

A person is silhouetted against a bright, circular beam of light that extends from the top left towards the center of the frame. The background is a deep, textured blue, suggesting a night sky or a vast, dark space. The person appears to be standing on the edge of the light beam, looking out into the darkness.

Rugged Individualism and the Misunderstanding of American Inequality

By Lawrence M. Eppard, Mark Robert Rank, and Heather E. Bullock
With Noam Chomsky, Henry A. Giroux, David Brady, and Dan Schubert

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Chapter One

The Problem with American Individualism

There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we have the resources to get rid of it. . . . There is no deficit in human resources; the deficit is in human will. The well-off and the secure have too often become indifferent and oblivious to the poverty and deprivation in their midst.

—Martin Luther King Jr.¹

If I had to sum up what our social policy reveals, I'd say it reveals a very weak commitment to human dignity.

—Jamila Michener²

We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence.

—Franklin Roosevelt³

The United States is often thought of as both an exemplar and an outlier. It is widely recognized as a leader in a number of areas—the world's biggest economy, strongest military power, trailblazer in popular culture, innovator in technology, and so on. Yet it also stands alone among wealthy countries when it comes to addressing a number of key social problems. Whether the focus is upon health, crime, child care, or a host of other pressing concerns, the U.S. has frequently fallen short in confronting these problems through its social policies.

Poverty is a case in point. On the one hand, the U.S. is the wealthiest country in the world with the largest economy. On the other hand, it is plagued by rates of poverty at the top end among the group of OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) high-income countries (see table 1.1). This

Table 1.1. Relative Poverty across OECD Countries

<i>OECD Country</i>	<i>Relative Poverty %</i>
OECD Average (excluding U.S.)	12.3%
South Africa (2015)	26.6%
Costa Rica (2017)	20.4%
Israel (2017)	17.9%
United States (2016)	17.8%
South Korea (2017)	17.4%
Turkey (2015)	17.2%
Lithuania (2016)	16.9%
Latvia (2016)	16.8%
Mexico (2016)	16.6%
Chile (2015)	16.1%
Japan (2015)	15.7%
Estonia (2016)	15.7%
Spain (2016)	15.5%
Greece (2016)	14.4%
Italy (2016)	13.7%
Portugal (2016)	12.5%
Canada (2016)	12.4%
Australia (2016)	12.1%
United Kingdom (2016)	11.1%
Luxembourg (2016)	11.1%
New Zealand (2014)	10.9%
Germany (2016)	10.4%
Poland (2016)	10.3%
Hungary (2014)	10.1%
Ireland (2015)	9.8%
Austria (2016)	9.8%
Belgium (2016)	9.7%
Sweden (2017)	9.3%
Switzerland (2015)	9.1%
Slovenia (2016)	8.7%
Slovak Republic (2016)	8.5%
Norway (2017)	8.4%
Netherlands (2016)	8.3%
France (2016)	8.3%
Finland (2017)	6.3%
Czech Republic (2016)	5.6%
Denmark (2015)	5.5%
Iceland (2015)	5.4%

Note: All data latest available.

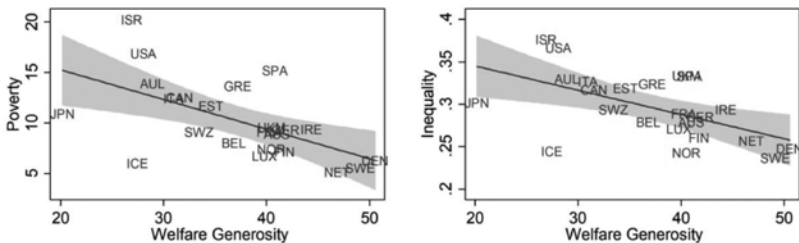
Source: OECD, "Poverty Rate," retrieved June 25, 2019 (<https://data.oecd.org/inequality/poverty-rate.htm>).

fundamental paradox of poverty amidst prosperity has afflicted the country for some time.⁴

How might we make sense of this paradox? Why should a country with the resources that the U.S. possesses have such levels of economic deprivation compared to other wealthy countries?

A variety of explanations have been offered to account for the variability in poverty rates in the wealthy world, with a number of scholars focusing on differences in economic performance or demographic characteristics between countries. In recent decades, however, a growing body of research has shown that a primary emphasis should be on social policies. When compared to competing explanations for cross-national differences in poverty and economic inequality among wealthy countries, the generosity of social policies is a much better predictor (Brady 2009; Brady et al. 2017). Those countries with more robust and structurally oriented⁵ (what we often call “European-style”) social policies tend to have lower levels of poverty and economic inequality. Conversely, those that take a less generous and more individualistically oriented (or “American-style”) approach tend to struggle with higher levels of economic deprivation (Smeeding 2005; Brady 2009) (see figure 1.1).

When we use the term *social policies*, we are referring to a broad array of government policies and programs directed at assisting with the well-being of American families, with a specific focus on those that broadly address economic inequality and poverty in some manner. These policies and programs operate at the federal, state, and local levels, and include Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), unemployment insurance, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, housing assistance, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the National School Lunch Program, and the Earned Income Tax



Note: Poverty correlation is -0.55, inequality correlation is -0.54. David Brady assisted with this analysis.

Figure 1.1. The Association between Welfare Generosity and Poverty/Inequality in Selected Rich Democracies.

Source: Author calculations with LIS (2018).

Credit (EITC), among others. Cross-national data consistently reveal that on general social spending, as well as spending in specific areas of interest to this discussion (such as spending on family benefits, unemployment, incapacity, etc.), the U.S. typically spends less than the OECD average as a percentage of GDP (Brady 2009; C. Lee and Koo 2016; OECD 2018d).

The question is, therefore, why the U.S. favors a less generous and more individualistically oriented approach to fighting poverty and economic inequality compared to many other wealthy countries, an approach that has proven less effective in addressing many social problems. There are a variety of factors to consider, many of which concern political and cultural features that differentiate the U.S. from other wealthy countries. As Alberto Alesina and his colleagues explain, three factors in particular help explain the differences in approaches to social policy between the U.S. and much of Europe:

Our bottom line is that Americans redistribute less than Europeans because (1) the majority believes that redistribution favors racial minorities, (2) Americans believe that they live in an open and fair society and that if someone is poor it is their own fault, and (3) the political system is geared towards preventing redistribution. (Alesina et al. 2001:39)

A number of studies confirm the importance of features of American political institutions in setting the U.S. social policy approach apart from Europe. The majoritarian political system in the U.S., for instance, is associated with weaker leftist politics compared to proportional systems elsewhere, and strong leftist politics are associated with more robust social policies and less poverty and economic inequality. Other American political features include the heavy influence of money in politics, low union membership, low voter turnout among the poor and working class, lower levels of female representation in government, numerous legislative checks and balances, the decentralized nature of the American federalist system, and the disproportionate responsiveness of Congress to the policy preferences of economic elites and business interests, among other features (Alesina et al. 2001; Brady 2009; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Royce 2015; Michener 2018).

As Alesina and his colleagues mention, a crucial factor that interacts with these political factors, and the factor that we will focus on in this book, is dominant culture. The dominant beliefs that Americans hold concerning the causes of economic, racial, and gender inequalities interact with features of the American political system to limit the size, design, and effectiveness of social policies. We call these beliefs “dominant inequality beliefs” or “the American inequality palette.”⁶ These dominant beliefs place far too much blame on the individual for social problems, and too little emphasis on the

role of social environments, relations, and institutions, as well as large-scale economic, political, cultural, and social forces. Such beliefs place far too much blame on African Americans, for instance, individually or as a group, for crushing racialized wealth disparities which actually result from a history of racism and the structural arrangement of contemporary American society. Dominant inequality beliefs also place too much blame on women themselves for wage disparities related to occupational segregation, the disproportionate burdening of women with the responsibilities of reproducing the species (an absolute societal necessity), and discrimination. Likewise, dominant beliefs explain economic deprivation and inequality in terms that are far too individualistic. In short, dominant inequality beliefs place far too much blame on the victim (Ryan 1976) instead of the perpetrator.

A doctor who believes a patient to be suffering from one illness, when in fact they are suffering from another, will not prescribe the correct treatment. Ultimately, this mistake will allow the illness to prevail.⁷ Likewise, blaming a social problem disproportionately on individuals, when in fact it stems as much from structural failings, allows that problem to persist. As we will discuss in chapter 7, research clearly demonstrates a link between Americans' dominant inequality beliefs and the types of social policies that they are willing to support. This research shows that the more individuals blame the victim for social problems, the less likely they are to support European-style social policies (Feagin 1972, 1975; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Hunt and Bullock 2016). We argue that dominant American culture, which places too heavy an emphasis on individualistic explanations of social problems over non-individualistic ones, is thus an important obstacle to the development of more generous and effective social policies. This helps explain the outlier status of the U.S. with respect to poverty and economic inequality in the wealthy world, as structural inequalities demand structural solutions (Bullock 2013). Flawed explanations that divert our attention from important structural factors impede the adoption of appropriate social policies.

Our main thesis is this: the stronger individualism and weaker structuralism found in the U.S. compared to much of Europe ensures that American politicians do not face the same degree of pressure that European politicians do to develop and/or maintain robust and structurally oriented social policies.

Take the example of national health care. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation survey found that 56 percent of Americans support a government national health plan that covers all Americans. Yet when the question is worded differently, responses change, and this change seems to be driven by how much the new wording does or does not activate the individualistic tendencies of respondents. While 62 percent express a positive reaction to "Medicare for

All,” for instance, only 44 percent react positively to “socialized medicine.” Likewise, 71 percent of respondents would support a Medicare-for-All plan if they heard it guaranteed universal coverage, but only 37 percent if it led to an increase in taxes (KFF 2019).

This is an example of the way that the stronger individualism and weaker structuralism found in the U.S. can weaken support for government programs that Americans often generally support in principle. This individualism, along with problematic beliefs about race and gender, can be tapped into in political debates in order to undercut popular support for policies that might otherwise appeal to many Americans.

Our focus in this book concerns the disproportionate emphasis on individualistic explanations of poverty and economic inequality in American society.⁸ At a number of points throughout, however, we will necessarily discuss other equally important inequality beliefs regarding racial and gender inequalities. One important reason is that our individualistic poverty/inequality beliefs impact our beliefs about race and gender, and vice versa. Another important reason is that it is the combination of these beliefs, rather than each set of beliefs in isolation, that most powerfully explains Americans’ less “European” social policy preferences.

It should be noted that Americans do not hate the poor. Studies find that Americans are generally sympathetic to the plight of the poor and believe the government plays a vital role in fighting poverty (NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy 2001; Piston 2018). The problem is that they also hold conflicting beliefs in other areas. Because of this conflict, we call Americans “skeptically altruistic.” Both Americans and Europeans tend to be morally committed to helping the poor, but unlike Americans, Europeans tend to be much more understanding of the non-individualistic causes of economic disadvantage. For Europeans, the sentiment “There, but for the grace of God, go I” seems to have stronger cultural currency. Americans are much more individualistic and likely to attribute one’s social position to individual effort/choices rather than structural forces or luck. Alongside Americans’ moral commitment to the poor, these individualistic beliefs create a persistent underlying tension. Americans want to end poverty and reduce economic inequality, and want the government to play a significant role in accomplishing this. At the same time they are suspicious of the morality and deservingness of many of the poor (which is associated with their views on race and gender), skeptical that government antipoverty efforts are effective, and wary (at least in abstract, “ideal” cultural terms) of “big government,” taxes, and market interventions. They also believe that there is substantial opportunity in the U.S. and that Americans have a high degree of control over their own destinies, and are thus much more supportive of social policies that focus on improving poor

individuals so that they may grasp these abundant opportunities, rather than on transforming social structures.

These individualistic beliefs can be activated in a variety of ways in political debates about social policy, and when activated they can help weaken and/or undercut Americans' support for generous and structurally oriented policies that otherwise might appeal to them. In the absence of this strong individualism, Americans' moral commitment to fighting poverty would put considerably more pressure on politicians to develop European-style social policies. Instead, the underlying tension between Americans' morals, poverty/inequality beliefs, and views on race and gender, combined with features of the American political system, ensures that social policies in the U.S. are never quite generous enough and never quite structural enough and never quite go all the way toward truly addressing poverty and economic inequality. As a result, some wealthy countries choose to reduce poverty by between 70 and 80 percent, while the U.S. chooses to achieve less than half of that reduction (Bernstein 2012). Relatedly, there is a very strong correlation (0.82) between social spending and inequality reduction among OECD countries. Some countries commit to high levels of social spending (as percentage of GDP) and achieve close to 50 percent income inequality reduction, while the U.S. spends much less and achieves about half as much reduction.⁹ We will discuss Americans' skeptical altruism in more detail in chapter 7.

We should add one final note before moving on. Individualism has historically been more pronounced in the U.S. than in Europe, but there are signs that this may be changing. Surveys from Gallup, Pew Research Center, and others in recent years suggest that structuralism may be becoming more influential in the U.S. Time will tell if this is temporary or a true shift in American culture.

Let us move on now and explore the meaning of American individualism.

THE MEANING OF AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM

Scholars have defined the term *individualism* in a variety of ways and applied it to a wide range of topical areas.¹⁰ We use the term to refer to a number of dominant American assumptions about the causes of poverty and economic inequality. These dominant assumptions place disproportionate emphasis on the individual rather than other key non-individualistic factors. Research has consistently shown that these individualistic explanations are widespread in the U.S. and have historically been more popular among Americans than non-individualistic ones (Hunt and Bullock 2016). "American society," Peter Callero eloquently argues, "is saturated with the holy

waters of individualism” (2009:20). Americans are not altogether unaware of non-individualistic explanations, of course, but have historically tended to be more comfortable with individualistic ones. Despite their popularity, research has consistently shown solely individualistic explanations to be severely flawed.¹¹

American-style individualism can be thought of as a way of understanding the world largely through the efforts, abilities, and decision making of the individual. The individual is viewed as autonomous, possessing a high degree of control over the outcomes within her or his life. Personal efforts, attributes, and decision-making skills, the logic goes, largely predict successful or unsuccessful life outcomes. Those who exhibit positive attributes such as determination, intelligence, and aptitude, as well as astute decision making, will generally do well and accomplish much in their lifetimes. On the other hand, those exhibiting a lack of decision-making skills coupled with negative attributes such as laziness will suffer the consequences in the form of poor life outcomes.

Americans utilizing this perspective understand poverty and economic inequality through the lens of individual failure and pathology. The assumption is made that in the U.S. there exists a largely classless society commonly referred to as the “land of opportunity,” with abundant opportunities available to everyone regardless of background.

The individualistic perspective argues that the educational system is open to all, and the occupational structure rewards all with the requisite talent. Consequently, personal success or failure rests within the purview of the autonomous individual to take advantage of such ample and open opportunities.

The work of a number of scholars across a variety of fields informs our conceptualization of American individualism. Many focus solely on individualism. Others, like Seymour Lipset, talk of an “American Creed” that includes individualism along with notions of liberty, egalitarianism, populism, and laissez-faire (1996:19). Still others explore related concepts like the “dominant ideology” or the “American Dream.”

Steven Lukes outlines the dominant form of individualism that has developed in the U.S.:

It was in the United States that “individualism” primarily came to celebrate capitalism and liberal democracy. It became a symbolic catchword of immense ideological significance, expressing all that has at various times been implied in the philosophy of natural rights, the belief in free enterprise, and the American Dream. It expressed, in fact, the operative ideals of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America (and indeed continues to play a major ideological role), advancing a set of universal claims seen as incompatible with the parallel claims

of the socialism and communism of the Old World. It referred . . . to the actual or imminent realization of the final stage of human progress in a spontaneously cohesive society of equal individual rights, limited government, *laissez-faire*, natural justice and equal opportunity, and individual freedom, moral development, and dignity. (1971:59)

In his book *The Myth of Individualism*, Peter Callero argues, “The artificial separation of the self from society, and the belief in the primacy and superiority of the autonomous actor is the *myth of individualism*” (2009:29).

Other scholars talk of a “dominant ideology.” In Huber and Form’s well-known *Income and Ideology*, the authors conceptualize the dominant ideology as emphasizing that the educational system is open, jobs are plentiful, and success is largely the result of effort and/or ability (1973). Robert Rothman’s conceptualization emphasizes that (1) there are abundant economic opportunities, (2) individuals should be industrious and competitive, (3) rewards in the form of jobs, education, and income are, and should be, the result of individual talent and effort, and (4) therefore, the distribution of inequality is generally fair and equitable (1993:57).

Still others explore the “American Dream.” Jennifer Hochschild describes the dream as an ideology that asserts that true success is virtuous, and that everyone, regardless of ascriptive traits, family background, or personal history, can reasonably anticipate achieving success through individual actions and traits within their control (1995:18).

We have similarly argued elsewhere that the American Dream:

is predicated on the belief in unbounded, limitless opportunity, available for the “taking” through a combination of innovation, dogged perseverance, and risk-taking, and while individual goals may vary, “success” is often conceptualized in terms of economic reward and social mobility. Core themes of the American dream also include “freedom to accomplish anything you want with hard work, freedom to say or do what you want, and that one’s children will be financially better off.” (Bullock 2013:41, citing Economic Mobility Project 2009:5)

There are common elements in these and other scholars’ work. For our discussion in this book, we settled on the following key components of American individualism:

- Individuals are autonomous agents.
- Equality of opportunity is preferable to equality of outcome.
- America is a land of abundant and open opportunity for all regardless of background.

- Success or failure within America's open-opportunity structure largely reflects individual effort, talent, and choices.
- Self-reliance and hard work are virtuous.
- In combination, American-style capitalism and democracy ensure a much higher degree of agency, opportunity, prosperity, and freedom relative to other economic/political combinations (and socialism and communism are particularly undesirable).
- The size of government and its interventions into economic markets should be limited where possible.

This is American individualism in its "purest" form. Not every American agrees with every assumption, and they differ in their degree of adherence to each assumption. Generally, however, each of these assumptions is more popular in American culture than more structuralist opposing arguments and significantly more popular than fatalistic ones.¹² For many Americans, these beliefs form the foundation of not only an explanation of the current social order but also a justification of it. From the perspective of American individualism, given the high degree of agency and abundant opportunities in the U.S., Americans are largely responsible for where they end up in life. Based on the decisions they make and the effort they put in, it is argued, Americans are ultimately responsible for their own fate. As we discuss in chapter 7, the high degree of individualism espoused by Americans is associated with their skeptical altruism concerning social policies.

We argue that the individualistic perspective outlined above is severely flawed. It diminishes the profound influence of social environments, relations, institutions, and forces in shaping our lives from childhood to old age. Factors such as discrimination, structural unemployment, or just plain chance are largely downplayed. Yet despite these significant flaws, American individualism remains popular. A number of studies clearly demonstrate that, more often than not, Americans prefer individualistic explanations of social inequality over non-individualistic ones, and the popularity of individualism in the U.S. exceeds that of the vast majority of wealthy countries (see table 1.2) (Feagin 1972; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Ladd 1994; Lipset 1996; Chafel 1997; Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Economic Mobility Project 2007, 2009; Hanson and Zogby 2010; Pew Research Center 2012a, 2014a, 2016a; Hunt and Bullock 2016; ISSP 2017).

Old habits die hard, and Americans still tend to believe that, through smart choices and a devotion to hard work, they can largely determine their own fate. In chapter 2 we will explore the key tenets of American individualism in more detail, as well as a number of important related beliefs. Let us now move on to discuss how individualism fits into the American inequality palette.

Table 1.2. Individualism across 44 Countries

Survey question: Please tell me whether you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or completely disagree with the following statement: Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control.

Countries	% Mostly/Completely Disagree
Global Average (excluding the U.S.)	38%
United States	57%
Advanced Economies	
Advanced Economy Average (excluding the U.S.)	41%
United Kingdom	55%
Israel	51%
France	50%
Spain	47%
Japan	44%
Greece	37%
Italy	32%
Germany	31%
South Korea	23%

Source: Pew Research Center 2014a.

THE AMERICAN INEQUALITY PALETTE

Individualism is one key component of American inequality beliefs. Throughout this book, we refer to dominant inequality beliefs—that is, the beliefs most Americans hold about the causes of not just poverty and economic inequality, but racial and gender inequalities as well—as the “American inequality palette.” The collection of beliefs in this “palette” represents the cultural resources that Americans have at their disposal, by virtue of being more readily available and well developed in our culture, compared to other cultural resources, to explain social inequalities based on social class, race, and gender. When examined closely, it is clear that these dominant inequality beliefs are deeply flawed, placing far too much blame on the individual for problems that scholars have identified as at least equally (and likely far more) non-individualistic in nature. Americans live in a culture that provides them with an underdeveloped non-individualistic vocabulary to describe problems like economic inequality, poverty, mass incarceration, the gender pay gap, and a number of other social issues. At the same time, that culture is saturated

with a well-developed vocabulary that easily places blame on individuals themselves—the poor, African Americans, and women—for these problems.

Taken together, this combination of problematic inequality beliefs contributes to the weaker support Americans tend to show, compared to their European counterparts, for more generous and structurally oriented social policies to address problems like persistent poverty and growing economic inequality. As Heather Bullock and her colleagues note, “Social scientists have attributed anti-welfare sentiment to multiple sources including stereotypes about welfare recipients and the welfare system, racism, sexism, and deeply held cultural beliefs about individualism, the causes of poverty, and self-sufficiency” (Bullock et al. 2003:36). This matters because it is the relative weakness of American social policies that largely explains the “outlier” status of the U.S. in the wealthy world in regard to poverty and economic inequality (Smeeding 2005; Brady 2009).

For the metaphor of the American inequality palette, imagine a painter in front of an easel getting ready to paint a picture. In her or his hand is a painter’s palette with a variety of paint colors, which could be used in myriad combinations to create nearly endless artistic possibilities. Despite the freedom to create something completely different with each new project, however, most artists typically have a particular style that they are comfortable with. Endless artistic possibilities may theoretically exist, but artists’ personal style places some limits on the range of forms they typically create. They prefer some color combinations more than others, some subject matter more than others, and so on. Most artists have certain artistic sensibilities that lead to predictable outcomes, a style that renders their art recognizable to those familiar with their work.

Similarly, the American inequality palette contains a range of explanations for the various inequalities that exist in American society. While endless possibilities exist for how Americans might explain social inequalities (including individualistic, structural, cultural, and fatalistic reasons), individualism is the style from which they most comfortably paint the social world. It is the default explanation they lean on. Americans will use non-individualistic explanations, as even the most ardent individualists often do. When considering the causes of problems like economic inequality, the average American has both individualistic and non-individualistic explanations at their disposal. Yet they are more comfortable with individualistic explanations on average, have more individualistic ones to choose from, and thus reach for individualistic explanations first. Individualism helps Americans to explain how the system of social stratification typically works. It is how they explain the world in abstract, general terms. If the evidence is overwhelming, they are willing to accept non-individualistic exceptions to the general “rule” of individualism.

But most of the time, they are more comfortable falling back on default individualistic explanations.

When it comes to our specific focus of poverty and economic inequality, we argue that the dominant explanations in the American inequality palette are severely flawed. Combined with equally problematic assumptions about the causes of racial and gender inequalities, this palette of beliefs limits the American imagination concerning how we might collectively address social problems.¹³

INDIVIDUALISM: AN AMERICAN TRADITION

The dominance of individualism in American society, and the uniqueness of the ideology's extreme popularity in the U.S. compared to elsewhere in the world (refer back to table 1.2), has been apparent for some time, as Martin Marger explains:

The place of individualism as the most basic component of the American creed and its pervasiveness throughout American culture have been recognized almost since the country's founding. Scholars and social commentators have repeatedly shown this aspect of American society to be truly exceptional in comparison with other societies. (2014:226)

Individualistic sayings like "You have no one to blame but yourself" are ubiquitous in the U.S. (Callero 2009:21), possessing a cultural currency unrivaled in many other parts of the world. As Heather Bullock notes, "The sheer pervasiveness of individualism and meritocratic beliefs in the mainstream media and political discourse make it very difficult for counterhegemonic information to take hold" (2013:66).

Individualism might even be said to be a core part of what it means to be an American. One notable American National Election Study (ANES) survey from the 1990s asked respondents how important "trying to get ahead on one's own effort" is in making somebody a "true American." An overwhelming majority, 80 percent, agreed that it is either very (45%) or extremely (35%) important, while only 5 percent said it was not at all important (Gilens 1999:35).

The popularity of individualism in American culture can be demonstrated in almost any historical period. The "Protestant ethic" of many colonial Americans, for instance, viewed idleness and poverty as immoral, sinful, and even criminal, while inequality was regarded as ordained by God due to variations in the virtue and character of individuals (Feagin 1975). In his *Poor Richard's Almanac*, Benjamin Franklin proclaimed that "God helps those who help themselves," giving "classic expression to what many felt in the

eighteenth century—and many have felt ever since—to be the most important about America: the chance for the individual to get ahead on his own initiative” (Bellah et al. 1985:32).

Based on his firsthand observations of American society in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that Americans “owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands” (Bellah et al. 1985:37). School textbooks around the time contained assertions like “every man is the maker of his own fortune,” and “even the poorest boy in our country . . . has as good a chance of becoming independent and respectable, and perhaps rich, as any man in the country” (Alesina and Glaeser 2004:204). In 1843, one of the country’s first national school textbooks, *McGuffey’s Reader*, proclaimed, “The road to wealth, to honor, to usefulness, and happiness, is open to all, and all who will, may enter upon it with the almost certain prospect of success” (Putnam 2015:33). By the end of the Civil War, such notions had “acquired an important place in the vocabulary of American ideology” (Lukes 1971:60).

Survey data from throughout the twentieth century demonstrates the persistent popularity of individualism. Even toward the end of the Great Depression in the late 1930s, with unemployment falling but still very high, 74 percent of Americans opposed a top limit on incomes, and only 35 percent supported the redistribution of taxes levied on the wealthy (Ladd 1994:58). By the early 1950s, 88 percent of Americans agreed that anybody who worked hard could go as far as they wanted (Kluegel and Smith 1986:44).

From the middle of the twentieth century to today, this individualism has persisted. As Robert Putnam explains, “In the past half century we have witnessed, for better or worse, a giant swing toward the individualist (or libertarian) pole in our culture, society, and politics” (2015:206), as “roughly two thirds of Americans from all walks of life told pollsters that as a matter of fact, anyone who worked hard could get ahead” (2015:34). Judith Chafel, summarizing the results from multiple nationwide surveys since the 1960s, similarly argues that in the decades since:

an ideology of individualism prevailed in American society. That ideology emphasized a number of beliefs: first, the personal responsibility of each individual for his or her place in life; second, the opportunity afforded by the “system” to improve one’s circumstances; third, the social utility of economic inequality in motivating achievement; and finally, the existing system as equitable and fair. The causes of poverty were seen by the American public as being individualistic in nature, and support for social welfare policy reflected a punitive attitude toward the poor as being deserving of their plight. . . . In sum, the findings reviewed here reveal a substantial degree of support for the status quo. (1997:445–46)

Why are Americans so much more individualistic than citizens in many other wealthy countries? Scholars have identified a number of factors, including (but

not limited to) the lack of a feudal past,¹⁴ absence of and aversion to monarchy and aristocracy, geographic distance from the Old World, the Protestant ethic, the focus on individual freedom and limits of state power at the founding, the publication of Adam Smith's influential work concurrently with the country's founding, the logic of American-style capitalism, the Western frontier and overall unusually large quantities of open land and natural resources,¹⁵ the enormous wealth and power of the U.S., the nineteenth-century popularity of Social Darwinism, the Cold War and aversion to communism and socialism, racial and ethnic heterogeneity in American society, and racism toward African Americans (Potter 1963; Lukes 1971; Ladd 1994; Lipset 1996; Gilens 1999; Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Mennell 2010; McNamee 2018).

It should not be concluded that the dominant ideology never faces serious challenges or that Americans are completely unaware of non-individualistic arguments. Critics of individualism always exist, and alternative ideologies have gained considerable strength during particular historical moments (such as in the 1930s, 1960s, and in recent years). What history shows us, however, is that these temporary challenges do not significantly alter the long-term dominance of individualism in the U.S.

In addition, individual people are never exclusively individualistic or exclusively non-individualistic. In the American inequality palette, non-individualistic (such as structural, cultural, and fatalistic) explanations exist alongside individualistic ones, as we discuss in chapter 2. Americans are aware of and support both individualistic and non-individualistic explanations for success and failure. However, they tend to be more comfortable with individualism on average, and have more individualistic explanations at their disposal, and thus use such explanations more frequently, especially in comparison to their counterparts in other wealthy countries.

In short, our history can be interpreted as strongly influenced by an emphasis on individualism. From the beginning, American culture developed differently from that of much of the "Old World," with less class consciousness, less recognition of the power of social forces, more anti-statism, and a greater disdain for authority (Lipset 1996). We have been, and remain, a highly individualistic society with a more minimalist approach to addressing social problems than that of many other wealthy countries.

INDIVIDUALISM APPLIED TO POVERTY

Given this background, it should not be surprising that Americans have historically been overly reliant on individualistic explanations of poverty. As opposed to more structurally minded European cultures, poverty in the U.S. has often been interpreted in disproportionately individualistic terms. There are variations under the rubric of individualism that the public often expresses.

One variation is the viewpoint that poverty has been brought about as a result of character flaws and bad decision making. These character flaws include the lack of a strong work ethic, an unwillingness to delay gratification, the absence of determination or grit, and many other moral and character shortcomings. These character flaws, in turn, result in bad decisions, such as dropping out of high school, becoming pregnant at an early age, engaging in crime, using drugs, and so on. As a result, such individuals are often prone to experiencing poverty and economic insecurity.

Another variation on this theme relates to skills and training. The human-capital perspective in economics is an exemplar of this approach. Here the emphasis is placed upon an individual's lack of skills and education as the cause of poverty. Those who do well in the labor market do so because their acquired skills and education have enabled them to compete for better quality jobs that provide a higher income. On the other hand, those lacking skills, experience, and education are only competitive for low-paying, unstable work. The result is that such individuals will frequently encounter spells of poverty.

Yet a third variation of individualism applied to poverty focuses on the inheritable attribute of intelligence or cognitive ability. According to this perspective, those who do well in life have inherited good genes in the form of intelligence, while those in poverty tend to suffer from low levels of intelligence. Individuals with lower intelligence simply cannot compete for better paying jobs, it is argued, and thus are doomed to a life of poverty.¹⁶

Underlying the overall framework of individualism as it is applied to poverty has been the important distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor. This distinction goes back hundreds of years in both the U.S. and England. A small group of deserving poor is viewed as worthy of our compassion and resources since their poverty was brought about through no fault of their own. This group has traditionally included those suffering from an unavoidable illness or injury, children, the elderly, and widows. On the other hand, a much larger group of undeserving poor are seen as worthy of neither our compassion nor our resources. Their poverty is perceived to have been brought about by the character flaws discussed earlier. This group consists mainly of the able-bodied working-age poor; rather than our compassion, they richly deserve our scorn.

An important outcome of the individualistic perspective is that poverty as a condition and the poor themselves are highly stigmatized. We argue that the sense of shame and stigma associated with poverty in the U.S. is a byproduct of the widespread acceptance of individualism in American society, coupled with other equally problematic beliefs concerning race and gender (such as the widespread suspicion of African Americans' work ethic and morality, or the widespread denigration of poor Black single mothers). This victim blam-

ing and stigma contribute to Americans' hesitancy to support more generous social policies.

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF INDIVIDUALISM

The major shortcoming with American individualism is that it either ignores or significantly downplays the role of the wider environment and forces beyond individual control in shaping people's abilities, resources, and opportunity pathways.¹⁷ It is largely the "lottery of birth" (Martinez 2016) that determines the environments, relationships, institutions, and forces—all external to and outside the control of individuals—that individuals find themselves embedded within. And it is these environments, relationships, institutions, and forces that will ultimately shape our lives, in terms of the individual characteristics we possess, the abilities we develop, and the resources and opportunities we find available to us. Raoul Martinez argues:

We do not choose to exist. We do not choose the environment we will grow up in. We do not choose to be born Hindu, Christian or Muslim, into a war-zone or peaceful middle-class suburb, into starvation or luxury. We do not choose our parents, nor whether they'll be happy or miserable, knowledgeable or ignorant, healthy or sickly, attentive or neglectful. The knowledge we possess, the beliefs we hold, the tastes we develop, the traditions we adopt, the opportunities we enjoy, the work we do—the very lives we lead. . . . This is the lottery of birth. (2016:3)

Martinez later remarks, "Whether we inherit a lot of money or property, are free from oppression and prejudice, are well educated, bright, strong, healthy, resourceful or beautiful, is ultimately down to luck" (2016:68).

Rather than thinking of the individual and of society as separate and distinct entities, as many do, it is useful to think of both as constituting each other. Individuals and society exist in a reciprocal relationship where both are inextricably linked together. Just as individuals shape society, society profoundly shapes individuals. One cannot step into or out of society. We are always inside of society, and society is always inside of us. The person you become in life is deeply impacted by your lifetime of experiences and relationships. We might even think of ourselves at any given moment as the accumulation of these experiences and relationships, as Peter Callero explains:

From a sociological point of view one cannot define the individual without first considering the fundamental role of social relationships. In fact, for sociologists the individual and society are simply two sides of the same coin and cannot

be separated. This means, for example, that our parents, siblings, coworkers, friends, and classmates are not only influential and important individuals, but they are actually a part of who we are . . . our very identity is a social creation that is constantly sustained by social relationships small and large. Some of our social relationships are experienced as close and intimate, while others are experienced as more distant and anonymous, but all combine to make us persons. (2009:2–3)

Society exists inside of us, beneath the skin, so that extricating ourselves from this accumulation of experiences and relationships is impossible. An astronaut who blasts off into space on a solitary mission does not shed this lifetime of experiences and relationships that have defined her or his identity, perceptions, beliefs, inclinations, abilities, behaviors, and so on. Individuals take on the “stamp” of their experiences and relationships, in the words of Norbert Elias, “from the history of the whole human network within which [she or he] grows up and lives” (1991:27). We carry our history and our whole human network with us at all times whether we are “actively working in a big city or shipwrecked on an island a thousand miles from [our] society” (Elias 1991:27).

Likewise, as society is always inside of us, we are always inside of society. By virtue of our existence, we constantly impact and are impacted by the people and contexts around us. What goes on beneath the skin is important, as are the forces outside of ourselves that constantly impact our life’s path. From the families we belong to, to the neighborhoods we live in and schools we attend, to the peer networks we are a part of, and beyond, our opportunities and direction in life are constantly impacted by people, environments, institutions, and forces outside of our control.

Together, our abilities, resources, and opportunities go a long way toward explaining where we end up in life, how much agency we possess, and how free we are to live the lives we want to live. As Jim Cullen argues, “all notions of freedom rest on a sense of agency, the idea that individuals have control over the course of their lives. Agency, in turn, lies at the very core of the American Dream, the bedrock premise upon which all else depends” (2003:10). In order to be truly free, individuals need agency, or the ability to freely decide on the life that they want to lead, and be able to think and act autonomously in pursuit of that life. We define true agency as the combination of (a) the full development of one’s abilities and (b) having access (unrestricted by unjust barriers) to resources and opportunity pathways. American individualism is inadequate in explaining the significant impact of social forces on the abilities, resources, and opportunities of individuals.

How do individuals gain the kind of control over their lives that true agency requires, allowing them to live the lives they imagine for themselves?

They do this by having their abilities developed fully, by having access to resources, and by being given entry to unrestricted opportunity pathways that allow them to make good use of those abilities and resources. Opportunity pathways cannot be fully utilized with few resources and compromised abilities, and abilities and resources are of little use without opportunities. As we will discuss later, both the development of our abilities and our access to resources and opportunities are highly dependent on social forces beyond our control. How will individuals become the best version of themselves if their home, neighborhood, and school environments stunt the development of their abilities? Or if they are lucky enough to have those abilities developed, how far will they go in life if good schools and well-paying jobs are not accessible to them? Because individuals and societies are not separate and distinct entities, but inextricably intertwined, one cannot understand the life of an individual without understanding how their society has profoundly shaped their abilities, resources, and opportunity pathways.

If we are not in full control of our abilities, resources, or opportunities, we are not in full control of our destiny. An extensive literature demonstrates the importance of environmental factors and forces beyond individual control in shaping an individual's behavior, well-being, and circumstances. Our individual characteristics—such as our individual identities, beliefs, inclinations, abilities, resources, behaviors, and so on—as well as our opportunities, are all shaped from birth (and in fact earlier in the womb) by a variety of forces beyond our control. A number of interlocking environments not of our choosing, from our family, neighborhood, peer network, school, and community to the country and historical period into which we are born, shape who we become as individuals and the opportunities available to us. The social groups we belong to and how those groups are either privileged or disadvantaged by the larger society shape who we become and how we will fit into society. Large-scale economic and political forces impact us at the individual level, profoundly shaping our development and path through the world. Social environments, relations, institutions, and forces significantly impact how our lives develop across time. Every major outcome in life—from educational attainment, to employment status, to earnings and wealth, to health and life expectancy, to risk of criminal involvement or victimization, just to name a few—is deeply impacted by forces beyond the individual.

As with other outcomes in life, our risk of economic deprivation is profoundly influenced by non-individualistic factors. Take, for example, the very random factors of where and to whom you were born.¹⁸ Recent studies demonstrate a strong relationship (what economists call “intergenerational earnings elasticity,” or IGE)¹⁹ between the earnings of parents and their adult children in the U.S. An IGE value of “zero” would indicate virtually

no relationship between the incomes of parents and their children, while a value of “one” would indicate a perfect relationship, where parents’ income perfectly predicts children’s income. The higher the value, the more the adult children’s income will mirror their parents’, with values of 0.50 or above considered a strong relationship. Recent research suggests that the IGE in the U.S. today is likely to be at least 0.50, with economist Bhashkar Mazumder calculating an IGE of 0.60 or higher (2016:120). This relationship is not only strong, but it is stronger than in virtually any other wealthy country, and in a number of cases considerably so (Mazumder 2005, 2016; Mishel et al. 2012). Mazumder argues that social mobility data from the U.S. “clearly challenge the ideal of America as a highly mobile society where individuals succeed or fail irrespective of their initial circumstances of birth” (2005:81).

A well-known analysis of American intergenerational mobility by Tom Hertz (2005) provides a good illustration of results from this relationship. This analysis found that approximately 62 percent of children born in the bottom income decile will likely remain in the bottom three deciles as adults, while only 1 percent will rise to the top decile. Of those born in the top decile, approximately 59 percent will stay in the top three deciles as adults, while only 2 percent will fall to the bottom. Recent analyses reveal similar results (Pew Charitable Trusts 2012). In a true meritocracy, where family background does not matter, around 10 percent of children would rise from the bottom to the top, and vice versa. This means that around 87 percent of American children who should rise from the bottom to the top do not. Likewise, around 85 percent of children who should fall from the top to the bottom do not, due to social protections (or “air bags” in the words of Robert Putnam) provided by their parents and their privileged social position.

To put this another way, imagine a fictional kindergarten cohort of 50 students, 25 born in the top income decile and 25 in the bottom decile. Given current mobility trends, at their high school reunion, you could expect to see 15 or so of the well-off children remaining in the top three deciles as adults. For the children who started out at the bottom, however, you could only expect about 2 to rise to the top three deciles. No more than one child would fall from the very top to the very bottom, or rise from the very bottom all the way to the very top. This is further complicated by race—the likelihood that one of these kindergartners would rise to the top is much higher if they are White, and the likelihood of being downwardly mobile is much higher if they are Black (Hertz 2005; Isaacs 2007; Mishel et al. 2009, 2012; Pew Charitable Trusts 2012).

Family social class matters a great deal, as does one’s (inherited and socially constructed) race and/or ethnicity. Take as an example the inequalities African Americans experience in relation to Whites. As Ta-Nehisi Coates notes, in America, “the concentration of poverty has been paired with a concentration of melanin” (2014). Recent U.S. Census data, for instance, showed that only

9 percent of Whites were poor, compared to 21 percent of African Americans (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Compared to Whites, African Americans inherit very different social positions (at both the family and neighborhood levels), and this unequal inheritance (combined with highly unequal treatment) leads to very unequal life chances. How would American individualism have us understand these differences? One variation of individualism as applied to poverty would have us believe that African Americans are disproportionately burdened with character flaws and poorer work ethics. Another variation would argue that they are not as likely as Whites to sufficiently invest in their human capital. A third variation would assert that African Americans, on average, are genetically predisposed to inherit lower levels of intelligence and cognitive ability than Whites. None of these arguments is supported by the evidence and therefore cannot explain racial/ethnic differences in poverty rates. Instead, social scientists have demonstrated that society is structured to privilege some racial and ethnic groups while disadvantaging others. In fact, compelling evidence suggests that the very concept of race was *invented* as a means to justify inequality and exploitation (Smedley and Smedley 2012; Omi and Winant 2015). As Coates argues, “race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming ‘the people’ has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy” (2015:7).

Beyond *whom* you are born to, consider also *where* you are born. A growing body of research in recent years has shown a powerful relationship between place—such as the neighborhood you are born into and the school you attend—and a variety of outcomes such as social mobility, criminal involvement and victimization, health, sexual behavior, drug use, and other outcomes (Putnam 2015). Different neighborhoods provide children with different resources, such as social capital, peer networks, norms and expectations, discipline, adult role models, and institutions (such as schools, libraries, grocery stores, parks, sports leagues, transportation, medical facilities, etc.).

Raj Chetty, an influential scholar in this area, explains his empirical work (and that of his collaborators) on the impact of place on the likelihood of upward mobility:

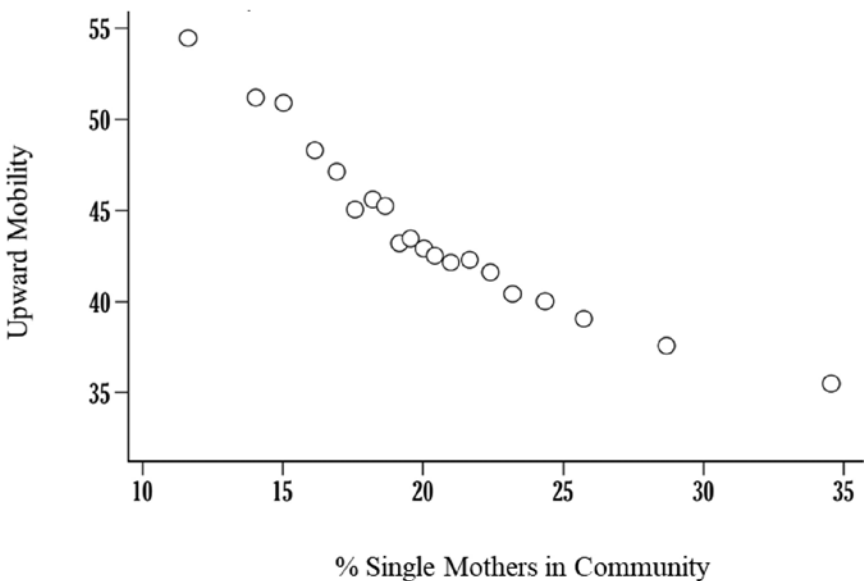
We find a strong negative correlation between standard measures of racial and income segregation and upward mobility. . . . These findings lead us to identify segregation as the first of five major factors that are strongly correlated with mobility. The second factor we explore is inequality. [Commuting zones] with larger Gini coefficients have less upward mobility, consistent with the “Great Gatsby curve.” . . . Third, proxies for the quality of the K-12 school system are also correlated with mobility. . . . Fourth, social capital indices—which are proxies for the strength of social networks and community involvement in an area—are very strongly correlated with mobility. . . . Finally, the

strongest predictors of upward mobility are measures of family structure such as the fraction of single parents in the area (2014:5–6).

The correlations that Chetty and his colleagues demonstrated between these community-level variables and the likelihood of upward mobility were indeed strong: -0.76 for family structure (fraction of single mothers) (see figure 1.2), 0.64 for social capital of neighbors, -0.58 for racial segregation, 0.58 for school quality, and -0.57 for income inequality (see figure 1.3) (Chetty et al. 2014:Online Appendix Table VIII).

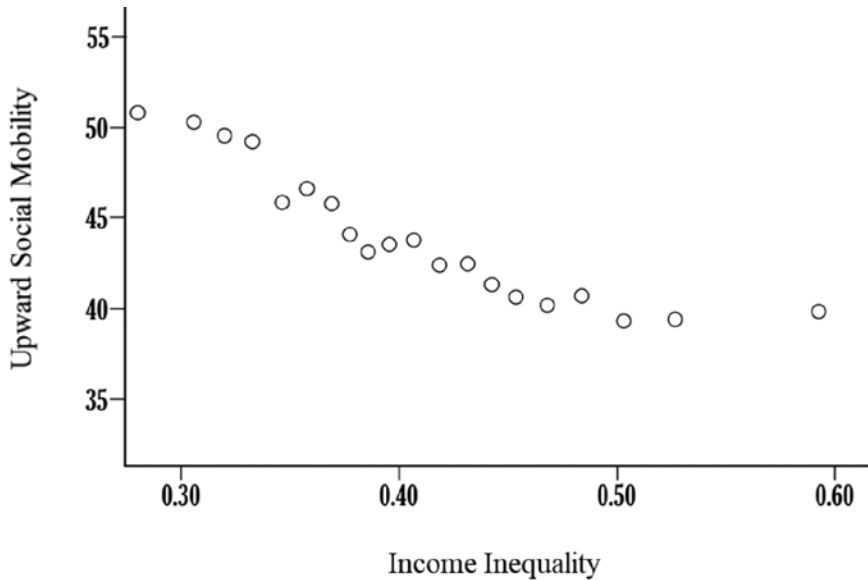
The Opportunity Atlas, an online data tool developed by Raj Chetty and his colleagues, provides further illustrations of the impact of place. Using this data tool, one can examine the adult outcomes of children from similar social-class and racial backgrounds, but who grew up in different neighborhoods. In just one example among many, this tool shows that low-income African American males who grew up in the Terrace Village area of Pittsburgh report a median total household income of \$12,000 per year as adults, and a 30 percent incarceration rate. Just a five-minute car ride away in Uptown, this group’s median income doubles to \$24,000, and their incarceration rate falls to 3 percent (Opportunity Insights 2018).

The data on the importance of place are troubling in light of the fact that American neighborhoods are becoming much more class segregated



Note: Correlation = -0.76 .

Figure 1.2. Single Motherhood and Upward Mobility across American Communities.
Source: Chetty et al. 2014: Online Appendix Figure XII.



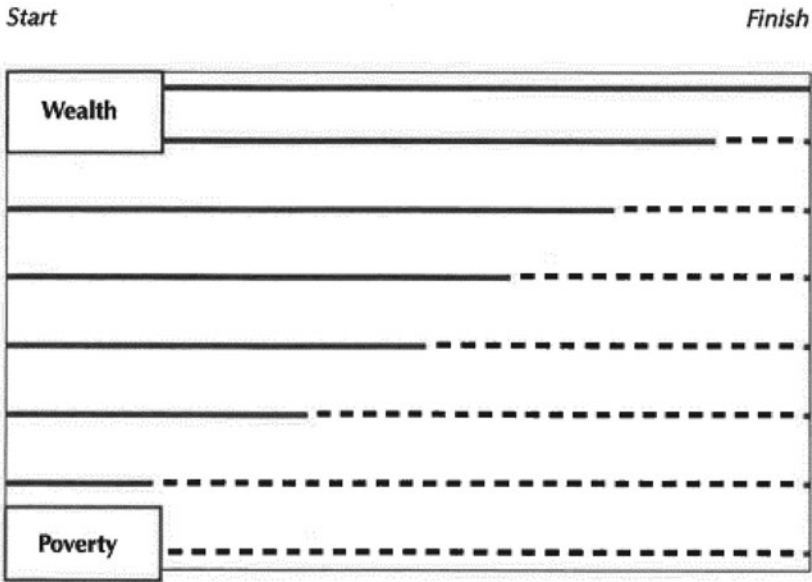
Note: Correlation = -0.57.

Figure 1.3. The “Great Gatsby Curve” across American Communities.

Source: Chetty et al. 2014: Online Appendix Figure XI.

in recent decades (Putnam 2015:38). In contemporary American society, high- and low-income children live in different neighborhoods, attend different schools, inhabit different social networks, and marry different people—all largely differentiated by social class—which has important implications for inequality of opportunity in American society (Putnam 2015). Robert Putnam observes: “Ultimately, growing class segregation across neighborhoods, schools, marriages (and probably also civic associations, workplaces, and friendship circles) means that rich Americans and poor Americans are living, learning, and raising children in increasingly separate and unequal worlds, removing the stepping-stones to upward mobility” (2015:41).

What the data in this section suggest is that life is like an intergenerational relay race. Some children start at or near the finish line, while others start near the beginning (McNamee 2018:43). Figure 1.4 helps demonstrate this metaphor, which was developed by Stephen McNamee in *The Meritocracy Myth*. The solid lines in this figure represent the impact of one’s background—how far we get ahead in life due to the families and social groups we are born into, the neighborhoods we grow up in, the schools we attend, and so on. The dotted lines represent our individual efforts. The same efforts will not yield



Note: The solid lines represent the effects of inheritance, while the dotted lines represent the potential effects of merit.

Figure 1.4. The Intergenerational Relay Race.

Source: Figure 3.1, “The Intergenerational Race to Get Ahead,” from p. 44 in *The Meritocracy Myth* (4th edition), by Stephen J. McNamee. Copyright © 2018 by The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Rowman & Littlefield.

the same outcomes if they occur at vastly different starting points, as in a real relay race. Inheritance matters.

Additionally, mobility not only varies significantly by family background and community, but also by country. Moving up from one’s social class of birth is more likely in a number of other wealthy countries. While the relationship (IGE) between the incomes of parents and children is regularly around 0.50 or higher in places like England and the U.S. (where it is likely 0.60 or higher), it is around *a third* of that in places like Denmark and Norway (Mishel et al. 2012). In fact, one’s likelihood of rising from the bottom to the top would almost double by simply being born north of the U.S.-Canada border instead of south of it (Reeves and Krause 2018). Countries like Denmark and Norway have created conditions that allow people from poor and working-class backgrounds to grasp opportunities in a way that is more difficult in the U.S. Commenting on this, Richard Wilkinson notes that a higher degree of government intervention in those countries allows *more*, not *less* freedom, asserting that “if Americans went

to countries like Sweden and Norway they would feel more rather than less free” (Eppard et al. 2018:143). And as Wilkinson is fond of saying, “If you want to live the American dream, you should move to Finland or Denmark” (Trueman 2011).

Research has repeatedly shown the powerful effects of forces beyond an individual’s control on their life chances and that these effects are cumulative. They are cumulative in that being born at the bottom of the social hierarchy does not expose a person to just one risk factor but to a variety of them, including in the areas of health, cognitive development, educational attainment, crime victimization, and others. It is likely that you will avoid some of these risks if you are born poor, but unlikely that you will avoid all of the countless others that accumulate in your disadvantaged social position. Being disadvantaged in one area of life can be harmful, whether in one’s family structure, parenting received, childhood experiences, school quality, peer groups, neighborhood and community quality, and so on (Putnam 2015). Being disadvantaged in multiple areas is even more harmful, and the risk of multiple sites of disadvantage is greater for poorer Americans.

Effects are also cumulative in another sense. Disadvantage at one stage in the life course can increase the risk factors faced at another stage. Poor prenatal care, for instance, is connected to the risk of low birth weight, which is related to possible stunted cognitive ability, poorer health, and worse educational outcomes. In turn, these outcomes are related to lower potential earnings in adulthood, a shorter life expectancy, a greater risk of being a victim of violent crime, and a number of other risks.

Another drawback of individualism as it is applied to poverty is that it fosters and encourages societal inaction toward poverty. As we discuss at length in chapter 7, the more individualistic people are, the less likely they are to support generous and structurally oriented social policies (Hunt and Bullock 2016). After all, if poverty is viewed as the result of individual failure, then the answer to and responsibility for alleviating poverty lies not with society but with the individual. An individualistically oriented approach, rather than a structurally oriented one, has largely been the U.S. approach toward addressing poverty and is a major reason for its outlier status in the wealthy world on measures of economic disadvantage. Indeed, when researchers estimate the impact of economic performance, demographic characteristics, and social policies on levels of poverty and economic inequality across wealthy countries, social policies are the best explanation for the differences among them (Smeeding 2005; Brady 2009).

Inaction on poverty is not only harmful to the individuals impacted by it, but it is also costly to society. In one recent analysis, researchers estimated

that the costs of childhood poverty, in terms of impacts to future economic productivity, health-care costs, criminal justice costs, and other costs, were over a \$1 trillion per year. This amounts to over a quarter (28%) of the federal budget. The authors estimate that for every dollar spent on reducing childhood poverty, the U.S. would save at least seven dollars due to the corresponding reduction in the economic costs of poverty (McLaughlin and Rank 2018; Rank 2018). Another analysis found that, on average, individual young people who do not go on to college or work in early adulthood end up costing society over \$37,000 annually each (in terms of lost economic productivity and/or the costs of criminal involvement) (Belfield et al. 2012:2). Based on the evidence, Mark Rank argues, “It is not a question of paying or not paying. Rather, it is a question of how we pay, which then affects the amount we end up spending. In making an investment up front to alleviate poverty, the evidence suggests, we will be repaid many times over by lowering the enormous costs associated with a host of interrelated problems” (2018).

In the U.S., our social policies have disproportionately focused on attempting to “improve” individuals, either through upgrading their skills or by attempting to instill “responsible” behavior in them. For example, the most recent welfare-reform bill passed by Congress, in 1996, was the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). As the name implied, much of this bill’s emphasis was on instilling responsibility in welfare recipients. This was to be accomplished through lifetime limits on welfare benefits, stricter work requirements, family caps (prohibiting increased payments for children born into a family on welfare), and so on. Likewise, “improving” poor people’s behavior has been emphasized in the long series of work- and job-training programs at both the state and federal levels. Rather than advocating job-creation policies, this approach has attempted to upgrade poor people’s job-seeking skills and abilities in order to make them more competitive in the labor market. Through their emphasis on individual failings, such policies and programs have largely neglected important structural components of poverty.

The individualistic nature of American culture informed both the development of and response to the PRWORA. In 1996, for example, a majority of Americans supported a two-year time limit (77%), a five-year lifetime limit (70%), family caps (67%), and work requirements (54%). Additionally, an overwhelming majority (82%) reported favoring the welfare reform bill (Shaw and Shapiro 2002:115–18).

We argue throughout this book that, by focusing too heavily on individual attributes as the cause of poverty and economic disparities, the underlying dynamic of American inequality has largely been missed. Too much attention has been paid to who loses the economic game rather than to addressing the

fact that the game produces losers in the first place. We now turn to several important structural failures that contribute to the high rates of economic disadvantage in the U.S. compared to other wealthy countries.

POVERTY AS A STRUCTURAL RATHER THAN INDIVIDUAL FAILURE

Considering the significant problems with the individualistic perspective, how might we better understand the root causes of poverty? In prior work, we have argued that poverty is primarily the result of structural, rather than individual, failings (Rank 2005; Bullock 2013; Eppard et al. 2017). One way to consider this dynamic is through the analogy of musical chairs. In a game of musical chairs, two approaches can be used to understand the dynamics of the game. The first is to focus attention on the characteristics of those who lose the game. For this example, imagine a game with ten players but only eight chairs. We can begin directing our attention to the characteristics of the two individuals who lost this game. Perhaps they were not as fast as the other players, or they were in a bad position when the music stopped, or they were not as agile as the other eight players. All of these could be appropriately cited as the specific reasons why these two individuals lost in this particular game. However, if we step back and consider the structure of the game itself, then it becomes clear that these factors only explain who lost this game, not why there are losers in the first place. To answer the latter question, we must focus on the structure of the game itself. Consequently, given that there are only eight chairs but ten individuals playing, two players are bound to lose regardless of what their individual characteristics might be. Even if we were to double everyone's speed and agility, there would still be two individuals losing out, given the structure of the game. In fact, all players' abilities could be *the same*, and the result would remain unchanged.

So it is with poverty. Our argument is that poverty is a result of much more than individual failures. Like a large-scale game of musical chairs, there are simply not enough good opportunities in American society for everyone to develop their abilities and gain access to important resources and pathways to success. The result is that a certain percentage of the population will find themselves at or near the poverty line. Poverty is the result of a mismatch between opportunities, on the one hand, and households in need of those opportunities, on the other. Those who wind up losing in this large-scale version of musical chairs will have characteristics that put them at a disadvantage in competing in the game, such as low educational attainment, physical disabilities, single-parent family structures, and so on. On one level, we can

point to these characteristics as the reasons why such individuals have found themselves in poverty. Yet on a deeper level, their poverty is ultimately the result of not enough decent-paying jobs and other resources needed to support all Americans above the poverty line.

Difference Rooted in Social Hierarchies and Cumulative Inequality

To be clear, there is considerable variation among Americans in the individual-level characteristics associated with success, and these differences tend to vary by social class. Before children even reach kindergarten, for instance, social scientists already observe major differences in their vocabularies and cognitive abilities. In one notable study of three-year-old children, the most advantaged children demonstrated an average IQ score of 117 and knew an average of 1,116 words, versus an average IQ score of 79 and a vocabulary of 525 words for the most disadvantaged children (Hart and Risley 1995:176). The researchers demonstrated that these inequalities were very strongly correlated with inequalities in the home environments of these children, particularly the practices of parents.

Other research has also found strong associations between the home environment, and parenting in particular, and children's outcomes—and home environments and parenting vary significantly by social class, as Richard Reeves and Kimberly Howard note:

Parenting quality is not randomly distributed across the population. . . . Almost half of all parents in the bottom income quintile fall into the category of weakest parents—and just three percent are among the strongest parents. Similarly, 45 percent of mothers with less than a high school degree are among the weakest parents and four percent of them are among the strongest parents. Forty-four percent of single mothers fall into the 'weakest' parent category, with just three percent in the strongest group. At the other end of the scale, higher levels of income, education, and family stability all strongly contribute to better parenting. (2013:6)

Only 34 percent of children of the weakest parents are meeting benchmarks in early childhood, and 36 percent in early adulthood. Children of the strongest parents are much more likely to be meeting benchmarks in both early childhood (77%) and early adulthood (75%) (Reeves and Howard 2013:9).

Clearly, early inequalities can last across the life course. A number of studies demonstrate not only that the first five years of life have a disproportionately important impact on the development of both language and higher cognitive functioning, but also the inequalities that emerge during this period

tend to persist. In the Hart and Risley study (1995) mentioned earlier, for instance, unequal early childhood parenting practices were correlated with unequal educational performance later in elementary school. Greg Duncan and his colleagues explain: “Income poverty has a strong association with a low level of preschool ability, which is associated with low test scores later in childhood as well as grade failure, school disengagement, and dropping out of school” (Duncan et al. 1998:420). Only 48 percent of low-income children are meeting benchmarks in early childhood, a proportion that *falls* by early adulthood (38%). For high-income children, the proportion meeting benchmarks is high in both early childhood (78%) and early adulthood (74%) (Sawhill et al. 2012:7).

This is why investments in early childhood are so important. Studies show these investments “pay off” (the initial investment reaps a matching societal benefit) by the teenage years and lead to societal “profit” every year afterward, in terms of better educational attainment, economic productivity, and health, as well as less need for welfare or incarceration (Schanzenbach et al. 2016; McLaughlin and Rank 2018; Rank 2018). Economist James Heckman and his colleagues estimate that investments in high-quality early childhood interventions for disadvantaged children can lead to at least a 7 percent societal return on investment per year, if not to the nearly 13 percent return suggested by their most recent research (Heckman 2017). Whether it is 7 percent or 13 percent, this suggests a significant societal profit as these children move through adulthood.

As mentioned earlier, early childhood inequalities tend to persist. Fewer than half of poor children are ready for school at age five, compared to 75 percent of children from moderate- or high-income households (Isaacs 2012). Seventy-two percent of middle-class children know the alphabet when starting school, versus only 19 percent of poor children (Putnam 2015:116). On average, poor children fare worse than non-poor children throughout their educational careers in terms of grades, test scores, risk of learning disabilities, risk of developmental delays, high school graduation rates, and college attendance and graduation rates—and the disparities can grow worse depending on the degree, duration, and timing of poverty (Secombe 2007:60).

While almost all children from the top socioeconomic quartile graduate from high school, more than a quarter of children from the bottom quartile do not (Putnam 2015:184). High school students with high-earning parents average a 1714 cumulative SAT score, versus a 1326 average for students of low-earning parents (Goldfarb 2014). Only 14 percent of children from low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds will complete college, compared to 60 percent from high-SES backgrounds (Bjorklund-Young 2016). At the most selective colleges in the U.S., 74 percent of the students come from

families in the top quarter of the socioeconomic scale, while just 3 percent come from the bottom quarter (Carnevale and Rose 2003:11).

Besides abilities, other individual-level differences matter as well. Take resources as an example. Individuals who occupy similar social positions tend to have similar access (or lack of access) to a variety of resources, such as financial resources, cultural resources (educational credentials, vocabulary, types of knowledge and skills, norms, etc.), social capital (the people you know and the resources they can make available to you), prestige/reputation, and so on.²⁰ The lower one's social class, the less likely one is to have access to these resources. Compared to lower-income children, higher-income children accumulate more of the cultural resources valued by dominant institutions, know more people in influential social circles, have better economic outcomes due to well-resourced families and schools, and have better access to prestige and reputation. Lower-income Americans, with greatly constrained access to such resources, find it much more difficult to be upwardly mobile.

Compared to those in the lowest social classes, those in the highest social classes are more likely to be in good health, have a stable marriage, own their own home, find life exciting, report being very happy, and see opportunities for getting ahead, as well as being much less likely to be victims of violent crime. Some of these gaps are astounding. On average, the richest American women live 10 years longer than the poorest, while the richest men live an astounding 15 years longer than the poorest (Chetty 2018). Median weekly earnings for high school graduates are only about 56 percent of the earnings of those who have a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. BLS 2015). The poverty rate for high school graduates is typically between 2.5 and 3 times higher than that of those with a college degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). In the top 25 percent of income earners, 88 percent own their own homes, 41 percent report being very happy, and only 14 percent have been victims of violent crime. In the bottom 25 percent of income earners, these numbers are 35 percent, 23 percent, and 41 percent, respectively (Gilbert 2011:2). Among women with a college degree, the likelihood of their first marriage lasting twenty years or longer is 78 percent, compared to 40 percent for those with a high school diploma or less (Pew Research Center 2015b).

We move beyond blaming the individual for these differences for a variety of reasons, but two are particularly crucial. First, these differences are impacted in significant ways by forces beyond the control of the individual. We like to believe that the things that make us unique, such as our identities, beliefs, inclinations, and abilities, are of our own making, when they are in fact the result of a collaborative process. Three-year-old children, like the ones in the aforementioned study by Hart and Risley (1995), for instance, are not re-

sponsible for the families, neighborhoods, countries, and other environments into which they are born, environments that contribute to the development or lack of development of their abilities.²¹ Likewise, the parents and neighbors of children from disadvantaged families and neighborhoods, rather than being solely to blame for the unequal development of children, are likely doing their best with a level of agency (abilities, resources, and opportunities) that was constrained by their own limited opportunities growing up.

These children are likewise not responsible for the racial and gender inequalities that disadvantage some and privilege others. They had no hand in creating forces like globalization, deindustrialization, or automation, which negatively impact some groups more than others.

If we assume that differences in the abilities of adults are innate, we miss all of the crucial ways that these inequalities might have been much smaller had poor and working-class children had the opportunity to develop their talents early on. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, dominant ideologies assert that “it is ‘the brightest and the best,’ as they say at Harvard, who come out on top,” yet social scientists know that abilities like intelligence are “distributed by society and that inequalities in intelligence are social inequalities” (2010:118–19).

In his classic article “Some Principles of Stratification: A Critical Analysis,” Melvin Tumin makes the critical point that only when every citizen’s abilities are developed from an early age can we truly know the extent of potential in a society: “It is only when there is genuinely equal access to recruitment and training for all potentially talented persons that differential rewards can conceivably be justified as functional. And stratification systems are apparently inherently antagonistic to the development of such full equality of opportunity” (1953:389). Tumin explains this point more fully:

In every society there is some demonstrable ignorance regarding the amount of talent present in the population. And the more rigidly stratified a society is, the less chance does that society have of discovering any new facts about the talents of its members. Smoothly working and stable systems of stratification, wherever found, tend to build-in obstacles to the further exploration of the range of available talent. This is especially true in those societies where the opportunity to discover talent in any one generation varies with the differential resources of the parent generation. Where, for instance, access to education depends upon the wealth of one’s parents, and where wealth is differentially distributed, large segments of the population are likely to be deprived of the chance even to discover what are their talents. Whether or not differential rewards and opportunities are functional in any one generation, it is clear that if those differentials are allowed to be socially inherited by the next generation, then, the stratification system is specifically dysfunctional for the discovery of talents in the next generation. In

this fashion, systems of social stratification tend to limit the chances available to maximize the efficiency of discovery, recruitment and training of “functionally important talent.” (1953:389)

Children do not decide whether they will have access to the resources that are crucial to their life chances. Educational attainment, for instance, is heavily impacted by the families we are born into, neighborhoods we live in, and schools we attend—all of which were determined by others’ choices. Research suggests that approximately 40 percent of income-related differences in cognitive outcomes in early childhood may be related to parenting alone (Waldfoegel and Washbrook 2011). Dan Goldhaber and his colleagues have calculated that about 60 percent of the differences in student achievement can be attributed to individual and family background characteristics, and about 21 percent to school quality (2002:52–53). The average poor student attends a school that ranks at the 40th percentile on state exams, compared to the 61st percentile for middle- and high-income students (Rothwell 2012:8). Economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues have found a strong correlation (0.58) between school quality and the likelihood of upward mobility (Chetty et al. 2014:Online Appendix Table VIII).

As Pierre Bourdieu argues, “the educational capital held at a given moment expresses, among other things, the economic and social level of the family of origin” (1984:105). Those with the greatest access to cultural resources in childhood also tend to be the ones plugged into those academic institutions most likely to multiply those resources. Thus, the educational system tends to “sanction and to reproduce the distribution of cultural capital by proportioning academic success to the amount of cultural capital bequeathed by the family” (Bourdieu 1977:497). As mentioned earlier, only 14 percent of children from low-SES backgrounds will complete college, compared to 60 percent from high-SES backgrounds, and approximately three-quarters of the students at the most prestigious colleges come from privileged backgrounds, versus 3 percent from the bottom of the SES hierarchy (Carnevale and Rose 2003; Bjorklund-Young 2016).

Like cultural capital, the accumulation of social capital and financial resources is similarly dependent on our background. Social capital accumulation is related to the families we are born into and the connections that they have, as well as where our families decide that we will live and go to school. Raj Chetty and his colleagues, as mentioned earlier, have calculated a strong correlation (0.64) between the social capital of those in our community and our likelihood of upward mobility (Chetty et al. 2014:Online Appendix Table VIII). Higher-SES Americans have wider and deeper social networks than lower-SES Americans, and this is a strong predictor of the well-being of their

children. Higher-SES parents not only have more strong ties than lower-SES parents, but also more of the important weak ties, to business leaders, teachers and professors, lawyers, medical professionals, and a number of other influential people, and this has wide-ranging positive consequences (such as much greater access to opportunities, expertise, and support) for their children's advancement (Putnam 2015:209). The gaps between the affluent and the poor are striking: 64 percent of affluent children have mentoring beyond their extended families, for instance, while 62 percent of poor children do not (Putnam 2015:216).

Financial resource accumulation likewise is largely related to family background and educational attainment. Some studies suggest that most American wealth is inherited, and that there is a strong relationship (IGE of between 0.50 and 0.60 or higher) between the income of parents and children (Kotlikoff and Summers 1981; Gale and Scholz 1994; Thurow 1996; Mazumder 2005 & 2016; Mishel et. al. 2012). The wealth and income levels of our parents have important consequences for our futures, and yet we have no control over them.

All of these resources are highly dependent on our background, all can be converted into other important resources (money can buy schooling, schooling can enhance social capital, and so on), and all play a significant role in the reproduction of social class from one generation to the next. Leonard Beeghly explains: "The class structure is stable across generations because people in each class pass their resources (wealth, education, interpersonal contacts) on to their children. . . . The rewards of hard work go mainly to those who start out with some advantages" (2008:143). In our individualistic society, the transmission of advantage, such as passing down cultural resources and social capital, is often misrecognized as meritocratic, thus reducing the number of challenges this transmission of advantage might otherwise face.

Even things as seemingly individualistic as our motivations and aspirations are profoundly shaped by our social position. When one's social position has not prepared children well for school, they are at a much higher risk of losing hope and becoming less motivated to excel and/or finish, thus "self-eliminating" themselves from the educational system early. One's social class position and the structure of the educational system "determine aspirations by determining the extent to which they can be satisfied" (Bourdieu 1977:496). Melvin Tumin makes a similar argument about unequal societies in general: "To the extent that participation and apathy depend upon the sense of significant membership in the society, social stratification systems function to distribute the motivation to participate unequally in a population" (1953:393).

So the first reason we move beyond individuals is because individual-level differences are significantly impacted by outside forces. It is true that

individual differences that begin to emerge in early childhood help to reproduce social hierarchies later in adulthood; yet such differences were created by existing social hierarchies in early childhood *in the first place*. Children do not enter a level playing field at birth and then find themselves sorted into different social positions later on according to merit. They enter into a particular social position in the social hierarchy, a hierarchy that then works aggressively throughout their childhood years to funnel them into a similar social position in adulthood.

Many citizens, politicians, and even a number of prominent scholars emphasize: “Those who graduate from high school, wait until marriage to have children, limit the size of their families, and work full-time will not be poor” (Sawhill 2003). While these folks are right that a person who follows such a path will have a very low risk of poverty (if any risk at all), they are wrong to assume that people are fully responsible for taking such a path in life. None of these individual-level differences are solely the choice of individuals. They are influenced in profound ways by the myriad environments, relationships, institutions, and forces that impact their lives from very early on in life, through no choice of their own, due to the “lottery of birth” (Martinez 2016). Economic deprivation impacts individuals at such consequential stages in their development (such as in the womb and early childhood) as to hinder their progress well into adulthood. Surely we cannot reasonably hold poor children accountable for the long-lasting impacts of poverty that occurred long before they were aware of them and could make choices to counter them. Amartya Sen asserts, “Without the substantive freedom and capability to do something, a person cannot be responsible for doing it” (1999:284).

Differences Matter Only in Context

A second and perhaps more important reason for this shift in focus away from the individual is because these individual-level characteristics tell us little about the reasons for the existence of poverty. A player in a game of musical chairs who consistently loses due to their lack of skill is not responsible for the design of the game, a design that *guarantees a specific number of losers regardless of individual attributes*. The question in a game of musical chairs is not *if* there will be losers or *how many* losers there will be (that much is already guaranteed), but *who* will lose. We could maximize the talents of every player in this game and engineer not a single additional winner. Likewise, individual-level characteristics and abilities may tell us who will experience poverty, but not why poverty exists. David Brady explains:

If the demographic explanation is correct, then the U.S. should have very high levels of single-parenthood, young headship, low educational attainment, and

unemployment. The reality, however, is that the U.S. is actually below average on these things compared to other rich democracies. . . . What is different in the U.S. is not the number of people with those individual characteristics, but the fact that we penalize the heck out of people with those characteristics. (Eppard et al. 2017:10)

As Brady and others have demonstrated, empirical studies do not demonstrate that demographic characteristics adequately account for differences in poverty rates between wealthy countries (Smeeding 2005; Brady 2009). The fact that the U.S. has a relative poverty rate that is over three times higher than Denmark cannot be explained by the number of unemployed or undereducated workers in the U.S. versus in Denmark. If achieving low levels of poverty was simply a matter of having an educated citizenry or low unemployment, the U.S. would actually have one of the lowest poverty rates among wealthy countries, not one of the highest.

Individual characteristics are not inherently problematic—much depends on the context within which they occur. Take the example of single-parent families. In one analysis of OECD countries, the average single-parent family poverty rate (excluding the U.S.) was 19 percent, with much lower rates in countries like Denmark (8%) and Finland (10%). The U.S., in comparison, had the highest poverty rate at 33 percent (Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis 2015). Blaming single parents for poverty (1) does not tell us why they became single parents in the first place and (2) does not tell us why they are more likely to be poor in the U.S. than in Denmark or Finland. Single parenthood may explain why some are at a higher risk of poverty versus others in particular countries, but not why poverty exists in the first place. “If certain characteristics associate with poverty only in some contexts,” Brady argues, “it tells you at least as much about that context as it does about poverty” (2009:18).

For another example, consider educational attainment. Those who come from poorer backgrounds are typically at a much higher risk of having their academic abilities limited by a number of forces beyond their control. As we discussed earlier, the family environment in early childhood has a significant impact on the development of one’s cognitive ability and vocabulary. This is further complicated by the effects of poor-quality schools and poor neighborhoods. Yet these differences matter only *in context*. Even for low-income students who overcome such obstacles and perform as well in school as high-performing high-SES students, their chances of graduating from college are incredibly unequal. In a recent analysis, college completion rates were calculated for students based on their family income and performance on eighth-grade math tests. What this analysis showed was that high-performing students from low-income families are no more likely to complete college

(29% completion rate) than low-performing students from high-income families (30%). As for high-performing, high-income students, 74 percent will complete college (Mishel et al. 2012:159). This is a striking example of how individual differences cannot be understood out of context.

Furthermore, the penalties associated with low educational attainment are not the same in every country. In Finland, full-time workers without a high school diploma suffer no major earnings penalty compared to high school graduates, compared to a 24 percent earnings penalty in the U.S. In the U.S., a college degree yields a 68 percent earnings increase for full-time workers over a high school diploma—but only 20 percent in Norway. The proportion of people with a high school diploma earning at or below the poverty threshold is 4.3 times higher in the U.S. than in Belgium (OECD 2019b). Context matters.

As one final example, consider unemployment. David Brady and his colleagues have demonstrated that, despite being at a higher risk of poverty in most countries if one is unemployed, the risk of poverty is much higher in countries like the U.S. than in more egalitarian countries (see figure 1.5) (Brady et al. 2017:753).

Just as one cannot understand differences in individual characteristics and abilities without understanding the social forces that contribute to them, one cannot understand why those differences matter without understanding the opportunity structure of that given society. It is ultimately the arrangement of the social structure that determines which individual characteristics matter and to what degree. This suggests that the persistently high levels of economic disadvantage that the U.S. is regularly burdened with, compared to other wealthy countries, is as much (if not much more) a structural failing as it is an individual failing.

Difference *does not* guarantee inequality. A society that rewards some and punishes others based on those differences, and institutionalizes both the

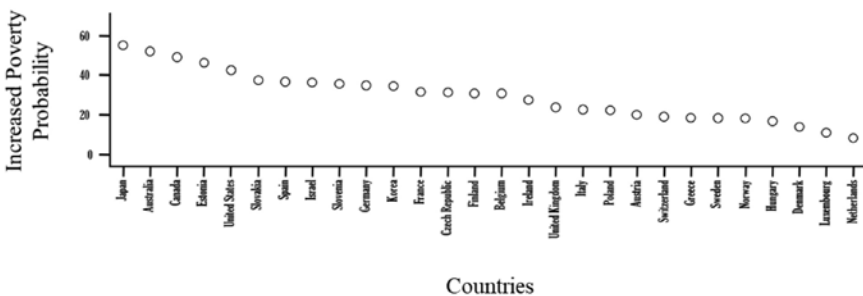


Figure 1.5. Increased Poverty Risk for the Unemployed across Rich Democracies.

Source: Brady et al. 2017: 753.

unequal production and legitimacy of those differences, generates inequality. Americans decide the manner in which society creates difference in the first place, and the degree of advantage or disadvantage that difference will confer. As Claude Fischer and his colleagues assert, "Inequality is not fated by nature, nor even by the 'invisible hand' of the market; it is a social construction, a result of our historical acts. *Americans have created the extent and type of inequality we have, and Americans maintain it*" (Fischer et al. 1996:7). We could create a society with less institutionalized privilege and disadvantage. We could also create a society that provides security for all regardless of the differences among us. Giving poor children a better chance of escaping the bottom rung of the economic ladder as adults is a worthy goal. An equally worthy goal is improving the social and economic conditions experienced at the bottom rung.

Because the social structure fails to provide opportunities for all Americans, arguments based on individual-level characteristics alone (work ethic, choices, abilities, etc.) are inadequate in explaining American poverty. Demonstrating this helps us to understand the significant flaws in the ideology of individualism, thus undermining the cultural justifications for our current social arrangements. With their legitimacy undermined, it becomes clear that new social formations are necessary. As Raoul Martinez asserts, "power is more vulnerable when it is perceived as illegitimate. Moral justifications, if widely accepted, can appear to rationalise extreme poverty and gross inequality" (2016:76).

In order to illustrate this point concerning limited opportunities, we turn to three examples: the inability of the U.S. labor market to provide enough decent-paying jobs for all families to avoid poverty or near poverty; the ineffectiveness of American social policy to reduce levels of poverty through governmental social safety-net programs; and the fact that the majority of the population will experience poverty during their adult lifetimes, indicative of the systemic nature of U.S. poverty. Each of these lines of evidence is intended to empirically illustrate that American poverty is the result of structural failures and processes, as much or more than they are about the individual.

The Inability of the Labor Market to Support All Families

It can be demonstrated that irrespective of the specific characteristics that Americans possess, there simply are not enough decent-paying jobs to support all of those (and their families) who are looking for work. Of those poor Americans eligible to work in the paid workforce, 63 percent are doing so (Gould 2015). Therefore, it is not just whether people work, which is important to examine, but their wages, whether they can get fulltime hours, their

benefits, and other indicators of job quality. During the past forty years, the American economy has increasingly produced large numbers of low-paying jobs, jobs that are part-time, and jobs that lack benefits (Kalleberg 2011). In two recent analyses, it was revealed that only around a quarter of American jobs provide decent pay, health insurance, and some type of retirement plan, while 28 percent of American jobs pay a poverty-level wage (Mishel et al. 2012:192, 333). Furthermore, a significant number (approximately 5.3 million in a given month) of Americans are working part-time although they want to be working fulltime (U.S. BLS 2018). In addition, 28 million Americans lack health insurance, largely because their employer does not provide such a benefit (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). Karen Secombe questions whether such structural failings in the labor market can be laid at the feet of workers:

The argument behind individualism is that we need to change the individual and increase her or his motivation and level of human capital to be competitive for jobs. Little attention is given to features of our social structure . . . what proponents of this perspective fail to ask themselves is, if the bulk of new jobs are being created in the low-paying service sector, can we really train people out of poverty? Will not someone else then occupy these roles? Poverty may be transferred to someone else, but it will not be eliminated. (2007:93–94)

Studies analyzing the percentage of the U.S. workforce that falls into the low-wage sector have shown that a much higher percentage of American workers do than their counterparts in other developed countries. For example, Smeeding, Rainwater, and Burtless (2001) found that 25 percent of all U.S. full-time workers could be classified as working in low-wage work (defined as earning less than 65 percent of the national median earnings in full-time jobs). This was by far the highest percentage in the countries analyzed, with the overall average at 12.9 percent. Likewise, a study by the Economic Policy Institute (Mishel 2014) also found that 25 percent of U.S. workers were in low-wage work, and further from being a median-wage worker than in any of the other twenty OECD countries examined.

There are a number of reasons for these low wages. One much-publicized reason is globalization, a force that has put downward pressure on wages in the U.S. American workers are often competing with workers whose wage scale is a fraction of what an American worker could command. Another reason is that the minimum wage has remained low over the years and has not been indexed to inflation. Changes in the minimum wage must come from Congress, and often years go by before Congress acts to raise it, causing it to lag further behind the cost of living. In addition, the decline in unions, shift from a manufacturing-based to a service-oriented economy, automation, and a number of other changes have impacted the quality of American jobs.

Beyond low wages, part-time work, and lack of benefits, there is also a mismatch between the actual number of available jobs and the number of those who need them. Timothy Bartik (2001, 2002) used several different approaches to estimate the number of jobs that would be needed to significantly address the issue of poverty in the U.S. Even in the booming economy of the late 1990s, he found that between five and nine million more jobs were needed to meet the needs of the poor and disadvantaged. In another analysis, Sheak and Morris (2002) analyzed data from a twenty-eight-year period from the 1970s to the 1990s. They found that at any given moment, failures in the U.S. economy left between 20 to 30 percent of the labor force “subemployed,” a classification that includes the unemployed, discouraged workers, involuntary part-time workers, and fulltime workers earning inadequate wages.

To summarize, the data presented in this section indicate that an under-emphasized factor leading to poverty in the U.S. is a failure of the economic structure to provide viable opportunities for all. In particular, the labor market simply does not provide enough decent-paying jobs for all who need them. As a result, millions of families find themselves struggling below or precariously close to the poverty line.

The Ineffectiveness of the Social Safety Net to Prevent Poverty

A second major structural failure is at the political level. Contrary to the popular rhetoric about vast amounts of tax dollars being spent on public assistance, the American social safety net can be more accurately described in minimalist terms (Esping-Andersen 1990). Charles Noble writes, “The U.S. welfare state is striking precisely because it is so limited in scope and ambition” (1997:3). Compared to other Western industrialized countries, the U.S. devotes far fewer resources to programs aimed at assisting the economically vulnerable (Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Brady 2009; C. Lee and Koo 2016). On the other hand, most European countries provide a wide range of social and insurance programs that largely prevent families from falling into poverty. These include substantial family or children’s allowances designed to transfer cash assistance to families with children. Unemployment assistance is far more generous in these countries than in the U.S., often providing support for more than a year following the loss of a job. Furthermore, universal health coverage is routinely provided, along with considerable support for child care. The result of these social policy differences is that they substantially reduce the extent of poverty in Europe and many other OECD countries, while U.S. social policy has had only a small impact upon poverty reduction.

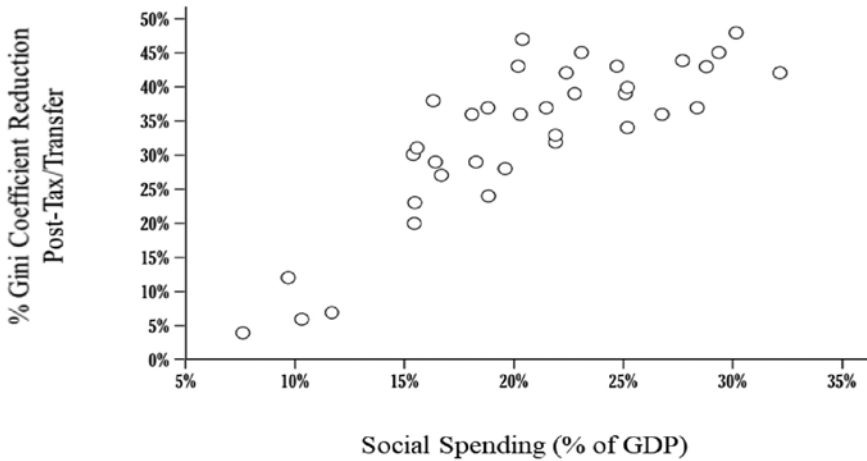
Consider an analysis by Jared Bernstein (2012) comparing 19 countries (15 European countries, along with Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and Japan)

to the U.S. in terms of their pre-tax/transfer and post-tax/transfer rates of poverty. The pre-tax/transfer rates indicate what the level of poverty would be in each country before taxes are withheld and in the absence of any governmental income transfers such as welfare payments, unemployment compensation, or social security payments. The post-tax/transfer rates represent the level of poverty after taxes and governmental transfers are included. Comparing these two levels of poverty reveals how effective (or ineffective) governmental policy is in reducing the overall extent of poverty in a country.

Looking first at the rates of pre-tax/transfer poverty, Bernstein shows that the U.S. stands at almost exactly the average of the other 19 countries with a poverty rate of approximately 26 percent. However, when he examines the post-tax/transfer rates of poverty, there is a dramatic difference in terms of where the U.S. stands vis-a-vis the comparison countries. The average post-tax/transfer poverty rate for the 19 comparison countries is 10 percent, but is 17 percent for the U.S. As a result of their more generous and structurally oriented social policies, the European and other OECD countries are able to significantly cut overall rates of poverty. For example, Sweden is able to reduce the number of people that would be poor (in the absence of any governmental help) by 80 percent as a result of its social policies. The overall average reduction factor for the 19 countries is 63 percent. In contrast, the poverty reduction factor in the U.S. stands at only 35 percent.

Similar pre-tax/transfer and post-tax/transfer analyses by other scholars find other countries in these studies reducing child poverty by an average of 43 percent (versus only 8% in the U.S.); single-parent family poverty by an average of 54 percent (versus 33% in U.S.); and income inequality by an average of 33 percent (versus 24% in U.S.) (Bradshaw et al. 2012:29; Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis 2015; Roser and Ortiz-Ospina 2016). Additionally, if you refer to figures 1.1 (earlier in this chapter) and 1.6, you can see the strong relationships across wealthy countries between welfare generosity and levels of poverty/inequality, as well as social spending and inequality reduction.

Taken together, the data discussed in this section illustrate a second major structural failing leading to the high rates of U.S. poverty—a failure at the political and policy level. Specifically, social and economic programs directed to the economically vulnerable populations in the U.S. have minimal ability to raise families out of poverty. While the U.S. has historically been one of “the most reluctant of all welfare states” (Feagin 1972:101), the past thirty-five years have witnessed several critical retrenchments and reductions in the social safety net. These reductions have included both scaling back the amount of benefits being transferred and tightening program eligibility (Edin and Shafer 2015). In addition, the U.S. has failed to offer the type of



Note: Correlation = 0.82.

Figure 1.6. Social Spending and Income Inequality Reduction across OECD Countries

Source: Authors' analysis of data from Roser and Ortiz-Ospina (2016) and OECD (2019c).

universal coverage for child care, medical insurance, or child allowances that most other developed countries routinely provide. As a result, the overall U.S. poverty rate remains at a very high level.

All of these data presented to this point tell a compelling story about the political nature of poverty and the failure of the U.S. to act to reduce economic disadvantage. The U.S. is far removed from other wealthy countries not just in how much it reduces poverty, but also in its commitment to doing so. This weak commitment is a political failure that contributes to relatively high levels of economic insecurity. Once again, this failure has virtually nothing to do with the individual. Rather, it is emblematic of a failure at the structural level. By focusing on individual characteristics, we lose sight of the fact that governments can and do exert a sizeable impact on reducing the extent of poverty within their jurisdictions. A number of wealthy countries are able, to varying degrees, to lift a significant percentage of their economically vulnerable above the threshold of poverty through governmental transfer and assistance policies. In contrast, the U.S. provides substantially less support through its social safety net, resulting in poverty rates that are currently among the highest in the industrialized world.²²

One case where the U.S. has effectively reduced the rate of poverty for a particular group has been that of the elderly. Their substantial reduction in the risk of poverty over the past sixty years has been directly attributed to the increasing

generosity of the Social Security program, as well as the introduction of Medicare in 1965 and the Supplemental Security Income Program in 1974. During the 1960s and 1970s, Social Security benefits were substantially increased and indexed to the rate of inflation, helping many of the elderly escape from poverty. It is estimated today that without Social Security, the poverty rate for seniors would balloon from 9 percent to 39 percent (Romig 2018). Put another way, Social Security is responsible for getting over three-quarters of the elderly above the poverty line, who would otherwise be poor. Once again, this illustrates the structural impact of welfare state policies upon the extent and severity of poverty within the U.S.

The Widespread Life-Course Risk of Poverty and Economic Insecurity

A third approach revealing the structural nature of American poverty can be found in a life-course analysis of poverty. Previous work on poverty has primarily examined the cross-sectional and spell dynamic risk. Consequently, these analyses have determined how many people are poor in any given year, and how long they are poor. Yet there is another way in which the incidence of poverty can be examined. Such an approach places the risk of poverty within the context of the American life course. By doing so, the systematic nature of American poverty can be revealed. This approach reveals that a majority of Americans, 59 percent, will experience poverty below the official federal poverty threshold in their lifetimes. Additionally, 68 percent of Americans will fall below the 125 percent threshold at some point, and 76 percent below the 150 percent threshold (Rank et al. 2003:20).

In a different analysis, Mark Rank and his colleagues (2014) estimated the proportion of the U.S. population who will encounter various years of economic insecurity between the ages of 25 and 60. They examined four different measures of economic insecurity. First, how likely is it that an individual will reside in a household that uses a social safety net or welfare program at some point during the year? Second, to what extent will individuals find themselves in households falling into poverty or near poverty (below 150 percent of the official poverty line)? Third, does the head of household experience a spell of unemployment at some point during the year? And finally, how likely is it that one or more of these events will occur to individuals during a year?

Their analysis makes it clear that economic insecurity is a very real component of the American experience for most people. By the age of 40, 38 percent of Americans have experienced at least one year of welfare use, 46 percent have encountered poverty, 55 percent have experienced the head of household being unemployed, and 70 percent have experienced one or more of these three events. By age 60, the cumulative percentages are 45 percent, 54 percent, 67 percent, and 79 percent. Consequently, approximately four-

fifths of Americans will experience at least one year of economic insecurity between the ages of 25 and 60 (Rank et al. 2014:190–91).

Additionally, while 79 percent of Americans will encounter at least one year of economic insecurity by age 60, approximately half will experience three or more years, and approximately a third will experience five or more years. In fact, during any ten-year period across the prime working years, at least half of the population will experience one or more years of significant economic insecurity (Rank et al. 2014:37–38). These data offer a clear indication of the widespread risk of economic insecurity across the American population.

An example of such insecurity comes from an individual interviewed by Mark Rank and his colleagues in *Chasing the American Dream* (Rank et al. 2014). This individual, Jim Wilson, had enjoyed a number of years of stability while working at a Chrysler automobile plant in the Midwest, only to find himself encountering periodic income declines as a result of lay-offs. The shock of such economic downturns was profound. He talked about those periods of time when he was out of work:

There's hardly a worse feeling. It was the same feeling I had when they announced they were shutting our plant down. There's hardly a worse feeling as a male in the United States . . . I was not prepared at all not to have a job.

When you go home and sit across the dinner table from your family, your wife and your three kids, and every one of them is counting on you to keep you from losing your home and to keep the food on the table and to make sure that they got their school lunch moneys and that they can go to school dressed in decent clothes. To sit across the table from them and say "I got laid off, I signed up at the Union Hall, and they're saying it's going to be six or eight months before I get a call." That's a horrible feeling because if you have no money in the bank, and you don't know where your next dollar is going to come from, it really puts you in a terrible spot. (Rank et al. 2014:38)

To summarize, longitudinal analyses indicate that the U.S. is a nation whose citizens face substantial economic insecurity at various points in time as they make their way through adulthood. Fully four-fifths of the population will encounter at least one year of significant economic insecurity between the ages of 25 and 60, and 50 percent will do so in three or more separate years across this period of time. Furthermore, during any ten-year period, approximately half of Americans will experience at least one year of economic insecurity.

These results are consistent with, and interesting to compare to, a large and unique study done by the International Labour Organization (ILO) that focused on economic security across approximately one hundred countries. The ILO created a multidimensional measure of economic security using

seven different indicators, such as income security, job security, and so on. Of the thirty-one OECD countries that were measured, the U.S. ranked twenty-fifth in terms of overall economic security experienced by its citizens (ILO 2004).

What these numbers indicate is that a clear majority of Americans will at some point experience poverty and economic insecurity during their lifetimes. Rather than an isolated event that occurs only among what has been labeled the “underclass,” the reality is that the majority of Americans will encounter economic insecurity firsthand during adulthood. Such patterns illuminate the systematic essence of American poverty, which in turn points to the structural nature of poverty.

If we focus on the life-span risks, the prevalent nature of American poverty can be revealed. At some point during adulthood, the bulk of Americans will face poverty. An approach that emphasizes individual failings or attributes as the primary cause of poverty loses much of its explanatory power in the shadow of such patterns. Rather, given the widespread occurrence of economic vulnerability, a life-span analysis points to a third line of evidence indicating that poverty is more appropriately viewed as a structural failing of American society. C. Wright Mills notes in his analysis of unemployment:

When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals. (1959:9)

ECONOMIC INSECURITY IS A SOCIETAL FAILING

Individual characteristics and abilities tell us who is at risk of experiencing economic insecurity but do little to explain the large-scale problems of persistent poverty and growing economic inequality in the U.S. These problems are largely societal failings related in large part to economic and political forces much larger than the individual. We offered three key lines of evidence to demonstrate this argument, including the shortage of good jobs, the ineffectiveness of America’s social safety net, and the widespread life-course risk of poverty. Other structural failings could have been explored as well (including widespread patterns of racial discrimination or the systematic lack of political

power for the economically disenfranchised, to name but two). Nevertheless, the lines of evidence discussed clearly demonstrate the largely structural nature of American poverty.

Allowing poverty and economic inequality to exist unnecessarily, and to ensnare certain groups disproportionately, is inherently unjust, a form of what scholars have called “structural violence” (Galtung 1969; B. Lee 2016; Rylko-Bauer and Farmer 2016). Structural violence, as Bandy Lee explains, refers to:

the avoidable limitations society places on groups of people that constrain them from achieving the quality of life that would have otherwise been possible. These limitations could be political, economic, religious, cultural, or legal in nature and usually originate in institutions that have authority over particular subjects. Because of its embedding within social structures, people tend to overlook them as ordinary difficulties that they encounter in the course of life. . . . Structural violence directly illustrates a power system wherein social structures or institutions cause harm to people in a way that results in maldevelopment or deprivation. (2016:110)

Social inequalities largely result from social institutions and processes that are not natural or inevitable, but ultimately within the control of people. There is no reason to believe they are unavoidable. But they require increased collective action that may depend in part on a greater awareness among the American public of their structural causes.

Part of the inaction on a number of social problems in American society stems from the fact that structural violence is often partially or completely invisible in everyday life. This invisibility is due to the ways in which dominant culture commits “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) on ordinary citizens. In this context, this refers to the internalization of cultural logic that masks and/or distorts both how people’s social positions are structured by forces beyond their control and the arbitrary logic behind why certain social positions are rewarded and others are punished. This masking/distortion leads to misrecognition of the arbitrary as the natural.

Pierre Bourdieu describes symbolic violence as “power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990:4). “According to Bourdieu,” Dan Schubert explains, “contemporary social hierarchies and social inequality, as well as the suffering that they cause, are produced and maintained less by physical force than by forms of symbolic domination. He refers to the results of such domination as *symbolic violence*” (2008:183). Bourdieu argues that symbolic domination “is something you absorb like air, something you don’t feel pressured by; it is everywhere and

nowhere, and to escape from that is very difficult” (Bourdieu and Eagleton 1992:115). Dan Schubert explains this point:

It [symbolic violence] is *everywhere* in that we all live in symbolic systems that, in the process of classifying and categorizing, impose hierarchies and ways of being and knowing the world that unevenly distribute suffering and limit even the ways in which we can imagine the possibility of an alternative world. It is *nowhere* because, in its gentleness and its subtleness, we fail to recognize its very existence, let alone the way it is at the root of much of violence and suffering. . . . If [social] worlds are constructed, then they can be re-constructed in other ways. (2008:195–96)

As such a perspective would suggest, as long as we passively accept the tenets of dominant American individualism, social hierarchies resist major challenges. This book is an effort in challenging this dominant logic, and ultimately challenging the legitimacy of social inequalities in the U.S.

CONCLUSION AND PLAN FOR THE BOOK

Individualism has had a profound effect both on how Americans have traditionally understood poverty and the approaches the U.S. has historically taken to address it. These policies have largely focused on attempting to elevate the abilities and moral underpinnings of individuals. Yet as we have seen, forces beyond the control of individuals influence both the development of their abilities and their access to resources and opportunities. And while abilities vary throughout the population, cross-national research makes it clear that these differences cannot explain the large-scale problems of poverty and economic inequality. These are structural failings largely rooted in the political choices we make.

In the chapters ahead, we will take a deeper look at the following questions: How dominant is individualism in American culture, and what are the consequences of its dominance? This book differs from many like it in the approach that we take to answer these questions. Many books focus solely on either the micro or macro level, on one specific methodology, or on one specific group of people. In this book, we instead approach the subject of American individualism as applied to poverty and economic inequality from several different levels, methodologies, and approaches. These include reviewing the results from a number of large-scale surveys, talking to academic experts, and interviewing both struggling Americans and future social workers. Some chapters take a birds-eye academic view, while others get “on the ground” and examine how individualism shows up in everyday American life. We

hope that this somewhat unorthodox approach, in illuminating American individualism from a number of different angles, will bring the subject into full relief for the reader.

Part I is devoted to providing an overall account of the academic research related to American individualism. In chapter 2, we review the existing literature on the dominance of individualistic explanations of poverty and economic inequality in American culture. In chapter 3, we discuss the psychological underpinnings of legitimizing ideologies, notably the benefits and costs (both individual and societal) of individualism and related beliefs. In chapter 4, we sit down for conversations with a number of scholars whose work has important implications for the relationship between individualism and social policies.

Part II is devoted to examining how Americans grapple with individualism in their everyday lives. In chapter 5, we explore the inequality beliefs of White working-class Americans, who remain individualistic despite losing ground in recent decades due to structural forces beyond their control. In chapter 6, we explore the strength of individualism among students studying to become social workers, an occupation that will place them in pivotal roles in the lives of the poor.

We conclude with Part III, which is devoted to the big overarching concerns of the book: why inequality beliefs matter. In chapter 7, we explore the empirical relationship between inequality beliefs and support for social policies, policies that are ultimately responsible for the major cross-national differences in economic disadvantage between wealthy countries. Noam Chomsky brings our discussion to a close in the afterword by discussing the unnecessary precarity of struggling Americans, compared to their counterparts elsewhere in the world.

NOTES

1. King 1964.
2. From chapter 4 of this book.
3. Roosevelt 1944.
4. Poverty scholar David Brady notes: “Although no other country, perhaps in history, has ascended to the riches of the United States, this country also stands out for having the most poverty among the rich democracies . . . poverty amidst progress continues to be one of the great enigmas of our time” (2009:165).
5. “Structurally oriented” social policies treat widespread economic disadvantage as largely the fault of large-scale economic and/or political forces and institutions. “Individualistically oriented” social policies treat widespread economic disadvantage as largely the fault of individual citizens. Like a doctor, who determines the particular

ailment of concern before prescribing a medical intervention (not any old treatment will do), policy makers likewise design a particular social policy based on the perceived causes. An individualistically oriented approach to poverty, based on the belief that poor individuals simply require the proper motivation to pull themselves out of poverty, may favor a policy like the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). A structurally oriented approach, which faults lack of opportunity rather than individual-level characteristics, may favor a policy like a family allowance. The EITC assumes jobs are available for all and thus rewards those who choose to work, while family allowances acknowledge structural failings may leave some families without enough resources, regardless of their efforts or characteristics, and thus help families with children meet their needs in light of this.

6. We use the terms “inequality beliefs” and “the American inequality palette” interchangeably throughout the book. It should be noted that the term that is typically used in the research literature is actually “stratification beliefs.” Scholars who study stratification beliefs examine “what people believe about who gets what and why” (Kluegel and Smith 1981:30). These beliefs consist of “information (veridical or non-veridical) about a phenomenon that an individual uses as a basis both for inferring other information and for action” (Kluegel and Smith 1981:30). For ease of reading for a general audience, and to not suggest a solely economic connotation, we will often use the terms “inequality beliefs” and “the American inequality palette” instead. We use all of these terms interchangeably to refer to problematic beliefs that Americans hold about the causes of economic, racial, and gender inequalities, beliefs that (1) place far too much blame on the individual instead of the equally important non-individualistic causes, (2) often contradict empirical findings, and (3) may prove to be obstacles to achieving a more robust and structurally oriented approach to addressing social problems in the U.S. Beliefs about other inequalities (such as inequalities based on sexual orientation or religion) are excluded *not* because they are unimportant. They are crucially important, but to sharpen our analytical focus, we will discuss the beliefs most strongly associated with support (or lack of support) for social policies concerning poverty and economic inequality.

7. While we developed this doctor metaphor before reading Crystal Fleming’s *How to Be Less Stupid about Race*, a book that was released in 2018 but that we did not read until 2019 after we had already written most of this book, Fleming uses a similar metaphor in her work. Although we came up with the metaphor on our own, her use of it was before our book was published, and we therefore believe it is important to acknowledge Fleming’s work here.

8. Explanations that “equate prosperity with hard work and virtue, and poverty with laziness and vice” (Bullock 2013:40).

9. Authors’ analysis based on data from Roser and Ortiz-Ospina (2016) and OECD (2019a).

10. We do not claim to offer a definitive nor a comprehensive definition of the term. Instead, we simply offer a definition that is useful for the purposes of our discussion in this book.

11. See Rank 2005, Bullock 2013, Putnam 2015, and McNamee 2018, among a number of other sources, for a good discussion of this research.

12. It is important to note that not every American agrees with every one of these assumptions, and even people who espouse such beliefs often do so to differing degrees. These beliefs are dominant, which simply means they tend to be more popular than competing beliefs in American culture.

13. A variety of sources inspired this concept of the American inequality palette, including Lewis (1993) and Swidler (1986).

14. It is important to note, as Robert Putnam (2015) and others have, that while not perceived as such by the White majority, antebellum slave-owning society certainly resembled feudal relations in many ways.

15. The idea that the land was “open” was an inaccurate and racist perception on the part of Whites, of course, as much of that land was owned and/or inhabited by indigenous peoples and/or other countries.

16. This perspective was notably espoused by Herrnstein and Murray in their 1994 book, *The Bell Curve*. For a number of critiques of *The Bell Curve*, see *Inequality by Design* by Fischer et al. (1996), Stephen Jay Gould’s November 1994 *New Yorker* article “Curveball,” or James J. Heckman’s 1995 article in the *Journal of Political Economy*, “Lessons from the Bell Curve,” among others. From Claude Fischer and his colleagues: “The authors [of *The Bell Curve*] err in assuming that human talents can be reduced to a single, fixed, and essentially innate skill they label intelligence. They err in asserting that this trait largely determines how people end up in life. And they err in imagining that individual competition explains the structure of inequality in society” (Fischer et al. 1996:10).

17. Claude Fischer and his colleagues note: “First, individuals’ social milieux—family, neighborhood, school, community—provide or withhold the means for attaining higher class positions in American society. . . . Second, social policy significantly influences the rewards individuals receive for having attained their positions in society” (Fischer et al. 1996:6). Or as Robert Putnam explains, “Poor kids, through no fault of their own, are less prepared by their families, their schools, and their communities to develop their God-given talents as fully as rich kids” (2015:230).

18. As Michael Harrington observed in *The Other America*, “the real explanation of why the poor are where they are is that they made the mistake of being born to the wrong parents, in the wrong section of the country, in the wrong industry, or in the wrong racial or ethnic group. Once that mistake has been made, they could have been paragons of will and morality, but most of them would never even have had a chance to get out of the other America” (1962:14–15).

19. From Lawrence Mishel and his colleagues: “Economists measure the extent of intergenerational mobility by calculating the correlation between income or earnings of parents and that of their children once they grow up and earn their own income—this is known as intergenerational elasticity, or IGE. . . . The higher the IGE, the greater the influence of one’s birth circumstances on later life position” (Mishel et al. 2012:150). IGE values range from zero to one, with *one* suggesting extreme rigidity—children earning basically the same incomes as their parents—and *zero* suggesting virtually no relationship between the earnings of parents and children.

20. Our conceptualization of social class is deeply indebted to Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu argues: “The primary differences, those which distinguish the major classes

of conditions of existence, derive from the overall volume of capital, understood as the set of actually usable resources and powers—economic capital, cultural capital and also social capital” (1984:114). For Bourdieu, “economic capital” refers to resources such as wealth, stocks, or property. “Cultural capital” refers to “educational credentials, types of knowledge and expertise, verbal skills, and aesthetic preferences” (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:688). The amount of social capital a person possesses “depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected” (Bourdieu 1986:21). Another form of capital that Bourdieu discusses, symbolic capital, refers to one’s prestige or reputation.

21. The researchers at the National Academy of Sciences concluded: “The scientific evidence on the significant developmental impacts of early experiences, caregiving relationships, and environmental threats is incontrovertible. Virtually every aspect of early human development, from the brain’s evolving circuitry to the child’s capacity for empathy, is affected by the environments and experiences that are encountered in a cumulative fashion, beginning early in the prenatal period and extending throughout the early childhood years” (NCBI 2000).

22. David Brady writes concerning the variability in poverty across countries: “What explains this tremendous variation in poverty across the affluent Western democracies? This question represents a serious challenge to any theory of poverty. Theories of poverty should be able to explain why some affluent Western democracies maintain substantial poverty and others are more egalitarian and accomplish low levels of poverty. Yet, the conventional approach in poverty studies is to analyze only the United States and to compare the characteristics of poor people (perhaps in poor neighborhoods) to nonpoor people. It is not an exaggeration to say that the vast majority of poverty studies explain why one group of people within a country are more likely to be poor, or why some individuals are poor while others are not. Thus, the conventional poverty research stops short of confronting the enormous cross-national differences. In contrast, I contend that these cross-national and historical differences in poverty are principally driven by politics” (2009:5–6).

Part I

SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVES

This section of the book is devoted to exploring the existing literature on American individualism. In the following chapter we review the social science research on the dominance of inequality beliefs concerning poverty, economic inequality, race, and gender in the U.S. These beliefs are important for a variety of reasons, including the significant ways in which they inform Americans' social policy preferences. Then in chapter 3, we discuss the psychological underpinnings of legitimizing ideologies, notably the benefits and costs (both individual and societal) of individualism and related beliefs. Part I concludes with chapter 4, where we sit down for conversations with a number of scholars whose work has important implications for the relationship between individualism and social policies.

Chapter Two

The American Inequality Palette

In chapter 1, we introduced readers to the concept of the “American inequality palette.” This concept refers to the cultural resources that Americans have at their disposal—by virtue of being more readily available and well developed than other cultural resources in our society—to explain social inequalities based on social class, race, and gender. These cultural resources come in a variety of forms, such as the most readily available vocabulary to describe them and commonsense understandings of these social phenomena. Dominant inequality beliefs are one such cultural resource. When examined closely, it is clear that dominant inequality beliefs are deeply flawed, placing far too much blame on the individual and far too little blame on other important factors.

American culture contains an underdeveloped structural vocabulary to describe problems like poverty, mass incarceration, the gender pay gap, and a number of other social problems. At the same time, American culture is saturated with a vocabulary that easily places blame on individuals themselves—the poor, African Americans, and women—for these problems. Taken together, this combination of problematic inequality beliefs contributes to the weaker support Americans typically show for generous and structurally oriented social policies, compared to their European counterparts.

We begin this chapter with a review of the existing academic literature on dominant American beliefs concerning the causes of poverty and economic inequality. We then move on to discuss dominant beliefs concerning race and gender. While our primary focus in this book is American individualism, these other inequality beliefs are included because it is ultimately the combination of inequality beliefs based on social class, race, and gender that shapes support for social policies. Later, in chapter 7, we will discuss

research that demonstrates how these beliefs are related to American social policy preferences.

THE CULTURE OF INEQUALITY

It has long been documented that Americans are a uniquely individualistic people. Americans have historically preferred to view themselves as autonomous agents who independently determine their success or failure through hard work and smart choices in the “land of opportunity.” This sets Americans apart from citizens in most other countries, who are more likely to view themselves as “interpersonal beings intertwined with one another in social webs” (Henrich et al. 2010:70).

In *The Culture of Inequality*, Michael Lewis explains that an individualistic sensibility is hegemonic in everyday discourse and has become conventional wisdom in American culture. This, despite the fact that social inequality is a consistent feature of American society. He argues that this sensibility both guides the manner in which individuals evaluate their own place in the world and shapes the social policies that Americans collectively develop to combat social problems. Here he describes the assumptions of the individualistic sensibility:

The emergence of [an] individualistic moral sensibility is of considerable significance [because] it has become central to the existence of the American *culture of inequality*—an interpretation of unequal outcomes given the assumption of equal chances. It is a sensibility that virtually ignores the impact of social structure upon personal achievement and mobility. According to this sensibility, it is the individual alone who is socially significant, who determines what his or her contribution to the commonweal will be, and who is therefore responsible for the degree of personal success achieved. Society is seen as benign, offering up opportunities and waiting to be enriched by those who have the will and the capacity to make productive use of them. . . . If [social and economic] inequality is simply an indication of differentials in the productive exertion of individuals, free to exercise their ambitions and talents to the fullest, then the presumption of social arbitrariness cannot be sustained and only the individual can be held accountable for the state of his or her well-being. If inequality exists it is nothing more than a reflection of different personal qualities. (Lewis 1993:8)

Lewis argues that the individualistic sensibility is the “informing presumption, the master theme, of what may justifiably be termed the American *culture of inequality*” (1993:14). This culture of inequality explains and justifies both advantage and disadvantage in a manner that “misrepresents the character of contemporary opportunity” (1993:18). Beyond the personal anguish

that individualism causes for Americans who fail to succeed, he argues that individualism constrains our collective ability to fight problems like economic disadvantage due to the unnecessary limits it places on social policy.

The argument in *The Culture of Inequality* is an important one: changing how we think about inequality is an important step in reducing it. Much like a doctor would not choose a treatment plan without first identifying the illness or disease, individuals support particular approaches to addressing social problems based on what they believe causes them. In American culture, individualistic explanations for poverty and economic inequality have typically been more popular than non-individualistic ones. These individualistic beliefs are deeply flawed and combine with other problematic inequality beliefs regarding race and gender to distort Americans' views of the causes of economic disadvantage and what should be done about it. This combination of beliefs, which we refer to as the "American inequality palette," places limits on how much support Americans are willing to show for more generous and structurally oriented social policies. This in turn impacts our ability to fight poverty and reduce economic inequality. Thus, these unnecessary limitations constrain our country's ability to achieve the kinds of impressive reductions in economic insecurity achieved in a number of other wealthy countries.

Throughout U.S. history, American society and culture "have been steeped in the notion of rugged individualism and personal progress" (Rank et al. 2014:153). Mark Rank and his colleagues explain the stable position that individualistic explanations for economic disadvantage have occupied in the American mind since the founding era:

Within the United States, the dominant perspective has been that of poverty as an individual failing. From Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* to the recent welfare reform changes, poverty has been conceptualized primarily as a consequence of individual failings and deficiencies. Indeed, social surveys asking about the causes of poverty have consistently found that Americans tend to rank individual reasons (such as laziness, lack of effort, and low ability) as the most important factors related to poverty. (Rank et al. 2003:4)

As Edward Royce notes, the "cultural power of the individualistic perspective outweighs that of the opposing structural perspective" in American culture (2015:148). Indeed, individualism is such a fundamental part of the American ethos that 80 percent of Americans agree that trying to get ahead on one's own efforts is either very (45%) or extremely (35%) important in making somebody a "true American" (Gilens 1999:35).

Previous research on American inequality beliefs reveals that, while Americans espouse a range of beliefs that include individualistic and non-individualistic explanations for poverty and economic inequality (including

structuralist, cultural, and fatalistic explanations),¹ individualistic explanations have historically tended to be more popular than non-individualistic ones. Responses to hundreds of survey items and interview questions from numerous studies across a half century confirm that, while a range of beliefs are espoused, individualistic ones are preferred by most Americans (Feagin 1972; Huber and Form 1973; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Ladd 1994; Lipset 1996; Chafel 1997; Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Economic Mobility Project 2007; Hanson and Zogby 2010; Henrich et al. 2010; Pew Research Center 2012b, 2014a, 2016a; Hunt and Bullock 2016; ISSP 2017). Contemporary inequality belief scholars Matthew Hunt and Heather Bullock argue that results from national surveys in the U.S. reveal that “Americans are decidedly individualistic” (2016:95). Robert Putnam calls Americans “philosophical conservatives,” who want to limit extreme inequalities of condition, but at the same time are “suspicious of the ability of government to redress inequality and convinced that responsibility for an individual’s well-being rests chiefly with him or her” (2015:32).

Summarizing the major nationwide studies of American inequality beliefs dating back to the late 1960s, Judith Chafel notes that “an ideology of individualism prevailed in American society” (1997:445). That ideology emphasized that (1) each individual American is responsible for her or his place in life, (2) widespread opportunity is afforded to people in American society, (3) economic inequality helps to motivate achievement, and (4) the existing system is both equitable and fair (Chafel 1997:445).

Not every American holds the same beliefs of course. In fact, the poor and African Americans tend to find both individualism and structuralism appealing (Hunt and Bullock 2016). Even Americans who share similar inequality beliefs differ in the degree to which they adhere to them. In the American inequality palette, numerous cultural resources exist, and Americans utilize a number of different types of beliefs (individualistic, structuralist, cultural, and fatalistic) at different times and in different contexts. What research suggests is that, despite a wide range of options, socialization within dominant culture leads the typical American to be more comfortable with individualistic explanations for economic disadvantage and to utilize them more frequently. Therefore, despite not deploying them in every circumstance, the general picture is one of an American population that prefers individualistic inequality beliefs over non-individualistic ones.

INDIVIDUALISM THROUGH SOCIALIZATION

The acquisition of the individualistic perspective begins at an early age. Individualism’s hold on the American mind is aided by its deep embeddedness in

American culture and institutions, where it is “regularly affirmed in the educational, political, and economic systems and in the process of family socialization” (Royce 2015:149). American children learn individualistic “blame the victim” (Ryan 1976) explanations of poverty and economic inequality early in life from a variety of socialization agents, including parents, peers, schools, and mass media.

Over time, the individualistic perspective becomes “so deeply seated in [Americans] that it is almost impossible to think in other than individualistic terms morally, economically, politically, religiously, and not least, psychologically” (Rosemont 2015:xii). Internalizing dominant culture means “internalizing the understanding that there are certain things it is not proper to say, and it is not proper to think. And if you don’t learn that, typically you’ll be weeded out of the institutions somewhere along the line” (Chomsky 2002:112).

In any given culture, there is an “unstated framework for thinkable thought,” in the words of Noam Chomsky (1987:132), where collective action that might challenge systems of power are “excised at the source” (1987:132) before they can ever lead to action. Applied to inequality beliefs, this means that some alternative ways of thinking about economic disadvantage simply do not occur to people due to their socialization in American culture. Thus, dominant ways of addressing these problems through social policy are not challenged the way they might otherwise be.

Research suggests that children are conscious of inequality as early as preschool age. At that young age, they are able to correctly identify rich and poor Americans, but have little ability to ascribe causes to those differences. As children grow and their ideas become more complex, research suggests they incorporate more individualistic causal beliefs about inequality that are increasingly similar to that of adult beliefs (Chafel 1997).

During adolescence, American children begin to ascribe causes to individuals’ poverty, tending toward individualistic explanations that link one’s life outcomes to individual intelligence, effort, and educational attainment. In the late teen years, American children begin to develop a conception of American inequality as an equitable consequence of a meritocratic process (Chafel 1997).

In Judith Chafel’s summary of the existing research on children’s inequality beliefs, she argues: “Viewed as a whole, these results point to the pervasiveness with which a dominant ideology about poverty exists in American society and the efficacy of the socialization process” (1997:452). She argues that the individualistic beliefs instilled early in childhood and nurtured during the maturation process come to form part of a worldview in adulthood that is resistant to change, contributing to the widespread popularity of individualism in American society.

Louis Althusser, in his work on ideology, provides a useful conceptualization of how individuals come to view themselves as autonomous actors. The very notion of what it means to be an individual, according to Althusser, is ideological. He argues that “the concept of the free and self-determining subject is . . . an ideological concept” (Ferretter 2006:88). This ideology assumes that an individual is “the independent origin of her own thoughts, actions and emotions” (2006:88), the “centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions” (2006:88, citing Althusser 1971:169). This conceptualization of the individual is in stark contrast to Althusser’s assertion that the complex combination of social forces that constitute societies ultimately determines the lives we live and the people we become.

So how do we come to view ourselves as self-determining subjects? Althusser argues that society “calls out” to people as autonomous actors from the moment they are born. We are treated as such by our parents, the educational system, the government, and so on. In the same way that somebody calling out to us using our given name will impact the way we internalize it as part of our identity as we grow, the individualistic manner in which social actors and institutions call out to us impacts how we internalize the ideology of the autonomous actor. In consistently addressing us as autonomous individuals, society convinces us that that is what we are. Society “interpellates” us as individuals, in the words of Althusser, despite evidence suggesting that we are very much interdependent and beholden to countless environments, relationships, and forces beyond our control (Ferretter 2006).

According to Althusser, the ideology of the subject “transforms” people into subjects because it “causes individuals whose lives are in reality determined by their insertion in a complex series of social practices to believe that they are free subjects, the origin and source of their thoughts, emotions and actions” (Ferretter 2006:89). Because of this ideology, we largely blame ourselves for our plight; have difficulty imagining the ways in which forces beyond ourselves might be to blame; and have a hard time identifying, and therefore do not strongly challenge, the forces that constrain us. Althusser argues: “By keeping us all, both the exploiting and the exploited classes, believing that we are free, ideology ensures that most of us do not become so” (Ferretter 2006:94).

COMPONENTS OF AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM

Before taking a closer look at the data on American inequality beliefs, it is useful to define what is meant by “American individualism.” In chapter 1, we gave a very brief overview of the core elements, and here we will provide

further explanation. This is by no means a definitive nor comprehensive definition of the term, but simply a basic framework to shape our discussion in this book. The core elements of American individualism include:

1. Individuals are autonomous agents.
2. Equality of opportunity is preferable to equality of outcome.
3. America is a land of abundant and open opportunity for all regardless of background.
4. Success or failure within America's open-opportunity structure largely reflects individual effort, talent, and choices.
5. Self-reliance and hard work are virtuous.
6. In combination, American-style capitalism and democracy ensure a much higher degree of agency, opportunity, prosperity, and freedom relative to other economic/political combinations (and socialism and communism are particularly undesirable).
7. The size of government and its interventions into economic markets should be limited where possible.

In this section, we review these core elements as well as a number of important related beliefs regarding agency, opportunity, meritocracy, and government.² Taken together, these beliefs might represent American individualism in its "purest" form. It is important to note that people do not always agree with every one of these assumptions, and even people who espouse such beliefs often do so to differing degrees. Additionally, these are what average Americans often espouse in abstract "ideal cultural" terms, but they are not always applied consistently. These beliefs simply tend to be more popular than competing beliefs in American culture among a majority of the population.

An important core individualistic belief is that *individuals are autonomous agents*. In American culture, there is an overemphasis on individuals as autonomous and self-contained, with a high degree of free will and individual control over their lives (a *homo clausus* conception of self in the words of Norbert Elias).³ There is a related underemphasis on individuals as inextricably embedded within a variety of social relationships and forces. As we discussed in chapter 1, this is a problematic assumption, as our abilities, resources, and opportunities are all dependent on a number of factors beyond our control. There are a number of widespread beliefs related to this assumption, including:

- A belief that the genesis of one's identity, beliefs, knowledge, talents/abilities, desires, dispositions, motivations, ambition, choices, and/or work

ethic is from within, not without. Individuals are responsible for who they are and the choices they make, and this ultimately dictates their likelihood of success or failure.

- When unequal playing fields are recognized, it is still assumed that individuals have the agency and responsibility to overcome these obstacles and succeed.
- The conflation of negative freedom with positive freedom, assuming that a comparatively low degree of government intervention into people's lives must make them equally free in the positive sense. "Negative freedom" refers to freedom from external constraint, which is typically conceptualized as freedom from the government dictating what one cannot do—such as where one cannot live, what one cannot say, which religion one cannot practice, and so on. "Positive freedom" refers to the possession of agency, the ability to freely decide the life one wants to live, and to be able to think and act autonomously in pursuit of that desired life. Americans often have a limited understanding of positive freedom and the extent of the impact of social forces on individual lives. Citizens in a number of European countries are more likely to see a much larger role for government enabling freedom, rather than restricting it. Negative freedom is often the primary concern for many Americans when it comes to government, instead of positive freedom.

A second core belief is that *equality of opportunity is preferable to equality of outcome*. Americans are highly supportive of ensuring that all people, regardless of background, have equal access to the opportunity to succeed. They are much less supportive of efforts to ensure equal outcomes, particularly if such outcomes are not believed to follow from the requisite hard work, ambition, and smart choices. This is why Americans are so supportive of public education, for instance, but so unenthusiastic about welfare. A key issue in American culture is disagreement over what constitutes equality of opportunity. Significant inequality of opportunity is often misrecognized as something approximating equality of opportunity in American culture, in large part due to dominant inequality beliefs.

A third core belief is that *America is a land of abundant and open opportunity for all regardless of background*. It is thought that middle-class economic opportunities exist for all who decide to work hard and make smart choices, regardless of their origin. It is often (correctly) assumed that there is substantial opportunity in the U.S., compared to many countries in the world, and thus it is often (incorrectly) assumed that this opportunity is virtually endless. A number of beliefs related to this assumption are widespread, including:

- A belief that since opportunities are available to all, Americans are expected to be independent, personally responsible, self-reliant, self-sufficient, and/or self-made. In a country with unlimited opportunities, individuals are thought to be responsible for grasping these opportunities.
- Extreme reverence for a strong work ethic.
- A belief that social institutions are largely neutral and disinterested.
- A belief that each individual will be personally upwardly mobile in their lifetimes and possibly even rich someday.
- A belief that the enviable wealth of the U.S. is proof that there must not be a better alternative system in the world, and modifications to our capitalist system represent a “slippery slope” risk of drifting toward a socialist or communist society.
- A belief that no class system exists in the U.S.
- The conflation of democracy, capitalism, and egalitarianism.

A fourth core belief is that the U.S. is a meritocracy. This means that *success or failure within America’s open opportunity structure largely reflects individual effort, talent, and choices*. Because opportunities are available to all, it makes little sense to many Americans that those who fail to grasp these opportunities should blame anybody but themselves. This leads to an overemphasis on individual-level factors impacting achievement, and an underemphasis on non-individualistic factors (for both wealth and poverty). The weight of the empirical evidence of course suggests that these non-individualistic factors are critically important, contrary to such meritocratic claims.

A fifth core belief is that *self-reliance and hard work are virtuous*. This has been a common theme in American culture dating back to the founding of the country. This belief is related to notions of autonomy and opportunity. An autonomous person who has the world at their fingertips is inherently suspect if they falter, for failure in this context must equate to a lack of self-reliance and lack of commitment to the work ethic.

A sixth core belief is that *in combination, American-style capitalism and democracy ensure a much higher degree of agency, opportunity, prosperity, and freedom relative to other economic/political combinations, and that socialism and communism are particularly undesirable*. Because the American system is seen as the most desirable compared to others, moves to fundamentally alter this system are often seen as moves away from freedom and prosperity. It is of course correct to assume that American society provides a degree of agency, opportunity, prosperity, and freedom unrivaled in many parts of the world. It is incorrect to assume, however, that it is the *only* country where these conditions exist, that everybody is equally free to live

the lives they desire here, or that improvements cannot be made to ensure that these conditions are enhanced even further.

A seventh core belief is that *the size of government and its interventions into economic markets should be limited where possible*. The history of American society is seen as one that has cultivated a high level of freedom and prosperity, in large part because of smaller government and less market intervention than elsewhere in the world. This leads to an overemphasis on the fairness of markets, an underemphasis on the fairness of government wealth redistribution, and a general hesitancy to endorse too much government intervention or “big government” to alleviate poverty and economic inequality (at least in abstract “ideal cultural” terms). This core belief, combined with the other components of American individualism, influences a number of related beliefs, including:

- favoring individualistic solutions to poverty and economic inequality over structural solutions;
- a high level of skepticism about the effectiveness of government anti-poverty programs;
- a high level of concern about the morality and deservingness of welfare recipients; and
- a focus on equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome.

In combination, these beliefs make it very difficult to institute the highly effective policies that many European countries have utilized to reduce poverty and economic inequality.

Taken together, these core and related beliefs tend to justify a certain level of inequality in American society. If opportunities are available to all, then social institutions act as neutral arbiters in a meritocratic system (and the rewards individuals receive are generally proportionate to their abilities, choices, ambition, and efforts), and the resulting inequality is perceived to be fair and justified. Some people, the argument goes, will naturally work harder, make better choices, and be more talented than other people, and these unavoidable differences will inevitably lead to inequality.

While an overwhelming amount of literature in the social sciences exposes all of these beliefs as either partially or completely flawed, they persist anyway, to varying degrees, in the American mind. This does not mean they go unchallenged or that Americans do not endorse competing non-individualistic ideas, as we will discuss later in this chapter. This is American individualism in its “purest” form, and different people adhere to different components to different degrees. Despite this, research suggests that a culture like that of the

U.S., which is steeped in the assumptions outlined above, will generally favor an individualistic perspective over a non-individualistic one.

SCOPE OF AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM

Seminal Studies

How widespread are individualistic beliefs in American society? While multiple studies have shed light on this question, many scholars consider the work of Joe Feagin (1972, 1975) and James Kluegel and Eliot Smith (1986) to be the seminal statements on American beliefs about poverty and economic inequality. Both remain important and widely cited in the field today. What they both revealed was a deep commitment among the American public to individualistic explanations of economic advantage and disadvantage, which were given priority over non-individualistic explanations. Reviewing the findings from both studies, Judith Chafel notes:

Poverty was attributed more to individual than to societal factors by participants in both studies. . . . Overall, these findings reflect an unflattering view of the poor as morally deficient and personally responsible for their plight. That so much agreement is to be found in these studies is indicative of the degree of consensus with which prevailing societal views of poverty are held. (1997:438)

Joe Feagin reported his findings, based on data from his 1969 nationwide survey, in a 1972 article in *Psychology Today* as well as in his 1975 book *Subordinating the Poor*. His findings revealed that “an individualistic, blame-the-poor view of poverty is firmly entrenched in the American value system” (Feagin 1972:103), as a majority of Americans “held poor people themselves responsible for poverty and were correspondingly reluctant to support new programs aimed at eradicating poverty” (1972:101). Fifty-three percent of his respondents gave high importance to individualistic factors in explaining poverty, compared to only 22 percent for structural factors (1972:104). Of the eleven causes of American poverty provided to respondents, the three strictly individualistic items—poor money management, lack of effort, and loose morals/drunkenness—were ranked first, second, and fourth in popularity.⁴ A fourth item, lack of ability and talent, was the third most popular (Feagin argues that this is not a strictly individualistic item). The rest of the items, which were all either structuralist or fatalistic, were less popular than these top four items.

Most of Feagin’s respondents held either a skeptical or negative view of welfare recipients. An overwhelming majority (84%) agreed that too many

people receive welfare who should be working, and more respondents disagreed (49%) than agreed (43%) that most people on welfare who can work try to find jobs so they can support themselves. There was deep skepticism about the neediness of welfare recipients, as 71 percent of respondents agreed with the notion that many people getting welfare are not honest about their need. A majority of respondents (61%) questioned the fertility decisions of female welfare recipients, agreeing that many have “illegitimate” babies to increase their welfare benefits (Feagin 1972:107). In addition to these findings, Feagin was able to demonstrate a strong correlation between poverty beliefs and welfare attitudes, finding that “high scores on the antiwelfare index turned out to be strongly correlated with high scores on the individualistic-factors index” (1972:108).

Expanding on Feagin’s earlier work, James Kluegel and Eliot Smith came to similar conclusions based on their 1980 nationwide survey, which they comprehensively analyzed in their seminal 1986 book *Beliefs about Inequality*. The authors found that, in general, most Americans believe that opportunities for economic advancement are widely available for all; a person’s position in the social class structure is determined by individual efforts and talents and economic inequality is fair, meritocratic, and equitable (Kluegel and Smith 1986:37). A majority of respondents did not think that the current level of income inequality needed addressing (1986:112). The three most popular explanations (among twelve possible explanations) for American poverty were individualistic ones—poor money management, lack of effort, and lack of ability. Poor-quality schools (tied for fourth most popular along with poor upbringing/poor subcultural values) was the only structural explanation ranked in the top five. The other structural explanations were all among the least popular. Most of the respondents believed that the wealthy attain their social positions based on their superior talent and effort (1986:121). The authors concluded: “Adherence to the dominant ideology is, as we proposed, widespread. In each of the groups we have examined the majority express agreement with dominant-ideology beliefs” (1986:289).

The following are additional selected key findings from *Beliefs about Inequality*:

- 92% of Americans said they had an average (54%) or better than average (38%) chance of getting ahead, compared to the average American.
- 92% said working-class children have an equal (69%) or better (23%) chance of getting ahead, compared to the average American.
- 72% said they had a fair opportunity to make the most of themselves in life without anything holding them back.

- 70% agreed that the U.S. is the land of opportunity where everybody who works hard can get ahead.
- 70% agreed that most Americans have a fair opportunity to make the most of themselves without anything holding them back.
- 66% said poor children have an equal (47%) or better (19%) chance of getting ahead compared to the average American.
- 63% said a person has a good or very good chance of getting ahead if they work hard.

In addition to individualistic beliefs concerning agency and opportunity, Kluegel and Smith found significant skepticism about welfare and welfare recipients: 81 percent believed the government was spending too much on welfare, 77 percent believed most welfare recipients were not honest about their need, and 69 percent disagreed that most welfare recipients tried to find jobs to support themselves (1986:153). Like Feagin, the authors were able to demonstrate that these beliefs shape how Americans think about social policies. In regression models with demographic controls, the authors found a negative association (-0.77) between inegalitarian beliefs and welfare support, a positive association (0.47) between a structural view of poverty and welfare support, and a negative association (-0.39) between an individualistic view of poverty and welfare support (1986:160). They also demonstrated a positive association (0.50) between egalitarian beliefs and support for a federal guaranteed-jobs program (1986:160).

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that individualistic explanations for poverty and economic inequality are more popular among Americans than non-individualistic ones, as Kluegel and Smith explain:

Americans consistently strongly endorse individual reasons for economic position, particularly for poverty, and reject liberal and (especially) radical explanations emphasizing structural causes. Individualistic responses are also preponderant in explanations for one's own situation and for that of Americans in general . . . the general picture is of broad agreement on individual causes of achievement in American society. (1986:1012)

The authors go on to note that “even among people who seem to have most reason to deny the dominant ideology, a majority do not” (Kluegel and Smith 1986:295).

Recent Survey Data

Research in subsequent decades suggests that individualism has remained popular in American society. Inequality belief scholars Hunt and Bullock recently observed, “Analysis of other nationally representative data sources

using [the same items as Feagin] suggests that individualistic beliefs continued to predominate among Americans in the decades following Feagin's work. . . . Structuralist (and especially fatalistic) reasons were less popular in the United States" (2016:95). The following are some key illustrations of the continued popularity of individualism in American culture since Feagin (1972, 1975) and Kluegel and Smith (1986).

In 1990, the General Social Survey revealed that of the four poverty-attribution items in their survey (lack of effort, loose morals, failure of society to provide good schools, and failure of private industry to provide enough good jobs), the two individualistic items were the most popular (Hunt and Bullock 2016). Between 1999 and 2007, at least 64 percent of respondents across six nationwide surveys agreed that most people who want to get ahead can do so if they are willing to work hard (Hanson and Zogby 2010:573–74). In a 2000 nationwide survey, 60 percent of Americans reported they were satisfied with the opportunity for a poor person to get ahead in the U.S. by working hard (2010:577). In 2005, 80 percent of Americans answered "yes" when asked if it is possible to start out poor, work hard, and become rich—that was up from 57 percent in 1983, despite social-mobility rates getting worse over that same period of time (Callero 2009:93). In 2007, 67 percent of Americans agreed that most people who want to get ahead can do so if they are willing to work hard (Hanson and Zogby 2010:573–74). In 2011, 75 percent of Americans agreed that everyone has it within their power to succeed, while only 19 percent said success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside of one's control (Pew Research Center 2012c). In 2017, 82 percent of Americans reported that they either have achieved the American Dream or are on their way to achieving it (Pew Research Center 2018a).

In 2007, a majority of Americans, 70 percent, said that, even if some are rich and some are poor, they preferred a free-market economy (Allen and Auxier 2009). In the same year, 65 percent of Americans reported that government had too much control in their lives (2009). A 2012 survey revealed that 72 percent of Americans either completely or mostly agreed that the poor had become too dependent on government assistance programs (Howard et al. 2017:785). In that same year, Americans reported being more favorable to a government that let each American get ahead on their own efforts (40%) than to a government that sees to it that every American has a job and a good standard of living (31%) (2017:776). In 2014, 51 percent of Americans preferred a smaller government with fewer services, compared to 40 percent who preferred a bigger government with more services (Pew Research Center 2014b). In the same year, 49 percent of Americans reported that we were spending too much on welfare, while only 19 percent said too little (Howard et al. 2017:782). In 2015, only 19 percent of Americans said they could trust

the government always or most of the time, one of the lowest levels of trust recorded in the last fifty years. In the same year, only 20 percent of Americans described government programs as being well-run, and strong majorities said the federal government (67%) and Congress (75%) had a negative impact on the way the country was going (Pew Research Center 2015a).

A 2009 Economic Mobility Project survey provides more useful data. In this survey, 71 percent of Americans said that the most important factor in economic mobility is the individual person and their individual traits, such as being a hard worker, while only 21 percent chose external factors such as economic conditions or background. This was true even for self-described lower-class respondents, with 56 percent citing the individual and only 36 percent citing forces outside of the individual. Most Americans (55%) disagreed that a child's chances of achieving financial success are tied to the income of their parents, and hard work and ambition were the most popular explanations for economic mobility. More Americans agreed (46%) than disagreed (36%) that the government does more to hurt than to help people to move up the economic ladder. When Americans were asked which factors were most important in causing an individual to be downwardly mobile, from a list of ten factors ranging from individualistic to non-individualistic factors, poor life choices was the most popular answer (Economic Mobility Project 2009).

A 2013 survey from the *Washington Post* and Miller Center is also illustrative of the persistence of individualistic beliefs in recent years. In this survey, most Americans (65%) agreed that most people who want to get ahead could make it if they were willing to work hard. In another question, respondents were asked which of the following was most important for getting ahead financially—education, friends and connections, growing up wealthy, hard work, or natural ability—and hard work was the most popular answer. When asked which of the following would be the single most important thing to help respondents better achieve their version of the American Dream—access to affordable college education, access to job training, affordable health care, affordable housing, less government/regulation/taxes, or low taxes—low taxes was the most popular answer. Finally, most Americans (58%) said that American workers who were not working hard enough to get ahead deserved some or a lot of the blame for it having become harder to find well-paying jobs in the U.S. than in the past (*Washington Post* and Miller Center 2013).

In addition to individualism, Americans regularly underestimate the level of inequality in American society, and overestimate the likelihood that an American born in the bottom income quintile will be upwardly mobile (Norton and Ariely 2011; Davidai and Gilovich 2015).

Taken as a whole, the data outlined in this section demonstrate that in the U.S., it continues to be true that “most Americans believe that meritocracy is

not only the way the system *should* work but the way it *does* work” (McNamee and Miller 2014:3).

Despite individualism’s privileged status across most social groups (except for African Americans and the poor), it should be noted that the degree of support for individualism does vary by group. Whites, wealthier individuals, men, and political conservatives, for instance, tend to be the most individualistic, with individualism weaker among the less wealthy, women, and liberals (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Bullock 2013; Royce 2015; Hunt and Bullock 2016; Pew Research Center 2017). As Heather Bullock notes, attributions for poverty and wealth tend to align with group advantage, as “groups with greater power tend to be more individualistic and less structural in their understanding of poverty and wealth than less powerful groups” (2013:53). Beyond race, social class, gender, and political orientation, other factors that impact the degree to which Americans espouse individualistic beliefs are educational attainment, personal experience (such as befriending a poor person), religiosity and religious denomination, community characteristics (living among more Republicans or more Democrats, living near a poor or homeless population that is disproportionately Black or White, etc.), and shifts in the economic and social climate at a given moment (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Royce 2015; Hunt and Bullock 2016).

American Individualism in Cross-National Context

Visitors to the U.S. often find its extreme individualism to be one of its more noticeable and unique characteristics, as Everett Carl Ladd notes: “There has been striking agreement among our foreign visitors as to the existence of a distinctive American socio-political ideology, centering around individualism, and its pervasiveness throughout U.S. political, economic, and social life” (1994:25). Joseph Henrich and his colleagues explain that even among Westerners, who are typically more individualistic than non-Westerners, Americans stand out for their extreme individualism:

Americans stand out relative to other Westerners on phenomena that are associated with independent self-concepts and individualism. A number of analyses, using a diverse range of methods, reveal that Americans are, on average, the most individualistic people in the world. The observation that the United States is especially individualistic is not new and dates at least as far back as de Tocqueville. The unusually individualistic nature of Americans may be caused by, or reflect, an ideology that particularly stresses the importance of freedom and self-sufficiency, as well as various practices in education and childrearing that may help to inculcate this sense of autonomy. (Henrich et al. 2010:74)

Indeed, there is a “distinctively American faith in individualism” (Brady 2009:16). The high degree to which Americans transform poverty and economic inequality into individual-level problems, or “personal troubles” in the words of C. Wright Mills (1959), seems to be a “peculiarly American tendency” (Katz 1989:237). Seymour Lipset calls Americans “the most anti-statist people in the developed world” (1996:71). Everett Carl Ladd argues that “Americans have shown themselves singularly unreceptive to appeals to take from the rich,” regardless of income group and regardless of time period—this was even the case during the Depression era (1994:38). “Americans dislike redistribution because they feel that people on welfare are lazy,” Alberto Alesina and his colleagues contend, while “Europeans feel that people on welfare are unfortunate” (Alesina et al. 2001:39).

A good demonstration of the power of individualism in American culture is provided by research comparing American beliefs to those of citizens in other countries. Such cross-national research suggests that Americans are indeed some of the most individualistic people in the world (Ladd 1994; Lipset 1996; Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Economic Mobility Project 2007; Henrich et al. 2010; Lepianka et al. 2010; Pew Research Center 2012b, 2014a, and 2016a; Hunt and Bullock 2016; ISSP 2017). Summarizing a number of studies of beliefs among citizens in non-U.S. countries, Hunt and Bullock argue that, “in contrast to the findings of most U.S.-based studies, the majority of these non-U.S. studies document a stronger endorsement of structuralist than individualistic beliefs” (2016:98). Numerous survey items across a number of countries show that individualism in the U.S., compared to other countries, is consistently “more intense, pervasive, and uncontradicted” (Ladd 1994:35). Researchers from the Economic Mobility Project explain the uniqueness of American inequality beliefs in cross-national context:

The underlying belief in the fluidity of class and economic status has differentiated Americans from citizens in the majority of other developed nations . . . compared to their global counterparts, Americans have tended to be far more optimistic about their ability to control their own economic destinies through hard work, less likely to believe that coming from a wealthy family is important to getting ahead, less likely to think that differences in income within their country are too large, and less likely to favor the government’s taking responsibility to reduce those differences. (2007:2)

In his 1994 book *The American Ideology*, Everett Carl Ladd reviews cross-national survey data collected by the National Opinion Research Center and International Social Survey Project. These data demonstrate the different beliefs about the role of government between Americans and their counterparts elsewhere in the wealthy world (see table 2.1). In Australia and Europe,

Table 2.1. Views on the Role of Government in U.S. Versus Europe/Australia

Survey Question	United States (% Agree)	Europe/Australia Average (% Agree)
It is the responsibility of government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes	29%	63%
The government should provide a job for everyone who wants one	45%	66%
The government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed	37%	59%
The government should provide everyone with a guaranteed basic income	21%	54%

Source: Ladd 1994:75.

a majority of citizens supported government inequality reduction in general (63%), as well as specific government programs such as a guaranteed-jobs program (66%), generous unemployment benefits (59%), and a guaranteed basic income (54%). There was much less support for these things in the U.S., with each of the four questions failing to receive majority support (29%, 45%, 37%, and 21%, respectively) (Ladd 1994:75).

In his 1996 book *American Exceptionalism*, Seymour Lipset further demonstrates how Americans differ from Europeans on issues concerning the role of the state. Compared to their European counterparts, there is less support among Americans for major government market interventions and social welfare policies. When asked whether the government should provide health care, for instance, 40 percent of Americans agreed, compared to a European average of 76 percent. When asked if the government should reduce differences in income between high- and low-income people, 38 percent of Americans agreed, compared to a 70 percent European average. Major differences between Americans and Europeans persisted even when income groups are compared (see table 2.2). Among high-income earners, for instance, there were substantial differences in support for a government guaranteed-jobs program (32% for the U.S. versus 62% average for Europe); government guaranteeing a decent standard of living for the unemployed (23% versus 57%); and government guaranteeing everybody a basic income (12% versus 46%). For low-income earners, sizeable differences also existed for support for a government guaranteed-jobs program (61% in the U.S. versus 83% average for Europe), government guaranteeing a decent standard of living for the unemployed (52% versus 72%), and government guaranteeing everybody a basic income (33% versus 68%) (Lipset 1996:7576).

Table 2.2. Responsibility of Government, United States Versus Europe

Question	U.S. High-Income Earners	Average for European High-Income Earners	U.S. Low-Income Earners	Average for European Low-Income Earners
Agree/strongly agree the government should provide everybody with a job	32%	62%	61%	83%
Agree/strongly agree the government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed	23%	57%	52%	72%
Agree/strongly agree the government should provide everyone with a guaranteed basic income	12%	46%	33%	68%

Source: Lipset 1996:76.

In their 2004 book *Fighting Poverty in the U.S. and Europe*, Alesina and Glaeser found differences between Americans and Europeans concerning the ideology of individualism. The authors demonstrated that, compared to Europeans, Americans were much more likely to believe the poor were lazy (60% for the U.S. versus 26% for Europe), and less likely to believe that luck was a determinant of income (30% versus 54%). Americans were also significantly less likely to endorse the view that poverty is inescapable (29%), compared to Europeans (60%) (Alesina and Glaeser 2004:184). Summarizing key differences between these two groups, the authors explain: “The American and European world views are quite different. The Europeans maintain a belief that birth determines status and the poor are trapped. Americans believe that they live in a land of opportunity where the people who stay poor are those who are too lazy to pull themselves up by their bootstraps” (2004:184).

Data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) provide another useful demonstration, in a cross-national context, of the extreme nature of American individualism. In the 1999 ISSP survey, for example, 61 percent of Americans agreed that people are rewarded for their efforts, and 69 percent agreed that people are rewarded for their intelligence and skill; the median responses across the other countries were 36 percent and 39 percent, respectively (Economic Mobility Project 2007:2).⁵ Americans are similarly unique when it comes to their views on the role of government in addressing economic disadvantage, favoring a more minimalist role than their counterparts in other

wealthy countries. In 2009, the ISSP asked whether it was the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high and low incomes. When we compared Americans to citizens in the other rich democracies, we found striking differences. Fifty-one percent of Americans disagreed that it was the government's responsibility, while the average disagreement across the other rich democracies was only 16 percent (ISSP 2017).⁶

A 2011 survey from the Pew Research Center further reinforces the uniqueness of American individualism compared to the ideologies of Europeans. In one question, respondents were asked which was more important: the freedom to pursue life's goals without state interference, or that the state guarantees that nobody is in need. In the U.S., 58 percent of respondents chose "freedom to pursue life's goals without state interference," compared to an average of 35 percent in the Western European countries. Only 35 percent of Americans chose "the state guarantees that nobody is in need," with an average response of 62 percent in the Western European countries. In another question, 36 percent of Americans agreed that "success in life is determined by forces outside our control," with an average agreement of 55 percent in the Western European countries. The same survey found that, while less-educated Americans were not as individualistic as their more highly educated fellow citizens, individualistic answers were still dominant:

About three-quarters (74%) of Germans in the less educated group believe that success in life is largely determined by forces beyond one's control, compared with 55% of college graduates. Among Americans, 41% of those without a college degree say they have little control over their fate, while just 22% of college graduates share this view. (Pew Research Center 2012b)

Summarizing their survey results, the Pew researchers concluded that "as has long been the case, American values differ from those of Western Europeans in many important ways. Most notably, Americans are more individualistic and are less supportive of a strong safety net" (Pew Research Center 2012b).

Another international survey from the Pew Research Center provides additional support for the uniqueness of American individualism. The survey is from 2014 and includes over 40 countries. In that survey, 57 percent of Americans disagreed that success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside of our control, compared to a median disagreement of 41 percent among other advanced economies and a global median disagreement of 38 percent (see table 2.3).

On another question, 73 percent of Americans said that it was very important to work hard to get ahead in life, compared to a European median response of 35 percent and a global median response of 50 percent (Pew Research Center 2014a, 2016a). The Pew researchers concluded that, compared

Table 2.3. Individualism across 44 Countries

Survey question: Please tell me whether you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or completely disagree with the following statement: Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control.

<i>Countries</i>	<i>% Mostly/Completely Disagree</i>
Global Average (excluding the U.S.)	38%
United States	57%
Advanced Economies	
Advanced Economy Average (excluding the U.S.)	41%
United Kingdom	55%
Israel	51%
France	50%
Spain	47%
Japan	44%
Greece	37%
Italy	32%
Germany	31%
South Korea	23%

Source: Pew Research Center 2014a.

to Europeans, “Americans are more likely to believe they control their own destiny,” and that “Americans are also especially likely to believe that an individual who works hard can find success” (Pew Research Center 2016a).

RESISTING THE DOMINANT IDEOLOGY

The weight of the evidence is clear: numerous survey items across a number of studies spanning a half century confirm that individualistic beliefs tend to be more numerous, more popular, more firmly held, and believed with more certainty and intensity than non-individualistic beliefs among the American population. Yet despite their privileged status in the American mind, individualistic beliefs are not the only ones that Americans hold, as important non-individualistic beliefs are held as well. Generally, it might be said that the large number of individualistic beliefs Americans hold constitute the default perspective, or the “rule,” that explains the overall system of stratification. Non-individualistic beliefs are the “exceptions” to the rule of individualism that are applied in specific circumstances. The tendency is for Americans to

be more comfortable with and fall back on individualistic assumptions, but allow themselves to be convinced of non-individualistic explanations in limited circumstances if the evidence is strong enough.

This is of course not to say that Americans are equally individualistic and structuralist. Individualism is the default perspective, consisting of a set of beliefs that tends to be stronger than non-individualistic beliefs. The only groups in American society who seem to truly allow structuralist beliefs an equal footing with individualistic ones are the poor and African Americans, who tend to be both strongly individualistic and strongly structuralist. Feagin (1972), for instance, found that 45 percent of African Americans rated individualistic explanations of poverty as “very important” (versus 56% of Whites), compared to 54 percent for structural explanations (but only 17% of Whites) (1972:104). He also found that 41 percent of Whites scored high on his anti-welfare index, compared to only 12 percent of African Americans (Feagin 1972:107).⁷

Even in the aforementioned seminal works of Feagin (1972, 1975) and Kluegel and Smith (1986), non-individualistic beliefs were present, even if outnumbered by individualistic ones. In Feagin’s study, a majority of respondents classified “lack of thrift,” “lack of effort,” and “lack of ability and talent” as “very important” in causing poverty. While no structural items were classified as “very important” by a majority, a majority of respondents nonetheless did rank four out of five structural items as at least somewhat important. The most popular structural item, for instance, “low wages,” garnered only 42 percent of respondents who classified it as very important. Thirty-five percent of respondents, however, rated it as “somewhat important,” meaning a majority of respondents gave it at least some importance. Overall, while 53 percent of respondents gave individualistic reasons high importance versus 22 percent for structural reasons, 60 percent of respondents did give structural reasons medium importance (Feagin 1972:104). The structural explanations were considerably less popular than the individualistic ones, but they were not absent and their popularity was not simply marginal. The respondents clearly had structural beliefs that could be activated under the right circumstances, even if those beliefs were not as strong as their individualistic ones.

In Kluegel and Smith’s study, 83 percent of respondents agreed that the rich have a better chance of getting ahead than the average American, and 55 percent disagreed that every young person has an equal chance to get a college education (1986:46-49). A majority believed that the incomes of K-12 teachers (62%) and non-unionized factory workers (61%) were too low, and that the incomes of corporate owners and executives were too high (71%) (Kluegel and Smith 1986:120). Additionally, a majority of respondents (61%) supported a federal guaranteed-jobs program (Kluegel and Smith 1986:153).

Despite their overall data suggesting that Americans prioritize individualistic explanations over non-individualistic ones, non-individualistic explanations were not completely absent and could be activated under certain circumstances.

What might convince Americans to venture out of their ideological comfort zone and utilize non-individualistic beliefs? The specific stimulus people are presented with is often very important in determining when they will and will not challenge the dominant ideology (Royce 2015). Take the problem of poverty. Americans are more likely to be sympathetic to a poor person and more likely to apply a structurally oriented explanation if the person in question is:

- a child versus an adult;
- a member of the “deserving” poor who is perceived as trying to “better themselves” versus the “undeserving” poor who are perceived as not doing everything within their power to escape poverty;
- physically disabled versus able-bodied (particularly able-bodied men);
- physically ill versus healthy;
- elderly versus working age;
- homeless versus housed;
- married with children versus single with children (particularly single Black mothers or teen mothers);
- poor but not using welfare versus welfare recipients;
- White versus non-White (particularly Black);
- a female versus a male.

Results from a 2012–2013 American National Election Studies (ANES) survey help underscore the importance of the stimulus. On this survey, while 72 percent of Americans expressed positive feelings toward the poor, only 37 percent expressed positive feelings toward welfare recipients (Howard et al. 2017:771). In another example from a 2014 National Opinion Research Center (NORC) survey, 62 percent of Americans said we were spending too little on assistance to the poor, but only 19 percent said we were spending too little on welfare (Howard et al. 2017:781–82).

Americans who do resist the dominant individualistic ideology do not tend to adopt an oppositional structuralist perspective. Instead, they tend to utilize what scholars have labeled “compromise” arguments. How the argument usually works is that when Americans do acknowledge that some people face barriers to success that others do not, they tend to maintain that these individuals still have the ability and the responsibility to overcome those barriers. All it takes, they assume, is a commitment to working hard and making smart

choices, and eventually the barrier can be overcome. Compromise arguments leave important components of American individualism unchallenged—such as the notion that all Americans are autonomous and have a high degree of control over their lives—while acknowledging that not all Americans may have equal access to opportunities. So rather than adopting a purely structuralist perspective, most Americans who challenge the dominant ideology utilize arguments that blend individualism with some elements of structuralism, resulting in compromise arguments that still tend to lean more heavily on individualistic assumptions. Judith Chafel explains how this was demonstrated in the work of Kluegel and Smith:

Poverty was attributed more to individual than to societal factors. . . . When structural barriers to opportunity were acknowledged in the case of Kluegel and Smith's study, such recognition did not significantly alter the belief that "everyone who works hard can get ahead." Causal attributions for poverty did not shift from the individual to society. Instead, as Kluegel and Smith pointed out, the admission resulted in compromise images. (1997:438)

These compromise images, according to Chafel, held that, "barriers to opportunity exist but can be overcome by strenuous individual effort. . . . In other words, they are appended to the prevailing ideology; they do not supplant it" (1997:438).

Among the groups who display the strongest resistance to the dominant ideology, such as African Americans and poor Americans, research suggests that their strong structuralist beliefs are held alongside their strong individualistic beliefs, not in place of them. Research suggests that the common experience of discrimination among African Americans, and the harsh experiences of everyday life faced by the poor, significantly increase these groups' awareness of unequal barriers, which leads to the development of stronger structuralist views. These experiences make structural forces "visible" in a way that they are not for more privileged groups, despite the fact that the structural forces are no less present for those groups (structure is there, even if it is *aiding* you). Because of this increased visibility for disadvantaged groups, they are much more likely to support both strong individualistic and strong structuralist views, rather than the default position where individualism dominates. These groups see unequal barriers that other groups either fail or refuse to see yet still believe hard work and smart choices will overcome them.

Kluegel and Smith noted that, even among lower-income Americans, those who challenge the dominant ideology tend to adopt a compromise rather than radical structuralist perspective. Among the poorest of the poor, the authors noted a tendency to either (a) believe people can and should overcome unequal barriers to opportunity or (b) believe that there are reputable poor peo-

ple (honest, disabled, or working) and disreputable poor people (dishonest, not working, etc.) (Kluegel and Smith 1986:297). So rather than completely rejecting individualism, they either challenge it while downplaying the extent to which unequal barriers matter or divide the poor into “deserving” and “undeserving” groups.

Survey results from the Economic Mobility Project (2009) provide a useful demonstration of the fact that, while individualistic beliefs are more numerous and privileged in American culture, non-individualistic beliefs are nonetheless present in the American mind (see table 2.4). When asked which factors are essential or important for economic mobility, the most popular answers were individualistic ones: hard work (92%) and ambition (89%). The impact of race (15%) and gender (16%) were hardly emphasized at all, and the impact of social class (28% for coming from a wealthy family, 37% for coming from an educated family, 40% for growing up in a good neighborhood, and 44% for knowing the right people) was only moderately emphasized, despite overwhelming empirical evidence demonstrating that social class (individual and neighborhood), race, and gender are highly influential in people’s lives. Some non-individualistic and decidedly structural factors are given a high

Table 2.4. American Beliefs Regarding the Causes of Economic Mobility

Respondents were asked: *Please tell me if this factor is essential, very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not important at all to economic mobility.* The following answered essential or very important.

Hard work	92%
Having ambition	89%
Staying healthy	83%
Quality K-12 education	83%
Having a good education	81%
Growing up in a stable family	74%
State of the economy	62%
Growing up in a two-parent family	54%
Knowing the right people	44%
Access to loans	43%
Growing up in a good neighborhood	40%
Educated parents	37%
Coming from a wealthy family	28%
Luck	21%
Gender	16%
Race	15%

Source: Economic Mobility Project 2009. Copyright © The Pew Charitable Trusts. All Rights Reserved. Reproduced with permission. Any further use without the express written consent of The Pew Charitable Trusts is prohibited.

level of importance, such as quality schools (83%) and the economy (62%). This is a good demonstration of what the existing literature suggests: while individualistic beliefs are more popular in relation to non-individualistic beliefs, beliefs that challenge the dominant ideology are not completely absent and can be activated under certain circumstances.

A survey from a few years later, conducted in 2015 by *The Atlantic* and the Aspen Institute, also demonstrates the ways in which a dually conscious public often thinks about certain issues. The popularity of individualism was clearly apparent. Most of the respondents said that they have had or will have the opportunity to achieve their personal (81%) and professional (73%) goals. When asked which was more important in achieving the American Dream—hard work, circumstances of birth, or luck—61 percent said “hard work,” 28 percent said “circumstances,” and 11 percent said “luck.” An overwhelming majority (87%) said that getting ahead through hard work is attainable. A majority (72%) said they are either living the American Dream (50%) or that they can achieve the American Dream someday (22%). Most (65%) said the American Dream is still achievable for those who are willing to work for it. Of a list of 24 possible obstacles to the American Dream, the most popular answer was “decline of work ethic,” followed by a tie for second between “decline of values/moral standards” and “personal debt.” Of those twenty-four barriers, “big government” was believed to be a greater barrier to the American Dream than health care costs, unequal educational access, racial and gender discrimination, access to affordable housing, insufficient social welfare programs, and lack of socioeconomic mobility (*Atlantic/Aspen* 2015).

Answers on different questions, however, show that structuralist concerns are present, even if they are not as much of a priority. A majority (75%), for instance, said the American Dream is suffering. Most (69%) believe that obstacles to realizing the American Dream are more severe today than ever before, and 73 percent said that the American Dream will be harder for future generations to attain. Despite the popularity of work ethic and values/moral standards as barriers to the American Dream, the same poll revealed that “rules favor the wealthy” and “lack of economic opportunity” were also in the top five. A majority (68%) said that action needs to be taken immediately to reduce barriers to the American Dream.

Sean McCoy, from *The Atlantic*, notes the dual consciousness captured by different questions within the same survey:

A majority of respondents think the American Dream—which they generally define as financial stability and security—is suffering, and they see more severe obstacles to achieving the dream today than ever before. They’re also split on the precise problems that have caused the dream to falter and on the best ways to

solve those problems. Yet for all their pessimism and division, most people are surprisingly upbeat about their personal lives. Perhaps paradoxically, a majority of Americans also believe that hard work and elbow grease are still enough for ordinary citizens to realize the dream. (2015)

To summarize, individualistic explanations for poverty and economic inequality are preferred by most Americans. When Americans do acknowledge that some people face barriers to success that others do not, they still assume that those individuals are able to, and responsible for, overcoming those barriers through hard work and smart choices. Few Americans adopt a purely structuralist perspective, and hardly any support a purely fatalistic one.

Despite rejecting some elements of the ideology of individualism, it should be noted that compromise arguments are still rather individualistic. These arguments often downplay the significance of social barriers, ignore the importance of socially distributed abilities and resources, and do not acknowledge how restricted access to resources and opportunities compromises the development of one's abilities. The "watered down" individualism represented by compromise arguments is nonetheless still rather individualistic. An individual cannot be commanded to overcome a barrier that is insurmountable. They cannot be commanded to overcome a barrier that requires abilities and resources that they do not have. It is likewise futile to ask individuals to overcome barriers that are responsible for distributing the very abilities and/or resources required for such a feat (attending a low-quality school, for instance, contributes to the maldevelopment that hinders academic success). Despite the deeply problematic nature of these requests, compromise arguments nonetheless make them of individuals. The idea that social inequalities are not *really* a problem, and can be overcome by most people through a stronger work ethic and smarter choices, significantly underestimates the significance of the barriers that many Americans face simply by being born in the wrong social position.

INTERSECTIONS: RACISM AND SEXISM

While there are many reasons to be concerned about the high level of individualism in American culture, we are principally interested in the role that it plays in shaping the kinds of social policies Americans are willing to support, as we explore at length in chapter 7. If Americans are uncomfortable with more robust and structurally oriented social policies, it will prove difficult to achieve the greater level of poverty and inequality reduction enjoyed by many other wealthy countries. To understand why Americans are somewhat hesitant to support such an approach to social policy, we must understand the

role of not only individualism but racism and sexism as well. Research suggests that American individualism combines with racism and sexism to shape people's enthusiasm for different types of social policies.

Poverty in the U.S. is, and always has been, racialized. As Ta-Nehisi Coates explains, in America, "the concentration of poverty has been paired with a concentration of melanin" (2014). In 2017, for example, 9 percent of Whites were poor, compared to 21 percent of African Americans (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Americans tend to come to a number of faulty conclusions based on this reality. One misunderstanding is the conflation of race and poverty—confusing disproportionate African American poverty with the false belief that most of the poor are Black or that most African Americans are poor. Another misunderstanding—a misunderstanding influenced by our individualistic culture and widespread animus toward African Americans—is that if a majority of the poor are Black, and poverty is therefore believed to be a "Black problem," this group must be suspect in some manner.

One variation of individualism would explain this by arguing that African Americans are disproportionately burdened with character flaws and poorer work ethics compared to Whites. Another variation would argue that African Americans are not as likely to invest in their human capital as Whites. A third variation would assert that African Americans are, on average, genetically predisposed to inherit lower levels of intelligence and cognitive ability than other groups.

All of these arguments are discredited by an overwhelming literature in both the social and natural sciences. It is the structure of society that privileges some racial and ethnic groups while disadvantaging others, not supposedly inherent characteristics. Racial inequality in the U.S. is built into the structure of society, embedded in a "network of social relations at social, political, economic, and ideological levels that shapes the life chances of the various races" (Bonilla-Silva 2014:26). But in a culture like that of the U.S., animus toward African Americans, coupled with a weak cultural understanding of structural forces, leads to widespread misrecognition of the sources of racial inequality and the cultivation and dissemination of faulty racist explanations.

Race has a profound impact on how Americans view poverty, economic inequality, and the role of government. Alberto Alesina and his colleagues, for instance, find that racism is one of three major factors contributing to the weaker American social welfare state relative to Europe, along with individualism and features of the American political system (Alesina et al. 2001). This is of course not a new argument. Scholars have long speculated that strong individualism and weak class-consciousness in the U.S. are related to racial divisions. Writing in the late nineteenth century, for instance, Karl Marx and

Friedrich Engels observed this phenomenon. In 1870, Marx wrote that “the working class is *split* into two *hostile* camps” in the U.S., with native-born White workers occupying a more privileged position, which distorted their perceptions of social inequality (Lipset and Marks 2000:29). In 1892, Engels argued that “your great obstacle in America, it seems to me, lies in the exceptional position of the native workers. . . . [T]he ordinary badly paid occupations [are left] to immigrants” (2000:29).

Indeed, views of government vary drastically by race. In a 2007 Pew survey, a strong majority (61%) of African Americans agreed that the government should (1) help more needy people (even if it increases debt), (2) guarantee food and shelter for all, and (3) take care of people who cannot take care of themselves. Only 38 percent of Whites agreed with all three items (Morin and Neidorf 2007).

In another illuminating Pew survey, this one from 2014, 51 percent of Americans reported that they preferred a smaller government with fewer services, versus 40 percent who preferred a bigger government with more services. Whites and non-Whites, however, had very different positions on this question. Pew reported these racial differences by age group. For Millennials, 52 percent of Whites and 21 percent of non-Whites supported smaller government, compared to 39 percent of Whites and 71 percent of non-Whites who supported bigger government. For Generation X, 67 percent of Whites and 20 percent of non-Whites supported smaller government, versus 27 percent of Whites and 71 percent of non-Whites who supported bigger government. For baby boomers, 70 percent of Whites and 28 percent of non-Whites supported smaller government, while 23 percent of Whites and 60 percent of non-Whites supported bigger government. There was no racial breakdown for the silent generation (Pew Research Center 2014b). There are clearly major differences among racial groups in how they view the government, which is informed by their inequality beliefs in other areas as well.

In his important book *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, Martin Gilens explores the relationship between beliefs about race and beliefs about welfare and welfare recipients. His analysis demonstrates that the American public

thinks that most people who receive welfare are black, and second, the public thinks that blacks are less committed to the work ethic than are other Americans . . . white Americans’ attitudes towards welfare can only be understood in connection with their beliefs about blacks—especially their judgements about the causes of racial inequality and the extent to which blacks’ problems stem from their own lack of effort. (Gilens 1999:3)

Gilens demonstrates that Americans hold a more negative view of the poor, of welfare, and of welfare recipients than might be the case if it were not for

their beliefs about race—specifically, the beliefs that most of the poor are Black and that African Americans are lazier and less committed to traditional morality than Whites. The false and racist view that most of the poor belong to a disproportionately lazy, immoral, and undeserving minority group leads the dominant imagery of poverty among Whites to be disproportionately focused on negative images of African Americans, which significantly impacts the types of social welfare programs White Americans are willing to support (Gilens 1999:67).

Welfare is one of the most unpopular and thoroughly racialized of government programs, a trend resistant to major changes in welfare policy. Dyck and Hussey, for instance, tracked opposition to welfare spending using American National Election Studies data from presidential election years from 1992 to 2004. They found that—despite dramatic changes to the welfare system and reduced racialized media coverage of welfare recipients over this time period—“attitudes toward welfare remained as strongly racialized in 2004 as they were a decade earlier, with the stereotyping of Blacks as lazy figuring prominently in welfare opposition” (Bullock 2013:65).

Nationwide survey results illustrate the manner in which many Americans, and particularly White Americans, conflate race and poverty/welfare and continue to disproportionately place the blame for racial inequality on African Americans themselves. When Americans are asked if most of the poor are Black or White, 55 percent report that most poor Americans are Black, while only 24 percent answer that most are White (Gilens 1999:68). In addition to conflating race and poverty, many White Americans ascribe disproportionate African American poverty to a supposed lack of work ethic, morality, and family values. One 2014 survey from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) asked respondents, on a seven-point scale from “lazy” to “hard-working,” where they would place African Americans—and Americans were more likely to place African Americans in the lazy half than the hardworking half. On the same survey, Americans were much more likely to place Whites in the hardworking half rather than the lazy half (Howard et al. 2017:775). A 2012 Associated Press (AP) survey revealed that Americans were more likely to agree (38%) than to disagree (23%) that most African American welfare recipients could get along without it if they tried (776). Research suggests that these false, racist beliefs are an important reason why many Whites resist taking a structural view of economic disadvantage.

In the aforementioned study by Kluegel and Smith, most Americans, and particularly White Americans, underemphasized the structural nature of racial inequality. Kluegel and Smith argued that their data suggest that “most Americans believe that blacks no longer face barriers to achieving economic

parity with whites. Most Americans appear to see limits to opportunity as a matter of the American past” (1986:200). The authors found that 73 percent of Americans reported that African Americans have an equal (45%) or better (28%) chance of getting ahead, compared to the average American (Kluegel and Smith 1986:49). Only 26 percent of Whites believed African Americans and other racial minorities face significant discrimination that limits their chances to get ahead. About the same number of Whites, 24 percent, reported that there is significant reverse discrimination against Whites, and more (31%) reported that there is a lot of preferential treatment that improves the chances for minorities to get ahead (190).

Recent survey research confirms that when Americans, and particularly White Americans, think about racial inequality, they tend to downplay the role of race in contemporary American life, place disproportionate blame on African Americans for racial inequality (individually or as a group), and downplay the roles that the larger culture and social structure play in structuring and perpetuating racial inequality. In a 2008 nationwide Gallup survey, 68 percent of Whites said that, everything else being equal, they would fare the same (60%) or better (8%) if they had been born Black (Gallup 2018a). A 2015 Atlantic/Aspen Institute survey revealed that 66 percent of Americans and 75 percent of White Americans reported that race was not an important factor in the availability of the American Dream (2015:52–53).

A recent psychological study revealed that White respondents reported that there was actually more anti-White bias in contemporary American society than anti-Black bias (Feagin 2014:132). A recent MTV survey of 18 to 24 year-olds revealed that 62 percent believe that Barack Obama’s presidency shows that minorities have the same opportunities as Whites, and 67 percent believe it proves that race is not a barrier to accomplishments. In the same survey, 70 percent of White young people reported that race-based affirmative action is unfair regardless of historical inequalities (Bouie 2014). In a 2012 Public Religion Research Institute survey, 58 percent of White young people said that discrimination against Whites is as big of a problem as discrimination against minorities (Bouie 2014). In a 2017 Pew survey, 54 percent of Whites said that African Americans who cannot get ahead have mostly themselves to blame, versus 35 percent who said discrimination is the main reason (Pew Research Center 2017). Finally, in a 2012 *Washington Post* poll, when respondents were asked, “Why do most Black voters so consistently support Democrats?” the second most commonly cited reason given by Republicans was that “black voters are dependent on government or seeking a government handout,” behind only “don’t know” in popularity (Bullock 2013:60).

The following are other selected key findings concerning racial inequality in America from 2016 nationwide Gallup survey data (Gallup 2018a):

- 80% of Whites believe that in their community, African Americans are treated fairly compared to Whites when shopping.
- 79% of Whites believe that in their community, African Americans are treated fairly compared to Whites at work.
- 77% of Whites believe racial minorities, including African Americans, are treated fairly by police officers in their area. When phrased differently, 55% of Whites believe that in their community, African Americans specifically are treated fairly compared to Whites by police officers (only 40% said less fairly).
- 75% of Whites believe that in their community, African American children have as good of a chance as White children to get a good education.
- 75% of Whites believe that in their community, African Americans have as good of a chance as Whites to get any housing they can afford.
- 70% of Whites believe that in their community, qualified African Americans have as good a chance as Whites to be hired for a job. White Americans are more evenly split when the question asks whether “racial minorities” have equal job opportunities to Whites, and the question asks about America in general rather than in their own community (52% say yes, 47% say no).
- 56% of White Americans are either somewhat or very satisfied with how African Americans are treated.
- While 56% of Whites report that racism is widespread against African Americans in the U.S., 43% also report that racism against Whites is widespread.
- 53% of Whites believe the criminal justice system is not biased against African Americans, while 45% believe that it is.

Pew Research Center (2016c, 2016d) data from 2016 reveals similar findings. In those surveys, a majority of Whites, 62 percent, say that their race has not had much impact on their ability to succeed. Only 36 percent of Whites cited discrimination as a major barrier inhibiting African American success. Sixty-nine percent reported that either too much attention (41%) or just enough attention (28%) was being paid to race. Only 50 percent of Whites said African Americans are treated less fairly by the police, and only 22 percent said African Americans are treated less fairly in the workplace. Less than half of Whites, 47 percent, believe that African Americans fare worse than Whites financially.

These survey results make it clear that Americans significantly downplay the structural nature of contemporary racial inequality. Yet in the same Gallup survey cited above, about as many Whites supported affirmative action for racial minorities (48%) as opposed it (46%). This seems contradictory, considering how little commitment there is to a structural view of racial inequality. Other recent nationwide surveys, however, find much less support for affirmative action when the question refers specifically to policies that provide racial preference. When worded in that manner, over two-thirds of Americans disapprove of racial preferences in college admissions and hiring, and three-quarters believe that such preferences result in less qualified people being admitted/hired (Feagin 2014:130).

While White Americans may be committed to the abstract ideal of racial equality, they either fail or refuse to acknowledge how far the U.S. is from achieving such equality, and the structural forces responsible for this reality. Most White Americans tend to be committed to racial equality only insofar as it means African Americans need to do more to help themselves. White Americans tend to support policies that increase certain kinds of opportunities, but not policies that treat racial inequality as a structural failing, as Joe Feagin explains:

Opinion surveys of whites indicate that most publicly support, when given abstract questions, equality of opportunity and equality of treatment and oppose racial discrimination. However, at the same time, the majority do not believe there is major and widespread racial discrimination across this society, and they also do not believe that governments should intervene to secure further racial equality. (2014:105)

Taken together, the weight of the evidence suggests that while there is a moderate level of support for race-targeted government programs in abstract terms, there is not widespread support for a structurally oriented view of and response to racial inequality in America.

In her recent book *Strangers in Their Own Land*, based on her interviews with conservative White working-class Louisianans, Arlie Hochschild provides illuminating qualitative data on White Americans' views of race and government. Hochschild found that many struggling White Americans believe they face an insecure economy, where the American Dream is increasingly becoming out of reach, on their own. While they believe they navigate this insecurity by themselves, other people (non-Whites, women, public-sector workers, etc.) are unfairly given government help that Whites have supposedly not been offered. To Whites, this preferential treatment is a betrayal. Despite feeling as though they are the only ones working hard and playing by

the rules, they believe they are ignored by a government that instead focuses on the lazy rule breakers. On top of this, working-class Whites are ridiculed by the culture at large. This leads to a sense of alienation, a feeling that they are strangers in their own land. This “deep story” resonates deeply for this group and animates many of their beliefs and actions (A. Hochschild 2016). Hochschild summarizes the White conservative deep story:

In the right-wing deep story, you are standing in line, as in a pilgrimage. At the top of the hill in front of you is the American Dream. You have been standing there a long time, your feet haven't moved, and you're tired. You feel a sense of deserving for that American Dream. You're middle-aged or older, you've worked hard, and you feel you have played by the rules. Then, in another moment of this deep story, it looks like people are cutting ahead of you in line. And you think, “Well, who are they?” And they are African Americans. There are women cutting in line. There are undocumented immigrants and refugees. You feel like you have been moved back in line, and that something unfair has been done to you. In another moment you have Barack Obama, who you believe should be impartially supervising the line, but who is instead waving to the line cutters. He is sponsoring them and pushing you back. You've been forgotten. (Eppard et al. 2018:137)

When Hochschild shared her description of their deep story with her participants, they agreed that it was accurate. One participant, Lee Sherman, remarked: “You've read my mind” (A. Hochschild 2016:145).

Scholars who have examined the 2016 U.S. presidential election have provided strong support for the notion that White Americans feel threatened by the economic and social progress of racial and ethnic minority groups, as well as changing demographics in general. Political scientist Diana Mutz, for instance, found that “status threat”—or dominant-group fears of losing ground to subordinate groups and to foreign countries—played a critical role in voters' support for Donald Trump. Mutz notes that, “Those who felt that the hierarchy was being upended—with whites discriminated against more than blacks, Christians discriminated against more than Muslims, and men discriminated against more than women—were most likely to support Trump” (2018:9). She goes on:

Political uprisings are often about downtrodden groups rising up to assert their right to better treatment and more equal life conditions relative to high-status groups. The 2016 election, in contrast, was an effort by members of already dominant groups to assure their continued dominance and by those in an already powerful and wealthy country to assure its continued dominance. (Mutz 2018:9)

Mutz notes that White Americans today are nostalgic about the past, wish to protect the status quo, and are becoming increasingly negative in their views of racial and ethnic minority groups (Khazan 2018). Given these findings, it is not surprising that a recent Atlantic/Aspen Institute survey found that while 63 percent of African Americans believe the country is on the right track and 80 percent say the country's best days are ahead of it, Whites disagree (27% and 48%, respectively) (Atlantic/Aspen 2015:59).

In their analysis of postelection survey data, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), in collaboration with *The Atlantic*, came to similar conclusions: Whites are concerned about the state of America, and much of this concern is related to their racial beliefs. Their analysis focused on White working-class voters, a group that still represents one-third of American adults. Trump won this group's vote by the largest margin of any presidential candidate since 1980—64 percent to Hillary Clinton's 32 percent. What this study demonstrated was that economic anxiety was not at the root of Trump support. In fact, people who reported that their finances were in fair or poor shape were almost twice as likely to support Clinton compared to more economically secure Americans. Rather than economic anxiety, it was cultural anxiety that was to blame. The analysis made clear that their level of concern over cultural changes was high:

Nearly two-thirds of the white working class say American culture has gotten worse since the 1950s. Sixty-eight percent say the U.S. is in danger of losing its identity, and 62 percent say America's growing number of immigrants threaten the country's culture. More than half say discrimination against whites has become just as problematic as discrimination against minorities. (Green 2017)

The PRRI/*Atlantic* analysis found that, apart from political affiliation, cultural anxiety best predicted support for Trump. They defined cultural anxiety as "feeling like a stranger in America, supporting the deportation of immigrants, and hesitating about educational investment" (Green 2017). This analysis suggested that Trump's campaign rhetoric spoke to many White Americans' desire to protect their culture from "others," such as racial/ethnic minorities and immigrants. The cultural anxieties were pronounced and clearly associated with voting behavior:

Sixty-eight percent of white working-class voters said the American way of life needs to be protected from foreign influence. And nearly half agreed with the statement, "things have changed so much that I often feel like a stranger in my own country." Together, these variables were strong indicators of support for

Trump: 79 percent of white working-class voters who had these anxieties chose Trump, while only 43 percent of white working-class voters who did not share one or both of these fears cast their vote the same way. (Green 2017)

On immigration, the analysis found that 87 percent of White voters who favored a policy of identifying and deporting immigrants in the country illegally supported Trump. In addition, White working-class voters who believed that “investing in college education is a risky gamble” were almost twice as likely to support Trump (Green 2017).

Despite rampant denialism, these and numerous other studies confirm that racism persists in American culture. As Robin DiAngelo explains, “The racial ideology that circulates in the United States rationalizes racial hierarchies as the outcome of a natural order resulting from either genetics or individual effort and talent” (2018:21). She goes on to note that “copious research attests to the disdain of whites for African Americans” (92), and that the socialization that Whites receive in American society “engenders many conflicting feelings towards African Americans: benevolence, resentment, superiority, hatred, and guilt” (98).

Deep anti-Black sentiment is inculcated in White Americans from childhood, impacting how they think about African Americans in general, as well as their encounters with Black Americans in a variety of social settings (DiAngelo 2018). More than 84 percent of Black and White Americans report having heard insulting/insensitive remarks targeting African Americans (Feagin 2014:127). In one study, 626 White college students recorded nearly seven thousand racist incidents (most of which targeted African Americans) in their everyday interactions over the course of a few weeks, many of which were not in public and out of view of non-Whites (Feagin 2014:107). A strong majority of African Americans, 71 percent, report that they have either experienced discrimination or been treated unfairly because of their race or ethnicity (Pew Research Center 2016c). As early as preschool, American children develop a sense of White superiority, as they learn to associate White faces with positive words, and Black faces with negative ones (Feagin 2014; DiAngelo 2018). Pro-White and anti-Black attitudes and images are pervasive in American culture. White Americans often frame themselves as models of virtue, merit, desirability, and superior morality, while framing African Americans as deviant, dangerous/violent, immoral, lazy, and/or undesirable (Feagin 2014:102, 107). White flight can be triggered in a neighborhood with only a minimal Black presence, indicating that the presence of African Americans in White spaces is often highly undesirable to White Americans (DiAngelo 2018:92). Research shows that pro-White and anti-Black implicit biases are widespread among White Americans (Feagin 2014; Kirwan Institute 2014).

The logical conclusion one would draw from holding the beliefs outlined in this section is decidedly racist. After all, “when you truly believe that the racial groups are equal, then you also believe that racial disparities must be the result of racial discrimination” (Kendi 2016:11). If most Whites are unwilling to cite structural causes for these disparities, then little is left but racist explanations that blame the individuals in question and/or the groups and subcultures they belong to.

Inequality beliefs help perpetuate racial inequality, as Ibram Kendi argues: “When we look back on our history, we often wonder why so many Americans did not resist slave trading, enslaving, segregating, or now, mass incarcerating. The reason is, again, racist ideas” (2016:10). Racism and individualism reinforce each other and make it very difficult for White Americans to understand contemporary social problems. White Americans have a difficult time blaming contemporary racial inequality on historical and contemporary racial discrimination and have a difficult time taking a structural view of poverty. Combined with racial animus toward African Americans, this proves to be a considerable barrier to nonracist explanations for and structurally oriented solutions to contemporary social problems.

African Americans suffer striking inequalities relative to Whites in the U.S. African Americans are massively overrepresented in prison and unequally treated at every stage of the criminal justice system (Alexander 2010; Bonilla-Silva 2014; Reiman and Leighton 2017). Between one-fourth and one-third of Black males in the U.S. spend time in prison at some point in their lives, and more Black males between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine are under the supervision of the criminal justice system than enrolled in college (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Kessler 2015). In 2014, 35 percent of Black men were either incarcerated, unemployed, or out of the labor force—compared to 17 percent of White men (Bayer and Charles 2018:52).

African Americans own less than 10 percent of the wealth of Whites, receive about one-tenth of the inheritance/financial gifts from their kin relative to Whites, and face more than twice the risk of poverty and unemployment (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Pew Research Center 2016b; EPI 2017; U.S. Census Bureau 2017; B. Thompson 2018). Almost a quarter (23%) of African Americans report using food banks/pantries during the year, compared to only 8 percent of Whites (Pew Research Center 2016d). The White median total household income is about \$71,000, versus about \$43,000 for African Americans (Pew Research Center 2016b). While almost three-quarters (72%) of Whites own their own home, fewer than half (43%) of African Americans do (Pew Research Center 2016b). More than one in four African American households have zero or negative net worth, compared to less than one in ten White families (Jones 2017).

Sixty-percent of White adults are married, compared to 35 percent of African American adults, and a slight majority of African American children live in a single-parent household, versus 19 percent of White children (Pew Research Center 2016b). White children have a poverty rate of 11 percent, compared to 31 percent for African American children (Child Trends 2018). Although 33 percent of White children born into the bottom income quintile stay there as adults, 53 percent of Black children do (Reeves 2013). A majority of Black children (56%) born into the middle quintile will be downwardly mobile, while an overwhelming majority of White children (68%) born in the middle will either remain there (24%) or be upwardly mobile (44%) (Reeves 2013). Of children born in the bottom economic quartile of neighborhoods, 72 percent of Black children remain in poor areas as adults, versus 40 percent of White children (Bonilla-Silva 2014:33). While 36 percent of Whites have a college degree, only 23 percent of African Americans do (Pew Research Center 2016b).

Research shows that African American families who earn \$100,000 typically live in the types of neighborhoods inhabited by White families who earn only \$30,000, leading principal researcher Patrick Sharkey to declare: “Blacks and whites inhabit such different neighborhoods that it is not possible to compare the economic outcomes of black and white children” (Coates 2014). When Sharkey studied children born between 1985 and 2000, he found that only 5 percent of White Americans had been raised in highly disadvantaged neighborhoods (neighborhoods with high poverty, single motherhood, unemployment, welfare use, racial segregation, etc.) versus 78 percent of African Americans (Sharkey 2009:10). Sharkey found that “neighborhood poverty alone accounts for a greater portion of the black-white downward mobility gap than the effects of parental education, occupation, labor force participation, and a range of other family characteristics combined” (2009:3). Even children born in the top three income quintiles are not protected from the effects of their neighborhoods. Sharkey found that for these children, living in a high poverty neighborhood raises their chances of downward mobility by 52 percent, despite their middle-to-high household incomes (2009:2).

When the *New York Times* recently reviewed the 503 most powerful people in American culture, government, education, and business, they found that only 44 (around 9%) were non-White (in a country where close to 40% of the population is non-White). Their analysis showed that 90 percent of Congress is White, along with 96 percent of U.S. governors. In addition, Whites overwhelmingly control the classrooms we learn in, television shows and movies we watch, news we consume, and books we read (Park et al. 2016, cited in DiAngelo 2018).

These are but a few of a number of glaring racial inequalities in contemporary American society. Ibram Kendi succinctly highlights the problem with these racial disparities:

If Black people make up 13.2 percent of the U.S. population, then Black people should make up somewhere close to 13 percent of the Americans killed by police, somewhere close to 13 percent of the Americans sitting in prison, somewhere close to owning 13 percent of U.S. wealth. But today, the United States remains nowhere close to racial parity. African Americans own 2.7 percent of the nation's wealth, and make up 40 percent of the incarcerated population. These are racial disparities, and racial disparities are older than the life of the United States. (2016:2)

In a society that continues to reproduce massive racial disparities and a culture that views them in disproportionately individualistic and/or culture-of-poverty terms, racial animus is likely to persist. In this way, America's persistent racial inequality reinforces America's persistent racism. Given that some racial disparities will take thousands of years to disappear at the current rate of progress (Kendi 2016:479), this should alarm every American.

The survey methods used to measure many of the beliefs discussed so far are useful and reveal a general unwillingness among Americans, and particularly White Americans, to view racial inequality as a structural failing. What previous research suggests, however, is that considerably more anti-Black sentiment exists than these surveys reveal. Declining overt racism in public opinion surveys overestimates changing White attitudes. While these changes certainly reflect a very real decline in overt racism, they also partly reflect an increased sensitivity in recent decades on the part of White Americans to giving socially desirable opinions in public. In one study, for instance, less than a third (30%) of White interview participants expressed outright support for interracial marriage—despite 90 percent of those participants having indicated approval on a prior survey (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000:57–59). Racism is clearly still alive and well in the U.S., even if Americans have become more hesitant to express overtly racist ideas in public.

Other methods utilized by social scientists, including experimental studies and implicit-association tests, are likely an even better indicator of anti-Black sentiment than surveys, and indeed reveal much more of it. Experimental studies, for instance, have demonstrated considerably more discrimination than should exist, given what Whites report on surveys, suggesting that racism is even more widespread than surveys suggest. Feagin and Feagin elaborate on this point:

Public opinion surveys have shown a decline in public expression of blatantly racist attitudes among whites in recent decades. Thus, several experimental researchers have also asked whether whites responding to such surveys with relatively liberal racial answers are concealing many racial prejudices and stereotypes. Reviewing experimental studies that used less obvious measures of discrimination . . . researchers have noted that experimental studies have found *much more* antiblack discrimination than they should have uncovered if the unprejudiced views that many whites express in surveys were their real views . . . many whites do indeed hide their traditionally racist views in more public settings—including in public opinion surveys. (2012:1920)

There are many experimental studies that illustrate this, but perhaps one of the more famous is an employment-audit study published by Devah Pager in 2003. In her experiment, Pager sent out Black and White male college students to pose as high school graduates applying for the same entry-level jobs throughout Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Their behaviors were similar and their credentials were identical. The only thing that differentiated them, beyond their race, was that some of the applicants pretended to have been recently released from prison, where they had supposedly served eighteen months for a drug felony. The effect of race was significant: 34 percent of Whites without jail time were called for an interview, versus 14 percent of African Americans without jail time. Even more alarming, however, was the fact that Whites *with jail time* still fared better (17% received callbacks) than equally qualified African Americans *without jail time* (14%). The color of one's skin, it was revealed, carried a greater penalty than a felony conviction (Pager 2003). Pager and her colleagues found very similar results in a follow-up study in New York City. If a majority of Americans were truly not prejudiced toward African Americans, such results would be impossible.

Pager's studies are notable, and they been replicated in other cities in recent years with similar results. In addition, experimental studies reveal discrimination in other areas beyond employment. Some studies suggest that, depending upon the city, African Americans are discriminated against in housing as much as 75 percent of the time (Bonilla-Silva 2014:33). In studies of lending institutions in major cities, discrimination is still prominent—in one study of Chicago lending institutions, for instance, discrimination was observed in 70 percent of the institutions studied (Bonilla-Silva 2014:34).

Like experimental studies, studies of implicit bias also reveal that surveys are concealing the true amount of anti-Black sentiment in contemporary American society. Implicit racial bias refers to:

attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's

awareness or intentional control. Residing deep in the subconscious, these biases are different from known biases that individuals may choose to conceal for the purposes of social and/or political correctness. Rather, implicit biases are not accessible through introspection. (Kirwan Institute 2014:16)

Research confirms that pro-White and anti-Black implicit biases are widespread among White Americans and can impact a wide range of behaviors and discriminatory actions (Feagin 2014; Kirwan Institute 2014).

The widespread racism that persists in contemporary American society does not mean that Americans do not support race-targeted government programs that aim to bring about more racial equality. More White Americans in the aforementioned 2016 Gallup survey, for instance, supported affirmative action (48%) than opposed it (46%). A majority of Americans (71%) support college and university affirmative action programs, including 66 percent of Whites. A majority of Americans (61%) also say the country needs to continue making changes to give African Americans equal rights with Whites, including 54 percent of Whites (Pew Research Center 2017). These are positive signs. Upon examining the data more closely, however, it is clear that this is not a blanket acceptance of race-targeted programs. White Americans are *not* deeply committed to a structural view of contemporary racial inequality and are therefore much less supportive of programs that violate the individualistic American ethos. This makes it difficult to solve what is ultimately a structural problem. Americans support racial equality in the abstract but do not understand what causes racial inequality and hold animus toward African Americans and therefore are unlikely to support the types of structurally oriented programs most likely to address racial inequality. As Entman and Rojecki note, many Americans are members of the “ambivalent majority,” a group that believes that African Americans face some disadvantages that Whites do not, but believe African Americans use that as an excuse for their failures—simultaneously arguing that the game is rigged, but that individuals bear responsibility for losing a rigged game (Kendi 2016:491).

What this all adds up to is that the more Americans conflate race and poverty/welfare and the more negative their judgments of African Americans, the more individualistic and anti-welfare they are. As Martin Gilens documents, images of African Americans “have come to dominate the public’s thinking about poverty and welfare” (1999:101). Of those Americans who believe most welfare recipients are Black, for instance, 63 percent believe lack of effort is more to blame for people being on welfare, while only 26 percent say it is due to circumstances beyond people’s control. When respondents think most people on welfare are White, only 40 percent believe lack of effort is more to blame for people being on welfare, while 50 percent say it is

circumstances beyond people's control (Gilens 1999:140). We will discuss the welfare support research in more detail in chapter 7.

In addition to individualism and racism, sexism also plays a critical role in the types of social welfare policies Americans are willing to support. There are a variety of ways in which American poverty is structurally gendered (see Bullock 2013 and Gornick and Boeri 2016 for a discussion of this literature). As Heather Bullock notes, gendered poverty results from disproportionate domestic responsibilities (including unpaid caregiving), the devaluation of motherhood (and single motherhood in particular), workplace segregation and discrimination, the gender pay gap, and a weak social safety net (2013:16). She argues that all of these things “are born from sexism, racism, and classism, and their intersections” (Bullock 2013:16). Instead of recognizing this as a structural failure, Americans often prioritize individualistic explanations of gendered poverty over the more important structural causes, leading to sexist interpretations of the distribution of poverty. This widespread misunderstanding of gendered poverty further reinforces American-style (less generous and more individualistically oriented than European-style) social policies.

A greater understanding of how poverty is gendered is critical when social policies are designed. American women are at a greater risk of economic insecurity due to social and economic inequalities, and that disproportionate risk is growing. Women typically experience poverty more deeply and persistently than men do, and the obstacles to escaping poverty are typically greater for women. Compared to men, women are funneled into lower-paying and less stable occupations and are treated unequally by employers, even in the same professions. Women are systematically disadvantaged by a culture that expects them, but not their husbands, to reduce and/or pause their personal educational and career development for the sake of their families and the undervalued work of mothering—an unjust expectation by itself, particularly given how many of these responsibilities could be shared and how this disadvantages women when their marriages end or their husbands die. Society does not exist unless the most fundamentally important tasks of the reproduction and socialization of the human species occur, yet the capitalist market does not account for this essential work and marginalizes those who do it. When marriages dissolve, women are overwhelmingly likely to be responsible for the children without much help.

The risk of poverty for single-mother-headed households is extraordinarily high. In 2017, for instance, 41 percent of children living in single-mother families were in poverty, compared to only 8 percent of children living in married-couple families (Child Trends 2018). When single-parent households are headed by men, they are typically about half as likely to be poor (Bullock 2013). The depth of poverty in single-mother families is deeply troubling.

Half of single-mother families have an annual income of less than \$25,000, two-fifths are food insecure, and one-fifth have no health insurance (Bullock 2013:25). Children of poor single-mothers have a particularly hard time being upwardly mobile, compared to other children (2013).

The meagerness of family policy in the U.S., compared to other wealthy countries, exacerbates the gendered nature of poverty and reflects the limited cultural understanding of gendered poverty in the U.S. We live in a culture where our ideology of mothering holds that children are sacred and demands that mothers lavish their time and energy on them. At the same time, our culture overlooks how this disadvantages women in the long run (less educational and occupational advancement, lower Social Security payments, etc.) and how our government provides inadequate resources to achieve this goal. This is particularly true for unemployed single mothers, who are both castigated by our individualistic culture for putting their children first if they stay home and inadequately supported by their government if they decide to seek paid work (Hays 1996; Seecombe 2011).

In one analysis of a number of OECD countries, the U.S. social welfare system was one of the least effective in reducing single-parent poverty. The average reduction factor among the other countries was 54 percent, with countries like the U.K. (77%) and Denmark (78%) enjoying significantly higher reductions. In the U.S., the reduction factor was one of the worst in the analysis at only 33 percent (Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis 2015). As Heather Bullock notes, more egalitarian countries recognize the societal importance of caregiving, even if the market does not:

Motherhood is touted as being among the most important “jobs,” yet parenting and other caregiving responsibilities are largely uncompensated in the United States, at least in material terms. This is not the case in other industrialized countries such as Sweden, Germany, and France, in which individuals who care for dependent children or sick or elderly relatives receive caregiver credits and/or wages. Caregiver wages treat largely invisible work within the home as valued, paid labor, while caregiver credit bolsters public pension benefits by compensating for workforce separations due to caregiving responsibilities. (2013:17)

The ways in which poverty is gendered are structural, yet our individualistic culture often obscures this fact and instead lays the blame at the feet of individuals themselves. Single mothers in particular receive some of the harshest criticisms. Karen Seecombe discusses some of the problematic aspects of the individualistic perspective when it comes to single mothers:

Given their daily parental responsibilities, tasks, and time constraints, they do not have the same opportunities to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” as do

other adults who are without children (e.g., poor men). To ignore the emotional and time commitment involved in taking care of dependent children, and to fail to recognize the ways in which caretaking can inhibit women's ability to be socially mobile, is to ignore the reality of many women's existence. (2007:93)

Without understanding the structural "feminization of poverty" (Pearce 1978), one cannot truly grasp the steps necessary to address American poverty.

While a variety of sexist beliefs shape American attitudes toward social welfare policy, those concerning single mothers are particularly powerful. In Karen Seccombe's (2011) study of welfare recipients, for instance, she found that even single mothers receiving welfare, while careful to explain the non-individualistic reasons for their own plight, tended to demonize other single welfare mothers as being responsible for theirs. Concerns about single mothers, and *especially* Black single mothers, are inextricably linked to Americans' thinking about poverty and welfare.

Sexist assumptions that poor women make immoral and irresponsible fertility decisions have long led designers of American social welfare policies to attempt to manipulate the fertility decisions of poor mothers. Vicky Lens notes: "The reproductive choices of poor women have always attracted the attention of the larger society, usually in the form of coercive attempts to limit the number of children born to the poor" (1998:21). These efforts have included forced sterilization, mandatory levonorgestrel-releasing implants, morality requirements (such as "suitable home" and "substitute father" provisions), and "bridefare," among others. From the beginning, social welfare policies have been designed to punish poor women, and poor Black women in particular, for their fertility decisions:

When the original Aid to Dependent Children program was enacted in 1935, both the House and the Senate made clear in their committee reports that the states were free to continue the tradition of the mother's pension programs and impose morality requirements. The states responded by enacting "suitable home" provisions, which permitted officials to deny aid to needy women and their children for immoral behavior, including bearing children out of wedlock. It was most often black women who were found to be morally unfit, lending a racial cast to the rule, particularly in the South. In 1959, Florida found 7,000 needy families with over 30,000 children (91% of whom were black) ineligible for assistance because the children in the home were illegitimate or the mother's sexual behavior had been judged as unacceptable by a welfare worker. (Lens 1998:23)

Over the latter part of the twentieth century, common American racist beliefs combined with common sexist beliefs regarding single mothers and the fertility of the poor to create the image of the "welfare queen," a powerful

and persistent anti-welfare symbol in the American mind. “Shorthand terms, such as ‘welfare queen,’” argues Heather Bullock, draw their power from a variety of problematic beliefs, including “intersecting racist, sexist, and classist characterizations of welfare recipients as lazy, sexually promiscuous, and disinterested in education, work, or obeying the law” (2013:56). She goes on to note:

Classist beliefs are intertwined with both racist and sexist stereotypes. Thus, stereotypes surrounding sexual availability, single motherhood, and irresponsible parenting are more likely to be applied to poor women of color than poor white women. Indeed, terms such as the “underclass,” which dominated popular discourse and public imagination in the 1980s through the mid 1990s, are grounded in racist stereotypes of poor African American men as drug dealers and poor Black women as lazy welfare cheats and irresponsible “baby factories.” So fused are terms such as “welfare” and “underclass” with race and gender that they act as “codewords,” activating racist, classist, and sexist assumptions without explicit mention of these dynamics. (Bullock 2013:59)

Rising single motherhood, expanding welfare rolls, an expanding African American proportion of those rolls, and increasingly racialized media coverage of poverty and welfare turned the public’s attitude toward welfare in a much more negative direction: “The term ‘welfare’ took on a new meaning—a ‘despised program of last resort,’ for the ‘undeserving’ who carried the stigma of race and sex” (Handler and Hasenfeld 2007:158). The image of the welfare queen—the irresponsible and immoral single mother, typically viewed as African American, whose out-of-control fertility and welfare abuse are a drain on the rest of society, and who passes on the “culture of poverty” to her children—was invoked time and again during the welfare-reform movement of the 1980s and 1990s:

With behavior rather than defects in the economic system as the preferred explanation for poverty, attention was again turned toward the lifestyle and reproductive choices of welfare mothers. Out-of-wedlock births among welfare mothers became a lightning rod for welfare reform, although out-of-wedlock birth rates were increasing throughout the rest of society as well, fueled in part by changing sexual norms. In 1984, conservative Charles Murray proclaimed illegitimacy as a primary social problem and placed the blame on the welfare system. As they had in the past, racist stereotyping and gender issues played a major role in this latest attack on welfare mothers, during which unmarried and black women bore the brunt of midnight raids in search of substitute fathers and the enforcement of suitable home provisions. Welfare mothers, and black women in particular, were branded as deviant and promiscuous “welfare queens,” whose behavior needed altering. (Lens 1998:25)

The welfare queen image activates other related racist and sexist American attitudes and images, including the belief that Black families are disproportionately large, on welfare, and female headed (Feagin 2014:110). As Arlie Hochschild argues, “race is very fundamentally tied in with the belief that [White Americans] are being asked to give their hard-earned dollars to support people who aren’t working, and are having too many children” (Eppard et al. 2018:138). “Welfare queen” is “race-coded” language in the same way that words like “ghetto,” “inner city,” and “thug” are. That is, it is meant to conjure negative images of African Americans without explicitly referring to them by name.

Ronald Reagan has been credited with helping to bring the fictional welfare queen to much greater national notoriety, beginning during his 1976 campaign. Combining true (although often exaggerated) stories of welfare fraud into one terrifying welfare cheat, the welfare queen played on many long-standing American fears about big government, welfare, the undeserving poor, poor single mothers, and African Americans. While Reagan helped make her more widely known, “the welfare queen emerged from a long and deeply racialized history of suspicion of and resentment toward families receiving welfare in the United States” (Black and Sprague 2016).

Despite the fact that abuses by supposed welfare queens were not widespread, and despite the deeply sexist and racist implications of the symbol, it nonetheless helped fuel welfare reformers’ success. Over time, Americans’ views on poverty were deeply impacted by this sexist and racist messaging. For example, in the same year that the landmark 1996 welfare-reform legislation was passed, 67 percent of Americans surveyed reported favoring family caps on welfare, policies that deny increases in benefits to families for children born while the family is receiving welfare (Shaw and Shapiro 2002:115). The symbol of the welfare queen is credited with helping to shape public attitudes toward welfare reform efforts that hinged on the perceptions of the behaviors of the poor. Evidence suggests that “whites’ perceptions of black welfare mothers are far better predictors of their attitudes towards poverty and welfare than are their perceptions of white welfare mothers” (Gilens 1999:214). Negative images of Black single mothers were implicitly and explicitly invoked by politicians at the state and national level and used as a weapon in the welfare-reform movement that gained momentum throughout the 1980s and ultimately resulted in federal legislation in the form of the Family Support Act of 1988 and Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996.

Sexist and racist concerns about the fertility of poor women persist in the American mind today. Almost a third of U.S. states still have family caps, welfare policies that deny additional benefits to families for any children born

when the family is receiving welfare. These policies were designed under the assumption that poor women have too many children, are irresponsible and/or immoral in their fertility choices, and/or use childbirth as a way to gain more in benefits. Proponents of the policies believe they will deter women from making these decisions. Given the lack of empirical evidence to justify the principles behind the family cap, it is hard to argue that sexist and racist assumptions about African Americans, single mothers, and welfare recipients do not underpin their design and implementation.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the best available data strongly suggest that Americans consistently misrecognize the structural causes of poverty and economic inequality, as well as inequalities based on race and gender. In combination with widespread animus toward African Americans, single mothers, and the “undeserving” beneficiaries of social policies, this dampens American enthusiasm for more robust and structurally oriented social policies, as we will discuss in chapter 7.

NOTES

1. Individualistic beliefs blame individuals personally for their success or failure, focusing on the role of individual hard work, talent, ambition, morality, smart choices, and so on. Non-individualistic beliefs include structuralist, fatalistic, and cultural beliefs. Structuralist beliefs blame larger systems—such as the economic or political system—for shaping the opportunities available to people to fully develop their abilities and exert a true sense of agency. Fatalistic beliefs focus on causes that are outside of the control of individuals but not structural—such as bad luck or an unexpected devastating illness. Cultural beliefs blame the norms and values of groups to which individuals belong—such as blaming a person’s poverty on the lack of a commitment to education that they learned from their parents (Hunt and Bullock 2016).

2. This section drew from a variety of sources. For more information, see Berlin 1970, Feagin 1972, 1975, Huber and Form 1973, Kluegel and Smith 1986, Lewis 1993, Lipset 1996, Gilens 1999, Elias 2000, Cullen 2003, Mennell 2007, Henrich et al. 2010, McNamee and Miller 2014, Marger 2014, Rank et al. 2014, Krause 2015, Rosemont 2015, Royce 2015, and Hunt and Bullock 2016.

3. See Elias 2000 and Mennell 2007.

4. Throughout this book, we paraphrase survey items from the studies we discuss without changing the meaning of the items to make it easier to read them. See Feagin (1972) for the precise wording. For other survey items referenced in this book, please also refer to the original sources if you wish to see the precise wording.

5. The most recent ISSP survey on social inequality was from 2009. Unfortunately, this question was not asked in that survey. Therefore, we had to rely on the 1999 data as that was the most recent year this particular question was asked.

6. This analysis was conducted in collaboration with David Brady at University of California, Riverside.

7. In another example, Kluegel and Smith demonstrated a positive association (0.45 regression coefficient) between “non-White” racial classification and welfare support (1986:160). They note: “The largest and most consistent group disparities in expressed doubt about the workings of the American stratification order are those between blacks and whites” (1986:289).

Chapter Three

Social Psychological Functions of Inequality Beliefs

Social science research and public opinion polls tell us much about the endorsement of individualism across diverse demographic groups. Yet we are often left questioning why people believe what they do, particularly when their beliefs seem to go against personal experience and individual self-interest. When economic elites and other privileged groups endorse dominant inequality beliefs and oppose redistributive policies, we are rarely surprised. We assume, correctly or not, that advantaged groups will support ideologies that are psychologically and materially beneficial. But when marginalized groups hold the same beliefs, how do we make sense of their support for ideologies that undermine leveling the playing field?

Low-income groups are more likely than their high-income counterparts to believe that income differences are unfair or too large (Caricati 2017). They also tend to be more structural in their understandings of poverty and wealth, and comparatively more supportive of safety net and redistributive programs (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Hunt and Bullock 2016; Bullock and Reppond 2017). However, marginalized groups are not immune to the steady “drip feed” of individualism, meritocracy, and beliefs about deservingness that pervade American society (Fine and Ruglis 2008). A snapshot of findings from public opinion polls illustrates this point:

- Even in the aftermath of the Great Recession, “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” attitudes prevail. In a Pew Research Center (2016e) poll of 5,006 Americans, 72 percent of respondents believed that “a lot” of responsibility for preparing and succeeding in the workforce rests with individuals to ensure that they have the right skills and education. The strongest support for personal responsibility was found among respondents living in

households earning more than \$75,000, those with higher levels of education, Republicans, and Whites (2016e). Yet majorities in *all* demographic cohorts, including low earners, believed that individuals have “a lot” of responsibility for their job preparedness (2016e).

- Sixty-six percent of 1,202 respondents, including 57 percent of poor and 70 percent of non-poor respondents, identified with the statement: “People are responsible for their own well-being and they have an obligation to take care of themselves” as coming closest to their own position (American Enterprise Institute and *Los Angeles Times* 2016:6). Alternatively, only 29 percent of respondents, notably 38 percent of poor and 26 percent of non-poor respondents, believed that the statement “The government is responsible for the well-being of all its citizens and it has an obligation to take care of them” reflected their own position (2016:6). In this same survey, 81 percent of poor and 91 percent of non-poor respondents believed that welfare programs should require “poor people to seek work or participate in a training, if they are physically able to do so, in return for their benefits” (2016:4).

This support for individualism and tough work requirements by low-income respondents flies in the face of “rational choice” and economic self-interest, underscoring the need for multifaceted explanations capable of explaining the seemingly contradictory factors at play (Jost, Langer et al. 2017).

Social scientists have long sought to understand why marginalized groups may, at times, endorse ideologies, policies, and political candidates that do not overtly appear to serve their interests. This common thread of inquiry runs through analyses of the alignment of landless White working-class Southerners with White plantation owners rather than Black workers (Du Bois 1935), studies of low-income groups’ causal attributions for poverty and wealth (Hunt and Bullock 2016), and investigations of support for policy makers who hollow out the safety net programs that their voters depend on (A. Hochschild 2016). The 2016 U.S. presidential election has spurred extensive analysis of low-income and working-class support for Donald Trump, who ran, in part, on promising to repeal the health care program they relied upon (French 2017; Zeitz 2017).

Social psychological research on the *functions* of beliefs—the needs they fill and the purposes they serve psychologically, materially, and politically—helps explain these seemingly self-defeating beliefs and behaviors and why people support and at times even vigorously defend systems that they do not benefit from. Individualism, meritocracy, and the Protestant work ethic, along with other dominant U.S. beliefs, are the “ideological glue” that bring together diverse members of a society and reflect central values. These core beliefs also

cluster to form schemas that help streamline complex incoming information. However, they are more than a cultural “blueprint” or a cognitive “shortcut” for processing data. As Jost and Major observe, “attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes serve to legitimize social arrangements and to provide ideological support for social and political systems” and policy preferences (2001:4).

In this chapter, we examine the legitimizing functions of inequality beliefs, focusing on their role in system justification (Jost and Banaji 1994; Jost et al. 2015). More specifically, we consider the psychological underpinnings of legitimizing ideologies, notably the individual and psychological benefits and costs of supporting these beliefs. In doing so, we challenge common, often derogatory judgments of low-income and working-class individuals as “ignorant” or “stupid” when they endorse dominant inequality beliefs. This is not to minimize the well-documented damaging consequences of these beliefs. Legitimizing beliefs diminish recognition of inequality and discrimination, preserve the political and economic status quo, and reduce collective action (Bullock 2013; Osborne and Sibley 2013; Jost et al. 2015; Jost, Langer et al. 2017; Bullock and Reppond 2018; chapter 7 of this text). Yet, by increasing positive affect and decreasing negative emotions, they also serve powerful palliative functions (Jost et al. 2015). A multifaceted approach to inequality beliefs is essential to not only understanding their persistence and the social conditions that foster their endorsement but also to potentially loosening the stronghold of individualism and dominant understandings of poverty, wealth, and economic inequality.

INEQUALITY IDEOLOGIES AS LEGITIMIZING BELIEFS

Individualism, in its many forms, including dispositional attributions for poverty and wealth (i.e., poverty is caused by laziness and lack of effort, and wealth by perseverance and merit), is part of a large network of intersecting “hierarchy-enhancing beliefs.” Alternatively described as “legitimizing beliefs,” “legitimizing myths,” or “status beliefs,” they share the common function of providing “moral and intellectual justification for the social practices that distribute social value within the social system” (Sidanius and Pratto 1999:45). Cecilia Ridgeway explains:

There are widely shared beliefs in society that people who belong to one category of the distinction (e.g., men, professionals) are more socially worthy and competent than those that belong to another category of distinction (e.g., women, service workers). . . . Such status beliefs both affirm the significance of a given categorical distinction for social relations in society and justify inequality in outcomes between the categories by reference to differences in

competence and social worth. As a result, status beliefs are a pervasive and fundamental form of legitimizing ideology in society. They are, in effect, cultural schemas for organizing interdependent, cooperative relations across boundaries of social difference in a society but on unequal terms. (2001:257)

Part of what makes individualism, meritocracy, and other legitimizing beliefs so powerful is their widely shared, consensual nature. Simply put, “virtually everyone shares them as cultural knowledge about what ‘most people’ think,” including those who are disadvantaged by these ideologies (Ridgeway 2014:5). In part, it is this seeming consensuality that gives inequality beliefs their power. As Ridgeway (2001:258) observes, “Their apparent consensuality gives status beliefs *social validity* in the eyes of those who encounter them.”

The Power of Consensuality

Consensuality is reflected in Godfrey and Wolf’s (2016) interviews with low-income mothers. Consistent with dominant societal beliefs, the majority of their respondents (89%) attributed poverty and wealth to individualistic causes, and more than half blamed poverty on character flaws of the poor. One respondent claimed:

They are poor for a reason, not poor for no reason. If you’re poor it is because you don’t want to do nothing with your life, and don’t want to provide money for yourself. . . . You’re poor because you want to be poor. It’s not because. . . probably you’re a junkie, a drug addict, it’s your fault that you’re drinking and a drug addict, you know. It’s nobody else’s fault. It’s your fault. (Godfrey and Wolf 2016:97)

For low-income women and men, adopting rugged individualism may serve to maintain a sense of belonging in and alignment with a society in which poverty is deeply devalued.

Consensuality is, in part, recreated through the socialization of dominant societal values. Insight into these processes is gained by examining adolescents’ beliefs about inequality and justice in “opportunity” societies (e.g., the United States, Australia) versus “security” societies (e.g., Hungary, Czech Republic, Russia). Opportunity societies, with their emphasis on private markets and limited government assistance, tend to be more individualistic than security societies, which have historically provided higher levels of state-guaranteed support (Flanagan et al. 2003). Paralleling the dominant beliefs and arrangements of their respective countries, Constance Flanagan and her colleagues (2003) found that teenagers in opportunity societies were more likely than their security society peers to regard their home countries as

meritocracies and to believe in limited government responsibility for social welfare programs. In Australia, and especially the U.S., where individualism has long been the dominant ideology, working-class adolescents were especially likely to believe that hard work pays off and to support anti-welfare stereotypes. As Flanagan and her colleagues (2014:2523) query:

This world view may be functional for working-class youth in an opportunity society who want to move up the social ladder. Indeed, embracing a belief in the efficacy of an individual's hard work may be even more important for these youth than for their more privileged peers. The latter group is protected by social networks that extend from their families, connect them to a range of opportunities, and help them to navigate the system. In contrast, self reliance and hard work for the working class is indispensable. There is no other way for people "like them" to make it.

Not only do these findings show the consensuality of dominant beliefs, they also reveal their functionality and why their endorsement by low-income groups should not be dismissed as irrational or illogical. As Flanagan and her colleagues query, "It is functional for those with few safety nets to believe in a system that rewards individual effort. How else can they hope to attain the American dream?" (Flanagan et al. 2003:12).

Social policies and programs also play a central role in reinforcing dominant social values and fostering ideological consensuality. Contemporary welfare programs are steeped in individualism, an ideological stronghold that is communicated via time limits that put strict restrictions on the length of time that families can receive benefits, work requirements that prioritize self-sufficiency, and stigmatization that equates welfare receipt with "dependency" and personal failure. Program recipients are well aware of these dominant constructions. For example, Ellen Scott and her colleagues found that welfare recipients' conceptualizations of self-sufficiency mirrored dominant individualist values. Self-sufficiency was described as "doing things for yourself," "being able to depend on . . . yourself, nobody else," "independent," and "taking care of your own bills. Doing your own things" (Scott et al. 2007:608–9).

For low-income groups, individualism and other inequality beliefs may sustain a sense of self-worth "that is challenged by the stigma of welfare receipt" (Scott et al. 2007:618). In doing so, welfare recipients align themselves ideologically and symbolically with economically advantaged "in-groups" and distance themselves from low-income "out-groups" by stereotyping them as rejecting mainstream values. This function of individualism is documented in a study by Heather Bullock and her colleagues (2017) of trainees in a work

program for homeless women and men. Despite their own experiences of homelessness, participants stereotyped other unhoused locals and distanced themselves from them:

Well, there's some people that make it look bad for the people that are homeless—[some people] would rather pick up cans and turn in the money, then beg for it, puttin' their hand out. I picked up cans when I was homeless. And I made sure I had something to eat. I didn't do it just to have a drink or drugs. . . . I would never lower myself. To me there's self-esteem; they, they don't care about themselves. (Bullock et al. 2017:184)

Discussing these findings, the researchers observe:

In distinguishing themselves from others who have experienced homelessness, particularly “panhandlers,” respondents not only communicated the personal inapplicability of dominant stereotypes (e.g., “I’m not lazy”), they also affirmed their commitment to mainstream societal beliefs about the value and importance of work. Through this “ideological belonging,” respondents affirmed their “citizenship” and participation in a society from which they are largely excluded. (Bullock et al. 2017:184)

Bringing these covert functions to the forefront reveals the psychological benefits of individualism, an area we explore more fully later in this chapter.

Individualism as Part of a Network of Legitimizing Beliefs

Consensuality is only one facet of individualism’s strength. John Jost and Orsolya Hunyady (2005:261) have identified a vast network of hierarchy-enhancing beliefs that complement individualism, including:

- *the Protestant work ethic* (i.e., hard work is virtuous and rewarding in and of itself);
- *meritocratic ideology* (i.e., regardless of family of origin, anyone who works hard and perseveres can move up the socioeconomic ladder);
- *fair market ideology* (i.e., the “market” is trustworthy, fair, and just);
- *social dominance orientation* (i.e., some groups are inherently superior to others; social hierarchies are inevitable and beneficial);
- *opposition to equality* (i.e., increased economic and social equality would harm society and is unachievable);
- *authoritarianism* (i.e., upholds the importance of obeying traditions and authorities); and
- *political conservatism* (i.e., emphasizes traditional values, self-reliance).

Social science research documents the effects of these beliefs independently and synergistically. For example, social-dominance orientation is positively correlated with numerous other legitimizing beliefs including the Protestant work ethic, belief in a just world, anti-Black racism, and political-economic conservatism (Pratto et al. 1994). Belief in fair market ideology is positively related to belief in a just world, political conservatism, authoritarianism, power distance, and economic-system justification (Jost et al. 2003).

Classist, racist, and sexist stereotypes are also powerful legitimizing beliefs. Stereotypes exert influence via their descriptive (i.e., how diverse groups *allegedly* think, feel, and behave) and prescriptive (i.e., how diverse groups *should* think, feel, and behave) functions (Durante et al. 2013). Stereotypes about low socioeconomic (SES) groups emphasize bestiality and primitiveness (Loughnan et al. 2014), and poor women and men, particularly welfare recipients, are commonly stereotyped as criminal, lazy, unmotivated, stupid, and sexually irresponsible (Bullock 2013; Bullock and Reppond 2018). Not surprisingly, when stereotypes are internalized by low-income people, they are detrimental to how individuals think about themselves and their group (Volpato et al. 2017). They also undermine policy support. In the U.S., well-worn stereotypes of welfare mothers as “Cadillac queens” who “game the system” undermine safety net programs, as well as attitudes toward the government more generally. Research by Suzanne Mettler (2018) finds that people who endorse anti-welfare attitudes, regardless of how many benefits they themselves may have received, also hold more negative views toward government.

Susan Fiske’s (2018) research on perceived warmth (i.e., trustworthiness, friendliness) and competence (i.e., capability, assertiveness) illuminates the underlying content of stereotypes about different social classes. Across studies, welfare recipients, as well as poor and homeless people, were consistently rated as low in both qualities, positioning them as disliked and disrespected. Discussing this pattern, Fiske explains:

Triggering disgust and contempt, they are viewed as extremely low-status and as undermining the values of society . . . note that poor blacks and poor whites, as well as welfare recipients, land here. They allegedly lack both typically human qualities such as sociability and uniquely human qualities such as autonomy, so people effectively dehumanize them. (2012:35)

The middle class, on the other hand, was evaluated more favorably on these dimensions, ranking highly on both warmth and competence and eliciting pride and admiration (Fiske 2018). Alternatively, the rich were perceived as

highly competent but low in warmth, evoking both admiration and jealousy (Fiske 2012, 2018; see also Durante et al. 2017). Collectively, these findings speak to the importance of considering both the content of stereotypes and the emotions they elicit.

The problematic nature of overt stereotyping (e.g., poor people are lazy) is obvious, while complementary stereotypes such as “poor but honest” and “rich but miserable” may be mistaken as benign. By portraying “both advantaged and disadvantaged groups as possessing distinctive but counterbalanced strengths and weaknesses,” it is “as if every ‘class gets its share’” (Durante et al. 2013:728). However, research indicates that rather than being neutralizing, complementary stereotypes rationalize inequality. Across a series of four experiments, Aaron Kay and John Jost (2003) found that exposure to complementary class stereotypes (e.g., “rich but unhappy,” “poor but happy”) increased the perceived fairness, legitimacy, and justifiability of the prevailing social and economic system. Related evidence comes from Ferderica Durante and her colleagues’ (2013) analysis of data from thirty-seven cross-national samples. Greater support for ambivalent warmth and competence stereotypes (high on one dimension, low on the other) was found in countries characterized by high- rather than low-income inequality. This suggests that in highly unequal societies such as that of the U.S., complementary (or ambivalent) stereotypes play an important role in justifying material disparities and minimizing their severity (Durante et al. 2013:740).

The most straightforward illustrations of individualism’s legitimizing functions come from research examining ideological predictors of policy support. It is well documented that individualistic attributions for poverty and wealth are key predictors of restrictive welfare policies as well as policies that redistribute wealth upward, such as lowered tax rates on dividend earnings (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Bullock et al. 2003; Henry et al. 2004; Bullock and Fernald 2005). Other legitimizing beliefs, such as social dominance, are implicated in reduced support for hierarchy-attenuating policies concerning gay and lesbian rights and women’s rights, social welfare, environmental protection, and racial discrimination (Pratto et al. 1994). Rosa Rodríguez-Bailón and her colleagues (Rodríguez-Bailón et al. 2017) found that both social-dominance-orientation beliefs and economic-system-justifying beliefs (e.g., “Most people who don’t get ahead in our society should not blame the system; they have only themselves to blame” and “Economic positions are legitimate reflections of people’s achievements,” respectively) predicted opposition to governmental and nongovernmental initiatives to reduce inequality (i.e., class-based affirmative action, social welfare programs, progressive taxation, charitable giving). These effects were mediated by individualistic attributions for poverty.

Taking a more fine-grained approach, Danny Osborne and Bernard Weiner (2015) studied how different attributional patterns are related to willingness to help the poor. First, they assessed whether poverty was perceived as being caused by factors within or outside the individual (i.e., locus), enduring or short-term (i.e., stability), and controllable or uncontrollable by the self or others. Next, latent profiles were created by grouping respondents who shared similar attributional patterns. Three attributional profiles emerged: (1) “*blaming* (high internal locus; moderate stability; high personal control; high other control), *caring* (low internal locus; moderate stability; low personal control; high other control), or *ambivalent* (moderate across causal properties)” (Osborne and Weiner 2015:149). Compared to the caring profile, the blaming profile was associated with greater conservatism, system justification, and anger, as well as less sympathy and support for the poor (Osborne and Weiner 2015). Understanding these different facets of causal attributions allows us to better predict individualism’s effects.

In addition to their direct effects, legitimizing beliefs operate indirectly. For example, right-wing authoritarianism and social-dominance orientation have been found to influence support for New York City’s “Stop and Frisk” policy via prejudicial attitudes (Saunders et al. 2016). Research by Rosa Rodríguez-Bailón and her colleagues (Rodríguez-Bailón et al. 2017) further illuminates the pathways that legitimizing beliefs travel. Subjective class status, particularly self-identification as high SES, and stronger economic-system justification both predicted greater belief that resources are fairly distributed. This, in turn, reduced the degree to which respondents regarded society as unequal, essentially “blinding” people to even recognizing inequality. Relatedly, legitimizing beliefs have been found to moderate perceptions of actual versus idealized levels of inequality such that stronger endorsement of these ideologies is associated with perceiving the gap between real and preferred inequality as smaller (Willis et al. 2015).

Not surprisingly, legitimizing beliefs blunt our sense of obligation for reducing bias and discrimination. Liz Redford and Kate Ratliff (2016) found that support for just-world beliefs, social dominance, and political conservatism resulted in greater protection of discriminators and reduced support for targets of discrimination. Respondents “blamed a discriminator more when they believed that the discriminator’s had a greater obligation to avoid discriminating” but legitimizing beliefs squashed this sense of responsibility (Redford and Ratliff 2016:180). Legitimizing beliefs also diminish proactive emotional responses to injustice. For example, exposure to “rags-to-riches” narratives decreases moral outrage and negative affect and, in turn, support for redistributive programs (Wakslak et al. 2007).

Understanding these legitimizing effects is critical to making sense of how inequality is maintained as well as how it can be disrupted. We now turn to a deeper examination of the social psychological processes that contribute to system justification and the personal benefits and cost of legitimizing ideologies.

LEGITIMIZING ECONOMIC INEQUALITY: A SYSTEM-JUSTIFICATION PERSPECTIVE

Drawing on Marx and Engel's concept of false consciousness and the premise that powerful groups maintain their dominance, in part, via ideological control, John Jost and Mahzarin Banaji (1994) introduced system-justification theory to explain the psychological processes associated with defending the status quo, especially when doing so goes against one's own personal and group interests. Just as individuals are motivated to perceive themselves and their own social groups and networks positively, system-justification theory similarly posits that we also want to perceive the social, political, and economic systems that affect us as legitimate and just (Jost and Banaji 1994). Outlining the parameters of system justification, Jost and his colleagues note:

The system justification motive drives individuals to exaggerate their system's virtues, downplay its vices, and see the societal status quo as more fair and desirable than it actually is. This motive creates an inherently conservative tendency to maintain the status quo. . . . System justification processes can occur both consciously and unconsciously. . . . The social systems that individuals are motivated to justify may be small in size and scope, such as (at the most micro level of analysis) relationship dyads and family units, or they may extend to formal and informal status hierarchies, institutional or organizational policies, and (at the most macro level of analysis) even entire nations or societies. (Jost et al. 2015:321)

Accordingly, both advantaged and disadvantaged groups are prone to engaging in some degree of system justification, with the strength of this tendency varying as a function of both dispositional and situational factors.

Contexts That Strengthen System-Justifying Tendencies

Among system-justification theory's greatest strengths is its consideration of how contextual factors shape support for legitimizing beliefs. Understanding the conditions that activate system justification potentially opens fruitful avenues for challenging individualism and other legitimizing beliefs that move

beyond the person as the sole locus of intervention. Numerous factors have been identified as heightening system justification:

System justification motivation is activated (or increased) when (a) the individual feels dependent on or controlled by the system and its authorities; (b) the status quo is perceived as inevitable or inescapable; (c) inequality in the system is made especially salient; (d) the system is criticized, challenged, or threatened; and (e) the system is perceived as traditional or longstanding. (Jost et al. 2015:322)

In many respects, the very conditions that increase system justification are also emblematic of high-inequality, capitalist societies, such as the United States. Put another way, system-justifying conditions may be “baked” into our institutions and social and economic relationships.

Take for example a basic aspect of capitalist societies—the vast majority of the population depends on income to survive, most commonly from employment in the paid labor market. Despite this deep reliance, many people have limited job security or control over their wages. A series of studies by Jojanneke van der Toorn and his colleagues (2015) show how common feelings of powerlessness and dependence can fuel system justification. In their first study, van der Toorn and his colleagues examined whether powerlessness predicted system justification in the workplace, finding that among a nationally representative sample of over 1,500 U.S. employees, financial dependence on one’s job (e.g., “I depend heavily on the money I make where I work”; “If I lost even one week’s pay, I would have a difficult time making ends meet”) was positively associated with the perceived legitimacy of one’s supervisor. Relatedly, they also found that a general sense of powerlessness was positively correlated with believing in the fairness and legitimacy of the economic system and economic inequality (van der Toorn et al. 2015). Not surprisingly, lower SES was associated with this reduced sense of power. These relationships were further investigated in two follow-up experiments in which participants were primed to feel powerful or powerless. Compared to respondents who felt powerful, participants who felt powerless engaged in greater system justification, even when systemic explanations for class, gender, and race disparities were presented to them (van der Toorn et al. 2015). In a final study, the researchers examined political powerlessness, finding that respondents who felt powerless in this domain believed in governmental authority and legitimacy more strongly than those who felt powerful. Collectively, these findings make clear that when “disadvantage is accompanied by a strong sense of powerlessness (or outcome dependence), individuals are more likely to accept and justify the system” than challenge it (van der Toorn et al. 2015:14).

Cross-cultural research by Anesu Mandisodza and his colleagues (2006) complements these findings by revealing how reactions to wealth and poverty reinforce meritocratic ideology and “prime” system justification. Australia and the U.S. have many commonalities; however, the researchers posited that the “American Dream” ideology may encourage Americans to place greater value on wealth and power and less emphasis on egalitarianism. Americans may also defend these values more strongly. Mandisodza and his colleagues’ (2006) findings support these hypotheses. After reading a vignette about an individual who was born rich (versus born poor), U.S. respondents perceived the economic system as more legitimate and fair; conversely, this same scenario led Australians to perceive the system as less legitimate and fair. The researchers attribute these responses to cultural differences in the acceptability of inequality in each country and to the motive to neutralize the psychological discomfort that undeserved poverty (or wealth) raises about the legitimacy of the system (Mandisodza et al. 2006).

Although seemingly counterintuitive, greater inequality can also foster system justification. When income inequality rises, people may adjust their perceptions of what is legitimate, and as a consequence, increased awareness of inequality may not translate into opposition against it (Trump 2018). Indeed, in a survey experiment, Kris-Stella Trump found that after receiving information about high levels of U.S. income inequality, participants’ modified, “upward their perceptions of how large income differences are legitimate (without changing their attitudes on whether inequality is too high)” (2018:931). In a follow-up study, Trump found that priming participants with system-justifying messages further enhanced this effect, resulting in greater upward adjustment of acceptable income differences and tolerance of inequality. Higher rates of inequality also have implications for collective mobilization. In Simon Varaine’s (2018) historical analysis of French mobilization between 1882 and 1980, he found that higher rates of inequality were associated with lower levels of mobilization by revolutionary (i.e., progressive radical) organizations and higher levels of mobilization by reactionary (i.e., conservative radical) organizations. Conversely, higher GDP growth was associated with greater mobilization by progressive than conservative organizations (Varaine 2018).

Other findings, however, raise questions about whether rising inequality begets greater acceptance of economic disparity. A series of studies by Kris-Stella Trump and Ariel White (2018) found no evidence of system justification in response to heightened awareness of inequality. Other research indicates that heightened inequality may, in fact, spark structural critique rather than justification of the status quo. Leslie McCall and her colleagues (2017) presented participants with information about rising U.S. economic inequality or an unrelated control message. Respondents then

rated the importance of structural (e.g., being born wealthy) and individualistic (e.g., hard work) factors in “getting ahead” and the entities responsible for reducing economic inequality (e.g., business, government). Compared to those in the control condition, participants exposed to information about rising inequality expressed greater support for structural attributions and were more likely to hold corporations and the government, rather than low-income individuals, responsible for reducing inequality (McCall et al. 2017). Even so, it bears noting that meritocratic ideology remained strong, with participants in the inequality condition rating individualistic causes of getting ahead as more important than structural factors. However, the gap in support for individualistic and structural causes was smaller in the inequality than in the control condition, leading McCall and her colleagues (2017) to conclude that exposure to rising inequality can erode support for “American dream” ideology and foster greater structuralism. We do not see these findings as negating central tenets of system justification; rather, they speak to the difficulty (but not impossibility) of changing these beliefs.

Nevertheless, individualism and other system-justifying beliefs are highly resilient and may grow stronger when threatened. An experiment by John Duckitt and Kristin Fisher (2003) found that when people were confronted with a threatening scenario involving the economic decline of their country, they became more authoritarian. It appears that even when system-justifying beliefs shift, they may still remain intact. For instance, Sarah Becker and Paul Sparks (2016) found that when strong system justifiers were exposed to system-critical information, they evaluated the economic system as being less fair than their counterparts did, who were not exposed to this information. Yet they also indicated stronger belief in the idea that inequality is natural. In this way, support for the status quo was maintained despite their seeing it as unfair.

Beliefs and practices that are perceived as traditional and longstanding are also highly influential. Patrick Haack and Jost Sieweke’s (2018) natural experiment of reunification of socialist East Germany and capitalist West Germany illustrates the transmission of dominant societal beliefs. Analyzing data from German citizens, they found that individuals who were new to living in a society characterized by widespread inequality and relative acceptance of it similarly came to view inequality as acceptable. The researchers interpreted this shift as reflecting “the subtle but powerful influence of collective legitimacy on an individual’s tacit approval of inequality” and as documentation “that individuals react to actual or perceived inequality by adapting their legitimacy beliefs to the level of inequality that they experience” (Haack and Sieweke 2018:486, 509). We take these findings as further evidence of the steady “drip feed” of legitimizing beliefs (Fine and Ruglis 2008:21), with

clear implications for understanding immigrants' and low-income groups' adaptation to U.S. capitalism.

Other situational factors also contribute to economic-system justification. Belief in the unavoidability or inevitability of the status quo may be particularly relevant when it comes to legitimizing economic inequality. When individuals felt that their capacity to exit a system was blocked or restricted, Kristin Laurin and her colleagues (2010) found that they doubled down by defending the status quo and justifying policies and practices that reduced mobility. Other research shows that when policy outcomes are regarded as prescribed or inevitable, they are particularly likely to be rationalized rather than resisted (Kay et al. 2002). The applicability of these findings to poverty and economic inequality are readily evident. Consider the reality that millions of people in the U.S. experience economic hardship, yet many do not overtly question (or protest) the legitimacy of U.S. capitalism or advocate for the adoption of the stronger safety net programs found in many other wealthy countries.

If systemic blockages enhance legitimization, mobility would seem to be a powerful antidote. This too, however, is associated with system justification. Belief in class permeability, particularly regarding the socioeconomic ladder as scalable, is a central facet of American individualism and the American Dream. And this belief comes at a significant cost. Greater inequality is more likely to be tolerated when class boundaries are perceived as permeable and class status is believed to be determined by meritocratic principles (Davidai and Gilovich 2015). A study by Martin Day and Susan Fiske (2017) vividly illustrates this point. After randomly assigning participants to read a vignette that induced perceptions of either moderate or low societal mobility, respondents in the moderate-mobility condition were more supportive of the current system and defended it more strongly than those in the low-mobility condition (Day and Fiske 2017). Conversely, exposure to low mobility resulted in less support for meritocratic and just-world beliefs, which, in turn, was associated with reduced defense of the status quo (Day and Fiske 2017). It appears that even a moderate level of mobility is sufficient to maintain belief in meritocracy and support for the socioeconomic status quo. Indeed, people who perceive themselves as being upwardly mobile are more likely than those who do not to see themselves as mobile to attribute poverty to individualistic causes such as laziness (Gugushvili 2016).

In the U.S., individualism and its corollaries are so powerful that we "see" mobility that does not exist. In a study by Shai Davidai and Thomas Gilovich, participants significantly misestimated the likelihood of both upward and downward mobility. Expectations regarding upward mobility were particularly inaccurate. Discussing these findings, the authors observe, "Because people wish to climb the economic ladder (or secure their position at the top), their likelihood of succeeding may be overesti-

mated, leading to stronger impressions of upward mobility than downward mobility” (Davidai and Gilovich 2015:68). Exposure to the “drip feed” of individualism and meritocracy are inescapable in the U.S. (Fine and Ruglis 2008:21), but the pull to system justification may make overestimating mobility more prevalent among disadvantaged groups. Indeed, Davidai and Gilovich (2015) found that low-income respondents and participants of color believed that there is more mobility in the U.S. than higher income groups and Whites.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL “BENEFITS” AND COSTS OF SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION FOR ECONOMICALLY MARGINALIZED GROUPS

Our discussion thus far sheds light on individual and contextual factors that foster support for individualism and the system-justifying consequences of doing so, but the fundamental question remains: Why do low-income and working-class people endorse hierarchy-enhancing beliefs that go against their own self-interest, and in some instances, devalue the very groups to which they belong? In part, understanding the endorsement of legitimizing beliefs, especially among marginalized groups, requires considering the stress associated with experiencing systemic exclusion, what it means personally and politically to believe that the world and one’s own society is unfair, and the needs that system justification can fulfill.

The Palliative Effects of Defending the Status Quo

Both poverty and discrimination are associated with a wide range of physical- and mental-health risks including diabetes, high blood pressure, anxiety, depression, and a sense of powerlessness (Belle and Doucet 2003). Perceiving oneself as a victim of injustice, a belief that undermines personal security and the sense of the world as a fair place, also conveys risk (Sullivan et al. 2014). For example, regarding oneself as a victim is positively correlated with adverse pain outcomes and undermines recovery from a range of health issues, including back injuries, chronic illnesses, and posttraumatic stress symptoms (Sullivan et al. 2014). Recognizing structural inequality and limited prospects for upward mobility comes with costs as well. Compared to low SES students who hold strong mobility beliefs, low SES students with weaker mobility beliefs report being less inclined to persist in school when faced with academic challenges (Browman et al. 2017). Findings such as these illuminate the psychological price of recognizing social and economic exclusion in one’s own life.

The motive to avoid these negative effects and perceive the world as a fair place is powerful. Although system-justifying beliefs have many negative effects in terms of maintaining inequality, their endorsement can personally alleviate some of its pernicious effects by temporarily fulfilling fundamental epistemic, existential, and relational needs:

The tendency to defend, bolster, and justify the status quo is motivationally compelling because it satisfies *epistemic* needs to attain certainty, order, and structure; *existential* needs to maintain safety and security and to minimize danger and threat; and *relational* needs to affiliate with others and acquire a sense of belongingness and shared reality. (Jost et al. 2013:236)

In meeting these needs, “system justification increases satisfaction with the status quo and, in so doing, serves the (short-term) palliative function of increasing positive affect and decreasing negative affect” (Jost et al. 2015:331). Enhanced well-being, self-esteem, and sense of personal control are among the “consolatory” effects of system-justifying beliefs. In an analysis of eighteen nations, Salvador Vargas-Salfate and his colleagues (2018) found that system justification was positively correlated with life satisfaction and negatively related to anxiety and depression. Showing remarkable consistency across countries, neither society-level inequality nor individual status moderated palliative function, leading the researchers to conclude, “The palliative effects of system-justifying beliefs appear to be a stabilizing factor for societies, even those with high inequality and lower levels of human development” (Vargas-Salfate et al. 2018:586).

Perceiving the class system as fluid and poverty as transient may provide low-income and working-class groups with a “lifeline” by offering a sense of control over and hope for the future (Davidai and Gilovich 2015). Students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds have not only been found to believe more strongly in societal meritocracy than their higher SES peers, but they are also stronger believers that schools are meritocratic (Wiederkehr et al. 2015). Explaining the function of these beliefs, the researchers observe:

This might well serve a need to believe that, if they work well at school, they might acquire status later on in society, as that might be the only chance they get. If they do not succeed to climb the ladder, they will have only them to blame (i.e., their lack of efforts at school). Thus, for them, relying on BSM [belief in school meritocracy] might be especially important to keep on believing that they actually control their future achievement in life. (Wiederkehr et al. 2015:5)

A growing body of research brings these palliative effects into sharper focus. Findings from Danny Osborne and Chris Sibley’s (2013) national probability sample of New Zealanders help explain the attractiveness of system-

justifying beliefs. These beliefs were found to provide a protective buffer against the negative effects of inequality both by increasing satisfaction with one's current standard of living and reducing one's psychological distress. Belief in meritocracy may be particularly potent in terms of fostering well-being. Shannon McCoy and her colleagues (McCoy et al. 2013) found that low-income women and women of color who believed in meritocracy had higher self-esteem and reported better physical health. Perceived control mediated these effects, suggesting that meritocratic beliefs derive their positive influence from providing a sense of power over one's life and future (McCoy et al. 2013). Although greater well-being is typically treated as an outcome of system justification, Erin Godfrey's (2013) longitudinal analysis of low-income Dominican, Mexican, and African American mothers raises the possibility that the reverse may also be true. Mothers' self-reported psychological distress at 14- and 24-month check-ins predicted greater system justification at subsequent assessments. This indicates that low-income groups may turn to system justification as a way to cope with the distress of economic hardship (Godfrey 2013).

The palliative effects of system justification blunt the negative emotions associated with wage inequality. In two experiments, Angela Maitner (2015) examined how negotiable versus nonnegotiable salary systems and belief in meritocracy influenced responses to unequal pay. She posited that when an unequal pay structure appeared negotiable or changeable (as is the case in the U.S.), belief in meritocratic ideology would reduce negative responses to inequality. Supporting this expectation, stronger meritocratic beliefs decreased anger when unequal treatment appeared negotiable (Maitner 2015). Conversely, when unequal pay violated meritocratic ideals by being unchangeable, meritocratic beliefs gave way to greater anger. These findings offer insight into how legitimizing beliefs and perceived agency function to dull anger and keep people focused on individual versus collective change (Jost, Becker et al. 2017).

Paying the Price: The High Cost of System Justification for Low-Income Groups

Importantly, these reinforcing effects make understanding poor and working-class individualism easier to understand. In difficult economic circumstances, legitimizing beliefs restore faith in the system and provide optimism for the future, but these seeming "gains" are more limited and complex than they appear to be at first glance. Although advantaged and disadvantaged groups experience some of the same palliative effects of system justification, fundamental differences distinguish their experiences (Jost and Hunyady 2005). Among advan-

tagged groups, system justification alleviates guilt (“I deserve this”), enhances privilege (“I earned it”), and reduces personal responsibility (“This is natural/inevitable”), resulting in enhanced self-esteem, in-group favoritism, and long-term well-being (Jost et al. 2015). This process is more conflictual for disadvantaged groups who, in justifying the status quo, risk feeling less positively about themselves and the groups they belong to (Jost and Hunyady 2005). By upholding systemic fairness and the belief that hard work pays off, individualistic ideology can increase positive affect, reduce frustration, and increase satisfaction with one’s current situation (Jost and Hunyady 2005). Yet, for low-income groups, blaming poverty on the personal flaws of your own group can erode self-esteem, reduce in-group identification, and increase alignment with economically secure out-groups. Put simply, “system-justifying beliefs play an insidious role in the maintenance of social inequalities by providing a psychological incentive for those who experience inequality” (Osborne and Sibley 2013:1002).

The double-edged sword of system justification extends beyond the personal to the political because system-justifying ideologies discourage support for system-challenging policies and collective action (Hennes et al. 2012; Jost, Becker et al. 2017). Erin Hennes and her colleagues found that heightened epistemic (i.e., lower need for cognition), existential (i.e., greater death anxiety), and relational (i.e., a stronger desire for a shared reality) needs predicted support for economic system justification. In turn, these beliefs contributed to greater support for the Tea Party movement and opposition to the Occupy movement, and mediated supporting the status quo on health care, immigration, and climate change (Hennes et al. 2012). Complementing these findings, John Jost and his colleagues (Jost, Langer et al. 2017) report strong support for economic system justification among poor respondents, and that these legitimizing beliefs are associated with conservative politics.

System justification’s relationship to political conservatism is well established across diverse socioeconomic groups and is not exclusive to poor and working-class people. With this in mind, system-justification theory is well suited to understanding why economically disadvantaged groups, as well as more advantaged groups, support conservative candidates. In their analysis of survey data collected prior to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Flávio Azevedo and his colleagues (2017) found that Donald Trump supporters across all income levels endorsed system-justifying beliefs about the economy more strongly than Hillary Clinton supporters. While working-class Clinton supporters questioned the legitimacy of economic inequality under capitalism, working-class Trump supporters did not.

Trump supporters were also significantly more likely than Clinton supporters to endorse gender system justification (Azevedo et al. 2017). This social psy-

chological bias toward defending the status quo is credited with contributing to conservatism's comparative political advantage (Azevedo et al. 2017).

Collectively, these findings offer insight into how “fundamental epistemic, existential, and relational needs for certainty, security, and conformity” contribute to system justification, particularly among low-income groups, and “why conservative economic attitudes are relatively popular even among those who do not benefit (in material terms) from conservative economic policies” (Jost, Langer et al. 2017:e19). When viewed through a system-justification lens, support for individualism and other legitimizing beliefs remains deeply problematic but is not irrational. While system justification's palliative effects are powerful and should not to be minimized, it is clear that their “benefits” pale in comparison to the gains social and economic justice would bring for economically marginalized groups.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

People observe unequal outcomes and must infer the invisible forces that brought these about, be they meritocratic or structural in nature. In making inferences about the causes of inequality, people draw on lessons from past experience and information about the world, both of which are biased and limited by their background, social networks, and the environments they have been exposed to. (Mijts 2018:1)

Throughout this chapter, our goals were twofold: to render visible the individual and contextual factors that contribute to endorsing inequality beliefs, and to illuminate the personal and societal consequences of these beliefs. We focused primarily on how legitimizing beliefs minimize and neutralize perceptions of inequality, the “triggers” that encourage system justification, and the benefits and/or needs served by individualism and meritocratic beliefs. In doing so, what becomes clear is that the very conditions of everyday life in high-inequality, capitalist societies, in and of themselves, foster system justification and support for the status quo. Given the well-documented challenges of attitude change, we believe directing more attention toward identifying conditions and contexts that enhance hierarchy-attenuating beliefs (e.g., structuralism, rejection of just-world beliefs) is crucial.

Of course, individualism and other legitimizing beliefs are just one piece of a vast network of mechanisms that fuel inequality. Our institutions and policies are paramount to creating and maintaining structural inequalities and skewing the distribution of income and wealth, but these practices are not sustainable without ideologies that justify how and to whom resources

are distributed. By revealing the overt and covert functions of legitimizing beliefs and their appeal, system-justification research complements and deepens macro-level understandings of inequality. Indeed, individualism and other legitimizing beliefs maintain structural inequalities by reducing the likelihood that members of disadvantaged groups will perceive themselves or their group as targets of discrimination and by undermining participation in collective action. Advantaged groups are also prone to system justification, with legitimizing beliefs minimizing the gap between perceived and actual inequality and reinforcing the belief that one's own status is earned. The role that inequality beliefs play in protecting a sense of privilege and deservingness among economically advantaged groups should not be underestimated.

Despite their seeming intractability, we remain optimistic that inequality beliefs can be challenged. This is, of course, a tall order, given the centrality of individualism and meritocratic beliefs to Americans' identities. Nevertheless, the same factors that strengthen legitimizing ideologies can be used to develop interventions and foster pro-equality beliefs. New insights can be gained from research examining the centrality of perceived fairness in judgments of inequality. Synthesizing findings from laboratory studies, cross-cultural research, and experiments with infants and young children, Christina Stairmans and her colleagues assert that, "humans naturally favour fair distributions, not equal ones, and that when fairness and equality clash, people prefer fair inequality over unfair equality" (Stairmans et al. 2017:1). Putting this observation into action by framing wealth and poverty as unfair may provide an ideological footing in the struggle to reduce economic inequality. Even so, we believe such efforts are unlikely to be successful without fully addressing the complex social psychological functions served by inequality beliefs.

Chapter Four

In Conversation

In chapter 2 we summarized the relevant research on the dominance of American inequality beliefs. In this chapter we take a different approach, allowing leading scholars, in conversation, to discuss this research and reflect on what it all means for American society. We sat down for interviews with David Brady, Heather Bullock, Peter Callero, Henry Giroux, Sharon Krause, Michael Lewis, Stephen McNamee, and Jamila Michener. Each of these scholars has conducted academic work with important implications for the questions posed in this book concerning inequality beliefs and social policy. The interviews were conducted separately with each of the scholars and have been brought together for this chapter. What follows are highlights from our conversations, edited with input from the scholars themselves, and arranged thematically. Brief biographic sketches are available at the end of this chapter.

AMERICAN PRECARITY

As we discussed in chapter 1, the U.S. ranks poorly among wealthy countries on measures of overall poverty, childhood poverty, economic inequality, and social mobility, among others. The U.S. also stands out for the comparatively less generous and more individualistically oriented nature of its social policies. We begin our discussion by focusing on the uniqueness of American precarity in the wealthy world.

David Brady: The U.S. stands out as an exceptionally unequal country compared to other rich democracies. Across the board the U.S. is consistently one of the worst in terms of poverty, inequality, polarization of resources,

disadvantages, etc. The U.S. really sticks out on all of these measures as being exceptionally and unusually and consistently unequal.

Why does the U.S. have twice as much poverty as most Western European democracies? What you find, I argue, is that it is really the generosity of the social policies. We have decided to have these high levels of inequality and it is reflected in everything we do. The generosity of a country's social policies really is the driving factor that explains why some rich democracies have low poverty and some have high poverty. Now, this is different from saying it's the demography, that there are more single parents, or there are fewer people working. Those sorts of explanations don't really explain the big differences. It is the generosity of social policies that really matters.

Henry Giroux: Economic inequality is getting worse; it is at levels that are obscene. Four hundred families own most of the wealth in the country. We see a massive shift of wealth away from the general population to the upper one-tenth of one percent. Twenty percent of all kids in the United States live in poverty. The welfare state is under enormous attack due to neoliberal ideology politics. People at the top are consolidating power in ways that we haven't seen since the first Gilded Age. The repercussions are horrendous in terms of public goods being defunded, everything from public transport to public schools.

One could say the United States has reached its limit point in terms of whether or not it wants to call itself a democracy. I think what is different between the United States and Europe, with some exceptions, is that the United States is totally unapologetic at this point about its inequality, its accelerating culture of cruelty, and its politics of disposability and racial purifying. Rather than something a government should be ashamed about, racism has become a signature feature of the current administration. Extremist ideologies have migrated from the margins to the center of power. This represents more than a crisis of values, ethics, and compassion. It is a dark political moment that is totally unapologetic about the divorce of economic activity from ethical considerations, which amounts to a politics emptied of any sense of moral and social responsibility.

Jamila Michener: We should be thinking about why the United States is doing as terribly as it is on any number of metrics. We can think about poverty more generally, we can think about child poverty, we can think about outcomes like infant mortality. Across a range of measures, the theme is that the United States is not performing well, especially not relative to countries that are anywhere in the same realm as us economically.

For a country that is as tremendously wealthy as we are, the number of people who are living in poverty or some degree of economic precarity

is pretty astounding. The distribution of poverty across the populace is also troubling. We're much more likely to see Black, Latino, and Native Americans living in poverty, more likely to see women living in poverty, and more likely to see children living in poverty. There are identifiable subsets of the population that are more heavily affected by the patterns of poverty that we see in the U.S., and that's not as much the case among our international peers.

The United States is especially bad at providing people who are not wealthy with economic security. We are especially bad at making sure that people who are disadvantaged economically are not disproportionately coming from a handful of groups. We're not doing well. The important questions are about why and how to change that.

David Brady: We used to believe that the U.S. was the land of opportunity. Sure, we had high inequality, but that's okay because there was also lots of mobility. Working-class people could be rich, and rich people could fall into poverty. Whereas in some other countries there was less inequality but also less mobility. We know now that was wrong, that is certainly false. The U.S. is certainly not a high-mobility country.

Henry Giroux: People used to talk about getting ahead and social mobility. Now many people aren't talking about getting ahead anymore, they're talking about surviving. This is the great distinctive feature of the neoliberal age. Wages have gone down over the last thirty years, they are lower than they were in the 1970s. There are fewer jobs for young people. There's more inequality. The tentacles of the punishing state hover over students, depriving them of any safe spaces. You have massive social atomization because you don't have public spheres that bring people together anymore. They are all being defunded or basically eliminated.

David Brady: It is easy to see why economic elites might want to live in a place like the U.S. If you are rich, it is hard to beat living in the U.S. because it is easier to live an opulent life. It is easier to buy a house, and you can live a very private existence. The transportation infrastructure is in place, taxes are lower, there is less regulation, there are lots of private goods that you can consume, etc. So it is easy for me to understand why rich people want to keep the American system the way that it is.

For poor people, it is hard to argue that living in the U.S. is better for them. You live a very fragile, precarious existence. There are so many ways in which the poor are more economically insecure here. In other rich democracies, people may not be rich—I don't mean to imply that the poor in Sweden

are living a life of opulence—but they are secure. They are taken care of. They know that they need not worry about these fundamental things.

Especially before health care reform was passed in the U.S. with the ACA, it was a real thing that people could become bankrupt because of a medical bill. That was a real thing. And that is unimaginable in Western Europe. Just unimaginable, absolutely never going to happen there. And that is a good example of the insecurity, the fragility, the precarity that working people suffer from here. Something like a health crisis could throw your family into economic crisis in the U.S., which is much less likely to occur in Europe.

Now, plenty of working-class Americans are able to make their house payments and have some modicum of economic comfort, but the risk factors are so much higher here. There is so much more uncertainty. You have a certain social insurance that exists with the generous social policies of Europe. There are also ways in which the working class and the poor are just socially excluded from mainstream American society, from participating in mainstream middle-class institutions, whereas in Europe they are much more integrated. It is not perfect; Europe is certainly not a utopia for the working class. There is a danger in slipping into that argument. There is inequality there as well, that is important to acknowledge. But in the U.S. there is so much more insecurity and vulnerability, and that leads to forms of extreme deprivation that you just never see in many other rich countries. You don't see the levels of homelessness in Europe, for instance, that you see in the U.S. Where is this same problem in Europe? That says something about their community, about public intervention in vulnerable people's lives to make sure that extreme deprivation doesn't occur. The insecurity and the extreme deprivation, you don't see that in other rich democracies.

Jamila Michener: I think that poverty and economic deprivation are political choices. They're a reflection of political choices that we have made and that we continue to make over and over again as a society. Are there people who sometimes don't work as hard as they should? Sure. But the idea that cultural deficiencies or individual character attributes explain the contours of poverty and economic deprivation in the U.S. just doesn't have solid empirical grounding. That's especially the case if we think about the U.S. in comparative context. A lot of the things that we claim are causes of poverty exist in other countries but just don't lead to the levels of poverty and inequality that we have here.

The argument that this is cultural or it's about individual people not doing what they need to do just doesn't hold up. Instead, I would say the proximate

reason for poverty in the U.S. is about decisions that we make, or sometimes fail to make, about social policy and resource distribution and redistribution. When people don't have access to affordable health care, access to jobs that pay living wages and allow them to take care of their families, or access to affordable housing, we end up in a situation where there's dramatic economic inequality and significant levels of economic deprivation. That's the exact situation that we are in, and those things—health care, housing, employment, and so forth—are a reflection of policy decisions that we make or fail to make.

Now, those policy decisions are themselves a reflection of politics, of political coalitions, and of political attitudes and behaviors among the American populace. And so part of this is about who has political power in this country, who organizes most effectively politically, and who the rules of the game benefit most. Politics is at base about the rules of the game. Who are the rules structured to benefit in this country? People who are wealthy, overwhelmingly men, and overwhelmingly White. When taken in combination—not just individually, but in combination—the rules of the game are structured to benefit those folks. The design of our politics is such that the people who are most disadvantaged by inequality and poverty have the least power in our political system.

All of those things cause the outcomes that we're talking about. So, what needs to change? A lot. But ultimately, we need a serious reorientation of our political system in a number of different ways before we're going to see substantial reductions in economic and material deprivation.

INDIVIDUALISM AND SOCIAL POLICY

One important factor that influences the generosity and orientation of a country's social policies is dominant culture. Research suggests that a number of cultural beliefs impact our support (or lack of support) for robust and structurally oriented social policies—not only beliefs about the causes of economic disadvantage, but beliefs about who “deserves” our help, beliefs about different social groups (such as African Americans and single mothers), and beliefs about the proper role of government, among others. Later in this chapter, we will explore the role of racism in shaping support for social policies. Here we discuss the relationship between American individualism and support for social policies.

Heather Bullock: Beliefs are absolutely pivotal because they inform the kinds of policies that we have. They inform what we see as the problem and what

we see as the solution. From my perspective, beliefs are absolutely pivotal to informing the kinds of systems that we have and the kinds of policies that we will or will not support.

Obviously beliefs are only one piece of the puzzle, but I think they're a really pivotal piece. There is a lot of research that looks at the relationship between people's beliefs and a whole range of policies, such as redistributive policies, welfare policy, tax policy, a whole host of policies and issues that are related to socioeconomic position. What a lot of that research shows is that individualistic beliefs—seeing the individual as responsible for her or his socioeconomic situation—are related to the types of policies that someone supports. Those individualistic beliefs tend to be related to more restrictive welfare policies, spending less on welfare programs, and work requirements, among other things.

David Brady: Considering the literature that has existed for decades about why some welfare states grow and are more generous than others, I would point to two broad factors. One is the ideologies, the belief systems, the culture, and the values that exist within a society. The other is the collective political actors in that society.

It matters that Americans are more individualistic and are more skeptical of social policies. It matters that Americans are more believing in the capitalist system. That really matters. It is a fundamental sort of baseline that influences the kinds of social policies that we get.

It also matters how strong your labor unions are, how strong the leftist parties are, and the way your electoral system is set up. I think of institutionalized power relations theory as exploring the power of these collective actors, mixed in with a set of ideologies and beliefs that shape both the power of those collective actors and shape the social policies themselves. All of this funnels through the generosity of the social policies, and that is what explains poverty and inequality.

Peter Callero: American society is saturated with the holy waters of individualism. We honor the self-reliant, praise the independent thinker, and worship the initiative of the entrepreneur. Cultural representations of individuals who have succeeded against great odds are common in American films, television, literature, and sport. And this overarching cultural narrative is often reinforced in educational, religious, and governmental institutions. But I would say the most important sustaining force is capitalism. More than any

other economic system, capitalism promotes and advances the myth of radical individualism.

Most of us can agree, on both the left and the right, when there are certain problems, and when there are certain facts that can't be ignored. There is a fact of homelessness. There is a fact of wealth concentration at the top. Those things can't be denied. If we agree to certain facts, then where the disagreement lies is in the explanation or interpretation of that. If we have an individualistically oriented interpretation of the causes of the problem, then the solutions and the policies that come of that are going to be rooted in that. Maybe the interpretation is that we don't need to respond as a state or collectively because it is solely a matter of individuals. Then you get a radical individualism, radical libertarianism, and radical individualistic economic solutions. And in my opinion, they actually make the problem increase rather than decrease when you take that strategy.

Heather Bullock: A way that people think about individualism a lot of times, particularly in relation to socioeconomic position, is that the person, the individual, is responsible for their economic position. You might think of this as the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality, the notion that the individual is the master of her or his own fate. It's really the idea that the person is responsible for their socioeconomic position. In the United States, that kind of belief is connected to the American Dream, it's connected to meritocracy. It's really embedded in our culture in very deep ways.

Stephen McNamee: Our individualistic culture prevents more government intervention. In the U.S., the responsibility that the group takes for its members is minimal. The dominant ideology says that nobody owes you a living, you are responsible for being on your own. In our country, being in need of help is seen as a sign of a character flaw, a sign of weakness that you are unable to take care of yourself. You haven't been responsible, you haven't been self-reliant. So there is pushback and resentment. Americans resent the idea that their money, through taxation, should be used to provide for somebody else. Their impulse is to only want to pay for themselves and not for anybody else. I think that is all wrapped up with the hyper-individualism.

David Brady: The United States is really distinctive among the rich democracies for punishing people so severely for a few mistakes. It is unusual. In other countries, you might be a single mother, you might be uneducated, and you might be unemployed, but there is no absolute guarantee that you are going to be poor. There are government policies that help you. In the United

States we have the approach that if you have these characteristics, we are going to severely punish you and penalize you, and your odds of poverty are extraordinarily high. Why do we attach such strong penalties to these characteristics, whereas other countries don't?

Henry Giroux: Think about the things that make a democracy viable. Maybe this is the kind of discussion people really need to understand. Do you want to live in a democracy that provides certain kinds of protections, certain kinds of social provisions, certain kinds of public goods? Well, you can't live in a democracy when you have massive inequality. You can't live in a democracy when very few people virtually own and control the political process. You can't live in a democracy when corporations define everything about how life should be run. You can't live in a democracy without public institutions that provide the opportunities for people to think critically, to be healthy, to have access to resources that are absolutely essential to their own sense of agency. You can't live in a democracy when you have an economic, social, and political formation at work—call it what you want, market fundamentalism, casino capitalism, neoliberalism—all aimed at consolidating the power all in the hands of a small, limited number of people. That's not about democracy.

The argument that needs to be made is that people are going to suffer under this form of toxic mode of governance. All of the things that matter are going to be taken away from them—whether we are talking about pensions, health care, access to good schools for kids—all of these things are being privatized, commodified, or eliminated. We need a narrative in which people can recognize themselves. We need a narrative in which they can recognize the underlying causes at work in taking away their jobs, Medicaid, dignity, and the future itself. They need a narrative that enables them to assume a sense of agency and recognize that many of the problems they face have almost nothing to do with the scapegoating of undocumented immigrants, Muslims, African Americans, and those others considered disposable, and everything to do with a cruel, savage, and extreme form of capitalism. We need a new narrative here, one that says that capitalism and democracy are not the same. What does it mean for people to exercise the kind of power to reclaim their role as agents in a democracy in which they can learn how to govern rather than simply be governed? That they can have some control over the conditions that bear down on their lives?

David Brady: We vacate certain responsibilities that we could take on. We could decide as a society that children are important and that it would be re-

ally smart to make investments early in their lives, and they will pay off in terms of the productivity of those children and their potential and what they can achieve and what we collectively achieve as a society. We would probably save a lot of money as opposed to imprisoning them. We institutionalize a lot of the social problems we have by choosing not to invest in our children when they are young, whether that be investments in their health, their child care, their education, their development, and so on.

We also institutionalize inequality by creating extraordinary opportunities for rich people. We have all these ways that are built into our tax system, built into our governmental distribution of resources, etc. The classic example is that if you own a home, all of the interest that you pay on the mortgage from that home is deductible. It is a huge, gigantic tax advantage to people that are rich enough to own homes. This penalizes low-income people that don't have enough money to own homes and are forced to rent. So it's a massively regressive tax benefit for middle-class and rich people. It's clear that this costs dramatically more than what we spend on housing programs for low-income people or working-class people, and it definitely facilitated middle-class and upper-middle-class people getting much richer.

So there are a lot of ways in which the government contributes directly to making the rich even richer, and there are many ways in which we vacate our responsibility to lift up the poor.

Heather Bullock: One of the reasons it's really important that we think about our safety net programs is that those are the programs that can help people get a foot up and be able to survive in a country where we don't really have a level playing field. We like to think we have a level playing field, but we don't necessarily have one, so those safety net programs or welfare programs are really crucial to helping people survive.

I think one of the important things to do is to really think about even the word welfare, and what we associate with welfare complicates that term. In the United States, we really think of welfare policies as policies that benefit low-income groups, so we think about public assistance. Maybe we think about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP or food stamps. But we could back up and we could think about welfare also as corporate welfare, as certain benefits and tax breaks that go to corporations or companies. We tend not to think about those kinds of programs as welfare in the United States, but we certainly could.

Peter Callero: If you have a particular emphasis on individualistic interpretations of the world, you are going to see our social problems through that lens of individualism. And that has consequences. It has consequences in terms of what kinds of solutions we look for, what kinds of solutions seem rational. It has implications for the kinds of politicians that we find attractive. It is going to shape our understandings of ourselves. If you take that and apply it to basic structural inequalities, then that gets reduced to the person as being the problem, as opposed to maybe certain economic structures and economic systems and political structures and political systems that create these kinds of patterns of gross inequality.

Michael Lewis: A lot of people think you can separate opportunity and position. You can't. So we need to get people out of the places they are locked into.

If you go back to the War on Poverty, there are certain things that you simply cannot propose and expect them to be given serious consideration. One of the great missed opportunities was the notion of a negative income tax or a guaranteed annual income to set a floor. Those proposals went basically nowhere. There were a few pilot studies, and when the results challenged some preconceptions that we had, Congress basically ignored the results.

Economists talk about what they call “policy space.” It is a fictive space that has cultural boundaries, and for me those boundaries are locked into the importance of the individual-as-central sensibility. Things that fit within those boundaries, even if they don't work very well, can receive serious consideration. They fit the cultural preconceptions. And things that conceivably could work better than things that we are doing now, but are outside of those boundaries—and in the United States I would say those are the redistributive proposals that really deal with poverty—they're not going to get serious consideration because we see them as outrageous and outlandish. In some instances we see them as foreign, as stemming from Godless communism.

It is extraordinarily important to understand that problem solutions don't depend on how well they work, they depend on how well they fit. We need to understand that public policy determination is economic, it's political, and it is profoundly cultural. That's extraordinarily important.

David Brady: I think single-parenthood is a really good example. Americans think that if you are a single mother, the assumption is you are going to be poor. Especially if you are young and you are not working or you are not

highly educated. It is hard for Americans to think of a way that we can live in a world where single mothers are not going to be poor. Yet in most other rich democracies, the penalty attached to single motherhood is not as severe. Those countries make a choice, regardless of whether they like the idea of single motherhood or not, that doesn't matter. Because there is a child in that household, those countries believe it is important to supply public resources to that household, regardless of what they think about single motherhood. That child is important, that child needs investment. In fact, our society is going to be better off if we take care of this child and give them economic resources to develop well. As opposed to saying that their mother made a bad choice, whether it is a choice or not, and sentencing that child to low economic resources as a punishment for what we perceive as a poor or irresponsible choice by the mother. That is a very deliberate difference between us and other rich countries.

The United States is among the worst in its generosity to single mothers. But if you live in other rich democracies you are going to get a child benefit. You probably get some form of socialized health care so you don't have to worry about paying for your child's health care out of your pocket. If you live in these countries, you will get a more equal educational system. These educational systems, especially for early-childhood education, are going to be more egalitarian than the American system.

In the U.S. we choose to systematically underinvest in the children of single-parent families, and we pay for it as a society. Those children grow up to have more social problems, more health problems; they are more likely to be involved in deviant or criminal activities, and they are more likely to be incarcerated. We pay for the increased social problems, the cost of incarceration, etc., which is very expensive. We as a society pay for the consequences of all of that because we choose not to invest in people as children.

Other rich democracies make the choice that children are important, and people in those countries view their economic security as almost a right. So those countries just give economic resources to the people that are guardians of those children.

There is a really neat contrast that can be shown between Germany and Denmark. They share a border; they are very close to each other geographically. But Germany has made the political choice to not provide lots of economic support to single mothers, so single mothers are very disadvantaged. They are not a huge population in Germany; they are a smaller population than in

the United States. But if you are a single mother in Germany, it is very, very tough. But right across the border, with basically the same ethnic composition of people, you get very low rates of poverty among single mothers. So that shows you that it is a political issue. Because right across this geographic border, there is a dramatic discontinuity, where you are less likely to be poor in Denmark, but you are much more likely to be poor in Germany. It shows that you can politically manipulate this issue.

Stephen McNamee: Of course the ultimate irony is that the wealthy are more heavily subsidized than the poor in what amounts to an upside-down “wealthfare” system. Government benefits received by the more affluent are more subtle and disguised in ways that are not recognized as such, allowing the affluent to receive such benefits without any stigma attached to them. Besides generous tax breaks, exclusions, and deductions targeted to the affluent, and such non-means tested forms of social “entitlements” as Social Security and Medicare, other examples of government policy and expenditures that disproportionately advantage the affluent range from such things as federally subsidized highway systems linking affluent suburbs to major metropolitan areas, airport accommodations and infrastructure for private pilots, and substantial tuition subsidies for state schools populated by middle- and upper-class students, just to name a few. The ideology of individualism has contributed to what amounts to lavish benefits for the presumed “deserving” rich and a limited and highly stigmatized safety net for the “underserving poor.”

Jamila Michener: It’s about our fundamental lack of political willingness to treat people with dignity no matter who they are, no matter how they are. We are simply not dedicated to treating people with dignity irrespective of their circumstances. I would argue that we have never been committed to that. That is what our social welfare policy reflects. It reflects an attenuated commitment to human dignity. And the reasons for that attenuation are connected to ideas about who is deserving and who is not, ideas about race and ideas about the “free” market. All those things and more are funneled through our political institutions and systems, and they are embedded in the decisions of the powers that be and the processes for determining who is in power.

Essentially, those things point toward a weak commitment to guaranteeing a basic standard of living linked to an unequivocal appreciation for human dignity. That’s what’s missing. If I had to sum up what our social policy reveals, I’d say it reveals a very weak commitment to human dignity.

AMERICA'S CULTURE OF INEQUALITY

Beliefs concerning individualism, along with related beliefs concerning meritocracy, neoliberalism, the American Dream, and the dominant ideology, have strong currency in the U.S. Together, these beliefs form a “culture of inequality,” to borrow a concept from Michael Lewis. The prevalence of these beliefs and the ways in which they resonate with the average American help sustain what might otherwise be intolerable levels of economic insecurity. The following are highlights from our conversations about this culture of inequality in the U.S.

Jamila Michener: I believe that culture is important, just not in the way that most people tend to understand it. I teach a big course on the politics of poverty in the U.S., and so every fall I end up having long discussions with undergraduates here at Cornell University about poverty and its causes. One of the things that we talk about is culture. A lot of students believe that culture explains poverty, but they believe in something like a “culture of poverty.” There’s something about poor people, some cultural failing that explains why they can’t manage to do well.

There’s a reason why anyone who’s doing well wants to believe that. If you’re doing well, you want to believe that it’s something about you. You want to believe that you’ve worked hard, you’ve done what you should do, and you’ve played by the rules. You’ve made the necessary choices and sacrifices, and so that explains why you are doing well. And if we believe that about ourselves, then the opposite is true—when somebody’s doing badly, their choices, their cultural predilections explain that, too. We think of that as being the case for individuals, and then we abstract up to groups. If there are entire groups of people who aren’t doing well—poor people, Black people, etc.—it must be because of the choices that they’re making.

A long line of research has exposed that understanding of culture as fraudulent and not well aligned with what we’ve been able to measure as social scientists. Nonetheless, appreciating the contours and consequences of culture in terms of heterogeneous societal ideologies and attitudes like racism, sexism, classism, and individualism remains crucial.

I don’t see competition between acknowledging the role of culture and that of institutions or structure. All of these things are working together to produce our current situation. All sorts of cultural norms and ideologies are infused in our political system and are undergirding the policies that explain and create inequality and poverty.

Henry Giroux: Massive inequality now dominates American life. The U.S. is dealing with these obscene kinds of contradictions, and it becomes difficult if people lack the language to move out of them. There is a book called *Coming Up Short* by Jennifer Silva, which has a very interesting take on this. Silva visited five or six working-class communities, and she was looking at young people in these communities. There were no jobs, no hope, but they all drank the Kool-Aid. They all thought it was about character. They all thought that the only way to deal with this problem was to deal with their own emotional traumas. When they looked around and saw people who were suffering in the same way, they blamed them. It was about character, they weren't resilient enough.

David Brady: There seems to be something deeply, deeply stitched into the American DNA from centuries of culture that makes us more individualistic.

Sharon Krause: I understand agency as having two sides to it. On the one hand is the individual will and initiative, what it is that we try to bring about in the world through our actions. On the other hand is efficacy, or the actual effects that we have on the world, the actual impact that we have on the world, the ways that the world is different because of something that we've done. And I think very often, when Americans think about agency—and I think this is often true in philosophy and political theory, too—we tend to think about agency in ways that highlight the first thing, individual will and initiative, and neglect the second thing, efficacy.

As a result of emphasizing the will side, the individual initiative side of agency, we end up with a conception of agency, and ultimately of freedom, that has a tendency to kind of collapse agency and freedom into willing and initiative. It neglects all of the ways that society can interrupt the connection within agency between individual initiative and will, on the one hand, and efficacy or impact on the other.

I think we overwhelmingly fail to grasp the two sides of agency. And because we fail to grasp and take seriously both sides of agency, we tend to undercut or underappreciate the ways that those two sides can come apart. We underappreciate how prevailing social inequalities and background meanings and norms and so on that contain bias and stigma; we underappreciate the deep effects that those things have on individual agency, and therefore on freedom.

Henry Giroux: I think the culture of cruelty has accelerated to levels in which the unimaginable becomes normalized. The level of dispossession is so extreme. The level of inequality is so obscene. And all of a sudden, you just

have people being written off in ways that we have never seen before. With the social contract under attack and withering fast, as well as any notion of dependency and community being pathologized, it becomes much more difficult to protect those who are vulnerable. So they just become part of the logic of disability. Whole towns rotting because manufacturing has moved out, resources have been taken away from people.

We find ourselves living in a society based on a predatory culture. It replaces compassion, sharing, and concern for the other with an unbridled individualism that gains sustenance from the notion that what really matters is survival of the fittest. This is a culture of barbarism that preaches the reality television and Ayn Rand notion of selfishness, egoism, and a notion of ruthless competition that states that only one person can be left on the island. I think this ideology is enormously destructive in the ways in which it turns bonds of trust into bonds of fear, insecurity, and in some cases, violence, and it is constantly mimicked everywhere. It normalizes itself through an empty neoliberal notion of individual responsibility in which all systemic problems disappear so that the only problems to be solved, if not caused, fall on the shoulders of individuals. We know the script. If you are just resilient and self-reliant or you pray, you'll get by. And that's nonsense, and it is pitting everybody against everybody else. Equally important, it prevents people from translating private troubles into larger social considerations. Then there's the Wall Street logic that ethics don't matter, that all kinds of activity should be separated from social cost. The only thing that matters is that you're the last person standing. That's a very brutal logic, a society can't exist on that logic. A society has to have public values and public trust. It can't operate on the assumption that the willingness to care for others, that having compassion for others' suffering, is a liability rather than a gift.

Peter Callero: The best way to get a sense of the American culture of individualism is to compare it with other cultures, other societies. Now, "culture" is a big word, it encompasses so much, and you are making big generalizations when talking about a whole country. But there is a good deal of research which compares individualistic and collectivist-oriented cultures. When you do this cross-cultural comparison, you find that American society is one of the most individualistic in terms of its beliefs and understandings of the world.

Heather Bullock: A Pew report showed that the United States is really so far pulled away from other comparison countries on individualism, on this belief that with hard work you can make it and move up the socioeconomic ladder. If you look at the public opinion polls, you do see people in the United States

expressing concern about the distribution of income, and thinking that there needs to be a fair distribution, and yet still seeing that you can make it through hard work. We pull away from other countries in that respect.

Stephen McNamee: Cross-culturally, Americans tend to have more individualistic explanations than citizens in other wealthy countries. Industrial European societies are much more open to structural and economic explanations to account for the distribution of income and wealth in societies. They are more comfortable with the idea that inheritance matters in terms of social hierarchy and social ranking. They can more easily identify and have a sense that where you start out in life matters in terms of where you end up. Americans have this notion that their country is the land of opportunity, and that opportunities are only limited by your individual capacities. The sense that anything is achievable at the individual level is very uniquely American.

Michael Lewis: I think it was a typically American statement by John F. Kennedy in his inauguration speech, where he said, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Well, for the Europeans, that would sound strange in some ways. They believe that it is a legitimate question to ask what their countries can do for them.

Over the last few years, I have had an interesting opportunity to spend time in Western Europe, particularly in the Netherlands. I was invited to come to the University of Amsterdam and the Free University of Amsterdam. People there were worried that they were becoming more and more like the United States, more individualistic and so on. So I spent some time there, I gave a number of seminars, and we also had a conference. And it was very clear to me that they were wrong. They’re not becoming more like the United States. And it has to do with the difference in culture and how that affects the policy space.

For the Western Europeans, the relationship between a collective and the individual is very different than it is in the United States. Western Europeans see individuals as part of a collective, their identity stems from the collective. In the United States, we see it just the opposite, that the collectivity is an aggregation of individuals. These are two different cultural models. To the Europeans, the notion that the individual grows out of the collective makes it easier to pass welfare legislation in a way that is more effective and more generous than is in the United States. In the United States, where people see the individual as dependent on his or her own resources and person, that makes it more difficult to deal with public policy on welfare. We don’t share that much of an identity, except that we are Americans and have equal opportunity. If

I had worked harder than she has or he has, they should not ask me to solve their problems. Why should I pay for the next guy? Those are very different cultural formulations, and it seems to me that they have a profound impact.

This one anecdote illustrates, I think, how the culture works. At one of the meetings I attended when I was in Amsterdam, there was a member of the Dutch Parliament who was a Social Democrat. At the break when people were having coffee, he came up and we chatted a bit. He said, "We love Americans, but we don't understand you. We don't understand why you have this big problem trying to figure out how to provide health care for people. We do it, and it is very simple here. We pay our taxes and then we use the system." Which is of course a single-payer system. And this conversation was before this latest go-round on health care. He went on and said, "You get all bent out of shape, Americans make themselves into pretzels about health care. I know you will say we are a bunch of socialists, but we're not." He pointed to himself and said, "I'm a socialist. I wish my fellow countrymen were socialists. But they're not. In fact our history is a long history of capitalism. But we see this as a need that our fellow citizens have. You don't seem to see that in the same way."

Sharon Krause: There's a kind of individualism in our society that is more extreme than in many other places. There is something about our brand of individualism. There are some strengths to it, there are some positive aspects to it for sure. But it does, I think, stand in the way of our ability to see, acknowledge, and respond to the social conditions that undercut possibilities of agency and freedom for people who are marginalized. Or who are on the losing end of social inequalities.

I think one of the challenges for a democratic society is how to have aspirational ideals that motivate us to reach high, to aspire to a lot, that motivate us to love our country and appreciate what's good about it. But at the same time, ideals that don't cloud our judgment with fantasies. Ideals that enable us to be responsive to the ways in which the actual conditions of our lives or the lives of many Americans stand in the way, in systematic ways, of the realization of the aspirations that we hold as constitutive of what it means to be an American or what America means.

Heather Bullock: I think in the United States, individualism is baked into the way that we think about almost everything. It's like the air that we breathe. I don't even think we're conscious of it. It's part of popular culture in Nike "Just Do It" ads. It's part of political rhetoric.

Certainly you see individualism in how people think about socioeconomic status, but I think it extends much, much further than that. The major messages of individualism are everywhere. They're in novels that we read. They're in popular culture. They're in popular movies. They're in Horatio Alger. All of it. Everywhere they're around us, including in parental socialization practices, in the ways that our classrooms are structured. It's built in. It's part of our culture, but it is also built into our structures. We live in a very individualistic society where rewards, even in preschool classrooms, are distributed in ways that are rewarding individual behavior, typically individual merit or success.

Stephen McNamee: For a variety of reasons, individualism is the dominant explanation for poverty and inequality among Americans at large. There are historical reasons why the U.S. is the most hyper-individualistic culture in the world. We are particularly unique in that regard. American individualism comes from a combination of economic, political, and cultural origins—the independence associated with a break from the hereditary aristocracy of the British Crown, the adoption of individual ownership and competition associated with capitalism, the individualist orientation of the Protestant ethic associated with the early conquering Puritan settlers, the rugged individualism associated with the expanding Western frontier. As a result of these historical and cultural forces, the default explanation for most Americans is very individualistic and reductionist, not just for poverty but for virtually everything. The individualistic explanation locates the cause of poverty within the individual who is deficient in some way; they are “not made of the right stuff” in the language of *The Meritocracy Myth*. They are incompetent, lazy, and/or shiftless. The presumption is that the American system of inequality operates as a sort of giant centrifuge where the cream of the crop, those made of the right stuff, naturally rises to the top. The dregs, those who lack these qualities, sort out at the bottom of the system. The presumption is that the cause is located within the individual, and even more reductionist than just their personality or personal characteristics, but within their biological makeup. Sometimes I refer to these theories as “bad seed” theories. Now, the weight of the evidence would suggest that economic factors are dominant, but individualism is the impulse that most Americans have, and it is really strong, so it is an uphill battle to try to explain these things to most Americans. You have to be convincing, compelling, and overwhelming with the evidence.

I've given talks on *The Meritocracy Myth* every now and then where I very systematically present the arguments in the book, including a significant amount of data to support the arguments. And after my presentation was finished, I would often get just a flat out denial from the audience, especially

from older Americans. Many would dismiss all of the facts that I just presented and just presume that it was just my opinion. They just couldn't bring themselves to conceptualize the U.S. as anything other than a meritocracy, as having anything other than equal and unlimited opportunities. And of course they all had individual stories, people they knew who started out absolutely poor and then worked their way up through hard work and grit and determination and gumption. If they could do it, then anybody can. Now, in the models, yes, somebody could hit the lottery. But what are the odds stacked against people? Of course it does happen; it is rare but it does happen, and when it does, it is celebrated. Giving the sociological perspective, convincing people of something other than the dominant explanations, is an uphill battle.

Heather Bullock: It's so hard in the United States for us to even have a very honest and open discourse around social class. Class is still something of a taboo topic. I think we still don't fully want to acknowledge that there are social classes in the United States, even though we absolutely know that there are. We really don't have much of a discourse for that. Of course there is some mobility; I don't want to suggest that there isn't. But it's not to the degree that people might think.

Henry Giroux: The country has always had a kind of romance with rugged individualism that slides very easily into what we saw with neoliberalism. It creates all of these myths around notions of freedom that not only get absorbed in a neoliberal ethic where freedom means freedom from government regulation and freedom to consume, while increasingly displacing any notion of the social. The social in the United States is worse than in England, worse than when Margaret Thatcher said there was no such thing as society, only individuals and families. Of course, bereft of any sense of moral, social, and political responsibility, the neoliberal notion of freedom demonstrates and attempts to normalize the freedom to be a racist, hate Muslims, humiliate the vulnerable, and hold nothing back in exposing one's sexist, racist, and nativist impulses.

This is not just about the merging of freedom and bigotry, it is also about the collapse of civic literacy under the weight of a state that monopolizes the commanding cultural apparatuses and other modes of communication. That is, you have massive social apparatuses, powerful commanding apparatuses, from the schools to the mainstream media, that basically limit the ability of people to get access to points of view that would challenge the normalization of neoliberal values, ethics, and social relations. To challenge the normalization of neoliberal ideology. I think we underestimate that. Politics follows culture. The real question is how people learn these behaviors, learn

to identify with modes of oppression that are basically aimed at them, all in the name of myths.

People's sense of agency, their sense of desire, their sense of self, is being shaped in ways that basically turn them into marketable goods, into consumers. What are they told? They are told that the only form of citizenship that matters is consuming. They're told that they live in a world which is about the survival of the fittest, a war of all against all. They are constantly bombarded by an ideology that says there are no such things as social problems, only individual problems.

It seems to me that a real crisis of agency emerges for a number of people. They are being depoliticized. They're being told that the only orbit that matters is private, that public life is a joke. I think what you are seeing is a real distortion of the capacity and the possibility to engage critical citizens. What we are really talking about here is the collapse of civic culture and the systemic erosion of any sense of shared responsibility. This has been going on for decades, but since the 1980s, with Reagan and Thatcher, it really comes into full bloom.

Jamila Michener: I think a lot of ideas intersect in this arena. A huge one is the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving, which echoes notions of meritocracy. Another major idea is that of individualism. A kind of "boot straps" individualism where people shouldn't be relying on the government. They shouldn't be relying on the state; they should be doing everything on their own.

Connected to that is a growing anti-government ideology, a kind of suspicion of government and a desire for limited government. That has really blossomed, I would say, over the last at least thirty years in our country. It is a really strong kind of anti-government sentiment, anti-statism, a deep distrust of government, a deep desire for small government. These ideas are not just about government being bad, but about the market being good or neutral. The way that many Americans revere the market and revile the government creates a circumstance in which excesses of capitalism sometimes go unchecked.

All of these ideas intersect with racism and sexism in ways that can be really perverse, and in ways that we don't always recognize. We can't, or won't, always identify what the precise problem is. I don't have to talk about my issue in terms of racism if I know that's not socially acceptable, or if I don't even recognize my own racial bias. I can just talk about wanting small government

or a free market, and what that rhetoric contributes to producing is a set of policies that are especially bad for low-income people, and especially bad for people of color, and especially bad for women. But I don't have to justify that with respect to race or class or gender. I can justify it with respect to an appreciation for the market. In this way, the market provides implicit or explicit ideological leverage for advancing a set of policies that have disproportionate implications for certain members of our communities. More generally, such ideas provide political cover; they change the nature of our public discourse in ways that obscure who suffers most and deflect from who bears responsibility for material and social outcomes.

Sharon Krause: I think our radical and extreme version of free-market capitalism is a part of the picture. Because it kind of perpetuates this idea that everybody does it for themselves. And I think it's a mistake, it's not true that everybody does it for themselves. The pervasiveness it has in shaping our cultural values I think is part of why we lag behind some other democracies in being able to address the disabling conditions of individual agency in effective ways.

Heather Bullock: Individualism is very popular in the U.S. One way you might think about it, and I think Matt Hunt and I have talked about it this way in a chapter that we wrote together [in the *The Oxford Handbook of the Social Science of Poverty*], is that individualism is the base belief and then structuralism is layered on.

There's usually this kind of complicated sort of dual consciousness, particularly among groups who have experienced disadvantage in some way. So there's this emphasis that you're still part of this U.S. culture where individualism is embedded in our environment, so there's still this endorsement of individualism even among disadvantaged groups oftentimes. But then there's also oftentimes this recognition of the structural, too, based upon personal experience, hardship, contact, and so forth.

But even when we see barriers to upward mobility or we see the structural causes of poverty, for example, we might still think we're able to overcome those.

Michael Lewis: In the United States, the emphasis upon individualism in our culture is so strong and takes such primacy. This results in a lot of great success and a lot of achievement. But it also results in a sense that, no matter where people are located in the class structure, they basically have nobody to blame except themselves if they don't live up to their aspirations.

In the culture of inequality and its emphasis on the individual-as-central sensibility, we are constantly told that we all have opportunities. We tell kids in grade school that when they grow up, they can become president of the United States or some other august position. The first interpretation that we all make in this country is that, if I had only worked harder, I could have overcome everything.

Stephen McNamee: Racial inequality became a bigger part of the public discourse during and after the civil rights movement. For gender inequality, it happens on the heels of civil rights with the second wave in the 1970s. Then in the 1990s, we get LGBT issues becoming part of the public discourse. None of these issues are resolved, but at least they are openly debated and at least recognized as issues and potentially social justice issues. All of this is prior to the taking on of social class as a public issue that is just now becoming part of the public discourse. This is relatively new. I have been at this for forty years, and some of us have been screaming in the wilderness and nobody has been listening, so I think this is fascinating. All of a sudden, class issues have become a timely topic—the whole idea of economic inequality and of how much inequality America can tolerate or is sustainable. I take up a lot of these legitimacy arguments in *The Meritocracy Myth*.

Not to get too conspiratorial, but it has at least been convenient for the wealthy not to have to confront a counter-narrative of justification, for Americans to have a poor vocabulary, as you say, that doesn't present challenges to fairness based upon social class. There is a lot of false consciousness about this stuff—the whole ideology of individualism, worshipping at the altar of self and all that that entails. People don't see the structural constraints as easily.

Henry Giroux: We've got to rescue the language. The language of democracy, the language of justice, the language of fairness. All of a sudden, people are talking about inequality. That's new. All of a sudden, people are realizing that banks are terrible, they enrich the financial elite. All of a sudden, we are talking about people dying in this country by virtue of being atomized and being alienated, living in despair and anguish, and not knowing what to do with it. All of a sudden, we are talking about how trivial these cultural apparatuses have become in their promotion of idiocy, all in the name of choice. I think there is a formative culture emerging that is really at war with what I call the "failed sociality," the massively destructive formative culture that now dominates the United States.

There are a lot of people, such as independents, young people, women, the LGBT community, who are basically saying they have had enough.

And it seems to me that those mobilizations are going to increase. There is evidence for this in the recent organized, massive demonstrations waged by the Parkland students against gun violence and school shootings. We have also witnessed recently almost unparalleled walkouts, strikes, and demonstrations by teachers across the nation who are fighting not only for higher wages and better working conditions but also more funding to benefit their schools and students.

We have to find ways to promote alternative public spheres while at the same time working in the mainstream spheres and doing what you can to change them. Reinvent the formative culture that offers the possibility that the present isn't simply reproduced in the future.

WHAT'S SO WRONG WITH INDIVIDUALISM?

We have established that Americans generally prefer individualistic explanations of poverty and economic inequality over non-individualistic ones. But what's so wrong with individualism? Many of our scholars discussed the limitations of the individualistic perspective, and what follows are highlights from their arguments.

Heather Bullock: Individualistic beliefs really put us at risk of minimizing social barriers to advancement. Of minimizing the impact of all of the barriers to moving up the economic ladder. It leads us to minimize those and to not see them. It also blinds us to advantage as well, or if we see advantage, we attribute it to merit or hard work instead of to structure and advantage. So individualism works in both ways. It leads us to minimize structural factors as barriers to advancement and, in thinking about more advantaged groups, it also contributes to us minimizing the role of structural advantage in moving up that socioeconomic ladder.

I also think more broadly, it puts us at risk of not really thinking about or seeing a public good or the importance of a public good. It puts us at risk of not seeing that we have a shared fate with each other and a shared responsibility to each other. I think individualism blinds us to that as well. And really interestingly, there's some recent research that looks at the relationship of these kinds of beliefs to social mobility. The more individualistic we are, the more we tend to overestimate the likelihood of the possibility of social mobility. So it contributes to us thinking that it's easier to move up the socioeconomic ladder, which we very much do in the United States.

And a lot of times, even when we do see structural barriers to socioeconomic mobility, we see ourselves as being able to overcome those barriers.

Peter Callero: Where you are born in society, meaning the geography of place, the location of your social-class position—such as how much money your family has, how much education your parents have, the health status of your family of origin—those factors are the best predictors of where you are going to be in terms of social class.

It is something we don't want to believe. We want to believe that where we were born, our status in life in terms of class position, is going to be fluid, especially in this country. We want to believe that everybody has equal opportunity, and as long as we work hard and make the right choices, then we will succeed. This idea that in the United States, anybody can make it to the top. The evidence does not support that belief; that's an assumption that unfortunately is not based in fact. The explanation for why that is not the case is complicated and has many variables.

David Brady: Think about the big four individual risks of poverty: single parenthood, young headship, low education, and unemployment. These are indisputably the four big characteristics that predict your risk of poverty. If the demographic explanation is correct, then the United States should have very high levels of single parenthood, young headship, low educational attainment, and unemployment. That would explain why we have high poverty, because we have a large number of people carrying those four characteristics. The reality, however, is that the United States is actually below average on these things compared to other rich democracies. While we have above average single parenthood, we have very low unemployment rates, most of our population is highly educated, we have very few people compared to other countries who have low education, and we don't have particularly high young headship. So we don't actually have a lot of these individual characteristics in our country compared to other rich countries.

What is different in the United States is not the number of people with those individual characteristics, but the fact that we penalize the heck out of people with those characteristics. If you have these characteristics, we make it so incredibly hard to make ends meet. We penalize those characteristics very severely even though we don't see a particularly high prevalence of those characteristics in our country relative to other rich countries. The way we penalize them is that we provide insufficient social policies to support them. So if you are a young single mother with little education and you are unem-

ployed, you are almost guaranteed to be poor in the United States. It would be very, very hard for you to escape poverty. In most other rich democracies, it is a much lower probability of being poor. So we take these characteristics and we penalize them severely. All of our poverty scholarship is obsessed with reducing the number of people with these characteristics.

A more effective way to reduce poverty and a different way to think about it is to say that we choose politically which characteristics we are going to penalize and which characteristics we don't penalize. In our country we have chosen politically to penalize these characteristics by withholding social policies and withholding systems of support to help these people. So ultimately it is a political decision to penalize these characteristics and to withhold social policies to help these people, whereas most other rich democracies make a political choice to not penalize those characteristics as severely as we do.

Stephen McNamee: The idea that the U.S. is a meritocracy is the idea that people get ahead based upon their own individual merit. In thinking about why people get ahead, Americans identify innate talents, having the right attitude, working hard, and playing by the rules. That is the formula that Americans identify for getting ahead. The presumption in the U.S. is that these characteristics are directly associated with outcomes.

I argue in *The Meritocracy Myth* that this presumption is wildly overestimated. Instead, I argue that most Americans underestimate non-merit factors in accounting for who ends up with what—the biggest of which is inheritance broadly defined, where you start out in the first place. Your inheritance of your initial social-class position from your parents. I argue that the race to get ahead is a relay race that doesn't start over with each generation.

The privileges of starting ahead of others in the race includes social capital, who you know, which is a non-merit factor. Everybody knows other people, everybody has friends, but it helps to have friends in high places. Those who travel in high-powered social circles have access to information and resources that aid them in getting ahead beyond just merit. So that is non-merit advantage.

Cultural capital is also important. It is the knowledge of the ways of the life of the group. People born into privileged groups have the wherewithal, the demeanor, the presentation of self, and the comportment that goes with being accepted into those higher social circles without having to gain that knowledge from the outside in. And that is a non-merit advantage in getting ahead.

Also think about economic gifts from your parents. People get money from their parents when they die, but it is important to remember that you don't necessarily have to wait around for them to die to collect your inheritance. Parents invest in their children's futures while they are still alive as well. Most people would like to have their kids do well, but privileged parents are in a position to give them greater resources and make larger investments, beyond merit.

A huge factor that is not often talked about in discussions of inequality is the insulation against the risk of downward mobility that the privileged experience relative to the less privileged. Robert Putnam talks about the wealthy having "airbags" for their kids—if they mess up and make mistakes, the airbags will deploy and save them. They don't get permanently injured from the accidents that occur in life. So what goes up usually doesn't come down because of parental or familial rescue. Under a system of strict merit, when an individual does well or messes up, they move up or move down based on individual actions, based on individual merit. If you mess up, you should be downwardly mobile. But for the privileged, the family comes to the rescue with their resources. The poor don't have that. That is a non-merit advantage of the privileged.

Of all the non-merit factors, the one Americans tend to account for most is discrimination; they recognize that discrimination is unfair. They recognize that discrimination is the antithesis of merit. Most Americans are committed to at least the principle of equality of opportunity, and they recognize that blatant discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, and so on, is unfair. But the argument for many Americans is that those forms of discrimination are going away. Now even if all of those forms of discrimination magically disappeared, and the legacy of discrimination in terms of unequal starting points magically disappeared, the system would still be nowhere close to a meritocracy because of all of these other non-merit factors I have mentioned. Especially inheritance, which is downplayed for most Americans in terms of how they think the system operates. There are a litany of non-merit factors that people need to consider. It is my sense that Americans don't focus on those non-merit factors except for discrimination, and even then, they believe discrimination is going away, and most will claim they don't personally discriminate. And they think, if only we could have a system without discrimination, true equality of opportunity, it would be a true merit system. The evidence, however, suggests we would not be anywhere close to it, even if we could eliminate discrimination.

Jamila Michener: What we're getting wrong as a culture is that poverty is structural. People are massively misled about the degree to which poverty

is structural. It's not about what individual people are doing or not doing. It's not about personal choices, as much as we love choices. Does that mean people don't have any agency? No, of course they do. Does that mean the choices I make don't matter as far as my life outcomes? No, of course they do. But I am never free to make any choice I want. I am in a context, in a broader structural context in a particular country, in a particular state, in a particular neighborhood, and I am a part of different groups based on social class, race, gender, etc. I'm an immigrant or I'm not an immigrant.

I am in a variety of ways socially positioned, and that social position exposes me to a variety of structural conditions that are in large part responsible for my life trajectory. Social and economic positioning is responsible for whether I end up being poor or unequal relative to some other person or group. Public policy determines how hard it is to overcome that disadvantageous positioning, as well as how long, or hard, its consequences will endure. We can have people in our society who are low income or who aren't doing as well economically as others, and it doesn't have to mean they're not living a full and free life. But because of the structural reality that ultimately stems from social policies and relates to our cultural understandings, more people end up living in poverty and economic deprivation, and those people are prevented from having full, free, and fair standards of living. None of that has to be the case. None of it is inevitable. It's also not simply because individuals are making bad choices, although people across all social groups make bad choices at times.

It is because of the structure of our economy and the structure of our society. Unfortunately, structure is not as easy to understand or articulate as individual choices. Out of context, anyone can find some supposedly lazy person or some proverbial welfare queen and use them as an example, and say, "Look at these bad people." We all encounter people in our lives who might superficially fall into that category, and so the appeal of individualistic or cultural group explanations for poverty is compelling. It's intuitive to think about it that way.

But the main thing I would tell people is that our intuitions don't always lead us to the right place. Our intuitions make us think that poverty is individualistic, that it's about choices. Yet the most convincing empirical evidence that we have says that poverty is not about that, it is instead about systems and structures. Now, that means that we have to have more difficult conversations about what causes poverty. We have to think more carefully, we have to be more informed, we have to be more willing to engage in more thoughtful discussions about these issues. That's hard when you think about it on a national scale. Politics feeds on sound bites these days, and sound bites, anecdotes,

stereotypes, and shortcuts aren't going to get us to really tackling structural causes of poverty.

The takeaway is that we have to be prepared to do some work to grapple with structural realities and their historical and contemporary underpinnings. I understand that is a high, high calling. But it is how we should be thinking about the causes and consequences of inequality.

THE ROLE OF RACISM

Dominant culture, while not the only factor influencing social policies in the United States, is nonetheless important. While individualism is one aspect of dominant inequality beliefs, another which is at least as important to acknowledge is racism. Research suggests that racism is a strong predictor of people's support for different types of social policies. The following are highlights from some of our scholars' reflections on this relationship.

David Brady: There is this whole literature that shows that anti-Black sentiment is highly associated with welfare beliefs. It is part of the reason why Americans hate welfare. I'm persuaded by the work of Martin Gilens. There is something about anti-Black sentiment that is really powerful and undermines public support for social policy. And there is also this deep-seated individualism that is weird and unusual and distinctive. There is something uniquely cultural about American individualism which likely interacts powerfully with ideas about race in a way that really fuels anti-welfare sentiments.

It's not just race and it's not just individualism, it's a combination of those two. There is something about anti-Black sentiment, there is something about individualism, there is something really deep in our history that reinforces these cultural beliefs.

Jamila Michener: You must understand racial ideas and ideologies in order to understand what is underlying and motivating public policy decisions around social welfare policy.

In one study, Spencer Piston and Ashley Jardina showed a nationally representative sample of two thousand non-Hispanic White U.S. citizens a graphical depiction of the "Ascent of Man." The picture starts off with something that looks like an ape, and then progresses to something that looks a little less like an ape and more like a person, and finally after several slightly more

“evolved” steps forward, the graphic ends with a picture that is clearly a fully evolved human being. Piston and Jardina then asked survey respondents how “evolved” they believed Blacks and Whites to be on this evolutionary spectrum. What they found was that—and I don’t know if I’m remembering the number exactly, but I know I’m in the right ballpark—something like 38 percent of White Americans placed African Americans on a part of the evolutionary scale that was below Whites. Thirty-eight percent of White Americans don’t view Blacks as fully evolved relative to Whites. Now somebody may say, “Okay, 38 percent, at least the other 62 percent are on board.” But that’s just the 38 percent that were willing to admit their views. More than likely, because of social desirability bias, that number is even higher. And interestingly, even though there was some variation across political ideology and partisanship, there were still about a third of Democrats who placed African Americans as less fully evolved on that scale.

Then there’s the really important work of scholars like Martin Gilens, which helps us to think about why Americans hate welfare so much—and they hate welfare in part because they associate it with Black people. Going further, we know from studies on health care and criminal justice that racial resentment is underlying many of the policy preferences of Americans.

This really matters when you start talking about social policy. If people think that African Americans are really not even fully human—that they’re bound to fail, that they’re less intelligent, they don’t work as hard, they’re just inherently inferior—then they won’t want to support social policies that are going to help Black people. Then the logic becomes, “You can pour all the money into these communities you want, but these folks are just never going to be equal. They’re never going to cut it.” Ideas like that matter for how White Americans understand the right thing to do in terms of distributing social benefits and burdens.

Based on these notions, it makes a lot more sense to incarcerate Black people—to put them somewhere to limit the harm they can do to society—than it does to provide them with a better education, to provide them with health care, to provide them with other resources. I could go on. We can draw on aspects of research in public opinion and other fields in political science and sociology to build a broad and wide case for how racial ideologies, ideas, and attitudes that inhere in the American public, and have for a very long time, create constraints that prevent the enactment of policies that are truly equitable.

Stephen McNamee: There is a lot of White backlash now, and a lot of it is racial resentment, and a lot of that is connected to government supports and

how they have been racialized ideologically. Somehow welfare has come to be seen by many as supports for African Americans or other minority groups. White women, for instance, have benefited from affirmative action, but it tends not to get defined that way. Affirmative action is seen as something designated for people of color. And that is part of the backlash based on the assumption of reverse discrimination for Whites. The sense of loss that White working-class Americans have felt now that is associated with automation and globalization and deindustrialization, oftentimes when they look for somebody to blame for these circumstances the thought is, “Well, the rich can take care of themselves, and the government takes care of the poor, who are largely people of color. And the White working- and middle-classes get squeezed in the middle.” So race really complicates inequality in America in a lot of ways.

Henry Giroux: Racism creates false arguments that impede any sense of real solidarity. For example, this happens when people at the highest levels of government constantly use the language of bigotry and hate to suggest that the culture of Blackness is also the culture of criminality. Structural racism causes visceral violence that extends from the legacy of lynching to the current racialized plague of mass incarceration. It is also evident in policies that reinforce law-and-order agendas that are nothing but racist. Or to basically sanction all sorts of policies that are ultimately racist in terms of their representations, images, codes, practices, and policies. For instance, think about the racism that has shaped Hollywood movies for decades, the current attempt by right wingers to roll back voting rights, the ongoing criminalization of a wide range of behaviors allegedly committed by Black youth, the vile attacks on Muslims, and so it goes. Racism does more than divide the country and the working class; it also destroys any viable notion of solidarity across racial and class lines and in doing so, invokes the terror of race-based state terrorism.

Heather Bullock: If you ask Americans who they imagine as a welfare recipient, the association is typically with a person of color. There’s a very recent and really powerful social psychological study where they essentially did just this. They basically found that the prototypical welfare recipient that participants constructed was a blacker-skin-toned hypothetical person. They morphed these images. So it’s very much alive and well today.

I think there’s still a steady drumbeat of some of the other stereotypes just around laziness and work ethic. One of the things I worry a lot about is the movement to take work requirements and some of the things that we’ve seen

with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and moving them into an ever-growing number of programs, whether it's the SNAP program or health care benefits. You certainly hear a lot of talk about that. Dramatic illustrations are fingerprinting welfare recipients, which I think certainly has racist roots. It's really criminalizing poverty, and there's no evidence that that's an effective thing to do. Estimates of fraud are very low, and the cost of drug testing welfare recipients is quite expensive, so drug testing and fingerprinting, I think they're very racist in nature.

I do a lot of work with low-income women, women experiencing housing precarity, women receiving public assistance. One of the really vicious parts of individualism, I think, and individualistic stereotypes and attributions for poverty, is that it does create that kind of distancing where people think, "Well, I really need this program. It's the other people on it that are giving it a bad name." And so you have this division that really divides low-income people from each other, whether it's around racism, like White welfare recipients saying, "It's not me. It's people of color receiving assistance that are fraudulent or giving it a bad name." And I think overcoming that kind of divisiveness and finding ways to bring together groups that really do have shared interests is crucial. Obviously that has to include middle-class people, too, who I think see their own economic precarity but don't necessarily see it connected to the plight of low-income people.

Stephen McNamee: I believe it is America's great original sin. We've struggled mightily with issues of race since slavery, and we haven't resolved these issues. We have confronted it as part of the public discourse, but it hasn't been resolved.

It is the advantage of those who already have wealth and power and privilege to retain it. It is not enough just to have more than others, you have to have a compelling rationale for why you deserve to have more than others. And the greater the level of inequality, the more compelling these narratives of justification need to be. And of course meritocracy is the major narrative of justification of inequality in America. It has been convenient for the wealthy and the powerful to have racial divisions among the poor and the working class in such a way that the poor and working class never find common ground to challenge the rich and the powerful in terms of their presumption of legitimacy of differential privilege. In some cases, I think it has been deliberate for the wealthy to stop and look the other way, even to actively engage in a racial explanation for inequality, because it deflects from the social-class causes of inequality. And that has been part of the American story.

Heather Bullock: I really think that individualism seems to be a thread that runs through sexism, racism, classism, and other -isms, which are all intersecting with each other. It's also the case that there are these other beliefs that individualism maps on to, things like a social-dominance orientation, belief in a just world. So there's a whole constellation, a whole network of beliefs that individualistic beliefs about poverty and wealth are really connected to, and racism obviously figures prominently into that. Many of the stereotypes about low-income people, about being lazy and unmotivated, are the same classic stereotypes that we see about people of color in the United States, particularly African Americans. If you look at some of the really classic work by scholars like Martin Gilens, you really see the significance of racism and racist ideology in predicting, along with individualism, anti-welfare attitudes.

AMERICAN NOTIONS OF FREEDOM

In chapter 2 we discussed the work of Louis Althusser, who asserted: "By keeping us all, both the exploiting and the exploited classes, believing that we are free, ideology ensures that most of us do not become so" (Ferretter 2006:94). Our cultural conceptualization of freedom impacts what we expect and do not expect, and therefore what we do and do not demand from our government. Too much emphasis on the negative aspects of freedom, for instance, leads to an underdeveloped understanding of how social forces impact people's lives and weaker demands of government to facilitate social justice. In many of our conversations with our scholars, we discussed the dominant American cultural understandings of freedom, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of these dominant understandings. The following are highlights from our conversations.

David Brady: I have always bought Amartya Sen's argument about this. I thought it was very convincing, that we should develop these capabilities that people have in society. If you are really economically insecure and you are food insecure, for example, what kind of freedom do you really have? He says that we need to think broadly about functioning, or capabilities, to participate as equal members of society. I think that is not a bad way to think out it. Enhance people's capabilities and reduce the deprivation of capabilities. So development is giving more and more freedom to people to live their lives. That's not a bad way to think about freedom. So it's not just the negative issues of protecting your individual rights of expression or belief, it's also enhancing the opportunities and capabilities for the people that don't have a lot of resources. Having economic resources and capabilities allows people to exist as fully functioning members of society.

Heather Bullock: There is a very negative and pervasive framing of the government equaling regulations, or bureaucracy, or red tape, instead of government as an engine of mobility, of potentiality. I think that we got to a place where the framing of the government is entirely negative and not the government as a potential launch pad for opportunity, or for freedom, or for the pursuit of individual dreams or goals.

Henry Giroux: There are things missing from our very limited notion of freedom. The market functions in such a way as to suggest that it should govern not just economics but all of social life. Central to that is a notion of freedom which says that freedom is based on two things: unlimited choices and freedom from the government. You have multiple choices as a consumer, and freedom from the government, which is going to bear down on your life in ways that are disastrous. And I think both of those things are sheer nonsense. The foundation for both of these is a combination of two things. First, the organizing principle for this notion of freedom is that freedom is only about the freedom from and not the freedom to. Secondly, the ultimate sanction for freedom is fear, the ultimate legitimating force is fear. You have to be fearful of the people around you. What that does is it depoliticizes people. It offers up a kind of misrecognition about the social state that seems to suggest it is more of a pathology than anything else. That the government doesn't have responsibilities that are absolutely essential to a democracy, whether it is providing national health care or good schools or making sure that the air isn't polluted or regulating business, and so forth and so on.

Another issue around the question of freedom is that we typically don't talk about constraints. We don't talk about constraints that bear down on different groups in different ways so as to limit their freedom. So to say that a kid who is born in poverty has the same choices as anybody else, they just need to pick themselves up by their bootstraps, compared to a kid in the upper one percent, that is just nonsense. So unless you talk about choices in relation to constraints, then "choices" becomes an empty term. It becomes meaningless. But people drink the Kool-Aid because the social is absolutely individualized. All questions now are about character and individual responsibility, rather than the ability to translate private issues into larger social and systemic considerations.

Jamila Michener: I think that we have a notion of negative freedom in the U.S. So freedom is about not being interfered with in an explicit way by the government or by another individual or person. This is why issues of freedom of speech get people so upset and folks are really passionate about it.

If there's some kind of liberty that we focus on and that we have at least a moderate commitment to, it's a negative liberty. I should be left to do what I can do, to accomplish what I can accomplish given the context.

It's not about a positive liberty that brings the context into the equation. So the difference between "I should be free to achieve what I can achieve given the context" and "The context should be adjusted so that I am equipped to thrive, and so that anybody irrespective of their starting point is equipped to thrive," there's a difference there. It's not a subtle difference, it's a big difference. At the heart of it is a limitation as far as our popular imagination around what the role of the government, what the role of different kinds of institutions, and even what the role of the market should be. What we expect is a kind of negative liberty—you don't stop me from doing X if I wanna do X—as opposed to a kind of positive and affirmative responsibility on the part of the government and other major social institutions and entities to create an environment that allows anyone to thrive. That's not even really part of our discourse; it's not something that we're deeply committed to. I think part of that is because equality itself is not something that we're deeply committed to. I think that's part of the ideational change that would have to occur in order to think differently about the possibilities of social policy. Part of that ideational change will have to come from a more robust understanding of what life is like for people who are nothing like "us."

Negative liberty is essentially a least common denominator. "You just leave me alone, I leave you alone." This makes for a scenario where we just leave each other alone without thinking about the background conditions that account for where we are at the point that we seek to be left alone. That is the least common denominator. It's the least we can ask for. Least common denominator politics tends to support and uphold the status quo. The status quo being supported and upheld is all that many people are willing to agree to because the status quo benefits them. They most certainly don't want a regime that benefits others, benefits those who are not them, those who are not like them.

There's a connection between our political institutions, which are very status quo preserving, and our cultural commitment to freedom from interference. Both are rooted in a conceptualization of liberty that wrongheadedly eschews a societal obligation to cultivate human capacities and sustain human dignity.

Peter Callero: People's understanding of the term "freedom" has been leaning toward the negative freedom interpretation. It is obviously consistent with

what we have been talking about so far in terms of the culture of individualism. So much so that I have been frustrated even in teaching in trying to get students to understand an alternative way of understanding the word “freedom.” I am almost giving up on it, trying to come at it from a different angle.

It is difficult for people to understand that for us to be able to flourish as human beings, to reach our full potential, requires not only breaking down barriers but also creating the enabling social conditions that will allow us to flourish. If I use the word “freedom” in my lectures, then students just get confused. I think it’s rooted in this false, narrow, limited understanding of what it means to be a human being. Until we can really get beyond that, those kinds of limited assumptions and interpretations of our nature, I think we’re always going to struggle with this easy cultural interpretation of the isolated individual, the self-reliant and self-determined person. We need to be able to support the understanding of human beings as emerging from the social. Our individualism is really a gift from society, from community, from family, from institutions. Once we understand that, that the positive aspects of individuals that we cherish and value emerge from the social; once we understand that, then we can begin to introduce students and others to these larger ideas of the enabling conditions of society that allow us to flourish and allow us to thrive and allow us to reach our full potential as individuals.

Stephen McNamee: Part of the foundational character of American society is based on the concept of freedom. The early American colonists were in pursuit of freedom as a primary motivation for immigration to America. Some were seeking religious freedom, others were seeking freedom to acquire wealth, others seeking freedom from tyranny. In economic terms, Americans readily embraced the idea of a free market society as laid out in Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, coincidentally published in the same year as the Declaration of Independence. Smith’s book became the Bible of capitalism and the blueprint for an American economy emphasizing individual competition, entrepreneurial ownership, and minimal governmental interference. But free markets do not guarantee political freedoms. Political freedoms came much more slowly and begrudgingly. The American promise of freedom was from the beginning not fully extended to slaves, Native Americans, indentured servants, women, and others. Since those early days, Americans have conflated the idea of free markets with political freedom, but they are not the same. One does not guarantee the other.

Michael Lewis: Freedom’s an interesting thing. Freedom to do what? So you don’t want the government in your bedroom, you don’t want the government

in your private, personal life. That's a kind of freedom. But the other freedom is the freedom to achieve the American Dream.

We make a distinction between opportunity and social location, which is a false dichotomy. Your opportunities are constrained by your social location. And social location can only be dealt with through policy.

People would like the opportunity to do certain things. If government doesn't give me that opportunity, no matter how smart I am, and how motivated I am, it is going to be very difficult for me to achieve anything. If the people of New York City, through the government, did not offer to pay for the education of other people's children, I would not have gone to Brooklyn College, and then to graduate school, and then to do the work that I do. I got that freedom, a productive freedom.

Do I rule out all efforts to protect me from government? No I don't, and we of course need to be protected from the government in many ways.

The great philosopher John Stuart Mill was a great champion of income taxes. And when he was writing in support of that, people reacted, "How could you do that given your views on liberty?" And he said that there were certain things that were really important and that only governments, and governments with taxes available to them, can address. And I would take that position.

You're not going to deal with the inequality of place unless the government acts. And if you don't deal with the inequality of place, you aren't dealing with the problem of inequality of opportunity. And almost all Americans would say that not dealing with inequality of opportunity is wrong. And you can't deal with that without greater equality of place. That can only come through the intervention of the government.

Sharon Krause: I think about freedom as the collection of conditions—social, political, economic, cultural—that make the exercise of agency possible and make it possible for individual agency to come to fruition successfully. And I think about agency as the capacity to affect the world in ways that manifest or express who you are and what you're trying to do.

Providing freedom and protecting freedom for all of us means that as much as it means respecting other people's rights to religious freedom or freedom of assembly. It means actively fighting against economic inequality and implicit

bias and cultural values that stigmatize particular groups of people. Because those things stand in the way of individual freedom every bit as much as attacks on religious liberty or freedom of assembly. So none of us can enact our freedom by ourselves.

* * *

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Part II

INDIVIDUALISM ON THE GROUND

In the previous section, we provided an overall accounting of the social science research related to American individualism and its impact on American society and culture. We reviewed the dominance of individualistic explanations of economic disadvantage in American culture, as well as the psychological functions of individualism. We also sat down for conversations with a number of scholars whose work has important implications for the relationship between inequality beliefs and social policies.

In this section, we change gears considerably. Moving away from the academic arena, we get “on the ground” to understand how Americans grapple with individualism in their everyday lives. These perspectives help reinforce the conclusions we drew in part I, providing the reader with vivid real-world illustrations of the workings of the dominant ideology in everyday American life.

In chapter 5, we explore the inequality beliefs of White working-class Americans, who remain individualistic despite losing ground in recent decades due to structural forces beyond their control. In chapter 6, we explore the strength of individualism among students studying to become social workers, an occupation that will place them in pivotal roles in the lives of the poor. In this section, we examine the common themes that emerged from across these forty-five interviews and find that, despite their very different social locations, both groups prefer individualistic explanations of poverty and economic inequality over non-individualistic ones. We begin with White working-class custodial workers.

Chapter Five

Cleaning the Ivory Tower

With Dan Schubert and Henry A. Giroux

Increasing attention has been paid to the White working class in the U.S. in recent years. This attention is due in large part to the ways in which structural transformations in the American economy over the past few decades have impacted their lives, as well as their reactions to these changes. Many live in regions that have been negatively impacted by the “trauma of a simultaneous economic, social, and political collapse” (Gest 2016:10). Today’s economy demands more educational attainment and different types of skills than were expected of workers in previous generations, at the same time that union protections have been eroded significantly, shifts that have left many working-class Whites behind. As a result, White working-class incomes and benefits have declined in recent decades, and their economic insecurity has increased (Luhby 2016; Draught 2018). As Michèle Lamont notes, “their living standards are in long-term and uninterrupted decline,” and as a result, “the ideal of social success may appear increasingly unreachable to them” (2000:2).

Related to the financial impacts, there has been significant social fallout from their growing economic insecurity. White working-class Americans now come of age at a time when traditional markers of transition into adulthood—leaving home, attending college, becoming financially independent, and marrying and starting a family—have been delayed, postponed, canceled, and/or remade (Silva 2013). A number of indicators of success and well-being are under threat, including labor-force participation, marriage and divorce rates, social mobility, health and longevity, community engagement, and political participation (Lamont 2000; Silva 2013; Cherlin 2014; Case and Deaton 2015; Chen 2016; *The Economist* 2017; Graham 2017; Williams 2017).

A few examples help to underscore this group’s lost ground. Since the mid-1990s, the average income of working-class White men has dropped by

9 percent (Luhby 2016). The percentage of White men aged 35 to 45 with a high school diploma/GED or less who were unemployed or outside of the labor force rose from 15 percent in 1990 to 24 percent in 2016. Over that same time period, the percentage of these men reporting working 48 or more weeks the previous year fell from 73 percent to 69 percent. In 1990, 74 percent of Whites aged 35 to 45 with a high school diploma/GED or less were married, but only 53 percent in 2016. Over that same time period, the percentage of this group experiencing economic precarity (incomes below the 125 percent of the poverty threshold) rose from 13 percent to 21 percent (Ruggles et al. 2018).¹ In addition, a recent study by Case and Deaton found increasing midlife mortality from the late 1990s to today for working-class Whites, due in part to increases in “deaths of despair,” such as those caused by drugs, alcohol, or suicide. The authors found that “mortality rates of [middle-aged] whites with no more than a high school degree, which were around 30 percent lower than mortality rates of [all middle-aged] blacks in 1999, grew to be 30 percent higher than [all middle-aged] blacks by 2015” (Case and Deaton 2017).

In this chapter,² we focus on the White working class, but not because they have been the group most disadvantaged by growing economic inequality. Indeed, non-White working-class Americans have fared worse on a number of indicators (in some cases much worse), as have the poor. Our interest stems from the fact that this group, unlike the poor and African Americans, has historically resisted structural explanations of economic disadvantage, instead preferring individualistic ones (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Lamont 2000; Silva 2013; Hunt and Bullock 2016; Williams 2017). This naturally led to these questions: In the face of their own growing insecurity, have their inequality beliefs become more structuralist? Have they come to reject dominant individualistic beliefs, which place the blame for their growing economic insecurity squarely on working-class Whites themselves? Or have they experienced this growing insecurity as “double violence,” where the symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) of dominant culture hinders their ability to recognize the structural violence (Galtung 1969) of forces like globalization, deindustrialization, automation, and neoliberalism?

To explore these questions, we need not look far. In university settings like the ones in which we work, people from many different walks of life interact on a daily basis. This includes highly educated administrators and faculty members, students from throughout the social-class structure, and members of the university staff, many of whom come from disproportionately marginalized backgrounds. We had long wondered how the working-class staff members among us, such as the custodians who work hard for little pay to clean and maintain our campuses, were experiencing these structural economic transformations. This was the perfect opportunity to find out.

We reached out to non-Hispanic White³ custodial workers at universities throughout Appalachia. We chose Appalachia because this region continues to lag behind the rest of the country on a variety of measures of well-being (ARC 2015). We first identified which colleges and universities qualified as “Appalachian”⁴ and then contacted as many of their custodians as available contact information allowed. We received responses from twenty custodians⁵ from five Appalachian universities across three states: Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia. We asked them a variety of questions about the causes of poverty and economic inequality in the U.S. in general, as well as the causes of their own fortunes. Interviews took place mostly during the summer and fall of 2017. We analyzed the data utilizing qualitative coding methods similar to those articulated by Kathy Charmaz (2006).

We begin this chapter with the story of one of our participants, Karen. Her experiences and beliefs are typical and illustrative of the overall sample. A detailed account of our discussion with her provides the reader with an informative and immersive picture of our participants’ points of view. Later in the chapter, we move on to discuss patterns from across the interviews.

KAREN’S STORY

Karen⁶ is a 39-year-old White female custodial worker at a university in Virginia. She earns about \$21,000 per year, which she uses to support herself and her husband, who cannot work due to a disability. Karen and her husband do not currently receive any government assistance, despite their financial struggles. Their total household income is about \$15,000 less than a living wage for their family size,⁷ putting them right around the 125 percent federal poverty threshold.⁸

Karen was born in the eastern Appalachian region of Tennessee, where she spent her early childhood with her parents and five siblings. Her family was very poor and dealt with persistent alcoholism and abuse. Conflict was a constant in her childhood home—her father physically abused her mother so frequently and so severely that she was often reduced to what Karen described as a “bloody pulp.” Due to the alcoholism and abuse, Karen was removed from her parents’ custody by state authorities when she was young and placed into foster care. This time in her life proved to be a whirlwind of interruptions and transitions:

I was in 15 different foster care homes until my sister adopted me. I think I was six. I had my sister and my four brothers, so there were six kids. All of us were in foster care. Mom didn’t get to keep any of us because of her alcoholism. Mom

and dad would get drunk and dad would beat her to a bloody pulp. So we were all in CPS [Child Protective Services]. I remember CPS always coming to the house to get us. Nowadays CPS is a lot different than it used to be. My guess is they just didn't want me to get comfortable or they didn't want the people I was living with to get too close to me, I guess. So I would stay a few weeks, then they would move me, and then they would move me again, and again. Back and forth. It got tiring, but I had to do what they said because I was in CPS. In foster care you kinda had to do what they wanted you to do.

After losing custody of their children, Karen's parents continued their battles with alcoholism, which led to more heartbreak for Karen:

We would go on visits with my mom and dad. Say we went to a park—it was always one CPS worker and a police officer. If I was in school, they would come get me and take me to this park. They would go and visit with my mom first and I would stay in the cruiser. If they smelled any alcohol or anything on her breath, I didn't even get a chance to get out of the vehicle. The visitation was done because they were drunk. That happened quite a few times, I wouldn't get to see them. If they wasn't [drunk], then I got to see them.

At the age of six, after a chaotic stay in the foster care system, Karen was adopted by her older sister and would remain in her care until adulthood. Karen said her sister, who is fourteen years older than her, “adopted me to get me out of that environment.” She described their financial circumstances as “working-class and kinda rough,” as her sister raised Karen by herself on a meager military salary. Karen said, “We made it, but it wasn't like we had everything we needed.” Despite their financial struggles, her sister was a good and loving caregiver who provided a calm and stable environment that Karen had been desperately seeking. In adolescence, however, Karen would endure four years of sexual abuse from her uncle, unbeknownst to Karen's sister.

After graduating from high school, Karen “tried college one time and it didn't work.” “Actually,” she said, “I tried it a couple of times and it didn't work.” Most people in her family have only a high school diploma, although a couple have attempted a few college courses like Karen. So like the rest of her family before her, she reluctantly gave up on the idea of a college degree and went to work.

After discussing her childhood, we moved on to talk about Karen's inequality beliefs, which proved to be strongly individualistic despite her very challenging background. She believes the U.S. is a land of virtually endless opportunities as well as a meritocracy. When we asked her what percentage of the average American's life outcome is within their control, she said 80 percent. Her individualistic beliefs are underpinned by a focus on the importance of hard work and smart choices:

I'm a hard worker and I think anybody can do anything they set their mind to doing if they just try. America is the land of opportunity, I feel like, because you get out of it what you put into it. If you put more into life, then you are going to get something out of it. If you just lay around and do nothing, then more than likely you're not gonna get nothing. You will just be a settler, you will just settle for anything. I am always a go-getter, I am always going to strive to do better, and I'm gonna keep working hard to get what I want. . . . I feel like it is up to you. Everything I do has an outcome. I feel like we are responsible for a lot of our outcomes, a lot of our decisions.

For Karen, people succeed or fail in life based largely upon how hard they work and the choices that they make along the way, a belief that is reinforced by her pride in her own work ethic. Like many of our participants, she views her stable employment and avoidance of problems like drug addiction as an important accomplishment and something that sets her apart from other struggling Americans. If she could accomplish this feat, coming from where she did, she reasons, it is proof that others can as well if they likewise commit themselves to hard work and smart choices.

We asked each of our participants to rank six poverty causes—bad family upbringing, bad luck, lack of effort/laziness, not enough good jobs, poor choices, and poor-quality schools—from most to least important in causing American poverty. Karen ranked lack of effort/laziness as the most important cause of poverty, and the two structural causes—not enough good jobs and poor-quality schools—as the least important ones. Additionally, she believes that poor children have the same opportunity to succeed as the average American. This is based on her assertion that, regardless of one's social position, anybody can make smart choices:

There is always room to go forward, there is always room to go backwards, you just gotta choose which way you wanna go. Say I didn't get adopted. Say I stayed with my mom and dad. I could have chosen to stay in that life, or I could choose to do better. I think being poor gives you even more motivation to strive to do better, to have more, because you didn't have nothing as a child. Just because you're poor doesn't mean you are going to stay poor. You either wanna go up, or you wanna stay at the bottom.

During the interview, Karen made multiple references, as she did in this example, to the fact that she could have ended up like her parents but instead chose a different path. It became clear that Karen believes she has moved somewhat above those who struggle in her family and community. This is perhaps because, despite still clearly struggling financially, she is steadily employed and does not deal with different forms of abuse like others around her. She is proud of this fact, proud not to have fallen victim to the problems that many

of her impoverished family members and friends have. Indeed, in reading her story, it is hard not to marvel at how much she has accomplished, considering the monumental obstacles littering her path. Her sense of pride at having navigated poverty and family problems seems to “prove” to her that nothing can hold a person back and reinforces her individualism. If she overcame enormous obstacles through hard work and smart choices, she reasons, so can anybody else. If one makes the choice not to give in to poverty and to persevere no matter what, her logic dictates, that person will ultimately rise above it.

Karen believes all Americans have the opportunity to attend and succeed in college because of the availability of financial assistance:

Like [my university], they have all kinds of grants that they give out to people. For good students coming out of high school, they give them an opportunity to put in for a grant. I see grants going out all the time at [my university]. So anybody out there who wants to go to college, there are ways to do it. . . . There are all kinds of grants that a person can apply for, all they have to do is Google it. And I didn't know this but there are all kinds of organizations, too. It is a very open-ended thing. There are all kinds of organizations out there that will help you get a grant. I mean I have seen it.

Due to her university employment, Karen is now more aware of various forms of college assistance than she was when she was younger and trying to navigate college. Therefore, working at a university seems to reinforce her belief that anybody can apply for a grant and ultimately be upwardly mobile. From her point of view, the educational system is open as long as it is affordable, as she made no mention of the other ways one's background can limit one's educational opportunities and the development of one's academic abilities.

Karen has a very negative view of welfare, underpinned by beliefs that welfare recipients are both lazy and dependent: “I think welfare just throws money at them, and they don't give any positive reinforcement to people to make them even try to go out there and get a job. They don't make people even try.” She expanded on her beliefs using examples from her community:

I have always felt like the government, with all the food stamps and stuff, they need to redo the system. I see it every day in my family and other families. They would rather be out here drugging out than going to work. Or they think, “I'll get more living off the system than working.” It's laziness. People will be on food stamps, and then go to the grocery store to get a six-pack of beer, but they can't buy the food in their buggy. My thing is this: if you can't buy the food in your buggy, you need to put that beer down and go out and get you a damn job and get off the system. That's the way I feel about it.

Many of the most common conservative criticisms of the poor, welfare recipients, and of the welfare system resonate with Karen. This is due to

the frequency that she believes she has seen these problems play out in her family and community, problems that she believes are ultimately the fault of individual poor people themselves and a welfare system that only encourages their bad behavior. While we cannot know for certain, she may have felt differently had she remained in poverty herself in adulthood—but her accomplishment of finding steady work and avoiding drugs and abuse seem to make it hard for her to sympathize with others who remain impoverished and deal with problems like drug abuse and unemployment.

Karen does not support welfare work requirements despite being highly suspicious of the work ethic of the poor, but does support welfare drug testing and family caps (policies that prohibit additional welfare benefits to families for children born while the family is receiving assistance). Here she explains her support for welfare drug testing, a policy that denies government assistance to recipients who cannot pass a drug test:

I would definitely agree [with welfare drug testing]. That's what they need to do. If you're on welfare, all those people are going to the store and buying beer. I had somebody walk up to me in the store and say, "Hey, would you like some food stamps?" They had \$100 on their card, said I could give them \$100 and go buy \$100 worth of groceries. Well if that's the case, then why do you need them? Why don't you go out and get you a job?

Karen went on to discuss her support for family caps, again suggesting she has ample anecdotal evidence from her own community to support her beliefs: "A lot of people get on welfare for that reason. I've seen it, I've heard it. 'I'll just have another child, I'll have ten kids so I can get another check.' Because welfare throws so much more money to them for a child."

Architects of family caps argue that they discourage welfare recipients from growing their families, which these designers believe is irresponsible, immoral, and/or fraudulent (because recipients supposedly use children as a "paycheck"). Proponents of welfare drug testing believe that welfare recipients are more likely than non-recipients to abuse drugs, oppose supporting people who break the law, and/or oppose supporting people who waste their limited income on drugs. Out-of-control fertility and drug abuse among welfare recipients, however, while common American beliefs, are myths (Rank 1989; Cunha 2014; U.S. HHS 2016).⁹

Despite evidence to the contrary, these myths persist in our culture, and are reinforced in Karen's case by anecdotal evidence. She goes on to explain her position:

All these people having babies after babies, I think there should be a limit. Everybody makes a mistake, okay, you made the mistake the first time, but the second time, find your own way of feeding these kids. And I hate to say that

for the child's sake, but there's so many people out here just having kids for the money, you know? Where does it stop? And us taxpayers are paying for their mistake, to keep them going, and they're taking money from our pockets. I've seen people making double the money I'm making and getting food stamps. Now you tell me how in the world they're doing that, unless they're lying? And they're lying, and the system allows it.

We do not doubt that Karen has either witnessed or heard of welfare abuse in her community. It is of course possible she is exaggerating the frequency and severity of what she witnessed, as many Americans do. Welfare fraud accounts for only around 5 percent or less of overall welfare spending, which includes overpayments and underpayments that are often the fault of those distributing, rather than receiving, assistance (Fifield 2017). Our interest lies not in whether the examples of welfare abuse she gives actually happened, but in her interpretation of them—how she disproportionately privileges individualistic explanations over non-individualistic ones, framing problems that often *stem from* poverty as instead *causing* poverty.

At the end of our interviews, we asked our individualistically oriented participants why they maintained an individualistic worldview, given how limited this perspective can be in explaining their own journey through a truly unequal opportunity structure. Karen, for example, faced anything but a level playing field. She confronted many challenges in her childhood that likely impacted her life chances in significant and often negative ways, including her childhood poverty, her parents' alcoholism and abuse, her uncle's sexual abuse, her chaotic movement through fifteen different foster homes in early childhood, and the many ways her background left her ill equipped for college. Karen's answer? It is not okay to be a victim. In fact, Karen not only believes she had an equal opportunity to succeed, compared to most Americans, but said, "I may of even had more of an opportunity than most kids." Life is ultimately about choices, she believes, and she simply should have made better ones:

Yes I've had a hard childhood. Yes I was in 15 different foster homes. My parents, there was a lot of physical abuse, they were very abusive towards each other. My dad beat my mom until she was unrecognizable. I was also sexually molested when I was a kid, it was an uncle that did it. It started when I was eleven, it happened for probably four years. But I'm not the person that feels sorry for myself. There are a lot more people out there in a worse situation than me. I feel it is better to just pick my head up. I could sit home and think about mom and dad being alcoholics, think about how my life is doomed, I can't do nothing, might as well become an alcoholic myself. Or I could pick myself up and say, "Hey, I don't have to be like them."

Despite all of the challenges she faced, Karen's individualistic worldview is unshaken. She consistently portrayed her personal struggles, the struggles of her family, and the struggles of all economically disadvantaged people in disproportionately individualistic terms. She also consistently indicated that she was proud of her own success (stable employment and lack of drug abuse), which she believes serves as proof that those who "give in" to the problems of poverty, like many of her family and friends, have only themselves to blame.

DOMINANT INEQUALITY BELIEFS

Karen's story is illustrative of the larger picture that emerged across our interviews: strongly individualistic beliefs in explaining poverty and economic inequality in the U.S. in general, as well as the participants' own fortunes. The following are some of the common themes that emerged across the interviews:

- Individualism as the default belief system, the general "rule" that explains the American stratification system. Non-individualistic explanations were utilized but as the "exception to the rule," applied in specific, limited circumstances.
- A belief in nearly limitless opportunities in American society for all who desire to grasp them. These opportunities are available to all who make smart choices and work hard, regardless of where they started out in life.
- A conceptualization of individuals as independent, autonomous agents. These individuals have a high degree of control over their lives.
- A belief that the U.S. is largely a meritocracy, where a person's social position reflects their choices and work ethic. Because of individuals' high degree of control over their fortunes in a land of significant opportunity, success or failure inheres within the individual.
- A belief that people should be self-reliant and personally responsible, given the number of opportunities available and the autonomy of individuals. Depending on others, such as through the use of government assistance, was viewed negatively.
- When unlevel playing fields were acknowledged, most still maintained that people in these circumstances will eventually overcome those barriers if they put their mind to it.
- A belief that, despite very challenging working- or lower-class backgrounds, participants had a fair shot at making the most of themselves

without anything holding them back in life. There was a strong tendency to reject any notion that they are victims of circumstance.

- A strong tendency to distance themselves from the poor and other economically struggling Americans, even if it was clear they are struggling mightily themselves. This distancing often took the form of framing their stable employment and avoidance of problems like drug abuse as proof of their somewhat elevated status compared to others who struggle in their families and communities. “Making it” despite their very difficult backgrounds is a source of pride and reinforces their individualism.
- The conflation of positive and negative freedom—assuming that relative freedom from government oppression in the U.S. equals nearly unlimited agency.
- A negative view of the welfare system.
- Deep suspicion of the morality and deservingness of the poor and of welfare recipients, particularly as it relates to their presumed poor work ethic, rampant drug use, and out-of-control fertility.

Agency and Opportunity

A majority of our participants believe that Americans are autonomous individuals with a high degree of agency, and that American society is a meritocracy of virtually unlimited opportunities. When asked what percentage of people’s lives is within their control and what percentage is outside of their control, 90 percent answered that 70 percent or more is within Americans’ control, with 80 percent the most frequent answer. Tina’s sentiments were typical: “Everybody is in control of their own destiny. . . . For the majority of people, I think they are in control. I’d say about 80 percent [of people’s life outcomes are within their control].” A strong majority, 85 percent, agree that the U.S. is the land of opportunity, where everybody who works hard can succeed. A majority, 70 percent, also agrees that the U.S. is a meritocracy. Eighty percent believe that, even when some people face social barriers that others do not, they can overcome them if they really put their mind to it. The same percentage agree that most Americans can earn a college degree if they really want to. Half of our participants agree that a poor child’s opportunity to succeed is equal to the average American’s, with the other half believing it is worse.

Previous studies such as Feagin (1972) and Kluegel and Smith (1986) asked respondents whether different poverty causes are “very important,” “somewhat important,” or “not important.” While this approach is effective, we took a different one, asking participants to instead rank poverty causes in order of importance. In doing this, we believe that participants were ul-

timately more explicit in indicating how they prioritize poverty causes in relation to each other.

Most of our participants agree that individual-level causes of poverty are more important than non-individualistic ones. When asked to rank these six causes of poverty—bad family upbringing, bad luck, lack of effort/laziness, not enough good jobs, poor choices, and poor quality schools—“poor choices” and “lack of effort/laziness” were by far the most popular, with “poor choices” slightly edging out the others for the top spot. Seventy-five percent of our participants chose either “poor choices” or “lack of effort/laziness” as their top poverty cause, with 70 percent choosing one of those two choices for their second most important cause. The next most popular choice was “bad family upbringing,” followed by “not enough good jobs,” “poor quality schools,” and “bad luck.”

The data presented here suggest that individualistic explanations of economic disadvantage are privileged over non-individualistic ones. There was strong support for notions of individual autonomy, virtually unlimited opportunities, meritocracy, and individual-level blame for poverty.

Many of our participants reported meritocratic sentiments similar to those expressed by Anne and Jill. Anne said, “I would say most Americans probably get back what they deserve.” Jill similarly argued, “You’re only going to get out of life what you put into it. . . . If you keep going towards that goal and you don’t let up, I think you’re going to find success. Whereas if you don’t put much into trying to make something of yourself you’re never going to make anything of yourself.” These meritocratic beliefs were associated with a deep sense that there are virtually limitless opportunities in the U.S. Anne noted the connection between opportunity and meritocracy, stating, “If you live or come to America, you can become or do whatever you want to do, there’s opportunities there if you desire to take them.” Amy admitted that background matters, but only in a limited sense: “I understand your background may have a little bit of play in what happens to you. But you can accomplish anything you want. If you put forth the effort you can succeed. And here in America there are so many opportunities.” April noted that, given the number of opportunities available, the only thing preventing success is laziness: “I think there’s enough in this country that if we all work, I just think there’s a lot of opportunity. We could all be self-sufficient. I think a lot of Americans have gotten lazy.”

There was a strong tendency for participants to conflate negative and positive freedom when discussing opportunities in American society. Many of our participants believe that, because the U.S. is a wealthy nation, and because its government is less oppressive than many others, all Americans are free to live whichever lives they choose for themselves. Ryan’s comments are a typical

and illustrative example. He suggested that the high degree of negative freedom in a democratic society equals a high degree of positive freedom:

Well, we're a democracy, and I just think we all have a fair chance. I think we all have a pretty good chance to be who we want to be in our country. We live in the society where we're able to make our own choices, go to school, go to work every day. I mean, a lot of societies you can't do that. I just think that in the United States we can.

The democratic nature of American society, combined with the country's wealth, convinced many of our participants that life in the U.S. is what individuals make of it. To not succeed in a democratic land of plenty, it was reasoned, must ultimately be the fault of the individual.

There was a strong tendency to equate the availability of student loans and financial aid with unlimited access to higher education for all. Other barriers to educational attainment, such as the unequal social distribution of the ability to develop one's abilities, were either downplayed or ignored. Many of our participants suggested that this belief is often reinforced by working in a university setting, where they are frequently exposed to information concerning financial aid for students. Jill's comments were typical: "Whatever you decide to pursue, I think the opportunities are there for everyone, especially in this day and age because there's a lot of opportunity to pursue higher education. . . . So yeah, I mean I really do think basically it's the individual. It comes down to the choices and the decisions you make." She went on, later remarking, "I know 100 percent that anybody can [get a college education in the U.S. today]. You just need to apply yourself, and like I said, there's so many programs out there. So much so that I think anyone can." Anne made similar remarks:

I just think that the United States offers all kinds of programs to help the poor, people of different races, you know Blacks or whatever. . . . I just think the programs are out there that anybody in the United States, no matter what their color, their financial position, no matter what, I just, I think if you really want to go to college and succeed the opportunity is here.

Randy incorporated open access to public K–12 education in his reasoning:

If you really study hard or pursue what you want, you can get the education through the public school, which doesn't cost you anything. It will eventually pay off when you go to, say, community college, or get an online degree or something. And you can pursue maybe even some scholarships or something if you really work hard enough.

This widespread belief that higher education is available to all Americans who put forth the effort was clearly one important reason for their abstract beliefs concerning opportunity and meritocracy.

Hard Work and Smart Choices

Most participants buttressed their assertions about the meritocratic nature of American society by focusing on the role of hard work and smart choices. Brenda's reflections were typical: "How much you put out is how much you get back. If you're willing to work for it eventually you'll get somewhere." Anne believes that too many Americans have become spoiled by the number of opportunities available in the U.S. and are not working as hard as they could be to grasp them: "I think the United States, the opportunity is here if you want to work for it. I mean there's people who grow up here and they think it should all be handed to them, they don't work hard. Then they wonder why they are in life where they are. I just think the opportunity's here if you work hard for it." Sherry stated, "If you work hard, you can have anything you want in the United States. I mean you can go as far as you want. Get a good education and a good job." Randy cannot fathom that a hard worker will not ultimately find success in the U.S.: "I would say most people, if they really work at it, they give it 100 percent to achieve your best, you will succeed. . . . I couldn't believe that you wouldn't be a success." Jill linked choices and individual fortunes, saying, "I think that we all have choices and decisions to make. I think based on what choices and decisions you make is going to be the outcome." Grace argued that rich children can fail, and poor children can succeed; it is not their background but their work ethic that matters: "If you put your mind to anything you can accomplish it. It doesn't matter if you grew up poor or if you grew up rich. I mean, a rich kid could grow up with all the money in the world and still not make much of anything." You will remember from earlier in the chapter that Karen believes that growing up poor does not mean you have to stay poor. Instead, you need to make a decision to leave poverty and work hard in order to be upwardly mobile. Escaping the poverty and abuse of her childhood, according to Karen, was a choice that she made: "I could have chosen to stay in that life, or I could choose to do better. . . . You either wanna go up, or you wanna stay at the bottom."

A strong majority of participants, 80 percent, believe that even when people face social barriers that others do not, they can overcome them if they really put their mind to it. Such sentiments downplay the significance of social barriers while overestimating the amount of agency that Americans possess. Sadie argued, "It doesn't matter what you go through, you can always overcome that and come out on top. There's a way around all that stuff. You shouldn't let that stuff stop you from doing what you want to do." Jill similarly said, "Say you had a fire and you lost everything. Or you lost your job because of something that was totally unfair and had nothing to do with you. I still think you have the control in your life that you decide how you're going to respond to that, and what you're going to do to get out of it."

Many participants argued that because some people overcome long odds and achieve success, this is proof that all people can. Sherry, for instance, believes that the success of some poor people suggests that all can be upwardly mobile. She said the following when explaining why poor children have the same opportunities as non-poor children in the U.S.:

For one thing, I had a girlfriend I grew up with when I was a kid, she had nothing. Mom stayed home and didn't work, she didn't have nothing. I seen her as a kid try and go out and work at nine and ten years old. Babysitting, cleaning houses, anything that they can make a dollar at. People give them food, people give them clothes. I mean these kids had it really rough. And now they in big jobs.

Laziness, Immorality, and Welfare

Given their strongly individualistic inequality beliefs, it is not surprising that most participants have a negative opinion of the American social welfare system. The vast majority, 75 percent, view the welfare system as having a mostly negative impact on society. This is likely related to their general suspicion of the morality and deservingness of most welfare recipients. This, despite the fact that 60 percent of our participants reported needing welfare as a child, 55 percent have needed it in adulthood, and the fact that our participants frequently observe welfare use in their families and communities.

Negative views of welfare tended to focus on the assumed association between welfare and laziness, dependency, out-of-control fertility, drug abuse, and fraud. There was also a widespread assertion that welfare recipients owe it to taxpayers to prove that they are moral and hardworking in exchange for receiving "other people's money." A majority of our participants support welfare work requirements (65%), and all support welfare drug testing. Seventy-five percent support family caps of some kind, with 60 percent reporting outright support and an additional 15 percent supporting family caps above a certain number of children (typically after two children).

It is important to note how the logic of such policies contradicts the empirical evidence. Most eligible poor people (63%) are employed in paid work. Ninety-one percent of entitlement spending goes to the elderly, seriously disabled, or members of working households. Women on welfare tend to have lower fertility rates, on average, than the general population, and 77 percent of TANF families have either only one (50%) or two (27%) children (with a majority having a youngest child of five or younger). Finally, welfare recipients do not typically use illegal drugs at a higher rate than the general population (Rank 1989; Bullock 2013; Cunha 2014; Gould 2015; U.S. HHS 2016).¹⁰

A major concern among our participants is that welfare incentivizes laziness and encourages dependency. Kimberly's concerns are a typical example, as she lamented, "It just encourages them, I feel like, to stay home and continue to be lazy and keep getting your free money." This widespread concern surely helps explain the majority support for work requirements. The following are some examples of this common theme:

Just people think that they can live off of it instead of going out and getting a job. So, people who don't really need it are getting it just because they don't want to go and work. (Sadie)

It is way out of control. It was made to give people a hand up, to get them out of their situation, give them the tools they need. And I think it has gotten way beyond what it was meant for. I have been made to feel ashamed in my adult life because I have worked and I fell on hard times and I had to get assistance for a short period of time. But when I see people make a career out of it and they go in and they're patted on the back, but I am made to feel ashamed because I can work. Well they can too, but they have never made the effort to work. I think whole families have been raised to depend on it, to make a career out of it. I know people that are living on public assistance that do better than I do, with me and my husband both working. And they brag about it. That's what makes me angry, because they are able to work. (Tina)

I see it now all over. You see people that draws welfare that really don't need it. They are too lazy to go out and get a job. I mean they have a high school diploma, but they would rather live on welfare. They say, "I can get this and this and this, and I don't have to get up early." (Sherry)

It is there for help, for assistance, it isn't supposed to be a lifestyle. It teaches people you have to work for a payday. It teaches you that you have to work for what you have and for what you want. You don't just get to sit on your couch and watch soaps all day for a payday. (Amy)

Randy focused on laziness while also chafing at hardworking Americans having to pay for the welfare system:

A hardworking American has to pay for people to sit around and do nothing, and the welfare system allows it. And sometimes these people on welfare drives around in a big Cadillac. They never have a mortgage really to pay, or rent. And they're given food and food stamps, and everything is handed to them. They don't do anything to get it other than go down and do paperwork, and get checks and benefits and everything else handed to them. So it doesn't give a person a reason to work.

April shared similar sentiments to Randy's "Cadillac" remarks:

I think [welfare's impact on society is] pretty negative, with the people "using the system" so to speak. People having a lot of kids, and just a lot of stuff. This is just me hearing people say that people were using food stamps and all this stuff, and they're driving around in nice cars, and all this other stuff that other people can't afford. Getting free handouts. It seems like people just ain't trying to work anymore.

Amy has such a negative view of welfare, and believes so strongly that it incentivizes laziness, that she is willing to forgo assistance for herself and her family in order to avoid the indignity associated with welfare:

With my own son, he has a severe disability, reflux of the kidney. He has gone into kidney failure twice, at one point he was in grade five kidney failure and he was dying. It can happen at any moment, he could wake up today and be in kidney failure. He has no control over it. There is no medication for it, all they can do is monitor it. And I know this is going to sound cruel, but he qualifies for a disability check. If he received it, he would never have to work, if I got him this check. But I refuse to do it. If he wants it he is going to have to do it on his own, because I want him to go to college and see that there is better for him out there than getting a check every month, than getting welfare.

Another common set of assumptions that emerged from the interviews related to poverty and fertility. There was widespread support for the notions that welfare recipients have out-of-control fertility, plan to have more children in order to increase their monthly welfare benefits, and are irresponsible if they become pregnant while poor. These widespread concerns helped explain the strong support for family caps. Some of our participants, like Katie, think it is irresponsible to bring children into poverty, arguing, "You shouldn't be pumping out kids if you can't afford them." Amy focused both on the irresponsibility of bringing children into poverty while also framing welfare recipient fertility as a fraudulent means of increasing one's benefits:

You shouldn't get more benefits the more children you have. I mean I do think every American has the right to have a family and to have babies. But it is sad when people bring more and more children into a bad situation money-wise. I actually know a lady who had another child for more benefits. Whether she was telling the truth or not I don't know, but that is what she stated to me. And that isn't right. I don't think benefits should raise every kid you have. You should just get one set amount.

Sadie believes having children while poor is immoral and thinks that the government plays a critical role in discouraging such behavior:

If they get government assistance for that, I feel like it's making it easier for them to make the choice to have a baby. 'Cause when you make the choice, you gotta think about paying for the hospital stay, paying for all the equipment that they have to use. And I feel like if people couldn't afford that, they would get on birth control. I don't know, they would make better choices about having babies.

Jill made a similar observation:

I knew people who were on the system, they're pregnant with their third child, and I'm like, "Aren't you worried about affording them? How are you going to afford them," and they're like, "No, we'll just go on WIC." They just accept that that is there and it's available and they're going to use it. It doesn't matter. Whereas for me and my ex-husband, we agreed on a number of children, and a lot of what went into that decision was affordability. I come from six kids, so I would have loved to have had a larger family. When you look at the cost of things and what you can afford, we decided two. It's like they're being rewarded in a sense because they had another child.

Others focused on the issue of welfare recipients using childbirth as a way to gain more in benefits:

Well, I think a lot of them just don't want to work and I think that if they think they can have more kids, we're gonna get more money a month, and I think there ought to be a stop to that. I don't know what it is today. How do I want to say this? I think after two kids, they shouldn't get any more money. (Betty)

I agree with that because I know people that have kids to get a bigger check. So there needs to be like a family cap. I knew people, they admit it, "I'm gonna get pregnant 'cause you know I need, you know either this kid's graduated or out of the house so they need more income and let's have another kid." (Anne)

Of all of the topics discussed in the interviews, welfare drug testing seemed to provoke the most anger. This was routinely the part of the interview where participants became most animated, and it shows in their responses. Every participant supported policies that deny welfare to individuals and their families if the adult welfare recipient cannot pass a drug test. Common themes were the immorality of drug use, the negative impact of drug use on the children of recipients, the notion that buying drugs with money that could be spent on necessities was keeping people in poverty, and the need to address the opioid epidemic. Here are some examples from the interviews:

Even a time when I was a young adult I was aware of families that did the drugs. They all sniffed, they all drank. It's just really weird how they always had the money for the pleasure things, so to speak. But I think if you can't pass a drug

test then you should not receive any help. Because obviously you're getting drugs from somewhere, and either you're stealing or you're buying. Either way it's just not a good thing. If you're dealing and you're making money that way, you shouldn't have to live off the system, which I know is against the law, and I don't condone that. If you're using cash to buy drugs, that's money you should be using for food, for housing. I'm all for that. (Jill)

Well, if you have money for drugs you should have money for food. (Ryan)

Because I feel like if you can afford drugs, then you can afford whatever else, whatever government assistance you're getting, from Medicaid to food stamps. If you can afford drugs, then you can afford food. If you can afford drugs, you can afford insurance. (Sadie)

This country has really been on kind of a drug epidemic. Society today is very addicted to these drugs. And if you're on welfare and you're accepting money from the government, and you're using that to spend on drugs, it's defeating the purpose of welfare. (Randy)

I think if people on welfare could get drugs and pay whatever money for that then they obviously don't need to be using the welfare system. (April)

You go for any job, number one thing, they will ask you for a drug test. I think if people gets on welfare, and tries to make a living off the welfare department, I think they oughta have to take a drug test. I seen so many of them up there, "Oh, I got a check, I'm going out to get my drugs this weekend." So what happens? Little baby goes without food because that adult decided he wanted his drugs. (Sherry)

Of course, I would agree with that. If you can afford to buy drugs and use drugs, then I think you could definitely afford to somewhat support your family. So, you shouldn't be getting assistance. (Kimberly)

Previous research suggests that individualistic and anti-welfare beliefs are associated with racist and sexist beliefs. Americans who conflate poverty/welfare and race; assume that African Americans are lazy and/or immoral; and/or have a negative opinion of single mothers (particularly Black single mothers) have been found to have much more negative views of welfare than Americans with opposing beliefs (Gilens 1999).

Knowing this research, we attempted to explore our participants' beliefs concerning the causes of racial inequality in the U.S. Despite our efforts, our participants were extremely reluctant to talk about race, with most simply refusing to answer direct interview questions about racial inequality and avoiding directly addressing race at other points in the interviews. While their

silence could mean a number of things, the existing literature suggests that it was likely an attempt to avoid revealing problematic views concerning race that participants know are not “socially desirable.” Even if they disagree with the larger culture’s rejection of their conservative opinions on race, research suggests that many participants still do not want to invite such scrutiny and stigma upon themselves. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Devah Pager, Joe Feagin, and other scholars, for example, have demonstrated how certain research methods (such as interviews, employment audit studies, and implicit association tests) reveal considerably more prejudice in the U.S. than Americans are willing to admit on surveys (Pager 2003; Bonilla-Silva 2014; Feagin 2014).

Despite not addressing race directly, we suspect that much of what our participants said about welfare was at least in part euphemistically referring to their beliefs about African Americans. Heather Bullock notes in her summary of this research: “Although claimed to be a race-neutral policy, ‘welfare’ is a racially charged codeword that activates images of people of color, particularly African American and other so-called ‘undeserving’ poor, even when not explicitly mentioned” (2013:56).

While likely concealing many racist beliefs, sexist beliefs were often stated quite openly by our participants, such as their concerns about the fertility of the poor. Previous research suggests that the widespread associations our participants made between welfare and laziness, out-of-control fertility, and rampant drug abuse are very likely related to deeply problematic and inaccurate beliefs they hold about African Americans, single mothers, and welfare/poverty.

Blaming Themselves

While a strong majority of our participants are individualistic in their inequality beliefs concerning the U.S. in general, most are even more individualistic when explaining their own fortunes. When we asked our participants if they had a worse, equal, or better shot of making the most of themselves in life compared to the average American, for instance, all but one (95%) said they had at least an equal shot compared to the average American, with two (10%) saying that they had a better shot. When we asked if they had a fair shot of making the most of themselves in life without anything holding them back, all but two of our participants (90%) said yes. A majority, 65 percent, said they had either an equal (55%) or better (10%) shot of earning a college degree compared to the average American.

These results are quite striking, considering the decidedly unequal opportunities that their challenging backgrounds suggest they had available to them. The interviews were rife with stories of struggle. Most of the participants

grew up in families that were economically insecure. Of our twenty participants, half came from working-class backgrounds and nine (45%) grew up in poverty. Only one reported growing up in a social-class position higher than the working class (they reported a lower-middle-class childhood). Sixty percent of our participants reported needing welfare in childhood, and 55 percent in adulthood. Multiple participants reported significant periods of time where they would go hungry, as well as periods of time where their families would have their electricity or water shut off. There were a number of instances of abuse, including physical and sexual abuse, that the participants either witnessed or experienced themselves in childhood.

Only one of our participants earned a four-year college degree (although a few others tried college for a short period of time without completing a degree). The rest of our participants either concluded their educational careers after finishing high school (80%) or with their GED (15%). About a third (35%) of our participants reported one or both of their parents dropping out of high school. Only one participant reported having a parent with a four-year college degree (representing just 2.5 % of parents who held one)—his mother earned her bachelor's degree, and his dad dropped out of high school. Making it to college was difficult for our participants based both on preparation and affordability.

Single-parent families were common, with half of our participants spending significant amounts of time in childhood being raised by a single parent. About a third of our participants (35%) reported absent fathers (five left the family voluntarily during the participants' childhood, while the remaining two died during the participants' childhood). Three (15%) participants reported an absent mother (two left the family voluntarily during the participants' childhood, while one participant's mother died during their childhood). In adulthood, 80 percent of the participants were working class, while 20 percent reported a middle- to lower-middle-class household income.

Despite these struggles, hardly any of the participants are willing to see their lives in anything other than individualistic terms. Instead, they blame their own choices for their fortunes. This portion of the interview data underscores the value of utilizing a qualitative approach, which allowed participants to reveal how they make sense of individualism in their own lives in ways that would be difficult on a survey.

You will remember Karen, from earlier in the chapter, as a prime example. She was born into a family that struggled with poverty and severe abuse. She was taken away from her parents and cycled through fifteen different foster homes before she even reached third grade. In adolescence, Karen's uncle would subject her to four years of sexual abuse. Despite all of this, she holds strongly individualistic inequality beliefs about the U.S. in general, as well

as about her own fortunes. Karen believes that she had at least as good an opportunity to succeed as the average American, saying, "I may of even had more of an opportunity than most kids."

Anne, in explaining how she is responsible for her own life, said, "I mean it's hard to explain because I am just a custodian, but I got a job. I mean I can't complain. I'd say I have an equal [opportunity], I would say equal." Grace blames herself for not putting enough effort into school when she was younger, saying, "If I would have put the effort into it, I could have gotten to college. I just didn't choose that kind of path." Randy likewise cites his choices in explaining his life:

I believe that I could have done more in my life. I believe I could have been whatever I really wanted to if I would have tried a little bit harder. If I wouldn't of had doubt. I guess the biggest thing that holds anybody back is fear. I think the biggest obstacle for most people is themselves, you know, fear, doubt, the unknowns, things of that nature. I believe I had the greatest opportunity to make something out of myself.

April similarly blames herself and the decisions that she made:

When it comes down to it, it was my choice. Just like everybody else, you end up with some regrets. There are a few things you'd like to have changed or done differently, but I wish I would have stuck it out with my classes. I just went to work instead of staying at home and doing some college and trying to get a better job. I guess I feel like it was more my choice, a poor choice.

Kimberly, despite many childhood struggles, believes she had an equal shot, saying, "I feel like everybody has that opportunity no matter where your struggle was. There's opportunities out there. Where there's a will, there's a way." Across the interviews, it was the same story: descriptions of incredibly unequal opportunities in childhood, yet individualistic inequality beliefs about themselves and the country in general.

Sadie's story provides a good example. She reported frequently going without food and electricity in childhood. Here she describes her family's struggles: "We could barely get by. My parents had trouble paying all the bills. We almost lost our house because we couldn't pay the mortgage. We had to beg schools to let us go on field trips, because we couldn't pay for it. It was embarrassing, because we had to pretty much beg for money." In one particularly heartbreaking story, she described having to fight with her siblings for a share of the scarce food supply in her household: "We were fighting over Shake-N-Bake, 'cause we didn't have any food. Me and my brothers and sisters were fighting over Shake-N-Bake, 'cause we were so

hungry.” She described her neighborhood as “pretty rough,” saying, “We lived on a street everybody refers to as the ghetto. There was drugs, there was alcohol, there was people fighting. It was pretty rough.” When she was five years old, Sadie was molested by a neighborhood boy she described as “much older than me.” In addition to all of these struggles, Sadie’s mother and stepfather battled drug addiction, and her stepfather regularly physically abused her mother. Police visited her home often in response to the abuse, and her mother ended up in the hospital multiple times. To pay for drugs, Sadie’s mother would sell the family’s food stamps. The drug addiction that plagued her mother and stepfather eventually claimed her stepfather’s life.

Despite her extremely challenging childhood, Sadie believes she had an opportunity to succeed equal to the average American’s, saying, “I think everybody makes their own choices which affects what happens to you.” She went on to say, “I am in control of my life. I’m the one who makes the choices. I can go out here and get a good job and go to school, pay for school, or I can go out here and I can get in trouble, and not be able to get that good job, and not be able to pay for school.” She said that it does not matter what a person goes through, they can always overcome anything. After enduring a childhood that could only be described as unequal to many other Americans’, Sadie refused to characterize her life in anything other than individualistic terms.

Tina grew up poor in a family that relied on food stamps, WIC, and Medicaid. Her mother divorced twice while Tina was young, with an additional third engagement called off:

After my mom and stepdad got a divorce, my mom started dating a man for two or three years and then they got engaged. Well, he ran off one weekend and married a woman he was having an affair with, unbeknownst to my mom. She found out afterwards and then found out she was pregnant with my brother. And the man gave up all rights to my brother.

Despite her family’s economic insecurity and a number of other challenges, Tina she saw her life in individualistic terms:

When I was younger, if I would have used my head more and listened, then I would be exponentially better, and my children’s lives would be better than they are now. I wouldn’t be having to scrub toilets for a living. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, but if I would have made better choices when I was younger, the outcome would have been drastically different. I was in control of that. I settled. And I know I settled.

Several times in the interview, she described being in a “rut” that was her own doing and hoping that her kids would use her as motivation to strive to

do better, saying, "I have pushed them to do better than me. I use myself as an example every single day." She went on:

My kids are my greatest accomplishments. . . . I tell my kids all the time, "Learn from my mistakes and do better for yourselves. Don't fall in the rut like I have in my life," you know. I feel like I didn't push myself hard enough, and I just settled, I let myself get in a rut. I got married very young, before I turned 18. I had my first child when I was 20, and my next one at 25. I was a stay-at-home mom up until my divorce from my first husband. . . . Now I am 39 and I look back and my kids are basically all I have to show for it.

Amy is another important example. Amy and her husband, a half-time cook, both earn minimum wage, which brings their yearly total household income to just over \$27,000 if they do not miss any work. A living wage for their family size (including their two dependent children) is a little over \$47,000, or about \$20,000 more than they earn. Their total household income is just above the 100 percent poverty threshold but \$3,000 less than the 125 percent poverty threshold. During her childhood years, money was a constant struggle:

My parents worked, but they didn't make a lot. Money for us was an everyday struggle. I can remember one time all we could afford for a whole month was macaroni and cheese. A whole month of nothing but mac and cheese. I never got new clothes or shoes for school, I never got new bookbags. It never changed, my entire childhood was like that.

Despite this, her mother was too prideful to look to the government for assistance: "My mother never received any public assistance. She needed it, but she didn't ever go get it. She said many times over the course of my life that we don't accept charity. It was her pride, I guess."

When she was eight years old, Amy's father passed away. A month later, her mother remarried and moved the family to Virginia Beach at her stepfather's behest. Once there, she and her sisters began to endure severe physical and mental abuse from both their stepfather and their mother:

My childhood was terrible, it was pretty bad. There were lots of other things going on. Me and my sisters were abused, physically and mentally, pretty severely by my mother and my stepfather. They drank, but it wasn't about alcohol, they didn't have to drink for it to happen. Punching, kicking, slapping, all of it. It was very unpredictable, it just depended on the mood that either one of them was in.

When Amy was seventeen her mother divorced her stepfather and moved Amy and her siblings back to her hometown to be near family. Shortly after returning, Amy dropped out of high school.

Despite these struggles, Amy maintains an individualistic worldview of the U.S. in general, and about her own fortunes. You'll remember Amy has such a negative view of welfare that she refuses disability benefits for which her son qualifies. Despite her challenging childhood, she believes she had the same opportunities as anybody else. She should have succeeded, she argued, and only has herself to blame for her perceived failures:

I had the same opportunities as anybody else, I just didn't take them. If I could have pushed myself to do more, I would have done more. See I grew up not caring, for a very long time I did not care. Even now I know I could go back to school and do better than what I am doing. My youngest is eight so it is a little hard, but that is no excuse. I could do it. It is my own fault.

We asked why she believes she received a fair shot, given the financial struggles of her family, her father passing away when she was young, the severe abuse that she and her sisters endured, and other struggles she reported. She responded:

I mean I have been through a lot, and I am still going through a lot. But I know that I am where I am at because of my choices. I blame myself. When I was pregnant with my son, that is when I got my GED, because I did not want him to be born to a high school dropout. I could have pushed myself to go even further . . . I could have pushed to get grants to go to college and make a better life for him. But I chose not to. I chose to stay home with him and allow his father to control me and my decisions. I blame myself, it was my choice to listen to him, to stay home and not do better. I know I could have done better. I know I could have.

In addition, Amy reported that she, along with every other American, has the same opportunity to pursue a college education as anybody else, saying, "You can only blame your income for so long." Despite lifelong struggles, Amy has a difficult time seeing life in anything other than individualistic terms.

Again and again, it was the same story. Despite the odds clearly stacked against most of our participants in childhood, they refused to believe they did not get a fair shot to succeed in life. They consistently refused to believe they are victims of circumstance. As individualistic as our participants are about American poverty and economic inequality in general, they are even more individualistic when explaining their own fortunes.

A Step Above

One factor contributing to our participants' individualism is their pride in having avoided the significant problems they observe in their families and

communities. At different points throughout their lives, our participants have witnessed drug abuse, physical and sexual abuse, welfare fraud, chronic unemployment, absent parents, and/or a number of other problems related to poverty. Exaggerated or not, it is likely that they observed and/or experienced a number of painful consequences of poverty in ways that middle- and upper-class Americans are much less familiar with. Rather than identifying non-individualistic causes of these problems and joining in solidarity with those who were not so lucky, our participants instead use their perceived success as a means of affirming their own dignity.

Many view their stable employment and avoidance of drug abuse as a source of pride, as some measure of success and social mobility that sets them apart from the poor and from the less successful members of their families and communities. They may not be rich, or even middle class, but they are proud not to be poor, and proud of achieving a measure of stability that was not easy to obtain given their backgrounds. Having successfully navigated very difficult circumstances, they are now critical of others in their families and communities who failed to follow their example of hard work and smart choices. They are proud of not having “given in” to the problems that ensnared those around them, and if they made it, they believe anybody can, thus reinforcing their individualistic beliefs. Many admit they are still struggling in adulthood, but they frame their struggles as different from those of the families and communities from whence they came. While they may still struggle financially, they are employed and sober, unlike the “lazier” and more “immoral” others around them.

Because their struggles are happening within the context of stable employment and moral living, this allows them to occupy a higher social position—differentiated not by income alone but more importantly by morality and work ethic—than those who struggle financially while also dealing with additional problems like unemployment and drug abuse. Previous research suggests that, in fact, people who perceive themselves as upwardly mobile may be more likely than those who do not to favor individualistic explanations of economic disadvantage (Gugushvili 2016).

Revisiting Karen’s interview provides a good illustration of this phenomenon. Karen reported witnessing drug use and welfare fraud both in her family and in her community. In one example, she described seeing people selling food stamps to patrons at the grocery store in order to buy drugs. After highlighting the many perceived sins of people in her family and community, Karen dissociated herself from them. She was once in their circumstances, she said, and could have stayed there. Instead, she made the choice not to. She uses her own life as proof that life is ultimately about the choices that you make, not about the hand you are dealt.

In addition to the pride at having achieved some measure of success, there was also a palpable sense of relief at having escaped very difficult circumstances. Our participants shared some extremely traumatic experiences. They faced problems up close and personal in ways that many Americans never do. One gets the sense in hearing their accounts that they desperately wanted to escape the families and/or communities where these problems occurred, regardless of who was to blame for the problems in the first place. The drug abuse, the hunger, the family conflict—for many of our participants, their childhoods were filled with intensely scary and unhappy periods. They abhor drug use, for instance, in a way that suggests they have seen the worst of what addiction can inflict on individuals, families, and communities. They outwardly project the image of a stably employed, sober, successful person as a means to manage stigma in their interactions with others—but they seem to *inwardly* project this image as well, a message intended for themselves as a means to manage their own fear that they will ever again have to face their former difficult circumstances.

Seeds of Resistance

Individualistic explanations of poverty and economic inequality are clearly more popular than non-individualistic ones among our participants. Despite this, most of our participants utilized non-individualistic explanations when discussing specific anecdotes. These non-individualistic arguments were far less numerous than their individualistic ones, and the “exceptions” did not undermine the belief that individualism is the default “rule” that explains the overall system of social stratification in the U.S. Despite this, the existence of structural explanations, and the willingness to use them under certain circumstances, suggests that a more structurally oriented worldview may be cultivated, given changes to dominant culture. On some level, our participants must feel the tension between these anecdotes and the dominant ideology. Translating those contradictions into a coherent challenge to the dominant ideology is no easy task, but the existence of these underlying tensions suggests it is not impossible and that the seeds of such a challenge are already there.

A number of our participants are concerned with the problems of persistent economic insecurity and growing inequality, as well as the slowdown in social mobility. When they were discussing these problems, it was clear that many were at least somewhat aware of the roles played by forces beyond the control of individuals. Linda, for instance, spoke insightfully about the intimate ways in which her family has experienced the negative impacts of

deindustrialization, revealing a sense of despair at being at the whims of forces beyond one's control:

I've worked a lot of factory jobs, some of them for like fifteen years, and they go overseas, just like my mom's. Then you're left stuck and you got to start all over again. You find you another job and you work another six years, same crap, you know? It's just over and over. They are taking jobs out of this country to overseas and they are not putting anything back into the United States, because it's cheaper to go overseas and pay people, you know, hardly nothing to do the same thing. But people don't buy American so they don't care, they just want the cheapest thing. So then where do you draw the line at?

Linda went on to describe the limited supply of good jobs that American workers are forced to compete for. She highlighted the ways that economic forces can leave workers behind and the difficulties of being forced to retrain later in life:

There's not that many jobs out there to be honest. Especially if the person is not somebody who's educated, don't went to school and maybe they got laid off and that's all they ever knew, like my mom did. She got laid off from a job she been at for like twenty years and then she had to go to school and get a trade and try to learn to do something. If you have to work and then nobody will hire you and all you can find is part time work well then you may not. You just going to starve to death because you can't find a job.

Sherry had similar concerns about the insecure nature of the modern economy and how that insecurity has impacted her life:

I raised my kids by myself. My ex-husband, he would not help me support the kids. There was times I needed [welfare]. There was times I got it, there was times I didn't. I applied and didn't get it. I have to usually call the governor to get it. Once in a while, I was laid off from work. I worked at the park for the state of West Virginia. And I was laid off there every winter. So in November I'd have to apply for food stamps. I didn't apply for a check but I did apply for food stamps.

Tina was concerned with how all of this related to slowing social mobility, saying, "I think some people get lucky and are able to pull themselves up. I feel like what you are born into, unless you hit the lottery, I feel like you pretty much stay there." She went on to discuss the lack of mobility for people in her profession, saying, "I am never going anywhere in this job. I am not going to move up. I know that no matter how hard I work, there is only so far you can go as a custodian. It is not a glamorous job. I am probably not going to get a raise anytime soon, I will stay at minimum wage."

Tina went on to voice a concern that many of our participants had: how could so much economic insecurity exist in such an affluent country? She said that, if she was in charge, it would not be allowed:

I would make sure nobody, no children, no elderly, no veterans, go hungry. There's too much food in this country that goes to waste and I do not think that anybody should go to bed with an empty belly. It boggles my mind how much food we throw away every day when somebody is sitting there wishing they had a half of what we are throwing away. Even if they only have one decent meal a day I think they should be able to eat, and it shouldn't be crap. . . . Make restaurants accountable for what they waste. Make sure that food goes to food banks and is stored properly.

Brenda also honed in on this sense that insecurity amid affluence is problematic:

My mom and my grandparents, we would help out people when we could. We had a group that comes from one trailer court and moved in for a little bit with my grandparents. She just had her child and he kept getting jobs and then they'd lay him off. He'd get work somewhere else, and they'd lay him off, or he'd get temporary work here, but they didn't need him all the time. So he worked maybe one day a week. I got friends who had jobs and one lost his and searched for over a year trying to find another job. I mean he applied everywhere he could think of, but he had no mode of transportation except for walking. They didn't want him if he couldn't get a ride to work, a reliable ride to work. Then you look and you see what the congressmen or some of the other people, the corporate people, are making, and you go, "Huh, that'd be nice to make even a crumb off of that." Two hundred thousand, a hundred thousand, even fifty thousand, you're going, "I want a crumb, I can't even find a job." Yet everybody else is prospering. They're putting all these new things out and they're not helping the people who don't have nothing.

Later, when discussing poverty, Brenda turned a popular conservative argument on its head. Rather than unmotivated individuals falling into poverty because of their laziness, she argued that some people lack motivation precisely because of the despair that poverty itself inculcates:

I've seen some of the trailer parks and stuff where my mom's lived, she's helped out some of the other people that were in there as much as she could. But some of them were in that major thing where if they didn't have a stable home, they didn't have a phone number, and they couldn't get the job, and they couldn't pay for nothing because they couldn't get a job. . . . Sometimes they could only lose jobs so much, or not get a job, or have one and don't get treated correctly in it or something, and after a while they give up. They just don't try anymore.

There's only so many times you can get turned down before you give up for some people. Some of the ones I've seen, they try so hard and then they, after a certain point, they won't try anymore and they just give up.

A number of our participants emphasized the way that the "rules had been changed" in the economy in recent years, where workers now need a college education to increase their likelihood of getting ahead in the modern economy. Many are frustrated at the perceived unfairness of these rules changing so late in their lives, at a point where it is much more difficult for them to change, compared to when they were young. Robert wonders, for instance, whether he would have made different decisions earlier in his life had he known the way that the rules were going to change: "When I was growing up they never ever really talked or pushed college much. I mean, now it seems like they're recruiting and going out and getting them right out of high school. I don't remember having that when I was growing up or maybe I would have pursued that, you know?"

Sherry reflected on a similar theme and revealed her thought process concerning how she should now adjust:

I can succeed more if I had a college degree. Back when I was growing up I didn't need that. I didn't think I needed that. But now you need it. I believe I could go to college if I really wanted to right now, but I am old enough to retire. Why go to college, I done worked all these years? I can work part-time and draw Social Security next year and still make a good living. I learned things now that I didn't know then. My dad was in the Army, fought two wars, and I could've went to college because of that, on his Army.

Amy could not help blaming herself for not going to college when she was young, and asserts that anybody can go to college if they wish. In the same response, she admitted that it would be too difficult for her to go to college now with a young child at home. In the same breath that she puts herself down, she (possibly unknowingly) identifies how difficult retraining can be at different stages in the life course.

Many of our participants are anxious about the way that they believe rising prices are outpacing their wage increases, if their wages are increasing at all. Linda's comments are a good example of this concern:

Everything is growing faster than we're getting raises, you know what I mean? It's like, you know, they raising the prices of everything, but yet the people that are working are not getting the proper raises to equal the value of the rest of the world you know . . . it's just not what should be because they going to keep raising the prices of everything like gas, you know food and everything. You know you getting paid the same, that's not equal, and you're struggling.

Likewise, Brenda voiced similar concerns: “There’s not that many jobs, and it’s harder to get a house for your family [these days]. Even if you’re working hard like some of the other people in here, it’s really hard for us just to get by. With the prices rising and stuff. I’m not just talking for the university. The cost of living went up.”

Given the mismatch between the number of good jobs and the number of people who need them, Brenda believes that the government should step in and guarantee work for all:

If the government even paid [poor people] very little, just a little bit would help them get up and out. Because some of them, if you don’t have a home or if you don’t have a solid [phone] number, [employers] won’t hire them. If they don’t have a job, how are they going to get that? Even just a dollar a person, a dollar a hour that would help a lot, and I don’t mean a major job. Picking up the trash around where they’re living. Bringing in cans, helping cut the grass, or just doing anything like that. Cuz we do a lot of that here and there’s the work crews for the state and stuff, for the jails and stuff they have them doing the work crew by roads that would help. That way everything would get picked up every day and there wouldn’t be all the litter on the road. If everybody worked it would improve our environment, improve the people and it might make them feel better that they’re doing something.

Given the intimate ways in which our participants have experienced structural forces, it would have been surprising if structural concerns were completely absent from our discussions. It is clear in their responses that they are often very conscious of the ways that forces beyond individual control can impact people’s lives. At various times, our participants spoke about globalization, deindustrialization, job scarcity, systemic insecurity, the paradox of poverty amid plenty, the decreasing value of a high school diploma, stagnating wages, and the inadequacy of the minimum wage, among other topics. The seeds of resistance to the dominant ideology are clearly present in their reflections on life in the working class.

The challenge is translating these experiences into criticisms of dominant modes of thought. To accomplish this, our participants would need to view these examples as evidence of systemic problems, rather than exceptions to the overall rule of individualism and meritocracy. Without this reformulation, what is left is a population whose dominant tendency is to view abstract questions of autonomy and opportunity from an individualistic perspective, even if they feel the contradictory tensions created by their more non-individualistic concerns in other areas. Their individualistic perspectives persist despite contrary lived experiences and despite the ways in which this perspective denigrates them personally as well as the people they care about in their families and communities.

EXPLAINING WHITE WORKING-CLASS INDIVIDUALISM

There are a variety of possible explanations for why individualism remains so popular among White working-class Americans like the ones we spoke with. Our participants are mostly Republican leaning in their voting behavior (80%) and from similarly Republican-leaning families (80%) who have spent their lives in Appalachia (100%). Beyond these characteristics, research suggests a prominent role for dominant American inequality beliefs, White racism, and the process of dissociation/boundary work.¹¹

Dominant Individualism and White Working-Class Experiences

White Americans across all socioeconomic groups, save for the poorest, have historically found individualistic explanations of poverty and economic inequality more appealing than non-individualistic ones (Feagin 1972; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Chafel 1997; Hunt and Bullock 2016). This reflects the dominant cultural lessons Whites are taught about economic disadvantage throughout their formative years in childhood, beliefs that are then reinforced by the larger culture in adulthood. A number of important books on this topic, including Michèle Lamont's *The Dignity of Working Men*, Joan Williams's *White Working Class*, and Jennifer Silva's *Coming Up Short*, help to explain how these dominant beliefs are filtered through White working-class experiences.

The White working class tends to privilege individualistic explanations of economic disadvantage over non-individualistic ones, as Michèle Lamont explains:

White [working class] workers do not privilege structural explanations . . . none provided a full-fledged structural explanation of poverty or of the precariousness of the condition of workers. They take a more individualist perspective, which has resonance for them: their own self-identity, and given their living conditions, struggles to pull one's weight and remain self-sufficient against all odds are central. In this context, they particularly resent that others receive help from the state. In the words of Tim Williams, the laborer, "Everything I got now I made myself. Nobody gave it to me. And anybody can do it." (2000:134)

Jennifer Silva's interviews with working-class Americans revealed that they were staunchly individualistic and do not trust government or dominant institutions. They tend to "embrace self-sufficiency over solidarity and blame those who are unsuccessful in the labor market . . . the cultural logic of neoliberalism resonates at the deepest level of self" (Silva 2013:18). Silva's participants are "acquiescing neoliberal subjects" (2013:109) who "long to

return to an imagined past in which the government did not interfere with markets, thus allowing individuals—understood as *transcendent of race*—to determine the course of their own lives” (2013:82). Silva explains these beliefs in more detail:

As they grow up, they learn to see their struggles to survive on their own as morally right, making virtue out of not asking for help; if they could do it, then everyone else should too. This sense of distrust and rugged individualism permeates intimate relationships and permeates gender and racial divisions. (2013:17)

Silva found that many of her participants “draw unforgiving boundaries against their family members and friends who cannot transform their selves—overcome addictions, save money, heal troubled relationships—through sheer determination alone” (2013:19).

Factors like dominant individualism, race, and the precariousness of their lives have a profound influence on White working-class worldviews. Joan Williams expands upon the manner in which everyday insecurity shapes their worldviews:

For working-class Americans, maintaining two full-time jobs and a settled life is a significant achievement, one that takes unrelenting drive and rigorous self-discipline. . . . Working-class whites like “people who care,” “who are clean,” “not disruptive,” “stand-up kind of people.” They dislike “irresponsible people who live for the moment.” The values most admired are “honesty,” “being responsible,” “having integrity,” and “being hardworking.” Those most despised are “dishonesty,” “being irresponsible,” and “being lazy.” (2017:16–17)

Working-class Whites internalize the dominant ideology and use it to make sense of their lives. On average, they tend to place a heavy emphasis on hard work, personal responsibility, and traditional morality as the means of struggling against the precarious nature of their lives and the social decay in their communities. They see these as the only means of survival and possible upward mobility. They believe that failure in these areas carries greater consequences for them than for higher-class Americans. They attribute their own success to hard work and living moral, “settled” lives, while believing those who fail have laziness, immorality, and “hard living” to blame. They believe they have a future orientation and impulse control, unlike groups below them. Working-class Whites believe that, despite being lazy and immoral, the poor and African Americans receive government assistance unavailable to the working class—despite the fact that, as Suzanne Mettler demonstrates in *The Submerged State*, over 90 percent of Americans, not just the poor, use government programs of one kind or another (2011:37). Because of this perceived illegitimate assistance, working-class Whites believe the poor and

many African Americans are allowed to live easier lives than the working class. They feel betrayed by labor markets, by the government, and even by those people closest to them. They are on their own, with little trust in people or institutions (Lamont 2000; Silva 2013; Williams 2017).

This is not to say the White working class wants people to feel bad for them, or are asking for anything resembling welfare or charity. Being offered welfare or being treated like a victim is perceived as a major affront to their dignity, a dignity that has been built on beliefs about their perceived superior hard work and morality. But they would like material help in the form of better jobs. They would also like cultural recognition of the legitimacy of their way of life, the societal importance of blue collar work, and the discipline they believe is required to make ends meet and avoid the ever-present pitfalls (drugs, despair, etc.) of their precarious circumstances (Lamont 2000; Williams 2017).

Working-class Whites resent the poor and African Americans, not just for receiving what they perceive to be illegitimate assistance for economic insecurity that they believe could be better overcome by working harder and living more moral lives, but for receiving undeserved cultural sympathy unavailable to working-class Whites. Joan Williams notes, "During an era when wealthy white Americans have learned to sympathetically imagine the lives of the poor, people of color, and LGBTQ people, the white working class has been insulted or ignored during precisely the period when their economic fortunes tanked" (2017:3). Many of these working-class Americans feel left behind both economically and culturally. This can breed resentment, according to Williams: "When you leave the two-thirds of Americans without college degrees out of your vision of the good life, they notice. And when elites commit to equality for many different groups but arrogantly dismiss 'the dark rigidity of fundamentalist rural America,' this is a recipe for extreme alienation among working-class whites" (2017:4).

Race and White Working-Class Individualism

It is clear that the dominant individualism that is popular among most White socioeconomic groups is also popular amid the working class, reinforced by experiences unique to their specific social location. But why are they different from their African American working-class counterparts, who Lamont and others have found are much more structurally oriented?

It has been well documented that African Americans are consistently more structurally oriented than Whites (Hunt and Bullock 2016). This pattern is present among the working class as well:

When it comes to attitudes about government programs, working-class African Americans differ from whites in an important way: African Americans understand

the structural nature of inequality. Working-class African Americans are more like the French (and unlike white working-class Americans) in their nonjudgmental “there but for the grace of God go I” attitude toward the poor, and their felt need for solidarity. (Williams 2017:22–23)

Previous research strongly suggests central roles for race and racism in explaining this phenomenon. Race shapes our perspectives in profound ways. The experience of discrimination, for instance, gives African Americans a much deeper understanding of how structural forces impact people’s lives. As Kluegel and Smith (1986) note, African Americans

are the group of Americans that come closest to being “class conscious” in the Marxian definition. . . . Opportunity for economic advancement has been explicitly denied on the basis of race. Residential, occupational, and other bases of racial segregation persist. Accordingly, blacks do express a greater sense of group consciousness than do members of other social groups. (1986:289)

Hunt and Bullock, summarizing research in this area, note that “Blacks’ greater structuralism is attributable to their history of group-based oppression and their continued disadvantage in U.S. society” (2016:103). Whites differ from African Americans in both not being disadvantaged by systemic racism and not being taught to see themselves in racial terms (DiAngelo 2018). They are therefore less likely to identify the ways in which race structures their experiences. In the absence of being taught to see themselves in racial terms or experiencing discrimination or some other radicalizing experience that might inculcate a critical view of dominant individualism, the dominant ideology goes largely unchallenged among many Whites.¹² Whites in America are like a jogger running with the wind, feeling fast and strong and unaware of (or worse, unwilling to acknowledge) the forces aiding him or her. African Americans are a jogger running against the wind, struggling to overcome forces of which they are keenly aware, and feeling ignored when they draw attention to them.

Growing up White in America not only renders structural forces partially invisible, but it also shapes how one views other racial groups. One important reason working-class Whites in the U.S. have beliefs dissimilar to those of working-class African Americans and working-class workers in many other countries is that they lack solidarity with others who are struggling. This lack of solidarity is at least partially related to racist White assumptions about African Americans. Many Whites assume that most of the poor are African American and that African Americans are not as committed to hard work and traditional morality as Whites (Gilens 1999; Lamont 2000; Williams 2017).

Joan Williams summarizes this dynamic, noting that “settled working-class whites, whose claims to privilege rest on morality and hard work, stereotype black people by conflating hard living and race” (2017:63). This has a significant impact on Whites’ views of poverty, inequality, and welfare. Additionally, working-class Whites scapegoat other social groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, for Whites’ loss of status in recent decades (A. Hochschild 2016; Green 2017; Khazan 2018; Mutz 2018).

In *The Dignity of Working Men*, Michèle Lamont notes that “work ethic and responsibility are privileged in drawing boundaries against blacks and the poor” (2000:54). She goes on to argue that “white Americans value individualism, self-reliance, a work ethic, obedience, and discipline, and they believe that blacks violate these values. Thus, they say that their racism is motivated not by a dislike of blacks but by a concern for key American values” (Lamont 2000:71).

Many Whites see both poverty and welfare as synonymous with being Black, and believe African Americans are disproportionately poor due to their lack of work ethic, morality, and family values. As Lamont notes, many working-class Whites “see blacks as lazy and contrast their own work ethic with that of black workers” (2000:3). She notes, “Many of the white workers I interviewed associated blacks with welfare, dependency, and affirmation action, just as they think of their own identity as organized around responsibility and hard work” (Lamont 2000:60). Adding insult to injury, in their view, many working-class Whites believe African Americans, after failing to prove themselves through hard work and playing by the rules, nevertheless still receive an unfair leg up from racially targeted government assistance and policies:

Whites also cite special privileges associated with affirmative action, perhaps the most contentious policy issue around which the American racial drama is played. Whites view it as particularly unfair because they believe they can count only on themselves to get ahead in life. This is essential to their class identity as they believe that it differentiates them from the middle class: they rarely get a break and no one is trying to pass on advantages to them. They are angry that they have to work harder than blacks to be promoted while they also go through great pain to remain self-reliant. (Lamont 2000:62)

These false, racist beliefs are an important reason why many working-class Whites resist taking a structural view of economic disadvantage in ways that other working-class groups do not. The overwhelmingly negative view of welfare among our participants, and widespread concern about the perceived out-of-control fertility, drug abuse, and laziness of welfare recipients, is very likely related to these false yet deeply held racist beliefs.

Stigma, Dissociation, and Boundary Work

A number of studies have noted a process of dissociation or “boundary work” among struggling Americans (Briar 1966; Rank 1994; Seccombe 2011; Lamont 2000; Silva 2013). This is a process whereby struggling Americans, in order to maintain dignity and/or manage stigma, set themselves apart from other social groups as well as members of their own social group. This phenomenon is pronounced among the poor, and welfare recipients in particular, but can also be found among the working class.

In Irving Goffman’s seminal work on stigma, Goffman noted that a stigmatized individual possesses “an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind,” and this attribute has a discrediting effect (1963:2–3). In response to the stigma of failing to live up to American expectations of self-reliance, and what this failure says about their own talents, effort, choices, and/or morality, many individuals will try to reduce this stigma by managing their own sense of self, as well as the impression that they project to others in their social interactions. Many struggling Americans—whether they are working class, poor, or on welfare—do not reject but share the general public’s negative view of the economically marginalized. In light of their own marginalized position, they then try hard to convince themselves and others that they are one of the few exceptions, that they are not truly “of” these groups.

In an early study of welfare recipients’ perspectives, Scott Briar found that the recipients he interviewed displayed a “sense of estrangement” from other welfare recipients:

This characteristic estrangement—also manifest in a tendency to view oneself as an atypical recipient, a self-conception which seemed to be held by nearly all the recipients interviewed—reflects the desire of these recipients to dissociate themselves from the image they have of other recipients. Our respondents expressed opinions about other public welfare recipients which usually have been associated primarily with conservative, anti-welfare groups. (1966:51)

Most of Briar’s participants almost never referred to welfare recipients as “we” but as “they.” This is due in large part to a process through which they set themselves apart from other recipients. While most recipients were highly skeptical of the reasons for others’ welfare use, “each recipient regarded as justifiable his own reason for seeking welfare assistance” (Briar 1966:51). In dissociating themselves from other recipients, they were able to manage the stigma of welfare use by asserting the legitimacy and dignity of their own situation in opposition to the less dignified and less legitimate situations of others.

Karen Seccombe and Mark Rank found similar phenomena in their respective later studies *So You Think I Drive a Cadillac?* and *Living on the Edge*.

In Seccombe's *Cadillac* study, for example, "Most of the women interviewed continued to distance themselves from other recipients while simultaneously blaming their own welfare use on forces beyond their control. They felt that they were on welfare through no fault of their own, but other recipients were often responsible for their own economic plight" (2011:66). Some identified themselves as middle class. Others contrasted the individualistic reasons responsible for the plight of other recipients to the external sources responsible for their own struggles. Describing this phenomenon, Seccombe notes:

Women on welfare often subscribe to the popular individual perspective to explain poverty and welfare use—at least to explain why other women use welfare. They criticize other welfare recipients for lacking incentive and motivation to improve their economic circumstances. The women interviewed want to distance themselves as far as possible from other recipients. (2011:61)

In Mark Rank's study he found a similar phenomenon. While 82 percent of his participants felt that they were on welfare due to circumstances beyond their control, approximately 90 percent felt that other recipients were either partially or fully to blame for their circumstances (Rank 1994:133, 142).

While the working class is not as economically disadvantaged or stigmatized as welfare recipients, they engage in a somewhat similar process of dissociation. Michèle Lamont, for instance, observed what she called "boundary work" in her study *The Dignity of Working Men*. Lamont describes how the working class draws boundaries around other social groups, distancing themselves from those above and below as a means of maintaining a sense of dignity. The boundaries for the White working class, Lamont argues, are organized around issues of morality: "[Morality] helps workers to maintain a sense of self-worth, to affirm their dignity independently of their relatively low social status, and to locate themselves above others" (2000:19). Lamont describes this boundary work more fully:

Morality is generally at the center of these workers' worlds. They find their self-worth in their ability to discipline themselves and conduct responsible yet caring lives to ensure order for themselves and others. These moral standards function as an alternative to economic definitions of success and offer them a way to maintain dignity and to make sense of their lives in a land where the American dream is ever more out of reach. Workers use these standards to define who they are and, just as important, who they are not. Hence, they draw the line that delimits an imagined community of "people like me" who share the same sacred values. (2000:3)

They believe they are better than those above them, for instance, because they believe they have more integrity, more sincerity, and better relationships.

They believe they are above those below them, such as the poor and African Americans, because of their superior morality, discipline, work ethic, and personal responsibility.

In her book *White Working Class*, Joan Williams (2017) catalogues a variety of working-class assumptions that contribute to the boundaries that they create between themselves and the poor. From the perspective of the working class, the poor receive government assistance not available to the working class, whose members work multiple jobs just to survive and would never suffer the indignity of welfare use, anyway. The poor succumb to despair, drugs, and alcohol, which the working class avoids. Many in the working class grew up in the same conditions as the poor, yet walked the razor's edge and somehow climbed the socioeconomic ladder through hard work, smart choices, discipline, and sacrifice. Unlike the poor, the working class is committed to responsibility, morality, and integrity. Where the poor cannot control their impulses or plan for the future, the working class regularly forgoes immediate gratification for their long-term goals. The working class must meet the impossible demands of full-time employment and child care, while the poor do not work yet still have their child care subsidized. The poor allow themselves to be seen as victims, something the working class would never endure. Yet, despite all of this, it is the *poor* who receive society's sympathy, not the *harder working and worse-off working class* (Williams 2017:13–23). Whether and to what degree any of these assumptions have merit, many in the working class nonetheless believe them. And in doing so, they draw boundaries around themselves and the poor in ways that make it more difficult to cite non-individualistic forces for both groups' plight and more difficult to develop the kinds of solidarity that might emerge from that realization.

Recently, Jennifer Silva also observed such boundary work around social class and race among her working-class participants:

Working-class men and women draw harsh boundaries against those who cannot make it on their own, revealing deep animosities toward others—particularly African Americans—who are perceived as undeserving of help. In the end, by rejecting solidarity with others, insisting that they are individuals who can define their own identities and futures, and hardening themselves against social institutions and the government, working-class men and women willingly embrace neoliberalism as the commonsense solution to the problems of bewilderment and betrayal that plague their coming of age journeys. (2013:84)

Our participants are engaged in a similar dissociation and boundary-drawing process. Unlike welfare recipients in some of the studies cited above, our participants maintained individualistic explanations of others' plight *and* of their own fortunes. To adopt a structural worldview for themselves would

be seen as a claim to victimhood and/or an association with the poor, both of which conflict with their White working-class identities and worldviews.

Our participants constructed themselves as a separate group from the poor and other struggling Americans despite the fact that many of our participants have struggled mightily throughout their lives. Like Lamont's participants, ours emphasized their work ethic (through their stable employment) and morality (through their lack of drug abuse). However much they struggle, they perceive their morality, commitment to hard work, and ability to maintain stable employment as at least some measure of success, dignity, and mobility—and as previous research suggests, people who perceive themselves as upwardly mobile may be more likely than those who do not to favor individualism (Gugushvili 2016). Their perceived elevated status is differentiated less by income and more by their work ethic and morality. Because they are not poor and not on welfare, and because of their employment and sobriety, they feel they can make claims to fulfilling the American ethos.

In addition to this pride at having achieved some measure of success, there was a palpable sense of relief at having escaped childhoods filled with very scary and unhappy episodes. Focusing on their stable employment and sobriety not only projects an image outward to others that is less stigmatized, but projects a message inward, intended for oneself, aimed at managing the fear that one will ever again have to face such difficult circumstances.

NOTES

1. Those defined as “White” in this analysis, as well as throughout this chapter, are non-Hispanic White.

2. Large portions of this chapter have been either reprinted or adapted from Lawrence Eppard, Dan Schubert, and Henry A. Giroux, “The Double Violence of Inequality: Precarity, Individualism, and White Working-Class Americans,” *Sociological Viewpoints* 32(1), 2018. This material appears here with the written permission of the editor of *Sociological Viewpoints*, Patricia Neff Cluster.

3. Throughout much of the book, for ease of reading, we use “White” interchangeably with “non-Hispanic White.”

4. Universities qualified if they are located in a county either inside of the Appalachian region or directly bordering a county in the region. We defined the Appalachian region according to the boundaries utilized by the Appalachian Regional Commission: https://www.arc.gov/appalachian_region/CountiesinAppalachia.asp.

5. As both incentive for participation and a thank-you for sharing their time and stories with us, participants were offered Walmart gift cards ranging from fifteen to twenty-five dollars.

6. This is a pseudonym. All names and (wherever possible) identifying information of participants in this chapter have been changed to protect the identities of

research participants. This is a requirement of our IRB protocol and the ethics of social scientific research.

7. Calculations based on data from the Living Wage Calculator: <http://living-wage.mit.edu/>.

8. See the U.S. Census poverty thresholds: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html>.

9. One analysis of a four-month period in Florida found that 2.6 percent of welfare applicants failed drug tests, less than the 8 percent of the general Florida population that used illegal drugs (Cunha 2014). Female welfare recipients have a fertility rate that is considerably lower than that of women in the general population, and the longer a woman remains on welfare the less likely she is to give birth (Rank 1989). From Mark Rank's previous research on welfare-recipient fertility: "The quantitative analysis has demonstrated that welfare recipients have a relatively low fertility rate. Their rate is considerably below that of women in the general population and is not an artifact of a more favorable demographic structure. Furthermore, the longer a woman remains on welfare, the less likely she is to give birth" (1989:301).

10. As mentioned previously, one analysis of a four-month period in Florida found that 2.6 percent of welfare applicants failed drug tests, less than the 8 percent of the general Florida population used illegal drugs (Cunha 2014). In addition, female welfare recipients have a fertility rate that is considerably lower than women in the general population, and the longer a woman remains on welfare the less likely she is to give birth (Rank 1989).

11. While the results of this study have important implications concerning the strength of individualism among the White working class in the U.S., there are limitations that limit generalizability. The most significant are that our sample was small, non-random, and not representative enough to be generalized to the entire White working class.

12. One caveat that should be mentioned, however, is that in recent work by Jennifer Silva, she found that (1) commitment to meritocracy among working-class African Americans was stronger than their belief in racial inequality and that (2) despite the acknowledgment of systemic racism among working-class African American respondents, they resisted framing themselves as victims of racism. Silva found that "disdain for minorities who cannot pull themselves up by their bootstraps prevails among both white and black respondents" (2013:107).

Chapter Six

Paved with Good Intentions

In the previous chapter, we found a high level of support for individualistic beliefs among the White working-class workers we interviewed, despite their significant financial struggles throughout their lives. These working-class Americans, disadvantaged by a number of forces beyond their control, are largely unwilling to acknowledge possible structural roots of these forces or provide strong support for policies that might help counteract them. At the same time, they espouse ideologies that stigmatize themselves and the people they care about in their families and communities.

We now turn our attention to social workers. As we look across the American social landscape for possible challenges to the dominant ideology, social work stands out as a possible exemplar. As Gregg Robinson explains in his study of both social workers and teachers, these professionals play a role of particular importance in the lives of the disadvantaged:

This importance is manifested in three ways: first, through the services they provide for low-income children; second, through the understanding of poverty they bring to poor families; and third, as allies in poor people's struggles. . . . Social workers intervene to protect children and to save families . . . in the process of their interventions, social workers and teachers also provide a view of poverty that becomes part of poor children's self-understanding . . . teachers and social workers are also possible allies in struggles over anti-poverty reforms. Poor people are often in need of allies in their struggles against deprivation and dislocation. . . . Given how important social workers and teachers are to poor people, their view of poverty is of considerable significance. (2011:2375–76)

Social workers play an undoubtedly crucial role in the lives of the poor, and thus we designed a research project to explore their inequality beliefs.

Furthermore, our interest grew after early conversations with these students as we prepared for the project. In exploratory conversations with aspiring social workers for this study, a majority of the social work students (referred to as “BSW students” hereafter) explicitly stated, without prompting, that a critical reason they were studying social work, one that they said was a crucial part of their developing professional identities, was that they considered their beliefs to be oppositional to dominant American individualism. This seemed like a valuable test of the dominant ideology. If dominant individualistic beliefs showed up strongly among this group, despite their claims that they reject such beliefs, it would suggest a dominant ideology highly resistant to challenges.

An ideology is particularly powerful not just if it appeals to those most drawn to it, but if it also makes its way into the worldviews of people who believe they oppose it. We likely learn more about the strength and persistence of dominant ideologies by examining their perpetuation among those with the weakest attachment to them. It should be noted that this is *not* a study of the field of social work or a critique of the profession. It is instead an examination of the power of the ideology of individualism among a group who professes little sympathy for it.

From the summer of 2012 until early 2013, we¹ interviewed 25 of the 97 students actively enrolled in an undergraduate BSW program at a university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States.² This program consisted of students who were mostly White, overwhelmingly female, and overwhelmingly from middle- and upper-middle class families and communities. We asked the students a variety of questions related to the causes of poverty and economic inequality in the U.S., as well as their attitudes toward welfare. Students were recruited utilizing convenience and snowball sampling. The interview data were analyzed utilizing qualitative coding techniques similar to those articulated by Kathy Charmaz (2006).

Despite espousing a structural perspective in exploratory conversations, and despite ranking social structuralism as the perspective they most agreed with at the beginning of our interviews, individualism dominated their interview responses and was clearly the most popular explanation of economic disadvantage among our sample. Despite truly believing that they reject the dominant ideology, we found that most students privileged it over other non-individualistic explanations in their interview responses.

ASHLEY: FIERCELY AND UNAPOLOGETICALLY INDIVIDUALISTIC

Ashley³ is one of the most fiercely individualistic students we spoke with. Her worldview seems almost entirely dependent on individualistic assump-

tions, with hints of structural arguments under specific and limited circumstances. It is useful to examine Ashley's beliefs because, while she was certainly on the extreme end of the individualism spectrum in this study, a majority of students' worldviews were more similar to Ashley's than to a non-individualistic one.

Ashley strongly believes that the U.S. is a meritocracy. This is reinforced by her family's upward mobility from poverty to the upper class. She believes this mobility is the result of her father's hard work, a belief that justifies not only her family's success but also fuels her criticisms of others who do not find similar success. If her family can be upwardly mobile from poverty to the upper class, she believes, it is proof that all Americans can be similarly mobile:

[The U.S.] is absolutely a meritocracy. I see my father and his life as a perfect example. I think all of my family gets very frustrated when people say that you can never rise out of poverty. Seeing my dad really work from the bottom up I know it is possible. We went from poverty to the upper class in one generation. I think there is a lot to be said about working hard and being able to achieve success.

Ashley believes that no person has a right to complain about her or his social position since it can be changed by individual hard work and smart choices. She believes her political conservatism and religiosity shape her beliefs, saying, "My religious views of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, they go hand-in-hand. We believe very strongly that you should be self-sufficient, that you need to depend upon yourself and don't go looking for somebody else to bail you out."

Ashley often bristles at the statements of her colleagues and the content of her class lectures. She believes that social work students and professors are "too liberal" and often questions the motives behind the challenging of what she considers to be unassailable individualistic assumptions: "I do disagree with course materials a whole lot, stuff we read and study . . . there have definitely been times when I read textbooks or articles that are assigned to us and I think, what are they teaching us?" She said she is often made to "feel a lot of cognitive dissonance" between what she knows to be true and what is being taught in her program. Ashley made a lengthy argument that her professors were intentionally choosing articles that were liberally biased and based on poor research. Discussing articles that the students had been assigned concerning the ineffectiveness of welfare drug testing, she said, "The research is very liberally-biased, slanted, whatever you want to say."

In discussing welfare with Ashley, we learned not only about her beliefs concerning public assistance but also related beliefs concerning poverty and economic inequality. One major concern for her is what she perceives to be the problem of welfare dependency. When we asked her whether she would

ever turn to welfare if she needed it, she was quite hesitant (understandably given her individualistic beliefs), saying, “I would feel very much like I was a burden to society.” If she absolutely had to use welfare, she argued, she would use it correctly: “I think the key difference [between her and other welfare recipients] is I would not depend upon it in a long-term situation. I would say, ‘This is just going to be a few months, maybe even a year.’ My goal in the beginning of receiving welfare would be to get off of it, not depend on it forever.” Ashley believes that there are limitless opportunities in the U.S., and all Americans can succeed if they so decide, so short-term welfare use is fundamentally important to her beliefs concerning welfare. Her strong belief in individualism leads her to be “scared” about the role of the government in helping to address social problems:

There are a lot of opportunities for people to depend upon the government right now, I think it is so freaking scary. I saw this in my internship—I think it is very scary to have someone not willing to work because of unemployment [benefits]. If unemployment is offered to you for 18 months and it is greater than the amount you can get at a part-time job or a full-time job, why not take the unemployment? And it will last you longer and offer more security in that way. But of course it doesn’t take you above the poverty line. I mean it will help you be somewhat self-sufficient but not adequately enough. I think long-term I think there’s always going to be poverty, there’s never going to be enough for everybody.

Despite her strongly individualistic beliefs, her answer contains the seeds of non-individualistic assumptions. She said that people will rely on government benefits such as unemployment compensation if they are greater in cash value and provide more security than what the low-wage labor market can provide. Depending on one’s perspective, this could be seen as a biting criticism of low-wage work in the U.S. Minimum wage is typically not equal to a living wage for American families, and welfare leavers often find that low-wage employment does not provide an improvement in earnings over welfare (see the Living Wage Calculator,⁴ as well as Cancian et al. 2002). Ashley interprets this differently, of course, believing that the poor should take the low-wage work anyway. Yet the seeds of a non-individualistic argument are there and could be developed.

Ashley went on to argue that government benefits will not raise an individual above the poverty line, and then went a step further and argued that there is “never going to be enough for everybody.” Such notions highlight a level of scarcity that clearly contradicts her belief in limitless opportunities. Ashley does not let any of these structural sentiments override her individualistic beliefs, but the seeds of a challenge to the dominant ideology are there. Instead

of acknowledging these sentiments and how they might modify her individualistic beliefs, Ashley seemed to sweep them aside. Inadequate welfare benefits and a scarcity of living-wage work, and the consequences for those whose lose out in the competition for scarce opportunities and resources, are somehow tolerable for her. For Ashley, welfare dependency is a greater ill.

Ashley believes strongly in the importance of hard work, a belief that is reinforced by her family's upward mobility. This belief leads her to support policies that will push people into the low-wage labor market, even if that market provides inadequate wages. She believes that everybody can work despite their circumstances, saying, "I feel that working is something that, no matter what your situation, it should happen. Especially if it is full-time work." She supported this belief by asserting that jobs are available for all who want them. She does not believe that poor mothers with young children should be exempted from the expectation to work, arguing, "Sacrifices have to come instead of just handing things to people and saying, 'Okay we'll pay you to stay at home with your kids.'" For Ashley, government assistance is a burden to taxpayers, and welfare use to her is by definition dependency, since economic opportunities are always available.

Despite discussing at length how her internship helped her to understand the complexities of addiction, Ashley framed drug addiction as a personal choice. In explaining her support for welfare drug testing, she argued, "We could bring this to their eyes and help them realize that they can't receive things because they are dealing with something that is feeding into their poverty." She strongly disagrees with critics of welfare drug testing, saying, "I don't think we can play the victim card. . . . I don't think they can say that we are being blamed, you know, playing the victim."

Despite her strongly individualistic beliefs, she did acknowledge some non-individualistic influences. Her internship in a homeless shelter helped her realize "that the stigmas and the stereotypes [about homeless individuals] aren't always correct." She said, "The homeless shelter internship changed my perspective, changed a lot of the attitudes and stereotypes I believed before working there. It changed a lot of my opinions." The biggest myths about homeless individuals that were debunked by her internship experiences, Ashley explained, were the assumption of rampant alcohol and drug use as well as about the causes of addiction. She said, "I think my eyes have really been opened as to the complexity behind addiction. Nobody gets into drugs and alcohol and says, 'Oh I want to become an addict,' or, 'I want to go into the criminal justice system.' I think there is a lot to be said about the person and their environment. Nothing happens in a vacuum." She also believes her internship helped her understand how an individual can become homeless through causes beyond their personal choices, and educated her about the

need for more affordable housing. She would contradict these statements at other times in our interview, demanding that those battling addiction not play the “victim card” and espousing strongly individualistic beliefs about the causes of poverty and economic inequality.

Beyond the homeless and people with conditions that could be justified on medical grounds, Ashley hardly acknowledged structural factors that might play a role for the rest of the poor. There were seeds of possible challenges to her dominant beliefs, but she remained individualistic on the vast majority of questions concerning poverty, economic inequality, and welfare. And while she was one of the most individualistically oriented students we spoke with, a majority of our participants were closer to her worldview than to a structurally oriented one.

INDIVIDUALISM: THE DOMINANT BELIEFS

Like Ashley, a majority of the BSW students supported a meritocratic vision of the U.S. and individualistic explanations of poverty and economic inequality.⁵ After individualism (60% support), the second most popular worldview was an individualism/structuralism compromise⁶ (36%), where both structural and individualistic assumptions were important to the participant, but neither was clearly privileged. A purely structural worldview was by far the least popular (4%), with only one student clearly defined as structurally oriented. While a sizeable minority of students espoused a compromise worldview, the primary focus of this chapter will be the dominant perspective espoused by our participants. Toward the end of the chapter, we provide examples of participants who expressed non-individualistic beliefs.

America: Land of Meritocracy and Opportunity

The belief that the U.S. is a meritocracy, where individual effort, choices, and talent determine one’s outcomes in life, was supported by a majority of the students. Of the twenty-five participants, 68 percent either agreed (56%) or somewhat agreed (12%), while 32 percent disagreed. Among the students who did not agree or only partially agreed, there was a tendency to suggest that while social barriers to upward mobility do exist for some people but not others, most people can overcome them if they try hard enough.

Most students agreed that hard work leads to success in a country like the U.S. because of the (assumed) virtually endless number of opportunities available. Jennifer, for instance, explained, “I would say individualism is what I most agree with . . . There are so many opportunities, its America, I

mean come on.” There was real exasperation in her voice when she delivered the line “I mean come on,” revealing disbelief that anybody could claim their failure in the economic game was the result of anything other than their own inability to grasp one of many opportunities available to all.

Like Jennifer, many of the BSW students have a hard time sympathizing with people who do not ultimately succeed amid so much perceived opportunity. Most of our participants believe that working hard in a land of endless opportunity leads to success for all who choose that path, regardless of the social class of origin. The belief in endless opportunities, along with the belief in the inevitable success that follows from hard work and smart choices, tended to go hand-in-hand with assumptions about welfare dependency.

Sarah argued that her fellow BSW classmates are “too structural” in their worldviews, saying, “I’ve seen classmates talk strongly about structuralism, how society puts different people in one area, how society distributes wages and stuff like that. So I’ve heard of those opinions. I don’t agree.” Sarah finds it difficult to accept the structural point of view because she believes anybody can “live minimum,” in her words, in the “land of opportunity” as long as they work hard and make smart choices: “Just because to me, I believe that poverty’s a very strong word. Poverty says you have nothing there. You might not be rich . . . but if you work hard, and if you make the right choices, you can actually—no matter what society throws at you, you can actually live minimum.” Sarah espoused the popular belief that any social barrier can be overcome if one tries hard enough. She also questioned whether the federal poverty threshold is too high, leading the government to overestimate the number of poor Americans.

Peter believes that opportunities are available for all who want them, and individuals are ultimately responsible for their own plight. He explained, “My personal belief is that whatever you get [in life] is what you put into it.” Peter stated that, because the U.S. has a higher standard of living than many other countries, Americans should be grateful regardless of where they end up in the social hierarchy:

Everyone says there’s no jobs right now, right? But there are jobs, there’s just not jobs that you like or that pay enough according to you. Everyone wants that one job that pays more than enough to live off of so they don’t have to work multiple jobs. But the bottom line is, if you have a job at McDonalds, yes, it doesn’t pay that well. Yes, it’s not a prestigious job. But that’s a job and a job is better than no job. When I was growing up in [Asia], if you converted the currency, people could make \$2.50 an hour and live happily. . . . I remember growing up, we didn’t have a fridge. . . . We had no centralized heating. I remember as a kid my job was to go downstairs and pick up pieces of coal. I think people take the concept of the “land of opportunity,” you know, they should get

the best, I think people take that a little too far. . . . Also I personally think, what keeps the perpetual cycle of poverty going, it's like that book from when you were a kid, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. People can't just—you give someone one thing and they can't be content with it. They have to have more.

To Peter, the distribution of resources in the U.S. seems equitable because of the high American standard of living, a notion that was widespread in the interview data.

Olivia said she “agrees a lot” with the individualistic perspective. She believes that opportunities are available for all who want them and, despite barriers that may make the path somewhat difficult, it is ultimately the personal responsibility of individuals to make the right choices and be successful:

I understand the system has been very unfair to you . . . but you are still a person. There is still the personal responsibility factor. And while all these things maybe are against you, if you give into the system it is your choice . . . giving in to the system is a personal decision. . . . Somebody very close to me, his dad is a cabdriver and his mom has a similar low-income job. But they are putting him through college. I am a firm believer that it is about the decisions that you make and I think sometimes that is where I differ from other social work majors. I see a lot of my social work friends are very much like, ‘Well it wasn't their fault.’ . . . I think that sometimes we need to be a little bit harsher. . . . I think sometimes I am a little bit more like, “That was their personal decision.”

Olivia's answer contained an assumption that was widespread in the interview data: success and failure are a matter of choices and decisions. She believes her personal experience is proof of this. According to this logic, individuals are subject to social forces only if they so choose, even if those social forces create barriers not experienced by others. She also repeated a common argument that because upward mobility is demonstrably possible for some, it is possible for all. Like Sarah and Ashley and a number of others, she gets annoyed by the structuralist arguments of her classmates. We heard this complaint a number of times from a number of participants, a suggestion of widespread structuralism among their colleagues that did not seem to square well with the obvious dominant individualism in our sample.

Ashley, you will remember, strongly believes that because her family was upwardly mobile from poverty to the upper class, everybody else can make that climb if they so choose. She says that the U.S. is “absolutely” a meritocracy, and Ashley and her family members get frustrated when they hear people disagree with that claim. Ashley was not alone in “proving” this through her life experience, as many students relied on anecdotal evidence to reinforce their beliefs. Ashley believes in the core tenets of American individ-

ualism: opportunities exist for all who want them, and hard work provides a surefire path to success. She also revealed an assumption that was widespread in the interview data: because mobility is possible for some, like her family, it is proof that it is possible for all.

Welfare Dependency

Related to the notion of endless opportunities is the widespread concern with welfare dependency. Rather than framing welfare as a means of addressing structural deficiencies, many of the students believe that welfare use is a sign that people cannot succeed on their own in a society of abundance and instead must depend on the hard-earned money of others. After all, the logic goes, why would welfare recipients depend upon others' money when a decent-paying job is presumably waiting for them? Welfare was typically framed as a redistribution of meritocratically earned resources rather than a correction of structural imbalances. Students also tended to frame welfare dependency as inherently immoral.

Jennifer discussed her homeless shelter internship experience and how it helped reinforce her beliefs about the tendency of welfare recipients to become dependent:

I saw it all the time at the homeless internship I did. A lot of those people, they were all homeless and whatever, they had families, and didn't have money and couldn't afford their own homes. So they would get on this list to get a home . . . but instead of trying to make their lives better, like trying to go to school or trying to get a job or saving their money and only buying necessities, they just didn't care. They thought, "Well, okay now I have this home, the government is helping us, they're giving us money, they're giving us all of these free things, I don't have to worry about that anymore. I am just going to rely on them instead of trying to get on my own feet." We were trying to get them on their feet and have them do the work to stay there, but they got really comfortable. It was really, really frustrating. No matter how many times a case manager would talk to them and say, "Hey, you need to do this or that," they just didn't.

Jennifer, like many of her colleagues, framed welfare dependency as the refusal to work hard and grasp widespread opportunities. As we did with the other participants, we asked Jennifer whether she would ever turn to welfare if she needed it. She quickly assured us, "I would try anything that I could think of to get out of it. I would figure it out and make it better." Jennifer's answer reinforced her other comments about welfare dependency, and like most of the students, she assured us that she would use welfare in a "correct" and "moral" manner.

Isabel believes that poverty and welfare dependency are problems that are passed down from one generation to the next:

Sometimes I think it [poverty/welfare] is just a circle. There is no beginning or end. It becomes like a circle for people. . . . Sometimes I think there is no improvement for those people. They just keep getting the same benefits or the same assistance. . . . [For] the people that I have seen it is just like a chain. My family got this, your family will get this, and your kids will get this.

For Isabel, the poor inherit deficiencies from their parents that prevent them from grasping widespread opportunities.

Natalia argued that welfare recipients need to be forced out of their dependency in order for them to grasp endless opportunities: “I think welfare should kind of get them on their feet, provide them with enough resources, and then kind of push them off. Because I also feel that a lot of people get dependent on it. . . . If you really want to get off welfare, then you will make yourself get off welfare.” Natalia believes that welfare use is a choice and those who want to leave the system can simply choose to do so. She said that being too generous with welfare causes her and other social workers providing aid “to get angry with ourselves, asking why are there all of these people on welfare?” Natalia believes that welfare assistance that is too generous is “feeding into the system.”

One useful interview technique was to pose a general question about poverty and/or welfare and see which topic the student was eager to discuss first, to see which topic was most salient and pressing. Ashley, like many students, immediately began talking about dependency when the topic of welfare was introduced. Referencing the Great Recession that was fresh in people’s minds at the time of the interview, she immediately seized on dependency, implying that expanded unemployment insurance was creating too many disincentives for the unemployed. Ashley echoed much of the rhetoric that had been popular in the most recent presidential campaign at the time of the interview: it was the government, not the economic crisis, that was keeping people in an economically vulnerable position.

The Dignity of Self-Sufficiency and Personal Responsibility

There were many themes related to the widespread focus on endless opportunities, hard work, and welfare dependency. Two related themes that were very popular were self-sufficiency and personal responsibility. The dominant logic held that there are endless opportunities for all who choose to work hard, so it seemed to logically follow that those who do not grasp these opportunities are clearly irresponsible and not self-sufficient.

Terra, like many of the students, discussed how social work is a field that preaches “self-determination.” The job of social workers, according to her, is to help individuals to help themselves and realize that success comes from within:

I think more [social workers] would lean toward individualism [as an explanation for poverty] . . . if you’re coming from a social work perspective, you’d probably pick individualism. Just because we practice self-determination meaning you get out of life what you give. I think individualism is more optimistic . . . we learn a lot about self-determination, like I said. And we are taught to think more . . . we think people first, we don’t think poverty. . . . So sort of helping individuals fix their problems, do for themselves.

It is instructive how Terra discussed the focus on people instead of poverty, focusing on individual deficiencies instead of structural issues. Terra believes that ultimately people travel the path in life that they choose, getting out of life what they give. The poor, in their failures, need to be helped in order to become self-sufficient.

Sarah also focused on self-determination. In discussing how welfare can be improved, she said that “not everybody wants to come get help themselves” and that we should try to “create programs to motivate self-determination.”

Sarah believes intelligence and decision making are crucial to being self-sufficient: “It could be that genetically they’re not—can I say they’re not smart enough to make the right choice? Probably if they’re genetically predisposed in that way, probably they don’t know—probably they just can’t help themselves. They don’t know any other avenues to influence themselves to get better.” Not only does Sarah believe that choices determine who succeeds, but she also suggested that the capacity to make proper choices may be passed down genetically, that the poor may be biologically inferior.

Jennifer also believes that the poor lack the intelligence and decision-making ability to rise out of poverty:

I think poor people aren’t knowledgeable enough about, well about really anything. Like people are stupid in the fact that they do drugs and drink alcohol. People are stupid and don’t know how to find jobs if they need to. They don’t know how to control their money spending. It is lack of knowledge, just basically stupidity actually. . . . There are poor and homeless people who are poor and homeless because they choose to be so as well, and that is also stupidity in my opinion.

Jennifer believes that poverty is largely a choice, and the poor are prone to self-destructive behavior and “stupidity” that prevents self-sufficiency and blocks access to otherwise open avenues to economic mobility.

Karen stated that turning to welfare would be embarrassing for her because she was raised to be self-sufficient: “I would not be dependent upon it personally. I would feel a little ashamed getting it not because it is welfare but because it is somebody else’s help. I was raised to be very self-sufficient so I would want to get off of it. I know I would not be ashamed because I would do everything I can to get off of it.” Her answers indicated that dependency is largely a personal trait rather than a structural consequence. Karen suggested that, unlike other recipients, there is something about her personally that makes her naturally self-sufficient. She believes that her choices and family upbringing would prevent her from becoming dependent on other people’s meritocratically earned money.

Natalia spent her earliest childhood years in a Russian orphanage. On multiple occasions in the interview, she reported that she never wants to feel as helpless as she felt in that orphanage. When talking about whether she would use welfare if she needed to, Natalia said resorting to welfare use would make her feel “weak,” “child-like,” and “helpless” and said, “I would feel more degraded in terms of how I felt about myself, my own judgment.” She went on to talk about how this would hurt her pride:

I would not feel comfortable [using welfare]. To me I feel that I am too proud to accept welfare. It would have to be a very, very, very, very last resort. I would probably go to the streets for a little bit before even thinking about welfare. . . . I think a part of me would hate myself if I didn’t try everything even if I had to choose welfare and it was the absolutely last resort, a part of me would still say no. You are going to fight it. A part of me, I don’t want to put myself down or take a step down from how I feel about my pride. The biggest thing is I just don’t think that I could bring myself to go onto welfare. I would feel like I am weak, helpless. And I have felt helpless and I don’t want to revisit that. So I don’t want to relive my past. I don’t want to bring it up and have to think again, “Great, here I am again.” I have done this once, and I don’t want to do this another time. I have been in that helpless child phase where I, even when I was put in with a family I still felt helpless, I felt out of control, I didn’t feel like I had control of my life. There is a part of me that would hate myself because I have already been helpless.

At several points in the interview, Natalia made the connection between dependency and being a helpless child, equating poverty and welfare use with the personal failure to become a self-sufficient adult.

Individual Deficiencies, Poor Choices

Nearly all of the students had some desire to study psychology when they initially enrolled in college, before eventually deciding on the field of social work. A substantial majority of students also reported an interest in

“fixing” perceived deficiencies in their clients. We speculated that these two things may be connected, and probed further. When we explored this phenomenon with the students, the pattern that emerged was that the students believe that there is something “wrong” within individuals that, if fixed, could remove the primary obstacle to their success. This obstacle was typically perceived as the inability to work hard and make the right choices. This was consistent with the poverty and welfare ideologies that the students expressed about social problems: a focus on fixing individuals rather than structures. From their point of view, psychology seemed to provide a pathway toward a career helping individuals transform themselves into more successful adults. At some point along the way, social work became a more desirable major and career, but their desire to help individuals transform themselves remained.

Tom’s discussion of his career choice highlighted many of the themes that appeared time and again across the interviews. Tom initially wanted to study psychology but chose social work instead. He feels that in the field of psychology, a professional must sit around all day and listen to the problems of people who cannot help themselves, which he objects to. He views social work, by contrast, as a field where you can actually help individuals fix their deficiencies rather than just hear about them:

I always knew I wanted to be in a helping profession. When I was younger it was more psychology and psychiatry, that sort of thing. But I had a personal issue with psychology and psychiatry, like, “Well if you need help, if you can’t resolve an issue on your own—I would never go seek help because you should be able to resolve an issue on your own.” So I thought to myself, “Well I don’t want to go into a career that does that, and I don’t want to sit and listen to people’s problems all day.” . . . My end goal [after social work] is to do work in mental health and eventually have my own practice where people are coming to see me—similar to what a psychologist or psychiatrist would do.

Tom believes education helps poor individuals realize how their family’s behaviors are flawed and teaches them to make the right decisions moving forward, saying, “Before I talked about the cycle of poverty a bit, so if a family member can see outside of themselves and their current situation, they have the opportunity to change the dynamic of the family situation.” Tom’s answers illustrate the widespread focus among our participants on individual-level explanations for poverty and economic inequality.

Olivia’s discussion of welfare was typical of this widespread focus on the assumed deficiencies of the poor:

Regardless of why they are poor, people should get welfare as long as they’re making a change in behavior. I am from a middle-class family. My family did not receive any government assistance. . . . I think it is unfair to ask people to

give up money that they have earned. Why do I have to give that to everybody else? I agree that is unfair especially if that person is not making an effort to change. . . . I hate to say that, but if you are not making an effort to change do you really deserve to receive this assistance? Because you don't seem to be appreciating or using it and really feeling like it is helping you. So I agree philosophically [with welfare] as long as it is structured the right way and people are making changes in their lives.

Like many of the BSW students, Olivia believes the poor have an obligation to change themselves before receiving other people's hard-earned money. After all, Olivia believes that nobody ever helped her family. Based on the assumption that the initial distribution of resources is equitable, for many of our participants it logically followed that the poor should be appreciative of being given something that is not rightfully theirs.

Corinne feels that the decision making of the poor needs to be "fixed." Corinne noted that ultimately "your choices determine who you are as a person," and poor individuals need to be taught to make better decisions than their family had been making up to that point. When asked how she would address poverty, Corinne said, "I think educating the family. . . . Poverty doesn't have to be the way that they live their lives. I think that would be where we would need to start." For Corinne, choices determine success and failure in life, and bad choices are learned from family.

Ashley used anecdotal evidence from her internship about a family who had recently fallen into poverty, but eventually escaped, as an example of how the poor can be upwardly mobile if only they make the right choices. In her answer, she assumes there is something within this particular family as individuals that makes them work hard and be self-motivated, excluding ways in which their previous middle-class experiences and non-economic resources may have influenced their eventual upward mobility: "Especially this one family I was working with. Both the husband and the wife together were making a wonderful amount of money, upper-middle-class, if not upper-class. They both lost their jobs, and it was a lot of self-determination and hard work that got them to where they ended up being, which is employed again." When addressing poverty specifically, Ashley said the poor need to be taught early on in childhood how to make the right choices so they do not become deficient, problematic adults. She said, "I think with education you can prevent a lot of problems that come down the line with people as they become adults."

Allison, like many others, echoed Ashley's concern that poor children need to be prevented from becoming deficient, problematic adults: "I used to think I'd want to work with children, but probably adolescents. I think because you can have such an influence, and I feel like that's a critical point in their

lives. You can have a big impact on them . . . working with them so that if there's any problems, to try to resolve them [before they become adults]." Allison assumes that poor adults are "too late to fix" to become self-sufficient individuals with the ability to make sound choices in a world of widespread opportunity. Such assumptions were widespread across the interviews.

The Assumed Immorality of Poverty and Welfare

It was not surprising, given the widespread individualism among our sample, that our participants are also generally suspicious of the morality of the poor and thus believe the poor's behavior should be regulated. Every participant made reference to the perceived immorality of poverty and/or welfare in some manner, with a majority of students mentioning at least two of the following themes: welfare is inherently wrong; welfare abuse is widespread; the poor are not self-sufficient or personally responsible; welfare recipients are "dependent"; welfare is a handout; welfare is a waste of government money; welfare should be minimal to prevent disincentives; welfare is a transfer of money from people who earned it to those who did not; drug use is widespread among the poor; the poor are lazy; and poor women's fertility is problematic. Because of these concerns and the individualistic beliefs mentioned earlier, there was widespread support for regulating the poor through welfare policy.

There was overwhelming support (84%) for policies that require welfare recipients to work in the paid labor force in order to receive welfare benefits. Most of the students who voiced their support for work requirements framed work at a decent wage as something that is available to all who want it, framed unemployment as a personal failing, and assumed those without work are lazy. Many of the students believe that without the proper motivation, such as work requirements, welfare recipients will have little incentive to grasp the endless opportunities available to them in the U.S. labor market.

Like work requirements, policies aimed at limiting poor women's fertility and punishing them for having children while receiving welfare were very popular. Family caps, policies that deny additional welfare benefits to families for children born while the family is on welfare, were favored by 68 percent of participants. Common beliefs were that having children is mostly a choice that should be based on family finances, and that nobody should choose to bring a child into poverty. This logic seemed to hinge on the notion that opportunities are available for all, so people do not have to be poor during their childbearing years if they so choose. There were also a large number of participants who believed, many quite strongly, that too many welfare recipients have children just to increase their monthly welfare benefits.

In addition to these concerns about the work ethic and fertility of the poor, there was also majority concern about drug abuse among the poor. It was widely assumed that the poor disproportionately abuse drugs. Sixty-percent of students supported mandatory drug testing in order for people to receive welfare. The assumption of disproportionate drug use highlighted the widespread belief in the inherent immorality of many of those in poverty and receiving welfare. Beyond the assumption of disproportionate drug use, students' concerns included: suspicion that welfare recipients use hard-earned taxpayer money for drugs instead of basic necessities, disagreement with the immoral act of using drugs, and disagreement with the government playing a role in enabling drug use.

Given the concerns about the work ethic, fertility, and drug use of the poor, we should mention some of the empirical studies on these issues. Most poor people (63%) who can work are employed in paid work. Ninety-one percent of entitlement spending goes to the elderly, seriously disabled, or members of working households. Poverty spells tend to be of fairly short duration with a majority of Americans experiencing poverty at some point during adulthood. Women on welfare tend to have lower fertility rates on average than the general population, and 77 percent of TANF families have either only one (50%) or two (27%) children (with a majority having a youngest child of five or younger). Finally, welfare recipients do not typically use illegal drugs at a higher rate than the general population (Rank 1989, 2005; Bullock 2013; Cunha 2014; Gould 2015; HHS 2016).⁷ Our participants presumably came across these data at some point in their college studies, but perhaps their overarching beliefs about the poor and welfare recipients made it difficult to incorporate these findings into their inequality beliefs.

Lessons from the Outlier

Out of the twenty-five students we interviewed, there was only one student who had a belief system clearly dominated by a structural perspective. This student, Jana, was raised in a European country that has a much more extensive social safety net than the U.S. In her home country, the dominant inequality beliefs are also much more structurally oriented than those in the U.S. In addition, she was raised by self-described socialist parents who seemed to be even more leftist and structurally oriented than much of the population of her homeland. These facts seemed to largely explain her outlier status among our sample.

Jana is very aware of how this upbringing gave her a very different and much more structurally oriented view on economic issues compared to many Americans. She shared that the degree of individualism in the U.S., and even

among many of her fellow BSW students, genuinely shocks her. Structurally oriented explanations for economic issues have always seemed “normal” to her, to the point where they were not even questioned in her home country. She said the same thing about their more expansive social welfare system, something that was not questioned and was considered desirable, positive, and a necessity in her country.

In our discussions of poverty, Jana stated that she firmly believes that “it is never a choice to be poor.” Here she discusses the structural nature of economic disadvantage:

I think if you look at the power structure of who is not poor you will notice it is White males from a Christian background. Then you look at the people who are most likely to be poor, which is women of color, and that explains the whole thing. The way we have our pay structure, the way we have our childcare structure. . . . It is built into society.

She argued that social workers should be trained not to look at individuals by themselves, but as people embedded within social contexts and relationships:

As a social worker I am not just looking at the person, I am looking at the person because that person is in like a spider web, right? It is like the center of the spider web and it touches all these different things within his or her environment. Which, if you have an issue you cannot just fix the person you actually have to fix all of the threads that connect that person. My family and I are doing very well, we are upper-middle-class. My kids are doing very well because of this benefit of being in this socioeconomic strata. I am doing well in life. I want for everybody to do well in life. So I think in social work you can really kind of give back and help out.

It is interesting that Jana frames social work in this manner, because her perception is different than so many other students that we spoke with.

We asked Jana if she was always interested in helping people, even when she was a child. She cited her upbringing within a different culture and different set of social welfare policies as important factors contributing to her interest:

I am from Europe, and my father is a big socialist. He is a party leader in the Socialist Party and so we were always pro-union, pro-social-welfare, and I think it is so sad in the United States that people here think that poor people don't deserve social welfare. I think these are the people that we need to take the most care of. The rich people can take care of themselves, it is really the poor people who cannot without our help. I just don't understand this meanness against poor people. It is not like they want to be poor. And so I think that is another big push

for me, I just think that this country really needs as many voices for the poor people as possible. Not voices from the poor, they need to be voices from people who are not poor. This sounds really kind of bourgeois, sometimes my voice is heard more than somebody who is poor who is asking for it. But me saying, “Hey we need to give that person something,” in some circles that carries more weight. And I am more than happy to do it. I mean, this whole healthcare thing, I don’t get what the problem is. You want people not to go to the emergency room to rack up emergency room bills, right, but you don’t want to help them out in any way to avoid that? I am shocked. It has a lot to do with my upbringing and seeing it from a different perspective, too. Coming from a country that has a huge social welfare network.

Growing up in Europe gave Jana a different perspective on socialism as well. Rather than being the “bogeyman” that it appears to be in many cases in American political and popular rhetoric, she thinks of “socialist” policies and the social welfare system as simply a socially just way to address structural failings:

A lot of people here [in the U.S.] don’t know what the word socialism means. I think they just see something that benefits all, and automatically they call it communism even though that would be more socialism. It’s even more profound for me. I am a military spouse, we have Tricare [the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniform Services, or CHAMPUS]. It is the military’s healthcare system . . . it is universal healthcare for us. We don’t ever have to pay a dime for anything . . . so I know what it feels like to have that peace of mind, to just know that if I am sick I can just go to the doctor. So for some people, especially military people to say, “Oh this is communism,” or, “What do these poor people want?” We enjoy what everybody deserves to have. Everybody should be able to take a sick kid to the doctor and have the doctor make the kid better without being called an abuser of the system or a freeloader or whatever. I just get very irate with people. In my country, they don’t call themselves socialists, they call themselves social democrats. It is not the socialist thing that we think of when we think of Russia. I think it is a democracy built on social welfare and social well-being. The U.S. has some of the same things to some extent, some to a lesser extent, it is just different.

Jana’s perspective gave her a particularly interesting take on the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign, which was in progress at the time of her interview, between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. Regarding the campaign rhetoric, she stated, “It strikes me as odd, this whole ‘maker versus taker’ thing that Romney and Ryan talk about.” She argued that all Americans use the social welfare system, but people are only critical of those viewed as undeserving. She said that of all the people who use some form of social welfare, we pick

and choose which ones to “excuse” for their welfare use. Who is deemed deserving and who is not, she argues, is based upon our own positive or negative views of those people and the reason they need welfare in the first place. She became excited and animated when she steered the conversation toward the rhetoric of the ongoing presidential campaign, saying:

How dare they tell other people that they’re freeloaders. It is never a choice to be poor and be a freeloader. I’m pretty sure if you ask any person who is poor and on public assistance, if you ask them if they would rather have a job or stand in line at the food bank, they would say a job. I hear people always saying, “Oh those Europeans they have it so nice, they have five weeks of vacation.” But they forget that we give up a lot to have these five weeks of vacation. We are paying 47 percent in taxes, but we have the universal healthcare, we have the excellent school systems, we have all of these things. But we don’t have four cars per family, we don’t have 4,000 square-foot McMansions that we can’t afford to cool in the summer. With our healthcare system, that system has worked since the Second World War and nobody complains, it is just understood that that is part of your expenses, you pay for healthcare. Here in the U.S., when somebody tries to raise the idea that you have to do something, they come out with the whole, “Don’t tread on me.” You see what happened to Obama when he just talks about changing healthcare.

Jana’s perspective stood out among our sample, and the reason seems clear: she was raised in a society where individualism is much less dominant, and social policies are robust and taken for granted.

The Compromise Perspective

While most of our participants (60%) prefer individualistic beliefs to non-individualistic ones, a sizeable minority (36%) espoused a compromise perspective. These individuals support both individualism and structuralism, with neither clearly privileged. Tom provides a good example of this worldview. He rejects the idea that the U.S. is a meritocracy, based largely on the persistence of racial discrimination. Tom believes that social workers, unlike students in other disciplines, are “focusing on theory, you’re looking at larger systems, you’re looking at larger aspects of what is affecting this individual.” He believes that social workers learn to look beyond the individual to see other factors that shape their experiences and outcomes, saying social workers “are also trying to effect change on a larger scale. So you may not directly impact person X or Y but if you can fix the system that’s around person X and Y hopefully they will benefit from that.” He went on to explain, “I think the overwhelming view [of most Americans] is that if you are poor you are

lazy and you are not doing enough to fix your situation. But what I study and learn is that there are so many other factors that go into it. . . . It is not just that they are not trying, it could be that that is just the situation.”

Despite rejecting the idea that the U.S. is a meritocracy, Tom has a deep-seated belief that individuals are ultimately responsible for their own financial success or failure. He has always had an interest in being able to “fix” problems that people have, including those of poor individuals, and has long been interested in psychology and psychiatry. He did not ultimately go into psychology or psychiatry because he does not want to “listen to people’s problems all day.” The primary reason he does not want to deal with their problems, he said, is because he believes most problems that afflict people can be solved individually through smart choices. Because of this, he would also feel uncomfortable seeking psychiatric help himself.

When the discussion turned to whether he would ever turn to welfare, he replied, “Pulling out food stamps and an EBT card at the grocery store in front of other people, my ego would just be shot. I feel like a reasonably intelligent individual, so if I got to that place I am sure I would be really depressed. Depressed to an extreme, and just embarrassed and disappointed.”

Tom has always considered himself as the person “on the other side of” the welfare desk giving help, not receiving it. He said his “ego would be hard-pressed to say yes” to accepting welfare assistance. The primary source of disappointment in accepting welfare for Tom is his belief that he is an intelligent human being who, like anybody else, should be able to solve his own problems if he puts his mind to it. His answer framed social problems such as poverty not as a structural failing but as an obstacle that poor people needed to figure out in order to overcome their problems.

When we discussed family caps, Tom framed poverty and fertility as choices that are largely within the control of individuals. He said he would support family caps as long as people were aware of them ahead of time. He is hesitant, because he does not want to see children hurt, but he clearly objects to the perceived irresponsibility of poor women having children. He explained, “I object to the idea of continuing to foster a method of no responsibility but also do not want that refusal to result in something far worse like the death of a child.”

While Tom discussed structural factors and recognized their impact, he is also drawn to individualism, espousing a worldview (like many Americans) that is often contradictory. He is frequently caught between his knowledge of these factors and his strong belief that people are ultimately responsible for their personal fortunes. Tom is very cognizant of structural factors that contribute to social problems, but resists incorporating them into a purely structural worldview. For Tom, both individualistic and non-individualistic explanations of poverty and economic inequality are appealing.

MAKING SENSE OF THE DATA

Dominant Themes

Most of the BSW students (60%) in this study believe strongly in many of the tenets of American individualism and prefer individualistic explanations for economic disadvantage to non-individualistic ones.⁸ Only one student, the aforementioned Jana, is decidedly structuralist, largely due to her upbringing with her socialist father in a leftist European culture.

On the surface, our findings are not generally surprising, as most Americans prefer individualistic explanations over more structurally oriented ones. What was somewhat surprising, however, was that our participants clearly supported individualism while simultaneously claiming to reject it. This suggests that resisting dominant culture is quite difficult, as it is often internalized in ways that we are not fully aware of. Our results are also surprising, given what previous research has revealed about the beliefs of social workers and social work students.

There were a number of patterns that emerged from across the interviews, including:

- There was a preference for individualistic explanations of poverty and economic inequality.
- There was a strong belief in the inherent autonomy of individuals and the notion that success or failure comes from within.
- There was more sympathy for poor children (viewed as victims of circumstances beyond their control) than poor adults (assumed to have control over their fortunes).
- Economic success and failure were typically explained in terms of personal responsibility, self-determination, hard work, proper motivation, and/or smart choices.
- Most participants maintained that the U.S. is a land of virtually endless opportunities.
- When unequal barriers were acknowledged, participants tended to assume that these barriers could still be overcome by hard work and determination.
- The current social structure tended to be taken for granted, and solutions to economic disadvantage tended not to challenge the status quo.
- The poor and welfare recipients were generally assumed to have problems with irresponsible fertility, drug abuse, and a poor work ethic.
- There was a tendency to conflate negative and positive freedom.

Additionally, participants tended to frame welfare as the redistribution of meritocratically earned resources. Many believed these resources were not

only being transferred from people who earned them to people who did not, but also that the recipients were engaging in immoral behavior (irresponsible fertility, substance abuse, and/or laziness). Therefore, given that they are receiving somebody else's hard-earned money, and given their immoral behavior, it made sense to many of our participants that welfare recipients owe it to taxpayers to change their behavior in exchange for help from others.

Contradicting Previous Research

A number of previous studies, whether examining the beliefs of college students studying to become social workers or social workers already in the field, find that both of these groups generally favor structural explanations over individualistic ones (Bullock 2004; Weiss-Gal et al. 2009; Robinson 2011; Hill et al. 2016). Gregg Robinson summarizes: "The most consistent findings in this literature are that social workers are more likely to hold structural views of poverty and are less likely to hold individualistic ones than the general population" (2011:2379). Idit Weiss-Gal and her colleagues similarly summarize the existing research: "Almost all studies, whether among students or practicing professionals, found that structural explanations for poverty were favored over individualistic, psychological, and fatalistic ones" (2009:126). This is most likely because individuals sympathetic to the poor are attracted to the social work profession in the first place, as well as because of socialization in BSW programs and later in professional social work settings (Weiss-Gal et al. 2009; Robinson 2011).

Why might our findings, where social work students favored individualistic explanations, differ from these previous studies? One reason may be that we asked different questions, particularly compared to those of studies that rely on surveys. Students' individualism may have come through in our interviews in ways that they might not have on surveys. Indeed, when we asked students a survey-like question at the beginning of the interviews asking them to rank structuralism, the culture of poverty, and individualism, structuralism was the most preferred perspective and individualism was the least preferred. Yet they consistently contradicted this stated belief on a majority of the remaining interview questions. As one example among many, a majority of students agreed that the U.S. is a meritocracy, an assertion diametrically opposed to a structuralist worldview.

Beyond possible methodological differences, the most likely explanation is that our sample was mostly White and disproportionately drawn from the middle- and upper-middle classes. This is a much more plausible explanation than the unlikely notion that we have somehow uncovered a major shift in the thinking of American social workers. Non-Hispanic Whites are typically

much more individualistic than non-Whites. Kluegel and Smith, for instance, found a positive association (0.70 regression coefficient) between race (non-White) and a structural orientation towards poverty (1986:90). Joe Feagin similarly found that only 17 percent of Whites gave high priority to structural explanations of poverty, versus 54 percent of African Americans (1972:104). Additionally, he found that 41 percent of Whites were highly anti-welfare, versus only 12 percent of African Americans (1972:107).

Previous research suggests that this is due in large part to the differential socialization of Whites and African Americans, as well as their different experiences with discrimination. African Americans are typically taught to see the importance of race in ways that Whites are not. White Americans receive many racist messages early in life that incorrectly imply that most of the poor are African American and that African Americans are less committed to the work ethic and traditional morality than Whites (Gilens 1999). This socialization impacts their more negative and individualistic views of poverty and welfare.

In addition to being taught to see the importance of race, African Americans' experiences with discrimination make the existence of structural barriers more obvious. Their socialization and experiences with discrimination provide important challenges to the dominant ideology, and the absence of such experiences helps perpetuate the dominant ideology among Whites (Hunt and Bullock 2016). While race was not addressed explicitly by our participants, the widespread concern among our participants about the morality of the poor and welfare recipients was likely related in some manner to their beliefs about African Americans, single mothers, and poverty/welfare.

In addition to being mostly White, our participants were overwhelmingly from the middle- and upper-middle classes. It was obvious that socioeconomic privilege played a crucial role in our participants' beliefs. You will recall Olivia's reflections on welfare from earlier in the chapter: "I am from a middle-class family. My family did not receive any government assistance. . . . I think it is unfair to ask people to give up money that they have earned. Why do I have to give that to everybody else?" In addition to their family socioeconomic status, the university these participants attended is located in one of the five wealthiest counties in the U.S. (by median household income). Of the nearly 80 percent of new freshmen enrollees at their university who were in-state residents, 73 percent came from either the county where the university is located or the three neighboring counties.⁹ The university's county and neighboring counties are in the top fifteen wealthiest counties in the country, with three in the top ten and two in the top five (WorldAtlas 2017).

This socioeconomic privilege meant that our participants may have thought little about poverty and economic inequality before college—as

many admitted—and certainly not from a radical structuralist perspective. Melanie’s admission was typical:

I absolutely did not think about this stuff before college. I was a little selfish until about my mid-20s, and I was like, “Oh right, there’s a whole world out there.” Before college, I would say I just wouldn’t think about poor people or anything like that. It was just kinda something I didn’t wanna think about, you know, poor people, it was just not something I needed to worry about.

Natalia shared similar reflections, saying, “I haven’t really thought about this question a lot. It does pop up in class sometimes.” She went on to say, “I don’t feel like I have researched it at all. . . . I never really thought about or never really spent a lot of time with these questions. This is probably the most time I have ever spent talking about this stuff.” Combined with their race, our participants’ privileged socioeconomic status meant they had few radicalizing experiences to challenge their individualistic orientations before college. Many admitted that they were not particularly challenged with structuralist arguments even as they advanced to the upper-division courses in their program.

Previous research suggests that Americans in general tend to favor individualistic explanations of economic disadvantage over non-individualistic ones, and this individualistic orientation increases as one’s income increases. Kluegel and Smith, for instance, found a negative association (-0.79 regression coefficient) between income and welfare support (1986:160). In Joe Feagin’s study, 43 percent of the high-income respondents were highly anti-welfare, versus only 26 percent of the low-income respondents (1972:107). Combined with the racial composition of our sample, this may explain participants’ greater affinity for individualism than social workers and social work students in other studies. We believe this is much more plausible than an alternative explanation that generalizes our findings to all social workers.

NOTES

1. Throughout this book, “we” is used to refer to the authors for the sake of continuity and ease of reading. This chapter is adapted from a previous study conducted individually by Lawrence Eppard. Large portions of this chapter were either reprinted or adapted from his article “Paved with Good Intentions: Individualism and the Cultural Reproduction of Poverty and Inequality,” *Sociation Today* 14(2), 2016. The material reprinted and/or adapted here was used with the written permission of the editors (at the time) of *Sociation Today*, George Conklin and Robert Wortham.

2. As required by our IRB protocol and the ethics of social-scientific research, all names and identifying information (wherever possible) have been changed.

3. This is a pseudonym. In order to protect the identities of our participants, all names and identifying information (wherever possible) have been changed. This is in accordance with our IRB protocol and the ethics of social scientific research.

4. The Living Wage Calculator can be accessed here: <http://livingwage.mit.edu/>.

5. Students were classified as “individualistic” if 60 percent or more of their poverty/inequality/welfare answers were individualistic, and “structural” if 60 percent or more of these answers were structural. If they failed to satisfy the requirements for either the “individualistic” or “structural” categories, they were classified as espousing a “compromise” perspective.

6. “Compromise” language borrowed from previous research (see Kluegel and Smith 1986). Of those that supported a compromise explanation, we would argue that there was a “weak structuralism” (Royce 2015) employed and that individualism still underpinned their fundamental conceptualization of the individual. This is a discussion beyond the scope of this chapter, but following the logic of such scholars as Henry Rosemont (2015), it was clear that individualism was important and foundational in the thinking of the vast majority of these students.

7. One analysis of a four-month period in Florida found that 2.6 percent of welfare applicants failed drug tests, less than the 8 percent of the general Florida population that used illegal drugs (Cunha 2014). In addition, female welfare recipients have a fertility rate that is considerably lower than women in the general population, and the longer a woman remains on welfare the less likely she is to give birth (Rank 1989).

8. While the results of this study have important implications concerning the strength of individualism in the U.S., there are limitations that limit generalizeability. While data from interviews with 25 out of 97 students in a single BSW program reveal quite a bit about the dominant beliefs of students in this particular program, this is certainly not a large enough or representative enough sample to make generalized statements about all BSW students in the U.S. Indeed, our data contradict previous research on social workers and social work students, which is likely due to unique characteristics of our sample.

9. A source cannot be provided here, as it would reveal the identity of the university where this research took place, which violates the principle of anonymity required by our IRB protocol and the ethics of social-science research.

Part III

THE BIG PICTURE

In the prior section, we moved away from the academic arena in order to get on the ground and see how Americans grapple with individualism in their everyday lives. We accomplished this by interviewing White working-class custodians and future social workers. Across the forty-five interviews, we found that both groups prefer individualistic explanations of poverty and economic inequality over non-individualistic ones, despite their very different social locations.

In this final section, we step back to take a look at the big picture. The weight of the evidence in this book—multiple large-scale surveys, discussions with academic experts, and interviews with everyday Americans—suggests that individualism persists in the American mind. But why do such inequality beliefs matter?

In the next chapter, we explore the empirical relationship between inequality beliefs and support for social policies, policies that are ultimately responsible for the significant cross-national differences in economic disadvantage between wealthy countries. We propose that dominant inequality beliefs are one barrier to more effective social policies, and thus to reducing poverty and economic inequality.

Noam Chomsky then brings our discussion to a close in the afterword. He provides important insights into the unnecessary precarity of struggling Americans, in comparison to their counterparts elsewhere in the world.

Chapter Seven

Inequality Beliefs and Social Justice

With David Brady, Dan Schubert,
and Henry A. Giroux

Whether one relies on large-scale survey data or on-the-ground conversations, the story is the same: individualism remains quite popular in the U.S. From the beliefs of the American public detailed in chapter 2 to those of the working-class custodians in chapter 5 to the perspectives of future social workers in chapter 6, the ideology of individualism appeals to a wide range of Americans. The weight of the evidence suggests that today, as in the past, Americans continue to possess underdeveloped understandings of the non-individualistic causes of social inequalities. After we review this evidence, one important question remains: why should we care what Americans believe about inequality?¹

After all, isn't what we *think* about economic disadvantage not really of concern as long as we *do* something about it? As appealing as such a notion may be, the reality is that how we act to address a social problem is related to what we believe causes it. Raoul Martinez notes, "Understanding the source of our problems—individually and collectively—is a crucial step on the path to solving them" (2016:17). Much as a doctor would not choose a treatment plan without first identifying the illness or disease, people support particular approaches to addressing social problems based upon what they believe causes them.

Multiple studies suggest that one's inequality beliefs are linked to one's policy preferences. This helps us to understand why Americans, given their preference for individualistic explanations for a wide range of social problems, tend to be more skeptical of robust and structurally oriented social policies than their European counterparts. This skepticism is a barrier to developing the types of social policies that have proven so effective in reducing poverty and economic inequality elsewhere. This individualism and resulting skepticism does not prevent Americans from wanting to help the poor, but

contributes to the U.S. stopping short of adopting a more robust and structurally oriented approach. Without such policies, the U.S. is burdened with levels of economic insecurity unrivaled in much of the wealthy world.

CULTURE AND “THINKABLE THOUGHT”

Individuals invariably have a difficult time conceiving of, being exposed to, and/or becoming comfortable with, alternative ideas about inequality that are outside of the “unstated framework for thinkable thought” (Chomsky 1987:132) in their specific culture. Our entire field of vision is impacted by the circumstances and dominant culture in which we are socialized. What we see in the world around us, what we look for, what we take for granted, what seems reasonable to believe, what seems reasonable to say, and which alternative social arrangements seem practical and reasonable to dream of, are all impacted by our socially conditioned worldviews.² If our imaginations are limited, the range of possible societies we might build is limited, too.

The American inequality palette—with its flawed explanations for social inequalities—makes it difficult for people to feel comfortable supporting social policies that are more robust and more structurally oriented than the ones to which we are accustomed. Michael Lewis explains how one component of American inequality beliefs, individualism, shapes thinkable thought on social policies:

The [individual-as-central] sensibility appears to define the range of “respectable” opinion, the universe of discourse within which legitimate differences may occur about the meaning of inequality in American society. It sets the boundaries for “thinkable” ideas about the mitigation of disadvantage, and consequently for “feasible” or “practical” policies concerning inequality. It makes moral and political outcasts of those whose ideas about failure and success—about inequality—in American life persistently run counter to the sensibility’s cardinal precept: the separability of personal destiny from social circumstance, of biography from history.

... The hegemony of the culture of inequality is such that we unself-consciously embrace it and internalize its tenets as though no alternatives were conceivable. (1993:12–13, 17)

Challenges to the status quo are often “excised at the source” (Chomsky 1987:132) by dominant culture, deemed illogical and/or unreasonable before they can become fully developed and articulated. This contributes to the limited manner in which we collectively address social problems, helping the U.S. to remain “iconically unequal” (Brady 2009:4) among wealthy countries.

As we discussed in chapter 1, the U.S. ranks poorly relative to other wealthy countries on measures of poverty (see table 7.1), childhood poverty (see table 7.2), economic inequality (see table 7.3), and social mobility (IGE of 0.50 to 0.60 or higher, compared to IGEs as low as 0.15 to 0.20), among a number of other important measures of societal well-being. The relationship between these outcomes and social spending is well documented. Generally speaking, the more generous a country's social policies, the better their outcomes on these measures (see figure 7.1). These social problems have solutions, but adopting the kinds of policies that have worked well in other wealthy countries is made more difficult by our current dominant cultural orientation toward a range of social problems.

Among a number of reasons why other wealthy countries spend more on social programs, and design them in a more structurally oriented manner, is that these cultures tend to have a better understanding of the structural roots of inequalities. Certainly, a number of factors, many of them concerning the structure of the political system, play important roles as well. But as Alberto Alesina and his colleagues explain, political and cultural factors *together* help explain the less generous nature of American social policy:

Our bottom line is that Americans redistribute less than Europeans because (1) the majority believes that redistribution favors racial minorities, (2) Americans believe that they live in an open and fair society and that if someone is poor it is their own fault, and (3) the political system is geared towards preventing redistribution. (Alesina et al. 2001:39)

A number of political factors, including the power of leftist political parties, level of unionization, structure of elections, influence of money in politics, proportion of elected government officials who are female, voter turnout among the poor and working class, and others, play crucial roles (Alesina et al. 2001; Brady 2009; Gilens 2012; Royce 2015; Michener 2018). But culture matters a great deal and interacts with these political factors to shape how we view social problems and what we perceive as practical and/or logical ways of addressing them. As David Brady argues, "social equality results from the reciprocal relationships among welfare states, ideologies, and interests" (2009:8).

The more a culture views economic disadvantage in individualistic terms, the less it tends to institutionalize equality through social policy. Levels of poverty and economic inequality, then, are partially the result of ideological battles, as Edward Royce explains:

An ideological battle is being waged in the United States. . . . On one important front in this larger culture war, opposing versions of "poverty knowledge" are pitted against one another. . . . The stakes in this battle are high. The winning

Table 7.1. Relative Poverty across OECD Countries

<i>OECD Country</i>	<i>Relative Poverty %</i>
OECD Average (excluding U.S.)	12.3%
South Africa (2015)	26.6%
Costa Rica (2017)	20.4%
Israel (2017)	17.9%
United States (2016)	17.8%
South Korea (2017)	17.4%
Turkey (2015)	17.2%
Lithuania (2016)	16.9%
Latvia (2016)	16.8%
Mexico (2016)	16.6%
Chile (2015)	16.1%
Japan (2015)	15.7%
Estonia (2016)	15.7%
Spain (2016)	15.5%
Greece (2016)	14.4%
Italy (2016)	13.7%
Portugal (2016)	12.5%
Canada (2016)	12.4%
Australia (2016)	12.1%
United Kingdom (2016)	11.1%
Luxembourg (2016)	11.1%
New Zealand (2014)	10.9%
Germany (2016)	10.4%
Poland (2016)	10.3%
Hungary (2014)	10.1%
Ireland (2015)	9.8%
Austria (2016)	9.8%
Belgium (2016)	9.7%
Sweden (2017)	9.3%
Switzerland (2015)	9.1%
Slovenia (2016)	8.7%
Slovak Republic (2016)	8.5%
Norway (2017)	8.4%
Netherlands (2016)	8.3%
France (2016)	8.3%
Finland (2017)	6.3%
Czech Republic (2016)	5.6%
Denmark (2015)	5.5%
Iceland (2015)	5.4%

Note: All data latest available.

Source: OECD, "Poverty Rate," retrieved June 25, 2019 (<https://data.oecd.org/inequality/poverty-rate.htm>).

Table 7.2. Childhood Poverty across OECD Countries

<i>OECD Country</i>	<i>Relative Poverty % for 0–17-Year-Olds</i>
OECD Average (excluding U.S.)	13.9%
South Africa (2015)	32.0%
Costa Rica (2017)	27.3%
Turkey (2015)	25.3%
Israel (2017)	23.7%
Spain (2016)	22.0%
Chile (2015)	21.1%
United States (2016)	20.9%
Mexico (2016)	19.8%
Lithuania (2016)	17.7%
Greece (2016)	17.6%
Italy (2016)	17.3%
Portugal (2016)	15.5%
South Korea (2017)	14.5%
Canada (2016)	14.2%
New Zealand (2014)	14.1%
Slovak Republic (2016)	14.0%
Japan (2015)	13.9%
Latvia (2016)	13.2%
Luxembourg (2016)	13.0%
Australia (2016)	12.5%
Germany (2016)	12.3%
Belgium (2016)	12.3%
United Kingdom (2016)	11.8%
Hungary (2014)	11.8%
France (2016)	11.5%
Austria (2016)	11.5%
Netherlands (2016)	10.9%
Ireland (2015)	10.8%
Estonia (2016)	9.6%
Switzerland (2015)	9.5%
Sweden (2017)	9.3%
Poland (2016)	9.3%
Czech Republic (2016)	8.5%
Norway (2017)	8.0%
Slovenia (2016)	7.1%
Iceland (2015)	5.8%
Finland (2017)	3.6%
Denmark (2015)	2.9%

Note: All data latest available.

Source: OECD, "Poverty Rate," retrieved June 25, 2019 (<https://data.oecd.org/inequality/poverty-rate.htm>).

Table 7.3. Income Inequality across OECD Countries

<i>OECD Country</i>	<i>Gini Coefficient</i>
OECD Average (excluding U.S.)	0.33
South Africa (2015)	0.62
Costa Rica (2017)	0.48
Mexico (2016)	0.46
Chile (2015)	0.45
Turkey (2015)	0.40
United States (2016)	0.39
Lithuania (2016)	0.38
South Korea (2017)	0.35
United Kingdom (2016)	0.35
New Zealand (2014)	0.35
Latvia (2016)	0.35
Israel (2017)	0.34
Spain (2016)	0.34
Japan (2015)	0.34
Greece (2016)	0.33
Portugal (2016)	0.33
Australia (2016)	0.33
Italy (2016)	0.33
Estonia (2016)	0.31
Canada (2016)	0.31
Luxembourg (2016)	0.30
Ireland (2015)	0.30
Switzerland (2015)	0.30
Germany (2016)	0.29
France (2016)	0.29
Hungary (2014)	0.29
Netherlands (2016)	0.28
Poland (2016)	0.28
Austria (2016)	0.28
Sweden (2017)	0.28
Finland (2017)	0.27
Belgium (2016)	0.27
Denmark (2015)	0.26
Norway (2017)	0.26
Iceland (2015)	0.26
Czech Republic (2016)	0.25
Slovenia (2016)	0.24
Slovak Republic (2016)	0.24

Note: All data latest available.

Source: OECD, "Income Inequality," Retrieved June 25, 2019 (<https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm>).

Table 7.4. Race and Perceptions of Welfare Recipients

	<i>Think Most Welfare Recipients Are Black</i>	<i>Think Most Welfare Recipients Are White</i>
In your opinion, what is more to blame when people are on welfare?		
Lack of effort on their own part	63%	40%
Circumstances beyond their control	26%	50%
Do most people on welfare want to work?		
Yes	31%	55%
No	69%	45%
Do most people on welfare really need it?		
Yes	36%	50%
No	64%	50%

Source: Gilens 1999:140. Reprinted with permission of the University of Chicago Press.

side at any particular historical moment defines the problem of poverty, sets the terms of debate, and controls the political agenda. . . .

We have the poverty we have in this country in part because of the beliefs and attitudes prevalent among the larger population. The poor are held hostage not only to the decisions of economic and political elites, but to the beliefs and opinions of the middle class as well. (2015:145, 147)

In his review of thousands of survey measures across wealthy countries, Everett Carl Ladd found that:

survey data show that individualism is more intense, pervasive, and uncontradicted [in the U.S.] than in other industrial democracies. As a result, support for a private-property-based economy remains strong . . . support for limits on government are still stronger in the U.S. than in most other industrial democracies. American policy on social welfare reflects national insistence on a large measure of individual, rather than governmental, responsibility. Americans value individual effort and achievement. (1994:35)

There are countless ways that a country can choose to combat social problems. The policies that are ultimately implemented will likely generally align with that culture’s beliefs about the causes of those problems, as “the welfare state is the culmination of a society’s beliefs for how economic resources ought to be distributed” (Brady 2009:8). In the next section, we explore

empirical studies demonstrating the strength of this relationship between inequality beliefs and welfare support.

INDIVIDUALISM AND SUPPORT FOR THE SAFETY NET

A number of studies demonstrate a relationship between an individual's inequality beliefs and support for social policies. Generally, these studies reveal that those individuals who espouse more individualistic beliefs are less supportive of income-targeted redistributive policies, and those who espouse more structuralist beliefs are more supportive. Summarizing this body of research, Hunt and Bullock note that:

dominant ideology beliefs (e.g., individualism) generally decrease support for redistributive policies, while system-challenging beliefs (e.g., structuralism) generally increase support for such initiatives. Feagin (1975) and Kluegel and Smith (1986) both document that individualistic beliefs about poverty reduced support for welfare spending, while structuralist beliefs increased such support. Numerous studies have replicated and expanded on these basic findings. (2016:106)

The work of Kluegel and Smith (1986) is an illustrative example. The authors demonstrated a relationship between inequality beliefs and support for welfare, a guaranteed-jobs program, and a guaranteed income. Some examples of the relationships that they found, in regression models with demographic controls, were a negative association between inegalitarian beliefs and welfare support (-0.77), a positive association between a structural view of poverty and welfare support (0.47), and a negative association between an individualistic view of poverty and welfare support (-0.39). They also demonstrated a positive association between egalitarian beliefs and support for a federal guaranteed jobs program (0.50) (Kluegel and Smith 1986:160).

Joe Feagin reported a similar relationship in his earlier study, reporting, "High scores on the antiwelfare index turned out to be strongly correlated with high scores on the individualistic-factors index" (1972:108). He explained this relationship further:

Of those who thought individualistic explanations of poverty were very important, 45 percent were highly antiwelfare and only 15 percent were low. Structural explanations of poverty and antiwelfarism showed the reverse relationship. Only 18 percent of those who held the system responsible for poverty were highly antiwelfare; 40 percent of them were prowelfare. . . .

Are those who believe that the causes of poverty are most in line with individualism also those who reject extensions of the welfare state? Yes. . . .

The relationship between high scores on the structural-factors index and support for the three programs was particularly strong. (Feagin 1972:108, 110, 129)

Feagin also found that of those who gave structural explanations of poverty high importance, 84 percent supported a guaranteed-jobs program. That support fell to 49 percent for those who gave structural explanations low importance. The same pattern held for guaranteed income. For those who gave structural explanations high importance, there was 48 percent support, but only 15 percent support for those who gave structural explanations low importance (Feagin 1972:110). Based on his findings, Feagin summarized the dominant American position on the welfare state:

Taken as a whole, the survey data confirm that Americans are dragging their feet on the road toward welfare-statism, and that their reluctance is closely related to strong beliefs about the meaning of economic failure. Persons who hold a man responsible for his own poverty, giving little credence to social or economic factors, also tend to have negative attitudes toward existing welfare programs and to oppose new anti-poverty proposals. As long as large numbers of Americans attribute social problems to the character defects of individuals, massive economic reform will be extraordinarily difficult. Individualistic interpretations of poverty mesh well with conservative attempts to maintain the status quo. Indeed, major improvements in the American economic structure (such as redistribution of income) may require—among other things—a major shift in American attitudes and values. (1972:129)

More recent studies demonstrate similar relationships. Alesina and Glaeser (2004) found that among Americans who believe that the government spends too much money fighting poverty, an overwhelming majority believe that poverty is caused by laziness (88%) and that there is a chance to escape poverty (88%). Among Americans who believe that the government spends too little fighting poverty, far fewer believe that poverty is caused by laziness (35%) and that there is a chance to escape poverty (55%) (Alesina and Glaeser 2004:189). Lauren Appelbaum (2001) demonstrated that Americans are more likely to support liberal social welfare policies, and less likely to support conservative ones, when the recipients are perceived to be deserving rather than undeserving, and their poverty is attributed to society rather than to the individual. She concluded:

When the recipients of aid are seen as not responsible for their poverty, more generous aid policies may be recommended and widely accepted. On the other

hand, if the recipients of aid are judged to be responsible for their poverty, then more restrictive policies that offer less direct aid and require poor people to find a way to lift themselves out of poverty may be considered appropriate. (2001:438)

Brianne Hastie (2010) found that among her Australian sample, support for three different types of poverty-alleviation programs—a minimum income for families, a guaranteed-jobs program, and an income-equalizing policy—was predicted by structural attributions for poverty. She concluded, “Overall, this research reiterates the importance of perceptions of the causes of social phenomena in people’s willingness to support policies directed at these phenomena” (Hastie 2010:26).

In another important study, Heather Bullock and her colleagues (2003) demonstrated a similar relationship between inequality beliefs and support for social policies. In this study, participants completed a series of questionnaires. Two of the questionnaires examined participants’ attributions for poverty and wealth. Both included individualistic, structural, and fatalistic attributions, and the poverty questionnaire included an additional culture-of-poverty attribution. Another questionnaire examined participants’ support for a variety of social policies, from progressive policies (such as extended child care and health benefits) to restrictive policies (such as fingerprinting welfare recipients, family caps, and punitive policies related to recipient behavior). The final questionnaire, based on the work of Kluegel and Smith (1986), examined participants’ beliefs about inequality.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to assess how well support for progressive and restrictive policies could be predicted by attributions for poverty and wealth, as well as beliefs about inequality. The strongest relationship was between structural attributions for poverty and support for progressive policies (0.54 standardized coefficient). The authors also found that attributing wealth to undeserved privilege and dissatisfaction with income inequality were both positively associated with progressive policy support. These three variables accounted for a majority of the variance in progressive policy attitudes. Additionally, attributing poverty to personal failings, and attributing wealth to ambition and perseverance, were both positively associated with restrictive social policy support (Bullock et. al. 2003:52). Here the authors explain their results:

Support for progressive policies appears to be largely related to perceiving poverty as a structural problem, income inequality as unfair, and wealth as unearned. The relationship between attributions for poverty and attitudes toward welfare policy is relatively well-documented and the results of this study further illustrate the policy implications of understanding poverty from a structural vantage point. . . . Conversely, support for restrictive policies appears to be

driven by holding the individual responsible for her or his situation. (Bullock et al. 2003:53)

RACISM, SEXISM, AND WELFARE SUPPORT

Individualism is clearly a key factor in how much support one is willing to give to robust and structurally oriented social policies. Two equally important factors to consider are racism and sexism. A number of studies demonstrate a relationship between support for social policies and beliefs about race and gender. Because it is a classic study that demonstrates the impact of both racism and sexism on welfare support, we will pay particular attention to *Why Americans Hate Welfare* by Martin Gilens (1999).

In his examination of six years of General Social Survey (GSS) data, Gilens found that 53 percent of White respondents wanted to cut welfare spending, versus 17 percent who wanted to increase it. For African Americans, only 33 percent wanted to cut spending, while 38 percent wanted to increase it (Gilens 1999:72). What explains this difference? Gilens found strong support for the roles of racism and sexism. Images of African Americans in particular, he argued, “have come to dominate the public’s thinking about poverty and welfare” (1999:101). Among his many findings, he demonstrated that welfare support is related to whether one believes African Americans are hardworking, whether one believes most poor people are Black, and whether one has a negative opinion of Black single mothers receiving welfare.

Americans who believe African Americans are not committed to the work ethic are less supportive of welfare. Gilens demonstrated a positive association (0.52 regression coefficient) between belief in the stereotype that African Americans are lazy and opposition to welfare. Among those with the strongest beliefs that African Americans are lazy, 63 percent wanted to cut welfare spending while 15 percent wanted to increase it. Of those with the strongest beliefs that African Americans are hardworking, only 35 percent wanted to cut welfare spending versus 47 percent who wanted to increase it (1999:68–70). Gilens also found that, among Americans who agree strongly that African Americans could do just as well as Whites if they would just try harder, over 50 percent strongly agreed that welfare should be cut. Of those who strongly disagreed, only 20 percent wanted welfare cut (1999:177).

The perceived racial composition of the poor also impacts people’s welfare support. Gilens found that the more Americans conflate welfare and race, the more anti-welfare they are (see table 7.4). Of those Americans who believe most welfare recipients are Black, 63 percent believe lack of effort

is more to blame for people being on welfare, while only 26 percent say it is circumstances beyond people's control. Among that same group, only 31 percent say most people on welfare want to work, versus 69 percent who say most do not. Additionally, only 36 percent of Americans who believe a majority of the poor are Black say most people on welfare really need it, versus 64 percent who say most do not. When respondents think that most people on welfare are White, the responses are very different. Of this group, only 40 percent believe lack of effort is more to blame for people being on welfare, while 50 percent say circumstances beyond people's control. Among that same group, 55 percent say most people on welfare want to work, versus 45 percent who say most do not. Additionally, the 50 percent of Americans who believe most welfare recipients are White say people on welfare really need it, versus 50 percent who say most do not (Gilens 1999:140).

A third belief that Gilens found to impact people's support for social welfare policies was how negative their perceptions were of Black single mothers. For example, he found little correlation between White welfare-mother stereotypes and the idea that most people who do not succeed in life are lazy (.05). Yet there was a much stronger correlation between Black welfare-mother stereotypes and this same idea (.20). A similar pattern emerged across a variety of other questions: "Black welfare mother stereotypes have consistently stronger correlations than do white welfare mother stereotypes with a wide range of welfare attitude measures. . . . Indeed, in some cases the association with welfare attitudes is four or five times as large" (Gilens 1999:100).

We review Gilens's classic study because of how powerfully illustrative it is of the impact of both racism and sexism on welfare support. A number of other studies come to similar conclusions. Alesina and Glaeser (2004), for instance, demonstrated that racial heterogeneity is negatively correlated with welfare spending, both when you compare countries and when you compare U.S. states. In another important study, Erzo Luttmer (2001) demonstrated that support for welfare spending increases when individuals live close to welfare recipients of their own race, and decreases when they live close to welfare recipients of a different race. In the aforementioned study from Lauren Appelbaum (2001), teen mothers and single mothers were two of the groups deemed less deserving of liberal welfare policies.

Taken together, the available evidence suggests that Americans' thinking about poverty and social welfare policies is both racialized and gendered. The data clearly demonstrates that racism and sexism combine with individualism to significantly impact Americans' thinking about poverty and social policies.

SKEPTICAL ALTRUISM

Given the weight of the evidence revealing deeply problematic explanations for economic, racial, and gender inequalities among the American public, it might be tempting to imagine that Americans must cruelly disregard those in need. This is not necessarily the case, as the reality is a complicated mixture of competing concerns. Despite their individualistic beliefs, Americans are generally not opposed to government spending targeted at fighting poverty and economic inequality, as well as a number of other inequalities, in abstract “ideal cultural” terms. In fact, Americans show a widespread moral commitment to helping those in need. Today, for example, 62 percent of Americans say the federal government is not doing enough to help poor people (Pew Research Center 2018b). As Spencer Piston details in *Class Attitudes in America* (2018), Americans are also generally sympathetic to the plight of the poor. Where it gets complicated is that, while Americans care about those in need, their concern is filtered through what we call their “skeptical altruism.” Skeptical altruism has five main components:

1. A moral commitment to helping the poor
2. Deep suspicion concerning the morality and deservingness of welfare recipients (and Black recipients in particular) and a demand that government assistance be targeted at the deserving rather than the undeserving poor
3. Skepticism that government programs actually work
4. Aversion (at least in abstract “ideal cultural” terms) to “big government,” market interventions, and taxes
5. Preference for individualistically rather than structurally oriented social policies, given the perceived widespread opportunity available in the U.S. and high degree of control Americans are assumed to have over their lives

Clearly, these concerns have the potential to conflict, as research suggests they often do in the American mind. This skeptical altruism, fueled by dominant individualistic, racist, and sexist beliefs, gets in the way of translating a widespread moral commitment to helping the needy into full-fledged support for European-style social policies. Does it mean *no* support? No, but it does place limits on how far we are willing to go in our generosity and structural orientation.

Feagin’s 1972 study provides an illustrative example of the operation of skeptical altruism in American culture. Despite the individualism of his respondents, Feagin reported that three-quarters supported “an all-out federal effort” (1972:108) to fight poverty. This is the first component of skeptical altruism, a moral commitment to helping the poor. There was deep suspicion

of the morality and deservingness of welfare recipients (the second component). A majority of respondents were critical of welfare recipients' work ethic (84%) and fertility (61%), and 71 percent were not certain welfare recipients were honest about their need (1972:107). Despite their support for a robust federal effort to fight poverty, only 10 percent of the respondents were optimistic about the nation's ability to eradicate poverty (1972:108) (the third component of skeptical altruism). The steep drop in support for a federal guaranteed-jobs program if it meant an increase in taxes (from 64% support to 35% support) (1972:108) is related to the fourth component. Finally, the fifth component of skeptical altruism was demonstrated: a preference for individualistically rather than structurally oriented policies. Feagin reported that 64 percent of his respondents supported a guaranteed-jobs program, while only 30 percent supported a guaranteed income. Even the poorest group in his study followed this pattern—a majority, 69 percent, supported a guaranteed-jobs program, while only 39 percent supported a guaranteed income (1972:107–8). This pattern presumably hinges on notions of both deservingness and a preference for individualistically oriented policies. A guaranteed-jobs program would still require hard work in order to pay off, for instance, while a guaranteed income would presumably not.

As the tenets of skeptical altruism would suggest, the main reluctance concerning European-style policies for many Americans is not an objection to helping the poor but to helping the *undeserving* poor, as “support or opposition to the various programs of the welfare state turns on issues of merit and deservedness” (Gilens 1999:2). Gilens found, for instance, that a majority of Americans support cutting welfare spending if they believe recipients could get by without it if they really tried, but less than a quarter support cuts if they think the opposite (1999:65). Karen Secombe traces this focus on deservingness back to the colonial period:

Our social welfare system developed within this framework of duality [between the deserving and undeserving poor], and it continues to operate in this fashion today. Our system has been described as “reluctant,” indicating our generosity toward the worthy poor, while demonstrating callous disregard for others. Thus, current decisions about who constitutes the worthy poor, and at what level they should be taken care of, reflect these longstanding debates. The most consistent part of our revolving antipoverty policy is to reinforce the work ethic. We are cautious about giving assistance because we fear that people will no longer want to work if they are given something for free. (2007:81)

Americans generally support government aid targeted at those they deem deserving (those who are believed to be genuinely in need and are viewed as doing all they can to help themselves) and resent giving aid to those who are

viewed as undeserving (those not genuinely in need and/or who are viewed as not doing enough to help themselves).

Results from Cook and Barrett's nationwide study confirm widespread skeptical altruism in American culture: "When recipients are seen as being in need, as having no other sources of help, as wanting to be independent, and as not being at fault for their condition, support will be forthcoming. Support for public assistance programs depends a great deal on images of program recipients" (1992:212, cited in Chafel 1997:442). Kluegel and Smith make a similar point:

Although most Americans do want to do something about poverty, it has become increasingly clear that this "something" does not include direct-transfer payments. Such payments directly challenge prevailing equity norms. . . . Other antipoverty programs (like government guaranteed jobs) that do not challenge Americans' beliefs about the functional value of economic inequality are not the objects of such strong negative sentiment. . . . If any government involvement is believed to be needed, the closer it is in content to assuring equal opportunity the greater is the degree of public support. The more it looks like direct redistribution, the greater is the opposition. (1986:293)

In summary, government programs in line with Americans' moral commitment to helping the poor enjoy majority support as long as they do not violate the individualistic American ethos too dramatically. And the more Americans espouse the individualistic, racist, and sexist beliefs we have discussed in this book, the more concerned they are with such a violation and the more likely they are to mischaracterize victims of forces beyond individual control as undeserving and personally to blame.

Multiple nationwide surveys demonstrate skeptical altruism among the American public. Findings detailed in two notable sources (Gilens 1999; NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy 2001) are summarized here:

- 71% of Americans want to cut spending on *people* on welfare, 63% on *welfare* in general.
- 69% believe that most people on welfare who can work do not try to find jobs to support themselves.
- 66% believe that most people on welfare are not genuinely in need but instead are taking advantage of the system.
- 61% believe that most people on welfare could get along without it if they tried.
- 61% say government programs that try to improve the condition of the poor either have little impact (48%) or are making their lives worse (13%), while only 34% believe these programs are making their lives better.

- 59% believe that most able-bodied people on welfare prefer to sit home and collect benefits even if they can work.
- 57% believe that welfare encourages women to have more children than they would have if they were not able to get welfare.
- 54% say we are spending the right amount (36%) or too much (18%) on the poor, while only 38% say we are not spending enough.
- 47% say that if government were willing to spend whatever it thought was necessary to eliminate poverty in the United States, it could be accomplished, versus 49% who said it could not be.
- When given a choice between two statements, 46% of Americans chose “poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return,” versus 43% who chose “poor people have hard lives because government benefits don’t go far enough to help them live decently.”
- Only 28% of Americans are willing to pay higher taxes to increase welfare spending.

Based on available survey data, “it would be hard to exaggerate the level of cynicism toward welfare recipients held by the American public” (Gilens 1999:64). Americans may be morally committed to helping the poor, but their inequality beliefs distort their perceptions of who is deserving and who is not.

Despite these skeptical views of welfare and negative views of welfare recipients, most Americans support a variety of government programs targeted at those in need. Noam Chomsky notes this seeming contradiction:

It is a complicated situation. If you take the people who say they want the government off of their back, that sector of the population, they are individualistic in that sense. In the same polls, when you ask them if they want to see more spending on education, health, and aid for mothers with dependent children, they say they support that. So they also have social democratic inclinations, although they wouldn’t like it called social democratic. Take welfare as an example, which they are opposed to. On the other hand, they are in favor of what welfare does, like aid mothers with dependent children. They are opposed to welfare because that’s been demonized, especially by Ronald Reagan with his tales about welfare queens, Black women supposedly driving around in limousines to steal your money at the welfare office, and all that business. People are opposed to that. But if you ask about the things that welfare performs, you get support for it. It is a complex mixture because of the nature of propaganda and of various conflicting elements of the dominant culture.³

While they may bristle at the word “welfare,” be skeptical of the effectiveness of government programs, and be suspicious of welfare recipients, most Americans nonetheless support directing more government resources toward

a variety of programs to help struggling Americans “help themselves.” These include job-training programs (94% support), schools in low-income areas (94%), subsidized day care (85%), medical care for the poor (83%), public employment programs (82%), tax credits for low-income workers (80%), subsidized housing (75%), food stamps (61%), and cash assistance for needy families (54%). In addition, 85 percent of Americans support increasing the minimum wage, and 57 percent support a guaranteed minimum income. In this same poll, when asked if they would be willing to pay more in taxes to cover the costs of the initiatives outlined above (*not* welfare), 56 percent of Americans said they would be (NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy 2001). In the American mind, it’s not *if* we should help those in need, but *how* we should help the *truly deserving* Americans.

You will notice that the overwhelming majority of the programs outlined in the survey above are seen by Americans as enhancing opportunities, not guaranteeing outcomes. In the aforementioned *Beliefs about Inequality*, Kluegel and Smith’s findings support the notion that Americans believe that welfare may be needed and morally justified, but it must go to those who are deserving and must not violate the underlying American ethos of individualism:

Social welfare programs must not weaken the motivation for hard work that inequality is perceived to provide. Thus, welfare programs for the poor must not offer “handouts” and must not discourage hard work by people with low-paying jobs. Affirmative-action programs (as opposed to simple equal opportunity) have been widely viewed as calling for equal outcomes and hence as violating the necessary relationship between inputs (hard work and talents) and outcomes. . . . Individualistic solutions to social problems, those aimed at changing characteristics of the persons blamed for the problem, will be more acceptable than structural solutions, involving changes to societal or institutional arrangements. Individualistic solutions to racial inequalities include providing training programs to blacks to teach them job-related skills and attitudes and have been much more popular than structural solutions. (1986:31)

Edward Royce makes a similar argument in *Poverty and Power*:

The logic of this ideology [of individualism] encourages its adherents to attribute poverty to the deficiencies of the poor and to favor individualistic solutions to problems of economic hardship. Policy advocates, regardless of political affiliation, thus typically target the poor for reform. Conservatives recommend improving poor people through tough love and moral uplift, while liberals call for more training and education. In the U.S. political culture, structural reforms—government job creation, public investment in poor communities, or redistribution of income and wealth, for example—rarely receive serious consideration. Measures such as these, besides facing strong opposition from

powerful business groups, are a hard sell to a public schooled in the virtues of self-reliance and small government. (2015:148)

So while Americans may display a moral commitment to expanding government programs, even at the expense of their own tax bills, they clearly prefer programs that align with the dominant ideology (programs that “fix” deficiencies in the poor, change their behavior, and/or “help them help themselves”) over programs that challenge the dominant ideology (programs predicated on the idea that the social structure has failed to provide opportunities to all Americans).

Take unemployment insurance and welfare as examples. In one survey, 22 percent of Americans wanted to spend more money on *unemployed people*, while 52 percent wanted to spend more money on retraining programs for *displaced workers*. The likely explanations? “Retraining programs” focus on providing *opportunity*, while “spending money on unemployed people” is too vague and could include “handouts.” Additionally, the category of “unemployed people” could contain many people deemed “undeserving” and not doing enough to help themselves, while the category of “displaced workers” is more likely to conjure images of hard-working Americans who have fallen on hard times despite their hard work (Gilens 1999:28). In another survey, only 22 percent of Americans reported that we spend too little on welfare, while 65 percent said that we spend too little on assistance to the poor (Ladd 1994:39). This is likely because welfare is demonized as violating the individualistic American ethos (framed as a “handout” that disproportionately benefits African Americans, single mothers, and/or other supposedly lazy and undeserving populations). Assistance to the poor, however, could conceivably be any program targeted at expanding opportunity, thus helping the poor to ascend through the culturally approved pathways of hard work and ambition.

It should be noted that, while Americans show a moral commitment to helping those in need, they rank addressing poverty as only moderately important relative to other issues they would like the government to address. The NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy survey cited above, for instance, found that while most respondents say that poverty is a big problem (55%), it is not at the top of their list of priorities for the government to focus on. When asked which issues were most important for the government to address, the top priorities were educational quality, taxes/tax reform, health care–related issues, Social Security, and the economy (NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy 2001).

THE WELFARE STATE MATTERS

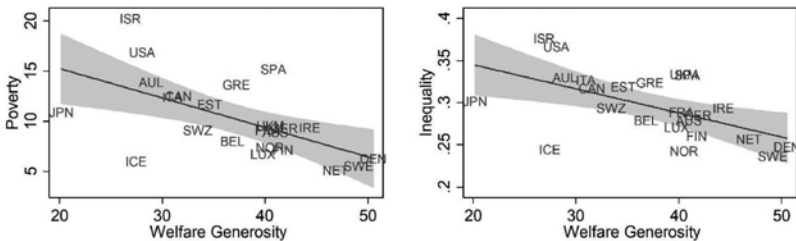
Widespread individualistic, racist, and sexist beliefs in the U.S. suggest an underdeveloped cultural understanding of structural forces. Research clearly

indicates that this is related to social policy support. The more underdeveloped one’s understanding of the structural causes of inequality, the more one can be convinced not to support more robust and structurally oriented social policies. This is crucial, as in the end, it is these social policies, and not economic performance or demographic characteristics, that are most responsible for the vastly different levels of poverty and economic inequality among wealthy countries (Smeeding 2005; Brady 2009).

Previous research suggests that social welfare spending matters a great deal and is a primary explanation for why wealthy countries have such different levels of economic disadvantage. This helps explain the outlier status of the U.S., which has very high levels of poverty and economic inequality, among wealthy countries (refer back to tables 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3). Indeed, the U.S. is uniquely unequal in comparison to these other countries. As mentioned previously, empirical research from scholars like David Brady and others demonstrates that the primary reason for the considerable variation in levels of economic disadvantage in the wealthy world is the welfare state:

Across all varieties and types of welfare states, there is a strong linear negative relationship between welfare generosity and poverty. The welfare state’s influence is unmatched by any other cause. The effects of welfare generosity are always significantly negative regardless of what one controls for. . . . The generosity of the welfare state is the dominant cause of how much poverty exists in affluent Western democracies. (Brady 2009:166)

If you refer to figure 7.1, you see the strong negative association between the generosity of the welfare state and the level of poverty and economic inequality across rich democracies. Well-funded and well-designed social welfare policies effectively mitigate poverty and economic inequality. When countries politically choose to not invest in such policies, they enable eco-



Note: Poverty correlation is -0.55, inequality correlation is -0.54. David Brady assisted with this analysis.

Figure 7.1. The Association between Welfare Generosity and Poverty/Inequality in Selected Rich Democracies.

Source: Author calculations with LIS (2018).

conomic disadvantage to persist at high levels. This is certainly the case for the U.S., which for some time has been described as “the most reluctant of all welfare states” (Feagin 1972:101). The best explanation for the unusually high poverty in the U.S. is the minimalist nature of this “reluctant” American social welfare system. “Where poverty is low,” David Brady argues, “equality has been institutionalized. Where poverty is widespread, as most visibly demonstrated by the United States, there has been a failure to institutionalize equality” (2009:6).

While it is true that the absence of government can enhance freedom, it is also true that the presence of government can do the same. Americans tend to focus too heavily on negative freedom—or freedom from outside interference (such as government control)—while placing too little emphasis on positive freedom—or freedom to live the life you imagine for yourself (and what is needed to enable this). In fact, many Americans assume that being left alone by the government equals freedom. This conflates negative and positive freedom, when in fact they are not the same. A world without government is not necessarily a world where everybody is given an opportunity to develop their abilities to the fullest and is given access to resources and opportunity pathways. Slavoj Žižek argues:

What Americans don’t want to admit . . . is that not only is there not a contradiction between state regulation and freedom, but in order for us to actually be free in our social interactions, there must be an extremely elaborated network of health, law, institutions, moral rules and so on. . . . Ideology today . . . [is] unfreedom which you sincerely personally experience as freedom. (Massey 2013)

Graduating from Harvard is hardly a choice for an individual who has not had significant support from parents, peers, teachers, community, and government. Likewise, living a long and healthy life is hardly an option for somebody whose mother was stressed and had inadequate access to health care during pregnancy, and who then was born into a childhood of dire poverty. These are unfreedoms brought about by conditions not of that child’s choosing. Richard Wilkinson, discussing the connection between economic disadvantage, health, and freedom, argues:

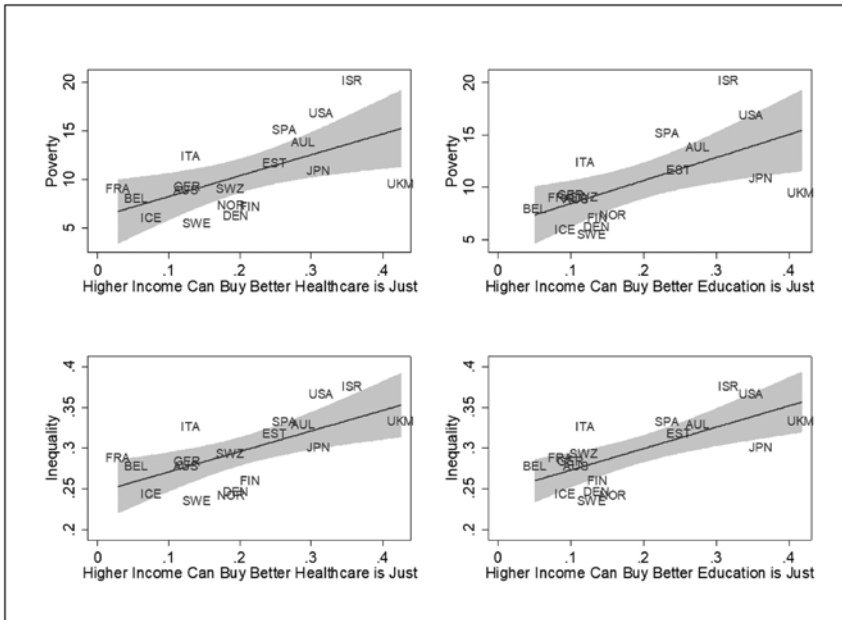
I suspect a great many people think about freedom as if it is about freedom from government regulation. But things like health inequalities deprive large swathes of the population of more than ten percent of life expectancy. The effects of poverty and inequality are forms of structural violence and limitations on true freedom. These things affect the quality of life very deeply. (Eppard et al. 2018:143)

Economic disadvantage erects significant barriers that inhibit the development of our abilities, as well as our access to resources and opportunity

pathways. Government can and should help create the conditions that remove such barriers and allow true freedom: the ability to freely choose the kind of life that we want to lead, and then to have the abilities, resources, and opportunities to make that dream a reality.

In a wealthy country like the U.S., the government has the means to create the conditions where such barriers are greatly reduced, and true freedom is expanded. Robust and structurally oriented social policies are a critical part of the solution to these problems. Wealthy countries that have achieved serious reductions in economic disadvantage have most certainly expanded the freedom of large segments of their populations by being more rather than less involved in the lives of their citizens.

We propose that the strength of individualism in American culture is one of the reasons that the U.S. resists implementing more robust and structurally oriented social policies, and this contributes to the high levels poverty and economic inequality in the U.S., compared to other wealthy countries. Indeed, figure 7.2 shows that some inequality beliefs actually correlate with levels of poverty and economic inequality at the macro level. As figure 7.2



Note: Top left correlation = 0.58, top right correlation = 0.60, bottom left correlation = 0.65, bottom right correlation = 0.69.

Figure 7.2. The Association between Poverty/Inequality and Beliefs about Just Distribution of Resources in Selected Rich Democracies.
 Source: Author calculations with LIS (2018) and ISSP (2017).

demonstrates, beliefs about whether it is “just” for people with higher incomes to be able to purchase better health care and education are strongly positively associated with poverty and economic inequality across rich democracies. A greater share of citizens in the U.S., Israel, and the UK holds such individualistic beliefs, and those countries have high poverty and economic inequality. By contrast, a much smaller share of citizens in Belgium, France, and Iceland hold such individualistic beliefs, and those countries have low poverty and economic inequality. This is likely due in part to the ways that individualistic beliefs contribute to a population showing less support for robust and structurally oriented social policies.

David Brady’s institutionalized power relations theory, outlined in *Rich Democracies, Poor People* (2009), provides a useful conceptual model for thinking about the relationship between inequality beliefs and social welfare policies in wealthy countries (see figure 7.3). He argues that the ideologies and interests of different groups in a population influence the types of coalitions that come together to put pressure on politicians to develop more robust and structurally oriented social welfare policies. The number of coalitions that exist, and the power that these coalitions wield, help determine how institutionalized leftist politics become in that country and the amount of pressure that politicians are under to develop generous and effective social welfare policies.

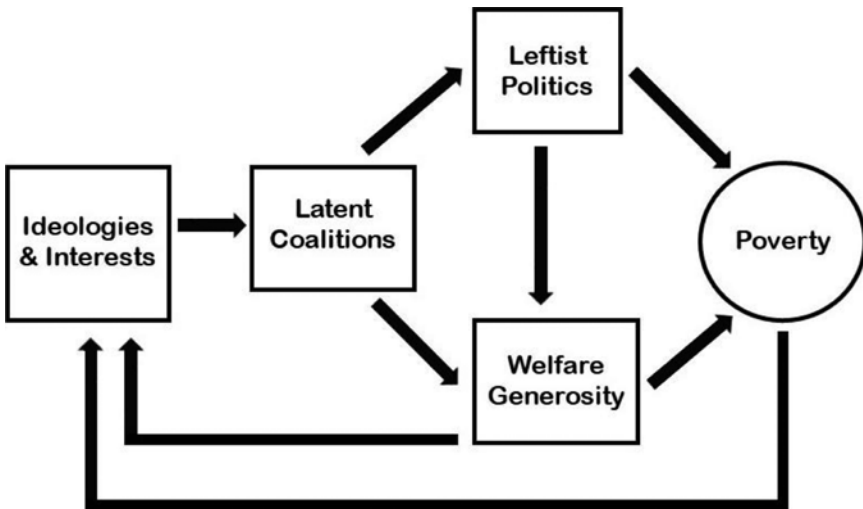


Figure 7.3. Conceptual Model for David Brady’s Institutionalized Power Relations Theory
Source: Figure 1.2, “Conceptual Model for Institutionalized Power Relations Theory,” from p. 14 in *Rich Democracies, Poor People: How Politics Explain Poverty*, by David Brady. Copyright © 2009 by Oxford University Press, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press, U.S.A.

The generosity and design of those policies then impact the level of poverty in that particular country. Finally, the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of these programs in reducing poverty feeds back into dominant cultural beliefs about poverty and social welfare.

According to the logic of this theory, ideologies concerning inequalities based on social class, race, and gender have an influence on the amount of pressure politicians face to develop or not develop specific types of social welfare policies. Widespread ideologies supportive of robust and structurally oriented policies keep the political pressure high and help to reduce economic disadvantage, while widespread ideologies oppositional to such policies work against such a reduction.

INEQUALITY BELIEFS AS SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE

Cultural resources such as inequality beliefs help us to understand the world around us. The cultural resources available to us, however, are not random, and the number of different explanations is not unlimited. Their number and character are deeply shaped by the society and culture in which we live. There are certain cultural resources available at any given moment concerning social problems: a certain vocabulary, certain storylines, certain boundaries of respectable debate, a certain range of “thinkable thought,” and certain policy responses deemed appropriate. While both individualistic and non-individualistic cultural resources are available, individualistic ones have historically been more prominent in the American inequality palette.

These individualistic resources occupy a “ubiquitous presence in the cultural system” (Royce 2015:150), and Americans are more likely to feel comfortable utilizing them relative to non-individualistic ones due to their socialization within American culture. As Edward Royce notes, “Americans’ routine exposure to ideologies of poverty and inequality is consistently skewed toward a language accentuating the efficacy of individual striving rather than the constraint of limited opportunities” (2015:149). While a structural language of poverty is available but weak in our culture, individualistic language has strong cultural currency. The disadvantaged cultural position of structuralism means that challenges to individualism are not nearly as substantial as they likely need to be in order for politicians to feel sustained pressure to develop a more robust and structurally oriented approach to economic disadvantage.

We argue that dominant American inequality beliefs—disproportionately influenced by individualism, racism, sexism, and skeptical altruism—help to reproduce social inequalities. We follow Pierre Bourdieu in arguing that together

these beliefs serve as forms of symbolic domination, and we conceptualize the consequences of these beliefs as symbolic violence. In this context, “symbolic violence” refers to the ways in which dominant culture contributes to the reproduction of social hierarchies. Bourdieu explains symbolic violence as, “every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990:4). Thus, symbolic violence in the context of our discussion refers to the ways that dominant culture justifies dominant social hierarchies in a manner that protects them from challenges.

Americans learn—at home, in school, from mass media, and in countless other ways—a variety of justifications for social hierarchies. Other ways of understanding and/or ordering the world, ways in which the relative positions of dominant and subordinate groups might be challenged and altered, are not as likely to be learned and internalized, and are therefore not fully recognized as legitimate.

In the words of Bourdieu, symbolic domination is “something you absorb like air, something you don’t feel pressured by; it is everywhere and nowhere, and to escape from that is very difficult” (Bourdieu and Eagleton 1992:115). Dan Schubert explains this point:

[Symbolic violence] is *everywhere* in that we all live in symbolic systems that, in the process of classifying and categorizing, impose hierarchies and ways of being and knowing the world that unevenly distribute suffering and limit even the ways in which we can imagine the possibility of an alternative world. It is *nowhere* because, in its gentleness and its subtleness, we fail to recognize its very existence, let alone the way it is at the root of much of violence and suffering. . . . If [social] worlds are constructed, then they can be re-constructed in other ways. (2008:195–96)

By internalizing dominant cultural justifications for inequalities, but being largely unaware of this fact, people end up involuntarily perceiving and acting on the world, to varying degrees, through individualistic, racist, and sexist lenses. The particular justifications these lenses contain are dependent upon the specific power relations of the society within which they emerge.

These dominant inequality beliefs lead Americans to misrecognize structural failings as individual failings, to mistake human-created injustices as natural and spontaneous, to confuse a class system with a meritocracy, and to misunderstand the structural nature of racial, gender, and a variety of other inequalities. The internalization of dominant culture leads Americans to misrecognize social hierarchies as the outcome of fair competitions between naturally unequal individuals, rather than the result of a human-designed

society that ensures the unequal development of people's abilities, as well as unequal access to resources and opportunity pathways.

One important consequence of this is that the specific social structures that produced social inequalities in the first place are not fully recognized or challenged. Symbolic violence ensures that "a misrecognized vision of the social world is legitimated—a vision that reproduces, with the complicity of the dominated, a stratified social order" (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:693).

In a way, our current age of inequality commits a double violence upon all Americans, and struggling Americans in particular. There is structural violence, which refers to avoidable social inequalities and social suffering that result from the ways in which societies are arranged. Bandy Lee explains:

[Structural violence] refers to the avoidable limitations society places on groups of people that constrain them from achieving the quality of life that would have otherwise been possible. . . . Because of its embedding within social structures, people tend to overlook them as ordinary difficulties that they encounter in the course of life. . . . Unlike the more visible forms of violence where one person perpetrates physical harm on another, structural violence occurs through economically, politically, or culturally driven processes working together to limit subjects from achieving full quality of life. . . . Structural violence directly illustrates a power system wherein social structures or institutions cause harm to people in a way that results in maldevelopment or deprivation. . . . A key aspect of structural violence is that it is often subtle, invisible, and accepted as a matter of course. . . . Societal structures are what we choose while deciding as a society, as every society does, how to distribute or not to distribute, or how to share or not to share, the collective income and wealth that the society produces. (2016:110)

Forces beyond the control of struggling Americans, such as globalization, deindustrialization, automation, and neoliberalism, have made them more insecure in a variety of ways in recent years. Rather than being natural or unavoidable, these forces impact Americans the way they do because of the deliberate choices of those in power in society. Whether around 5 or 6 percent of the population lives in poverty, such as in countries like Denmark and Finland, or close to 18 percent, as in the U.S. (refer back to table 7.1), comes down to the choices we make as a society. The same goes for the fifth of American children living in poverty, compared to only around 3 percent in Denmark and Finland (refer back to table 7.2). The reason almost half of the income goes to the top 10 percent in the U.S., but only around half of that in places like Iceland, is likewise due to deliberate choices made by society. The same goes for the almost three-quarters of the wealth that goes to the top 10 percent in the U.S., compared to only about half the wealth in the UK.⁴ This

unnecessary inequality and avoidable suffering inflicted on millions of people is an example of structural violence.

In addition to structural violence, there is the aforementioned and equally important symbolic violence—the ways in which available cultural tools lack the full capacity to interpret these social forces as structural phenomena. Dominant American inequality beliefs frame economic uncertainty, massive economic inequality, the loss of decent jobs, the fraying of the social contract, and persistent racial and gender inequalities in disproportionately individualistic terms. Heather Bullock notes:

Dominant U.S. beliefs about poverty and wealth are the ideological “glue” that legitimizes class position. No system of inequality can exist without an ideology to nurture, protect, and advance it . . . attributions for poverty and wealth along with belief in meritocracy, individualism, and the Protestant work ethic contribute to the acceptance of tremendous economic disparities in the richest nation in the world, and support for policies that both create and perpetuate wealth and poverty. Neither generous welfare benefits nor strong safety net programs are likely to be supported if beneficiaries are perceived as responsible for their own hardship. Intersecting classist, racist, and sexist stereotypes paint a portrait of dependency, irresponsibility, and undeservingness. . . . Classist beliefs and their intersections with racism and sexism are borne out in policies that govern much-needed benefits, such as cash assistance and health care, in interactions with teachers, neighbors, and caseworkers, and in our own self-understandings. Until economic disparity is widely understood as undeserved and unjust, support for progressive social policies and widespread change will remain elusive. (2013:68–69)

This symbolic violence of individualism not only diminishes people’s abilities to translate private problems into broader systemic and structural problems, but it also weakens bonds of solidarity. These bonds of solidarity are crucial in the fight to translate a greater structural understanding of economic disadvantage into effective political action.

We should not underestimate this symbolic dimension of our struggles. Addressing the insecurity of large portions of the population will likely require more than changing economic structures of domination, as important as that is. Symbolic violence renders structural violence partially invisible, and we cannot address what we cannot fully see. Henry Giroux argues, “Politics often begins when it becomes possible to make power visible, to challenge the ideological circuitry of hegemonic knowledge” (2008:113).

To have a future in which social policies can be better utilized to address wider social issues, Americans will likely need a deeper and more structural understanding of social problems. In its absence, they are in danger of blam-

ing structural transformations in American society on the wrong people, such as themselves, racial and ethnic minority groups, immigrants, single mothers, public employees, the poor, and so on. They are in danger of not seeing the ways in which we are all beholden to forces beyond our control, and missing out on the powerful solidarity such a realization might engender. A more structural worldview allows Americans to direct their energy in a more fruitful direction, helping to transform their society into something more just.

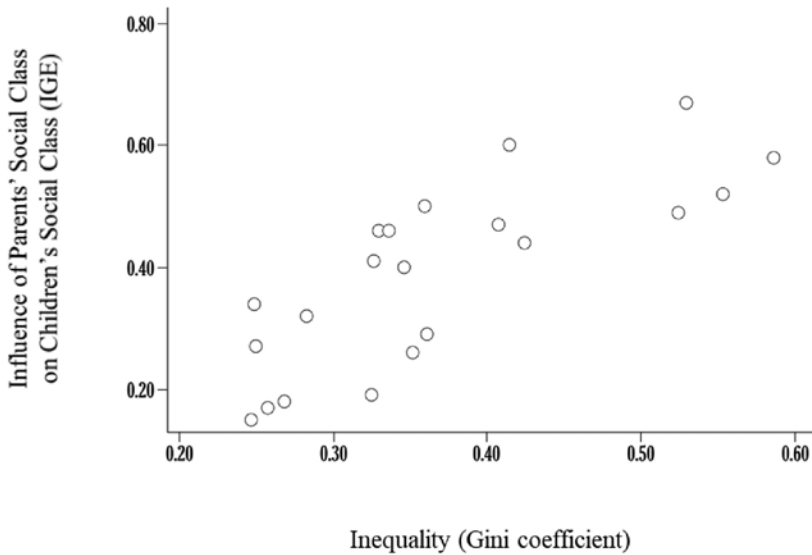
PARTING THOUGHTS

Economic inequality in the U.S. is at unconscionable levels, with the top 10 percent owning almost three-quarters (73%) of all wealth and taking home almost half (47%) of all income (WID 2018). Both the relative poverty rate and Gini coefficient in the U.S. are among the highest in the wealthy world. Joseph Stiglitz recently noted that the top one percent of American income earners earn 40 percent more in a single week's time than the bottom fifth earn over the entire year. Perhaps even more shockingly, he noted that the top 0.1 percent take home more in less than two days than the bottom 90 percent earn in about a year (Stiglitz 2013:5). The CEOs of the largest U.S. firms, on average, earn 312 times as much as the average American worker, up from 30 times as much in the 1970s (Mishel and Schieder 2018).

One in five American households has zero or negative net worth (Collins and Hoxie 2017:2). Thirty-nine percent of U.S. families have trouble meeting at least one of the basic needs of food, health care, housing, or utilities, and nearly a quarter struggle to meet two or more (Fottrell 2018). In addition, deep poverty has risen substantially, from less than 30 percent of the poor in the 1970s, to 45.6 percent today (Mishel et al. 2012:428; Bialik 2017).

Considering U.S. wealth and economic output, American children suffer unnecessarily. The U.S. ranks embarrassingly poorly in the wealthy world on not only child poverty but on other important measures of child well-being (Royce 2015). The U.S. has also fallen behind a number of countries on measures of social mobility (Mishel et al. 2012). It seems that as inequality increases, opportunity tends to decrease, as economist Miles Corak and others have shown by calculating the strong relationship (0.59) between income inequality and IGEs across countries (see figure 7.4).

A recent analysis revealed that 42 percent of American workers earn less than fifteen dollars an hour, despite the fact that such wages make it hard to cover basic necessities in most of the U.S. The jobs these workers find themselves in, unfortunately, are also some of the occupations most likely to grow over the next few years (Tung et al. 2015:1–2). Forces such as globalization,



Note: Correlation = 0.59.

Figure 7.4. The “Great Gatsby Curve” across Countries.

Source: Mishel et al. 2012; Corak 2016.

deindustrialization, automation, and neoliberalism have had a dramatic impact on the prospects for security among those near the bottom of the income and educational hierarchies. Since the 1970s, the bottom 50 percent of male wage earners have seen their wages decline. Over the same period of time, there has been a steep decline in the percentage of low-income and high school–educated workers who are offered employer-provided health care and pension coverage (Mishel et al. 2012:189, 200–201). Among Americans aged 30 to 49 with only a high school diploma/GED or less, the poverty/near poverty rate (below the 125% threshold) has risen from 19 percent in 1990 to 27 percent in 2016. In 1990, 68 percent of Americans in this group were married, compared to only 50 percent in 2016. Among men in this group, 81 percent were employed in 1990, compared to 76 percent in 2016 (Ruggles et al. 2018).

These glaring inequalities, in the words of Joseph Stiglitz, are leaving “the American social fabric, and the country’s economic sustainability, fraying at the edges” (2013:2). Such structural problems require structural solutions (Bullock 2013). The time to act is now. To do so, we must expand our imaginations beyond dominant “blame the victim” (Ryan 1976) ideologies, dream bigger, and imagine a more just future. We all lose when structural inequalities

are allowed to persist, and all stand to gain from their demise. In but one example of this, a recent analysis by one of the authors found that the annual cost of childhood poverty in the U.S. was approximately \$1 trillion. This represented 28 percent of the entire federal budget for 2015 (McLaughlin and Rank 2018). The study also determined that for every dollar spent on poverty reduction, the nation would save at least seven dollars with respect to the economic costs of poverty. In short, reducing such poverty is in all of society's best interest.

Interestingly, we find ourselves in the midst of great challenges to the dominant ideology, not unlike those posed by the Great Depression of the 1930s and the social movements of the 1960s. Recent movements such as Black Lives Matter, Occupy, and #MeToo have levied serious critiques against the structural arrangements that contribute to social inequalities. It is certainly the case that today many Americans possess a structural language—to describe such problems as mass incarceration, skyrocketing economic inequality, and patriarchy—that was not as widely available even in the recent past. Will this tamp down enthusiasm for American individualism? Survey data from the Pew Research Center and Gallup suggest that Americans, and particularly young Americans, may indeed be trending in a less individualistic and more pro-government direction at the moment. One recent Gallup survey, for example, found that while 51 percent of 18- to 29-year-old Americans view socialism positively, only 45 percent expressed a positive view of capitalism (Gallup 2018b). This is not to suggest that either “socialism” or “capitalism” are preferable in absolute terms, but that our culture may be becoming less individualistic more generally.

History suggests that the dominant ideology is nevertheless quite resilient, and that temporary challenges typically give way to the long-term reemergence of individualism. Whether our current era follows that pattern, or is truly an ideological turning point, is an open question. It would certainly be naïve to underestimate the staying power of American individualism as a way of viewing the world.

Yet it is also important to recognize that significant changes and shifts in American attitudes and beliefs can and do occur over fairly short periods of time. What was once considered appropriate and in fashion, with time and evidence, can become antiquated. What was once considered just can one day be reviled as unjust. What was once considered truth can eventually be recognized as myth. Thus, while we should not underestimate the staying power of American individualism, neither should we be immobilized by its apparent strength. We have witnessed major cultural shifts at different points in American history, which resulted in major societal progress, and remain hopeful that we are in the midst of another.

Two examples illustrate the fact that profound changes in attitudes and behaviors can occur over relatively short time periods. The first is the remarkable

transformation that took place, both morally and legally, regarding the legitimacy of civil rights for African Americans. Between the mid-1950s and the late 1960s, the civil rights movement revealed the hypocrisy of America's Jim Crow laws, its legally segregated school systems, its denial of voting rights, and a host of other inequities that brutally impacted African Americans. Opinions about the civil rights movement were transformed within a relatively short period of time. At the beginning of the movement, the asserted rights and claims were largely disregarded. By the end of the movement, there was widespread recognition of the legitimacy of the demands made by those within the movement. Equally important, a host of significant legal changes were signed into law during the mid- to late 1960s that reflected the magnitude of this profound change. These included the Voting Rights Act, the Fair Housing Act, and the Civil Rights Act.

A second example of rapid changes taking place in how an issue is viewed and acted upon is that of the physical environment. Prior to 1960, public concern over the environment was limited. Yet after publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, concern for the environment increased dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s. The public began to see graphic examples of the consequences of unchecked pollution. Reflecting this concern, between 1969 and 1976, seventeen separate pieces of federal environmental legislation were passed, including the Clean Air Act of 1970, the Clean Water Act of 1972, and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency. Today, environmental protection is an issue that the public consistently places near the top of its overall concerns.

In each of these cases, the old ways of thinking had been dominant over many decades. Yet dramatic shifts occurred within relatively short periods of time. A transformation took place in terms of how each of these social issues was viewed. As the dangers and injustice of the status quo became increasingly apparent, Americans realized the importance of paying closer attention to these concerns. By no means have we solved either of these problems or gone the necessary distance. Nevertheless, there has been an undeniable fundamental shift in the dominant paradigm applied to these social issues.

Such a shift in thinking is now needed, and may well be underway, in the case of American inequality and hardship. As we have discussed throughout this book, a major stumbling block to reducing the extent of inequality and poverty in this country has been the widespread acceptance of rugged individualism. The result of this has been twofold. First, it has misdiagnosed the reasons and dynamics of poverty and economic inequality. Rather than attribute the underlying causes of American hardship to failings at the structural level such as the shortage of decent-paying jobs or a failure to provide an effective safety net, individualism has placed the emphasis upon perceived personal inadequacies and, consequently, the importance of individual improvement in order to solve the problems of poverty and economic inequality. This has

resulted in an ongoing misunderstanding of why poverty and hardship exists in the first place.

But perhaps even more important, this focus upon individual failing and the need for self-improvement has provided a convenient justification for the general population to shirk any responsibility for solving this problem. In other words, if the perceived reason behind economic hardship is individual failing, then it is up to the affected individuals themselves to solve their own problems. Because individuals are generally viewed as solely responsible for their station in life, including poverty, it follows that community members are likely to feel little or no social obligation to help. In fact, by providing such help, one might argue that we only make the situation worse. Such is the basic conservative argument regarding the perceived failure of the welfare state to solve the problem of poverty and economic insecurity.

This helps to explain why the U.S. has had such a limited and reluctant welfare state and social safety net. This, in turn, helps to explain why the U.S. currently has some of the highest levels of poverty and economic inequality among the Western industrialized countries. Clearly then, a critical first step in addressing the inequality and hardship found in America is to shift our understanding of inequality from one that places the blame upon the individual to one that recognizes the injustice of structural inequities. Perhaps Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed this idea most eloquently in his final book, *Where Do We Go from Here*, in which he noted,

A true revolution of value will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. (1967:187–88)

These words ring as true today as they did when first written over fifty years ago. Indeed, the question before us is: Can we begin to reimagine and reshape that Jericho road? If we are able to do so, if we can begin to grasp the importance and urgency of such a restructuring, the promise of a more equitable and humane society surely lies ahead.

NOTES

1. Portions of this chapter have been either reprinted or adapted from Lawrence Eppard, Dan Schubert, and Henry A. Giroux, "The Double Violence of Inequality:

Precarity, Individualism, and White Working-Class Americans,” *Sociological Viewpoints*, 32(1), 2018. This material appears here with the written permission of the editor of *Sociological Viewpoints*, Patricia Neff Cluster.

2. Michael Rodriguez-Muñiz, in discussing fields of knowledge, argues that they “influence what is sayable, knowable and imaginable” (2015:93). We apply a similar notion to dominant culture.

3. Unpublished interview for this book.

4. See the World Inequality Database for these data: <https://wid.world/>.

Afterword

Noam Chomsky¹

The United States is a very significant, and in some ways quite shocking, example of poverty and inequality. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that these issues are not confined to our own country. The same neoliberal policies of the past generation that are leading to sharply increasing inequality in the U.S., along with the undermining of democracy and the breakdown of social cohesion, have been applied in much of the world over the past generation. There have been similar and often devastating effects in weaker societies.

There has also been significant poverty reduction during this period. Rather strikingly, this reduction has happened in the countries that have not accepted the neoliberal principles that the U.S. and its allies have been advocating. The greatest progress in poverty reduction was in China, where the whole system of policies is totally different. That trend is rather general.

As far as inequality is concerned, it has been growing quite rapidly world-wide. Every year Oxfam, the leading development agency, publishes an extensive and detailed report on the state of poverty and inequality in the world. In 2014, Oxfam found that about 90 individuals literally owned half of world wealth, which is an extraordinary degree of inequality. By 2015, the number had been reduced to 62. That is half of the world's wealth owned by 62 individuals. There are many ugly consequences of this. To take one example from the Oxfam report, they point out that five million children are dying of starvation every year. That means over 500 an hour. Now these children could very easily be saved, as the resources are certainly available. But policy is designed so that those resources go toward enriching the super-rich and powerful, not towards saving millions of children from starvation.

Among the rich developed countries of the OECD, the U.S. is at the extremes in both poverty and inequality. A recent report by the OECD noted

that the share of top incomes in English-speaking countries had increased over the past year, and far more in the U.S. than in other countries:

Income inequality is high in the U.S., compared to other OECD countries. Across countries, higher levels of income inequality are associated with less social mobility, and hence lower equality of opportunities. . . . Comparing living standards around the world, the average American is far richer than most. But this is not true for the poorest ten percent of Americans. (OECD 2014:1)

The report continues:

The share of top-income recipients in total gross income grew significantly in the past three decades in most countries, but it was particularly marked in the U.S., where the share of the richest one percent in all pre-tax income more than doubled since 1980, reaching almost 20% in 2012. . . . Over the longer run, between 1976 and 2007, the average income of the top one percent of earners grew faster than the average income of the rest of the population almost everywhere. Over this period, a very large fraction of income growth was “captured” by the top percentile in English-speaking countries, particularly in North America: around 47 percent of total growth has benefited the top one percent in the United States, 37 percent in Canada, and about 20 percent in New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Income growth was shared more equally in other OECD countries for which data are available, even though the top of the distribution still benefited more from income growth than the rest of the population. (OECD 2014:1–4)

It is in a fraction of the top one percent where there has been a huge explosion of inequality. This has been the case primarily in the U.S., but also to some extent in other English-speaking countries.

In the U.S., poverty also remains at extraordinary levels. By most measures, the U.S. ranks with the poorest of the OECD countries. Rates of poverty and inequality in the United States are much higher than poorer European countries like Portugal, and this has been consistent over fifty years. The same is true of measures of social justice, which include things like infant mortality and hunger. Of the OECD countries, the United States ranks down at the bottom along with Greece and only slightly above Mexico, Chile, and Turkey.

An associated and quite striking fact has recently been discovered. Among a large sector of the American population, less-educated White males (those with only a high school education), life expectancy is actually declining. That is something that is unheard of in rich societies, where life expectancy typically continually rises. Even though the U.S. is not particularly high in life expectancy among OECD countries to begin with, the fact that life expectancy is declining among a major sector of the population in such a rich country is unheard of.

All of these things are surely consequences of the neoliberal policies of the past generation, such as deregulation, marketization, and declining public institutions. In the U.S. and even worse elsewhere, this has led to stagnation and sometimes decline for a majority of the population. Real wages for male workers are now at the level of the late 1960s. Now, there has been considerable economic growth since then, but it has gone into very few pockets. Over the last couple of years, almost all of the growth has gone to a tiny percentage of the wealthy population. So there is in fact now a radical concentration of wealth, but not in parts of the population that are really productive. Much of this is in financial institutions, which have a dubious and possibly even harmful effect on the economy.

This is understood by the major, powerful institutions. Take Citigroup as an example. Citigroup, a major financial institution, published a report a couple of years ago for their investors. In this report, they urged investors to direct their investments to what they called the “plutonomy” index. “Plutonomy” means the wealthier sector of the population, a worldwide class system of very wealthy people. They are mostly in the U.S., with some elsewhere, including some in China and Saudi Arabia. But they are mostly in the U.S., and that is where the really good investment opportunities are located. You can disregard the rest, it is assumed, as they are not important. In fact it is now common to divide the world’s population into a plutonomy (the upper sector of wealth and power) and what is sometimes called the “precariat.” These are the people who live precarious lives, lives without security and without benefits. In many countries, including some rich countries in Europe, unemployment among youth is extraordinarily high, with people living at home into their forties. These young people cannot start a family, cannot start a career, and work part-time jobs when jobs are available. That’s the precariat.

It is the same in the U.S. Take colleges and universities, which increasingly are hiring temporary workers, such as adjuncts and graduate students. These are workers who have no protection and who can be paid very little and dismissed easily. That’s the precariat.

The world is dividing into a plutonomy and a precariat. As many have pointed out, by now the super-rich inhabit a different world, a world that barely has contact with the general population except to extract resources from them.

There is much debate about the causes of all of this, and there are many complexities. But there is ample evidence that it does not have to do with any economic laws or with economic necessity. Instead, it has to do with policy decisions. If we look at policy decisions in the U.S., we should recognize that the U.S. is different from other societies in many ways. One way is that it is by far the richest society in the world with incomparable advantages. That has been true since its founding. Throughout its history, it has either been the

richest or close to the richest country in the world. By the late nineteenth century, the U.S. economy was greater than that of the other advanced societies combined. In the twentieth century, this just accelerated. The U.S. has enormous advantages, including huge territory (relatively underpopulated once the indigenous population was eliminated), enormous internal resources, and extraordinary security.

In addition, to an unusual extent, the U.S. is a business-run society. This is partly the result of the fact that it did not grow out of existing feudal institutions. It became run by the business world to a high extent, and that is revealed in many ways. Take voting as an example. The U.S. has a pretty high abstention level, or people who just do not vote. This fact has been investigated with interesting results. One of the leading scholars on contemporary electoral politics, Walter Dean Burnham, conducted a careful study some years ago of the socioeconomic profile of nonvoters in the U.S. What he discovered is that their socioeconomic profile matches those in similar societies in Europe who vote for labor-based and/or social democratic parties. There are no such parties in the U.S., so that sector of the population just does not vote because nothing represents them. Burnham just recently, along with prominent political scientist Thomas Ferguson, conducted a very careful county-by-county study of voting in the 2014 election. They came to a pretty spectacular conclusion. As it turns out, voting in that election was approximately the same as in the 1820s, when the vote was restricted to propertied White males. This is in 2014, which tells you quite a lot about participation in what is called a democratic society.

These results are amplified when we look at how people are represented by their own elected representatives. This is a major topic in academic political science. There is very good work in this area by Martin Gilens, Larry Bartels, and other mainstream political scientists. The way to study this is to examine the policies that the representatives vote for, and then examine the attitudes and preferences of the people whom they represent. We know a great deal about these preferences from extensive and quite reliable polling data. It turns out that the lower 70 percent of the population on the income/wealth scale are basically disenfranchised. Their own representatives vote in ways dissociated from their constituents' preferences. As you move up the income/wealth scale, you get a little bit more influence on representatives. So policies are essentially made by the top fraction of one percent on the income/wealth scale.

In a recent study, well-known political scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page investigated a few hundred major decisions made in the political system, comparing the decisions with popular attitudes. Here was their conclusion:

The central point that emerges from our research is that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence. Our results provide substantial support for theories of Economic-Elite Domination and for theories of Biased Pluralism, but not for theories of Majoritarian Electoral Democracy or Majoritarian Pluralism. (Gilens and Page 2014:565)

To decode the language of academic political science, this means that the U.S. is essentially a plutocracy with some formal democratic elements that are increasingly at the margins. And the public is aware of this. People don't have to read leading political science journals to see it in their lives. We see it in much of what is happening today.

It turns out that policy in general is often quite contrary to popular preferences. There are extensive studies of people's attitudes. Even among sectors of the population that claim to want the government off their backs, attitudes tend to be pretty social democratic, the kinds of preferences that are missing in American politics. Even among those sectors, and in the population generally, there is strong preference for more spending for things like education and health. There is not strong support for welfare because it has been demonized, primarily by Ronald Reagan. Reagan told fanciful stories of African American women supposedly driving in their limousines to steal your money at the welfare office. Well, of course nobody wanted that. There is very strong support, however, for the things that welfare actually does, such as provide aid to women with dependent children.

One of the interesting cases is national health care. Bernie Sanders is considered an extremist because he is calling for national health care. Yet, for as far back as polls have been taken, they have revealed that national health care is very popular. Right now, at this moment, about 60 percent of the population believe the U.S. should have national health care. That is a pretty remarkable figure when you recognize that almost nobody speaks in support of national health care in public, and when it is mentioned, it is demonized. Nevertheless, 60 percent of the population believe we ought to have it.

Go back a few years to the Reagan era, and about 70 percent of the population thought that there ought to be a constitutional guarantee of national health care. In fact, 40 percent of the population believed that there already was a constitutional guarantee. This means they considered it such an obvious desideratum that it must already be in the Constitution.

When President Obama came along with the Affordable Care Act (ACA), there was originally mention of having a public option allowing people the choice of having public health care. Almost two-thirds of the population supports that, yet it was dropped without discussion.

Coming back to Sanders, his advocacy of national health care is considered an extremist position. So are some of his other positions, such as free college tuition. Yet these are positions that wouldn't have surprised President Eisenhower in the 1950s. Sanders's policies are basically traditional New Deal policies of the kind that even the moderate Republicans like Eisenhower recognized in the 1950s. And these policies are often supported by a large part, often a large majority, of the population, and have been for many years.

These policies are considered extremist for a simple reason: the mainstream political spectrum has shifted so far to the right that positions considered mainstream in the 1950s appear extremist today. Taxes are a very interesting case. There have been regular polls about taxes for decades asking basically two questions: whether people consider their own taxes to be too high, and whether they consider taxes on the rich to be too low. People respond "yes" to the first question; they would like to pay less in taxes. But they also believe the rich should pay much higher taxes. These results are consistent. Studies reveal that when these polls are reported, it is typically only the first question that is discussed, not the second that reveals that people want much higher taxes on the wealthy.

If you go back to the 1950s, taxes on the wealthy were far higher. In the Eisenhower period, the top rate was 90 percent, and it has been cut back regularly since then in direct opposition to the popular will. By now the poor probably pay a larger percentage of their income than the rich in taxes, when you consider the whole array of largely regressive taxes, such as state, local, Social Security, and so on.

These are all the effects of policy decisions in recent years that have led to extreme inequality and the maintenance of very high levels of poverty. In the 1950s, there used to be a quip that the U.S. is a one-party state, the business party, which has two factions: Democrats and Republicans. Today it is a little bit different. It is still a one-party state, the business party, but it does not have two factions anymore. As the political spectrum in this country has shifted to the right, there are moderate Republicans who call themselves Democrats, and the Republican Party, which has drifted off the spectrum. The left wing of the Democratic Party, such as Bernie Sanders's (who ran on the Democratic ticket), is very much like what Democrats and even moderate Republicans would have been in the 1950s. The Republican Party meanwhile has simply drifted off the political spectrum.

Highly respected conservative political commentators, such as Norman Ornstein of the conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI), describe today's Republican Party as a "radical insurgency" that has abandoned parliamentary politics. And to be completely frank and honest, I believe this is literally a threat to human survival. The almost uniform attitude on the issue

of global warming of those Republicans running for president in 2016, if they mean what they say, is almost a death knell for the species. That's not a small point.

The twentieth century was punctuated by devastating wars, World War I and particularly World War II, which destroyed or devastated U.S. competitors, who were already far behind economically, and enriched the U.S. Wartime spending during World War II ended the Great Depression and quadrupled industrial production. The U.S. benefited enormously economically while other major industrial societies were seriously harmed or destroyed. At the end of World War II, the U.S. may have had literally half of total world wealth, which has no historical comparison. That could not remain, of course, and it has somewhat declined over the years as other industrial societies were reconstructed and so-called underdeveloped societies began to develop, including Brazil and others. By 1970, the U.S. share of total world income had reduced to about 25 percent, which is still enormous but not 50 percent, and remains at roughly the same level now. The U.S. still has higher per capita income than rich European societies, but the main reason for that is that Americans put in about 20 percent more work hours a week each year than is done in comparable societies. And it is far from obvious that that is a healthy or desirable choice.

Another historical pattern of crucial importance is that over time, progress toward social justice correlates with popular activism, primarily in the labor movement. As a business-run society, the U.S. happens to have an extremely violent labor history, where hundreds of workers were being killed in industrial actions in the U.S. well into the 1930s. Nothing like that was happening at all in comparable societies. The labor movement was extremely powerful in the late nineteenth century. In the main industrial centers, such as western Pennsylvania, there were towns that were simply run by labor. Homestead is one example.

Meanwhile, it was still mainly an agricultural country. A radical farmers' movement developed, beginning in Texas and then spreading to Kansas and other areas. It was a populist movement with extremely radical programs. They wanted to free themselves from the control of northeastern bankers and merchants. This movement, one of the most radical popular movements in American history, was beginning to link up with the growing workers' movement, which was openly calling for workers to own and manage their own factories. This was mainstream radical American populism, with very few European inputs. And it was pretty much crushed, literally by force. The final blow was Woodrow Wilson's Red Scare, the most severe period of repression in American history. By the 1920s, the labor movement had been virtually destroyed. It picked up again in the 1930s with popular uprising,

CIO organizing, and labor militancy. That led to the New Deal measures, which significantly increased social welfare and social justice as part of a radical democratic uprising throughout much of the world.

There has been a strong reaction ever since the end of World War II, picking up in the 1970s with the neoliberal programs. And the net effect of this reaction is what we see today: policies of deregulation that have led to regular crises; concentration of wealth in financial institutions; Bill Clinton's program "ending welfare as we know it," which destroyed the welfare system and had a seriously harmful effect on the people who need welfare, especially women with dependent children; and so on. Right now there are millions of children in the U.S. whose families are struggling. There is lots of unskilled labor, which helps because there is a work requirement, which drives down wages and much else.

There is kind of a vicious cycle: increase the concentration of wealth, which leads to the concentration of political power, which leads to policy choices that increase the concentration of wealth, which maintains poverty. Now, as I mentioned, the population is certainly aware of this, but reactions often take destructive forms. The centrist parties in Europe are declining, and there is a rise of popular movements on both extremes. There is the nationalist, sometimes proto-fascist right, and the social democratic left.

And here in the U.S. we see the same thing, illustrated by the Trump/Sanders phenomenon in the 2016 election. Now this could turn into something like the rise of radical democracy in the 1890s, 1930s, and 1940s, with very positive results, setting off a reaction from wealth and power. Or it could turn into something else.

I am old enough to remember the 1930s, my childhood, and there was something similar at that time. There was a collapse of the political center and the rise of popular movements on the right and left. It didn't turn out very nicely. I am old enough to remember listening to Hitler's speeches, and though I couldn't understand the words, there was no mistaking the passion of the delivery and the fervor of the reaction. I do not want to draw analogies too closely, but we know what came out of that, and there are things to be deeply concerned about in our current situation.

NOTE

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