypes,¹¹⁰ more research is needed to identify the best ways of incorporating these strategies into the *Humanity* narrative and other poverty counter-narratives.

4. **How can counter-narratives combine compelling portraits of people experiencing poverty with discussion of systems?** The *System* narrative doesn't have an obvious place for rich characterizations of people, while the *Humanity* narrative doesn't include an obvious way of talking about systems. Research is needed to determine whether and how these narratives can be effectively combined or used in combination.
5. **Should counter-narratives focus on poverty or a different issue (e.g., economic and racial inequality)?** The counter-narratives discussed in this report are sometimes presented as counter-narratives *about poverty*, but at other times are characterized in broader terms (e.g., the Race-Class Narrative is about inequality more broadly). The broader frame may help to combat *Us vs. Them* thinking about people in poverty by not separating poverty from other economic issues. Also, long-standing research has found and Harmony Labs' recent work in the Narrative Observatory project has confirmed that narratives about poverty are relatively uncommon in entertainment and news media, making it difficult to effectively disseminate counter-narratives if they focus on poverty.¹¹¹ On the other hand, it may be difficult to shift thinking about poverty and perceptions of people in poverty without explicitly talking about poverty. More research is needed to determine what level or issue counter-narratives should focus on.

Summary Recommendations: How to Tell Effective New Stories

There are still questions about the larger counter-narratives discussed above, and more research is needed to answer these questions. Future research should focus on refining and supplementing the counter-narratives reviewed above in order to understand how these narratives can be used most effectively, including how they might be combined. While there is more to learn, the research clearly points to storytelling practices that all communicators should adopt, no matter which specific counter-narrative they are looking to employ. Below, we summarize recommendations from the research on existing and counter-narratives. Some of these ideas were touched on briefly above, while others did not come up in the discussions of specific narratives and are introduced here for the first time. Practitioners can use these strategies to tell stories that shift public perceptions of poverty and build support for anti-poverty programs and policies:

1. Carefully consider how your stories might reinforce existing unproductive narratives.

Because the dominant narratives around poverty are highly familiar to us all—we’re all used to *Bootstraps* stories and stories about “inner city” dysfunction—we unconsciously fit new stories that we hear and read into the narratives that we have been conditioned to expect. As a result, when people read a story about a protagonist who is struggling to get out of poverty, they’re likely to read it as a *Bootstraps* story even if the story doesn’t actually suggest that the individual’s willpower is what’s driving outcomes. By keeping these existing narratives in mind and developing an understanding of what story features activate them, communicators can avoid repeating or unintentionally cuing unproductive narratives.

2. Emphasize individual and collective action to build efficacy.

Stories that focus exclusively on systemic *problems*—without including discussion of *solutions*—can lead to fatalism and a sense that nothing can be done. Stories that focus on individual and collective actions against unfair systems can be particularly useful in building a sense of efficacy—the sense that what people do “actually matters,” as Color of Change describes.¹¹² Being concrete about the steps needed to address poverty is critical to leaving people with a clear sense that change is possible, motivating them to act, and building support for specific systemic changes. And as the Storytellers’ Guide to Changing Our World puts it, emphasizing that “together, we have the power” to make change can help people see a role for themselves in the change that must happen.¹¹³

3. In telling individual stories, bring the social setting to the foreground.

When stories about poverty focus on individuals only, they tend to reinforce the idea that poverty is caused by individual traits and must be solved through individual choices. Instead, stories should place individuals in systemic contexts and bring into view how social and economic systems perpetuate poverty, how these systems came about, and how they can be changed. The best ways to do this depend on the medium—TV dramas, for example, are unlikely to get into the finer points of the New Deal and the War on Poverty, but they can spotlight how current social welfare programs fail to provide the stability that recipients need.

4. Look for narratives that can shift the public discourse broadly.

Narrative change is about shifting culture broadly. The ultimate goal is to move deep and widely shared assumptions about poverty to create a different context for collective decision-making. This means shifting the broader narratives that circulate throughout our society as a whole.

While short-term political communications often adopt a segmented approach—targeting the specific groups who need to be mobilized or persuaded to achieve a particular goal, like moving a particular policy up the agenda or getting people to vote for a particular candidate or initiative—narrative change necessarily takes a longer-term perspective and must focus on the broader public. Particular campaigns or initiatives will, of course, target particular audiences, and knowing which groups are most likely to be early adopters and disseminators of a new narrative is incredibly valuable. But those engaged in narrative change work should look for new narratives that have the potential to spread widely and catch hold across

audiences. And since new narratives can only make their way into discourse through heavy repetition, narratives must be usable by different messengers, with different groups, and across different channels. These narratives must, of course, be tailored and adapted as they are used with different audiences and contexts, but only by disseminating narratives broadly will they begin to permeate our discourse and change culture.¹¹⁴

5. Foreground racial justice.

As the *Solidarity* narrative establishes, counter-narratives around poverty must take racism head on and explain the links between racial and economic justice. While there are outstanding questions about how best to do this, a basic point is clear: Deepening understanding of racism and its connection to economic inequality is necessary for our society to address poverty and economic inequality in a just way. Skirting the issue limits the progress we can make.

6. Use messengers to validate messages, challenge stereotypes, and amplify voices.

Messengers are powerful.¹¹⁵ They can validate messages, making an argument credible to those who might otherwise be skeptical. They can challenge stereotypes—this is the thinking behind having veterans or older people speak about their own experiences of poverty to counter people’s assumptions about who experiences poverty. And by giving excluded groups a platform, advocacy or activist organizations and media channels can amplify the voices of those who are typically erased, which itself can help challenge widespread assumptions about who deserves to speak.

Deciding which messengers to use depends on goals and contextual considerations. Narrative change practitioners should generally try to match messengers to their audiences and immediate goals. If they want to persuade an audience, practitioners should choose messengers that an audience finds credible and legitimate. If their goal is to counter stereotypes, practitioners should choose messengers that *don’t* fit stereotypes to stretch an audience’s understanding.

Long-term culture change requires amplifying the voices of groups who are currently silenced or sidelined. It’s important to acknowledge that this goal can be in tension with short-term persuasion of harder-to-reach groups. In the short term, for example, elevating messengers from advantaged groups—say, white professionals—may be the best way to reach hard-to-reach white conservative audiences. The problem, of course, is that this reinforces the idea that dominant groups’ voices are the ones worth hearing. Realizing racial and economic justice requires challenging existing assumptions about who has and should have social authority, and amplifying the voices of marginalized groups is a crucial way to do this.

Practitioners should look across communication to ensure that, taken together, the mix of messengers employed advances *all* of their goals.

By coalescing around effective new narratives about poverty, the field can tell mutually reinforcing stories that, over time, shift public perceptions of and attitudes about poverty in the right direction. Understanding the existing narratives about poverty in the United States is a critical step toward this goal. And by understanding possible counter-narratives, including their limitations and potential downsides, practitioners can move toward more effective storytelling. By taking seriously the critical findings of the research we have synthesized and following the recommendations for effective storytelling that emerge from it, practitioners can begin to shift public discourse and lay the groundwork for changing the narrative around poverty in the United States.

Endnotes

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2. USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center. (2020). Your Choices Are Only as Good as Your Options: Representations of Poverty in Modern Film and TV Content. *A Media Impact Project Research Report*. Los Angeles, CA: USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center.
3. Views expressed here do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.
4. In this report, we are not adopting a particular view about the *types* of patterns of meaning that narratives have *qua* narratives. In another piece of work that we have been doing in parallel to this report, FrameWorks has developed a model of narrative form that involves a somewhat stricter understanding of narrative: Narratives involve similarity in characters, plot, point of view, and other formal features. See: FrameWorks Institute. (2021). *The Features of Narratives: A Model of Narrative Form for Social Change Efforts*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
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Talking About Poverty: Narratives, Counter-Narratives, and Telling Effective Stories

April 2021

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*Miller, T., & Volmert, A. (2021). **Talking About Poverty: Narratives, Counter-Narratives, and Telling Effective Stories**. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.*

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