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Structural and individualistic theories of poverty

David Calnitsky

Department of Sociology, University of Western Ontario

Correspondence
David Calnitsky, Department of Sociology, University of Western Ontario, 5402 Social Science Centre, London, ON, Canada, N6A 5C2.
Email: dcalnits@uwo.ca

Abstract

This paper clarifies and contrasts the explanatory mechanisms in individualistic and structural accounts of poverty. I argue that individualistic approaches obscure a great deal of the theoretical substance in the causal explanation of poverty, as they lack a macro-level appraisal of the subject. Such arguments can explain why one person has a higher risk of poverty than another, but ignore the fact that a full account of poverty is not furnished by a simple adding up of all the separate individual-level accounts. I also argue that there are in fact two separate macro-level explanations of poverty: where macro-structural explanations attempt to provide accounts of the "empty places" of poverty into which individuals get slotted, situational accounts attempt to explain the circumstances under which specific "poverty-generating" behaviors arise. I conclude by providing a synthesis of individual and structural accounts of poverty, showing that while the two approaches need not be viewed as entirely antagonistic, the former should be accorded a far more modest role and indeed subsumed into broader structural accounts.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Human beings spontaneously appeal to individualistic explanations of poverty.[1] This bias is sometimes called the "fundamental attribution error" (Gilbert & Jones, 1986; Jones, 1979; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross, 1977), a snazzy term for a concept that lives up to the hype. Individualistic explanations are seductive because they are simpler than structural theories, and worse, they are often reinforced by our everyday experiences. It is easy to think, for example, of families we know where one sibling had a hard time at school and the other breezed through. We observe that the first had little interest or aptitude for learning, had trouble concentrating on homework, or perhaps abused drugs and alcohol. Meanwhile, the second took the prudent, assiduous road to a middle-class life. We conclude, mistakenly in my view, that when the first sibling is impoverished, her impoverishment is *caused* by the attributes we observed. This kind of reasoning is sometimes called "folk psychology," a term capturing people's spontaneous adherence to individualistic explanations (Elster, 2007).

If folk psychology is an elemental fact of human affairs, social science often reifies it instead of demystifying it. That is, social scientists, at a far higher level of sophistication, often operate by the very same logic. We set up regression analyses with poverty incidence as the dependent variable and a range of individual attributes as the independent variables, and eventually conclude—however judiciously, always worrying about missing variables, selection effects, and any number of potential biases—that impoverishment is very likely caused by some of those attributes.

This paper argues that the individualistic approach blunts the explanatory power in our accounts of poverty, as it lacks a macro-level appraisal of the subject. Such arguments can often explain why one *person* has a higher risk of poverty than another, but ignore the fact that a full account of poverty is not furnished by a simple adding up of all the separate individual-level accounts. In part, the basic tools of the trade—regression analysis with micro-level data for one country—deserve a good deal of the blame. With this technology in hand it is very easy to arrive at the conclusion that, say, single motherhood *causes* poverty (Ananat & Michaels, 2008; Thomas & Sawhill 2002; Sawhill, 2014; McLanahan, Sørensen, & Watson, 1989; McLanahan & Kelly, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

While there is a sense in which such analyses are true—and I discuss this further below—this paper zeroes in on the ways that they are false. And not only are they false, but they are *mystifying* in that they obscure various kinds of macro-level mechanisms that are less visible but no less causal. Shedding light on causality is then the first reason a distinction between structural and individual accounts of poverty is important.

The second reason the distinction matters is normative. Normative statements are ones that use words like "ought" and "should," as in "our poverty policy ought to stress training children to be grittier and more diligent." David Hume established that one cannot derive "ought" statements from "is" statements, but this derivation is made routinely and casually in the poverty literature: when we begin with poverty analysis (e.g., insufficient grit leads to poverty), poverty policy comes naturally (e.g., we should train people to be grittier). Contra Hume, I have no problem drawing normative conclusions, but it should be better appreciated that both the analysis of what poverty *is* and what its causes *are* always entail implications for what we *ought* to do about it.[2] And when the analysis of poverty is rooted in individualistic premises, these premises, I will argue, become implanted in our poverty policy, as if they were drawn from conclusions rather than guaranteed in the assumptions. There are reasons to believe, therefore, that a good deal of poverty research assumes its conclusions.

The beating heart of the normative issue in poverty scholarship is blame attribution. When the value judgments lying just below the surface are dug up and exposed, the question, as William Ryan (1970) put it, is whether we wish to blame society or blame the victim. Virtually all poverty research boils down to this single political implication. When we exclude structural analyses in our methods we rule out structural policy changes in our conclusions. Structuralists will forever point to the structural foundations of individualist arguments, while individualists insist that structure is nothing more than the sum of all individuals. The deep question of structure and agency takes us too far afield, but I argue here that the causal efficacy of structural accounts of poverty are largely under-recognized in contemporary poverty research, and their normative conclusions underappreciated.

The second section below lays out the explanatory mechanisms of individual accounts of poverty, and the third provides an account of structural explanations of poverty. The fourth section argues that structural explanations can take two forms, what I will call macro-structural and situational. On the one hand, macro-structural explanations attempt to provide accounts of the "empty places" of poverty into which individuals get slotted; the concept "empty place" will be fleshed out with a series of examples below. On the other hand, situational accounts attempt to explain the *circumstances* under which specific "poverty-generating" behaviors arise. Finally, I provide a synthesis of individual and structural accounts of poverty, showing that the two approaches need not be viewed as entirely antagonistic. Rather, they ask somewhat different questions and can be conceived as separate parts of a broader conceptual problem. I conclude that individualistic explanations of poverty ought not be rejected entirely, but rather accorded a far more modest role and subsumed into broader structural accounts.

2 | INDIVIDUALISTIC VIEWS OF POVERTY

The dominant approach in research on poverty, at least in the United States (O'Connor, 2009), locates the origins of poverty in individual attributes. Some of these attributes may themselves require structural explanation, but for the purposes of research they appear as variables that glom onto persons and can be read as a micro-level characteristics. The specific attributes considered might be skills, talents, habits, familial status, or behaviors, but they might also be education, social networks, or parental resources. These attributes, therefore, can be individual or social in origin and as I discuss below, while it is important to stress that some of these attributes have structural *causes*, here they are taken to be individual-level variables that each person holds in some amount.

Thus, the methodological approach takes as given a range of individual attributes—biological, psychological, cultural, economic, social—that are subsequently linked to a person's material conditions of life, whether they end up poor or not. This is a *gradational* rather than a relational view of inequality: inequality is a ladder where people can be ranked according to income or wealth, but there is no mention of relevant relationships *among* people that might help to explain the height of the ladder or the distance between the rungs (for the gradational/relational contrast, see Ossowski, 1963; Wright, 1979 and Wright, 2005). Accounting for these relationships is what structural explanations do, as I argue below, and if we provide no account of the relations tying people together then we are left with individuals who simply have more or less of some attribute. Thus, we can paint a picture of inequality as a rank-ordering of outcomes, which is causally explained by the discrete individual attributes of disconnected persons.

Erik Olin Wright has described the individual attributes account by way of the fable of the grasshopper and the ant.[3] As the fable goes, there is a lazy grasshopper and an industrious ant, and when winter arrives, the ant has saved up food and supplies, while the grasshopper is hungry. At the end of the story we have an outcome where the ant has and the grasshopper has not. Every political philosopher has his or her version: Kymlicka (2002) compares the lives of a tennis player and a gardener, while Parijs (1997) compares two similar figures, one named Crazy, the other named Lazy. But when we *explain* the fates of the two differently disposed characters, according to the individualist approach there is little need to appeal to any social relations or macro-structure. The outcome is a product of individual attributes—the dispositions, proclivities, and habits of each separate creature. There is no macro-structure that fixes the ant's prosperity to the grasshopper's penury; when we describe the attributes of one we need not invoke any information about the other, and when we describe outcomes it is sufficient to provide two separate accounts of the path from attributes to outcomes.

Individualistic explanations of poverty become more complex when we invoke individual attributes that themselves have social causes. This is a wrinkle that the grasshopper/ant story does not iron out because it portrays individual attributes (laziness, industriousness) with presumably individual, not social, causes. Remember that above I described the individual attributes approach as potentially including behaviors and talents on the one hand, but also on the other, say, education, as among a list of a person's attributes. Both may be read as individual-level attributes attached to persons, but they may differ in their origin story. To sort out the underlying causes of an attribute, Wright (1994) distinguishes between "monadic" and "relational" processes. The term monadic is just a fancy word for an *acquisition process* rooted in individual-level mechanisms: the attribute in question was acquired through mechanisms attached directly to the individual (i.e., she was "born that way"). By contrast, relational mechanisms refer to attributes acquired in ways that entail interaction with others (i.e., she "fought her way to the top," she "picked it up at school").

I return to these social mechanisms in section 4, but for now it is important to note that however the attributes were acquired, in these analyses they function similarly to the fable of the grasshopper and the ant: as specific properties of persons which help determine the incidence and intensity of poverty. We could have, for example, added facts about the health of the grasshopper and ant to the story instead of facts about their behavior. Thus, we can include information about an individual's health to a regression equation and assess the extent to which health predicts poverty status. An individual's health itself might be shaped by monadic mechanisms (diet, genes) or by relational mechanisms (rising food prices, an outbreak of disease), but in either case, health operates as an individual

attribute, and researchers in this tradition will ultimately determine that the specific health-status of persons likely *caused* their poverty statuses.

This approach provides a range of causal factors to sort out. Among the most popular in the literature are biological theories of poverty (Herrnstein & Murray, 1995), cultural theories of poverty (Lewis, 1966; Moynihan, 1965; Murray, 2013), and human capital theories of poverty (Becker, 1975). In biological theories it is typically people's natural differences in intelligence that determine who is condemned to poverty. Poverty is thus a simple reflection of underlying differences in cognitive ability across populations; those at the bottom of the genetic ladder find poverty to be their natural home. In cultural theories, it is the beliefs, habits, and dispositions implanted in us that generate the individual attributes that explain poverty. At issue here is a cultural process engendering low motivations, deviant lifestyles, or pernicious values in individuals. Early versions of these theories (e.g., Lewis, 1966) tended to argue that cultural depredations were rational adaptations to limited opportunities and historical oppression, while later versions tended to ignore ultimate causes and focus on the cultural attributes of individuals (see discussions in Steinberg, 2001, 2011; Small, Harding, & Lamont, 2010; Wilson, 2009).[4] According to these theories, because the underlying causes are mutable (unlike biological factors), poverty policy ought to focus on curtailing those deviant cultural proclivities, ranging from unwed childbirth to "hip-hop music" (Wilson, 2010a, 2010b; Patterson, 2000; Billson & Majors, 1992; Sawhill, 2014). Finally, there are human capital theories where inadequate education generates low productivity and, ultimately, poverty. A tangle of relational and monadic processes explains a person's educational trajectory—from people's decisions and aptitudes for schooling to its affordability and the cultural norms around it—but some amount of it attaches onto a person, and from the individual attributes approach it may be determined that those with little have a good chance of ending up poor.

In all cases, the underlying *mechanisms* can be either social or individual, but they ultimately congeal as *attributes* of individuals and, so the reasoning goes, cause those individuals to be impoverished. I return to those underlying social mechanisms in section 4, but for now it is sufficient to describe the basic analytical procedure of individualistic approaches: attributes of individuals are discovered; some focal attributes are deemed independent variables, others are controls; and the focal attributes are correlated with the central dependent variable, poverty. How exactly poverty is measured is beside the point. The procedure is the same for any operational definition, and when it is discovered that, say, low education causes a person's poverty, the normative conclusion flows naturally: somehow, she should have gotten more education.

3 | MACRO-STRUCTURAL VIEWS OF POVERTY

To describe the nature of macro-structural views of poverty, we can begin with the critique of individualistic views. Where biogenetic theories of poverty naturalize the phenomenon and tend to support the conclusion that whatever distribution of poverty exists is normatively appropriate, cultural and human capital theories more often generate moralistic responses. Here we might find that poverty correlates with an insufficient amount of human capital or perverse cultural proclivities, and decide the best way to reduce poverty is to change the poor (Duckworth, 2016; Sawhill, 2014).[5]

The macro-structural response argues that this basic mode of reasoning is guilty of the fallacy of composition. A description that is true of a part is not automatically true of the whole, just as we know that each separate part of the airplane cannot on its own fly in the air. Even if it is true that one person can reduce their chances of ending up poor by, say, improving their educational attainment, it does not follow that if *everyone* increased their educational attainment the poor would no longer be with us. One reason the conclusions might not follow from the premises is because it is always possible that the "empty places" of poverty and of decent jobs remain unchanged. That is, improvements in schooling need not alter the occupational structure of society. To simplify, imagine an economy with eight empty places called "jobs" and two empty places called "poverty"; with ten individuals, both before and after the change in educational attainment, two sorry people will be inserted into poverty. A generalized increase

in education may just mean that competition for those limited jobs is heightened, and both winners and losers of the competition have better educational credentials; however, the winners of the competition are still slotted into the available jobs and the losers into poverty.

The above argument rests on a claim that an account of the overall structure of poverty in a given society is separate from a combined account of each person's poverty-relevant attributes. To support this claim and give precision to the nature of structural explanations, I provide some alternative stories to contrast with the fable of the grasshopper and the ant.

The first story, briefly mentioned by philosopher Harold Kincaid (2006, p. 232–3), describes a pack of dogs in a pen. Imagine several dogs of varying size, strength, and ability snatching up bones. Imagine further that the dogs generally prefer large bones to small ones and when a bag of bones is tossed into the pen the final bone distribution—some have large bones, others have small ones, and some are bone poor, having none at all—is determined by a fight reflecting the individual dogs' preferences and attributes. The individualist view of poverty argues that dog poverty is explained by the attributes of certain dogs—perhaps they are meek, perhaps they lack the grit and tenacity of other dogs, perhaps they lack the requisite motivations found among the bone-rich dogs. The macro-structural counterargument sees this account as insufficient: the final bone distribution cannot be fully explained by an additive model of each individual dog's attributes. While it can tell us, say, who ends up with a large rather than a small bone, what is missing is a separate account of bones in the bag. A bag with more large bones than dogs produces a final distribution very different than one with fewer bones than dogs. The existence of bone poverty turns out to rest not just on dog attributes, but also—crucially—on the overall availability of bones.

Mark Rank (2004) provides a similar example where poverty is conceptualized as a game of musical chairs; by design, the game leaves some without a seat. Again, the macro-structural approach depicts poverty as a matter of few chairs rather than one of slow people. And moreover, the nature of the game is that the availability of chairs is determined through mechanisms that are more or less independent of the speed of contestants.

A final, somewhat more ornate, example comes from Alan Garfinkel's book *Forms of Explanation* (Garfinkel, 1981).[6] Imagine three identical first-year sociology classrooms in three nearly identical universes populated by the very same people. The only difference across the three universes is that the professor decides to use a different exam-grading scheme for each class. Otherwise we have the same students writing the same exams. The first grading scheme is harsh, giving out only one A, a few B's, and plenty of C's. The second scheme is generous: virtually all students get A's. The third grading scheme is somewhere in the middle: there are roughly equal amounts of A's, B's, and C's. We can then imagine the same person inhabiting these three different worlds; call him Garfinkel. Naturally, all three Garfinkels have the same abilities, levels of concentration, motivations, and study habits, and ultimately write the same exam in all three imaginary classrooms. However, the final grade differs in the different worlds, depending on the available macro-positions to get slotted into: in the first classroom Garfinkel gets a C, in the second he gets an A, and in the third he gets a B. He is grade poor in only one of the three worlds, but his individual attributes are fixed.

Poverty in this example depends not entirely on individual attributes, but partly on the macro rules of the game that determine overall distributions. An analysis of the behavior of individual students—no matter how careful and detailed—tells little about the resulting inequality. What is required is a separate account of the *structure*, the positions available for people to end up in. Understanding that structure is crucial for a causal explanation of the fate of individuals, including the first sibling described in the opening paragraph. Without the empty place of poverty available for her, she simply would not end up poor. And moreover, the existence or absence of that empty place is determined in a way that need not reference her attributes at all.

In sociological theory there is a long tradition (rarely considered in the poverty literature) that provides both an elaboration of the structure and a critique of the gradational individual attributes view. Again, the gradational approach says that everyone can be lined up in terms of how much income or education they have, but it says nothing about how the people in the line relate to one another. The people at the front of the line have more than the people in the back, but that is not *because* the people in the back are in the back. By contrast, Weberian theory (Breen, 2005; Parkin, 1981; Scott, 2014; Wright, 2002) is an attempt to show how the hoarding of opportunities—

from taxi medallions and professional credentials to monopoly control of productive assets—locks people into a structure of insider-outsider relationships where the advantages enjoyed by some depend not only on their attributes, but on the exclusion of others. Inequality here is deeply relational; advantages and disadvantages are conjoined by a macro-level structure. When you own a piece of land you obstruct others from owning it. Similarly, Marxian theory (Roemer, 1988; Wright, 1985, 1997) is an attempt to describe a structure of relations in which the advantages enjoyed by the owners of capital depend on the exclusion of others from the ownership and control of those productive assets: were it not for the deprivations of the poor they would not be induced to work for the rich. In both theoretical approaches, *relations* shape outcomes and interests, rather than individual attributes.

In concrete empirical work on poverty, if the paradigmatic individualistic research plan is micro-level regression in one country, the paradigmatic structural research plan is macro-comparative research using a range of techniques, from country- and state-level regression analysis—in particular, pooled cross-section time-series regression—to qualitative case comparisons and small-N comparisons (for examples and methodological discussions, see Amenta & Hicks, 2010; Brady, 2009; Hicks, 1994; Kenworthy, 2007; Kenworthy & Hicks, 2008; Kenworthy, 2011a, Kenworthy, 2011b; Myles, 1998; Therborn, 1986; Zuberi, 2009). The reason macro-comparative research is amenable to structural theory is that it looks at different societies with correspondingly different structures and *compares* them, rather than operating entirely *inside* one society and therefore taking its structure for granted. Whatever the methodological technique, the research plan in macro-comparative work asks why there is some specific amount of poverty in a given society, usually by comparing various countries or states with a diverse range of macro-level characteristics.

When we look at macro-level analyses of poverty, we may find results that diverge from individual-level analyses. For example, single motherhood may be a statistically significant correlate of poverty within one country (Ananat & Michaels, 2008; Thomas & Sawhill, 2002; McLanahan et al., 1989; McLanahan & Kelly, 1999), but highly variable between countries (Brady & Burroway, 2012; Christopher, 2002). Along these lines David Brady and co-authors distinguish between the *prevalence* and the *penalties* associated with the risks of poverty (Brady, Finnigan, & Hübgen, 2017). Countries differ both on how much, say, single motherhood exists and on the likelihood that characteristic leads to poverty, that is, on how it is penalized. This is because different countries, with different labor market and welfare institutions, naturally produce different outcomes for single mothers. Similarly, when examining a single country with different rates of poverty over time, we might find evidence against cultural and genetic arguments that static micro-level regression analyses in one country would miss.[7]

When the debate is framed at the macro-level, the discussion rides on a different set of issues entirely. Institutional factors that are decisive in macro-comparative work often do not figure in micro-level studies scanning for individual variation; rather, these institutional factors appear as an invisible backdrop for all individuals, in much the same way that fish fail to notice the water all around them. One macro-level factor that appears in cross-national comparisons is the welfare state. The *way* the welfare state is analyzed in these studies varies a good deal; sometimes researchers track simple measures such as total social welfare expenditures (Huber & Stephens, 2004; Kenworthy, 1999), and sometimes more ambitious arguments are made about the qualitative interaction of various welfare-state institutions that form distinguishable system-level types (Esping-Anderson, 1990). However it is measured, analyses often land on the intuitive finding that welfare generosity has a powerful negative effect on the incidence and intensity of poverty (e.g., Brady, 2009). In a country like the US, it is taken for granted that the only way to access any of the good things in life comes by way of a decent job. But a hypercompetitive labor market where the winners win big and the losers suffer is not the only way to set up a macro-organization of society, and the causal power of the welfare state evident in cross-national comparisons provides some support for the claim that the curse of the poor is their poverty.

A number of other macro-political variables are used in these studies, often ones that shape pre-market outcomes. It is sometimes argued that union density (Brady, Baker, & Finnigan, 2013; Rosenfeld & Laird, 2016), bargaining centralization, and left-wing political power (Brady, 2003, Brady, 2009; Smeeding & Rainwater, 2003; Piven & Minnite, 2016)—measured, for example, by the proportion of left government seats over time—all affect

the amount of poverty in a country. This suggests that the relevant factors are the power relations between different actors *before* they meet in the market. There is nothing particularly natural about the market; it always operates within a specific background context of power, and some of those contexts will produce market outcomes that are more conducive to poverty. Finally, there are economic variables such as economic growth, productivity, globalization, deindustrialization, unemployment, and technological change that might have macro-level impacts on poverty by shaping the quantity of available jobs in a given society (Alderson & Nielsen, 2002; Brady & Jäntti, 2016; Blank, 2000; Bluestone & Harrison, 2000; DeFina, 2004; Moller, Huber, Stephens, Bradley, & Nielsen, 2003; Wolff, 2009). One way or another, these accounts help to provide aggregate explanations for the number of empty places of poverty available for people to fill.

Rather than asking who falls into poverty, macro-structural analyses attempt to explain why its incidence and intensity vary across settings. The main limitation for research in this tradition is the limited number of unique (and truly independent) settings on planet earth. This is why theory continues to be valuable. While these structural arguments can incorporate a wide variety of substantive content, there is an entirely separate type of structural argument about the causes of poverty, namely situational explanations, to which I now turn.

4 | SITUATIONAL EXPLANATIONS OF POVERTY

If we imagine a person with a range of individual attributes who becomes poor, a macro-structural explanation in the sense described above would argue that the end state of poverty was caused by a macro-distribution of empty places in which *some* people will inevitably be sifted into positions of poverty. The situational explanation takes a different tack: here, the very attributes—or behaviors—of individuals are to be explained, irrespective of how they are penalized in the macro-structural sense above. In this model of the world, people's circumstances and situations explain their behaviors and attributes. Situationism, a term derived from social psychology (see Ross & Nisbett, 2011), is, in its broadest definition, an attempt to discover the *social* origins of specific behaviors: what were the social factors behind, say, someone's decision to drop out of school? Thus, the first macro account discussed above explains why certain behaviors lead to the end state of poverty; the second attempts to explain the circumstantial roots of the individual behaviors themselves. The first explains the behavior's consequences; the second explains its causes. For John Doris, the fundamental insight from situationism can be stated simply: "behavior is … extraordinarily sensitive to variation in circumstances" (2002, p. 2).

Individual-level analyses of poverty are often depicted as if the individual attributes that correlate with poverty are explained by the individual's *character* rather than her situation. But we know from everyday life that situations matter: we might be outgoing among friends and introverted among strangers. Montaigne calls this "the inconstancy of our actions" (de Montaigne, 1991). If folk psychology ascribes all action to character traits, quantitative social science is habitually silent on the question. Researchers often present behavioral differences across groups without presenting additional evidence to explain those differences, thereby leaving the interpretation to the prejudices of the audience. The poor, we discover, have lower labor-force participation (Schiller, 2001) or insufficient "grit" (Duckworth, 2016; Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, & Duckworth, 2014); readers then concoct a story in their minds as to the underlying causes. Those conclusions, however, have significant moral consequences. If it turns out that behaviors associated with poverty are *characterological*—that is, rooted not in the situations people find themselves in, but instead, their very personalities—we are right to either moralize or throw up our hands. If those behaviors are situational, we will be more inclined to change the situation.

The situation of poverty can explain human behavior and decision-making in a wide variety of ways, but to simplify, I divide the various accounts into two camps: the rational adaptation school and the irrational behavioral psychology school. Both argue that situations shape behavior, but in different respects. The latter argues that the poor act in irrational ways that are caused by poverty and reinforce that poverty, while the former argues that poor people's actions are perfectly rational adaptations to challenging circumstances.

One recent situational account of poverty, from Mullainathan and Shafir (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013; see also Shah, Mullainathan, & Shafir, 2012; Banerjee & Mullainathan, 2008, Banerjee & Mullainathan, 2010), maintains that the circumstances of the poor increase the likelihood of behaving in irrational ways that reinforce poverty. Irrational behaviors—such as over-borrowing, insufficient saving, and failing to enroll in assistance programs—are generated, so the argument goes, by the mindset shaped by resource scarcity. When money is scarce, even small increases in basic expenses take on special urgency and compete for our attention. Every small problem demands attention, and because poverty forces the poor to focus excessively on each one, mental resources become strained. This means other problems are neglected or dealt with poorly. For example, when increasing grocery prices creates a crisis, we neglect rent payments or fail to keep up with other pressing demands. Mullainathan and Shafir refer to this situation in terms of limited mental "bandwidth," whereby the very circumstances of poverty impair our cognitive capacity. The authors show this in a range of experiments on mall-goers, where subjects primed to worry about financial woes end up doing badly on a range of tests.

Although the account from Mullainathan and Shafir offers a number of valuable insights, made possible by the revolution in behavioral economics, the perspective fits too comfortably in the long history of applying *homo economicus*—the rational man haunting microeconomics textbooks—to all of humanity save the irrational poor. Contra Mullainathan and Shafir, however, there are plenty of big decisions in life that we make slowly, deliberately, and repeatedly. The question, for example, of how much to work seems more important, more deliberately mulled over, and therefore less vulnerable to irrationality than the choices Mullainathan and Shafir's mall experiments aim to capture. The poor do in fact work somewhat less than the middle class (Schiller, 2001), but the standard neoclassical argument seems inadequate for explaining this. The neoclassical argument goes as follows: the poor *must* be irrational, for if the theory of declining marginal utility holds and the first dollar earned is indeed the most valuable dollar, then why do the poor work less than the middle class? The view that one dollar is more valuable to the poor than the middle class seems unassailable. Are the poor somehow irrational? Must we find a new arrow in the behavioral economics quiver of irrationality?

Enter Charles Karelis, who provides a powerful account of human behavior in the context of poverty, arguing that the actions of the poor *are* perfectly rational (Karelis, 2009). Contrary to much microeconomic theory, the law of diminishing marginal utility does not apply under conditions when context-dependent basic needs are unmet. This is a rejoinder to the neoclassical logic above, suggesting the first dollar earned is *not* the most valuable dollar. Karelis compares poverty to having dozens of bee stings: having only one bee sting will induce individuals to work to seek relief for the sting, but working that same hour for relief from that same marginal sting would be irrational in the midst of dozens of other stings. Why bother expending the effort to treat a single sting when it will not reduce your discomfort? *That* would be irrational. Better to devote efforts to something that will actually generate some pleasurable results. Thus, when their basic needs go unmet, the rational poor will see "poverty-reducing behavior" as a suboptimal choice. Were we to dramatically, rather than marginally, improve the circumstances of the poor—say, by providing basic incomes, guaranteed housing, and eliminating economic deprivation entirely—so the argument goes, people would shift away from a situation that disincentivizes work, and toward one where work becomes rational.

My own inclination is that the rational adaptation view is more persuasive than the behavioral psychology perspective, and moreover, plenty of behaviors that appear irrational to outsiders in fact have a rationality to them upon closer inspection. Even if there is little doubt that plenty of the particular mechanisms described by the irrational psychology school hold true, the rational adaptation account offers a more sensible and broadly applicable approach to human behavior, suggesting that apart from irrationalities around the edges, people have reasons for what they do, and the object of social science is to uncover those reasons.

5 | CONCLUSION

One way to synthesize the arguments developed above goes as follows. Structural accounts tell us whether or not poverty exists in a given society, and if so, how much; if indeed it does exist, individual accounts tell us who

ultimately becomes poor. Returning to our example above, a structural account tells us how many bad and failing grades are doled out, individual student attributes tell us which students get them. Situational accounts then complicate the individual sorting mechanisms by showing that individual-level explanations rely on attributes that themselves can be explained by appealing to characterological or situational causes. Thus, the students who do get bad grades may have situational circumstances that account for their study habits, time available for homework, and so on.

In this synthesis, individualist-cum-characterological accounts play a far more narrowly circumscribed role than is usually recognized. My argument, in other words, is that the conclusions emerging from the individualistic research agenda do not follow from their data analysis; instead, they are guaranteed in the assumptions. For example, I argue above that single motherhood is only correlated with poverty when we take for granted the very structure of the economic and social institutions we live in. If these institutions were brought out from the shadows and studied, the conclusion might be not that single motherhood *causes* poverty but that, at least in America, it is harshly *penalized* (Brady et al., 2017). A full causal account of poverty is impossible with individual attributes alone; structural facts are necessary to explain how those attributes were themselves shaped (situational explanations) and how they go on to have the consequences they have (macro-structural explanations).

Why does any of this matter? As noted briefly above, the reason our explanations about poverty matter is because they determine the assignment of blame. In the words of William Ryan (1970), do we blame the victim or do we blame society? These questions are important because they determine our moral positions and the normative status of poverty from the perspective of justice. After all, if we can ultimately attribute blame to individuals for their poverty, then poverty may be their appropriate punishment.

But assigning moral responsibility turns out to be a thorny exercise. Liberal philosophy in the wake of John Rawls usually likes to say that people should not be blamed for morally arbitrary circumstances outside of their control, like whether or not they inherit money or whether they're tall or short. Remuneration ought to be "circumstance-insensitive." However, these accounts usually draw a line in the sand somewhere: while they argue that any theory of distribution worth its salt ought to be circumstance-insensitive, they also typically argue that it ought to be somewhat "choice-sensitive," blaming people for the bad choices they make (Dworkin, 1981a, 1981b; Kymlicka, 2002). But these normative theories also often acknowledge that when people's preferences are not formed under "conditions of justice" they should not be blamed for their "poverty-producing" choices (Kymlicka, 2002).

My own view is that drawing a line in the sand about where to justly assign blame is an impossible task from a purely moral perspective. If we are seriously committed to not blaming people for morally arbitrary facts out of their control, then there is no natural place to distinguish between what we are and are not responsible for. While it is easy to grant that we did not choose to inherit wealth, or our intelligence and strength, neither did we choose our personalities, nor our ability to wake up early in the morning or to stick to projects we start (our "sticktoittiveness"). Indeed, our very ability to learn and improve, our "absorption" rate, is entirely unchosen (Strawson, 1994). For these reasons, even if we accept that there is such a thing as individual character (e.g., Mischel, 2004), in my judgment there is no workable concept of individual moral responsibility.

These moral questions and our assignment of blame are themselves important because of their implications for what kind of social policy we ought to have. That is, normative judgments are relevant for prescriptive responses. When our theories about the causes of poverty operate at the individual level, so will the normative conclusions. If we believe, as I do, that we ought to take seriously structural analyses of poverty, it means that our solutions ought to be equally structural. If the problem is too few bones in the dog pen, or too few chairs in the children's game, our solutions ought to produce more bones and more chairs. If we simply provide the dogs with better training, all we generate is a higher level of competition for the same reward structure. Concentrating effort instead on the overall availability of bones or chairs in the examples above might translate into a social policy that prioritizes a federal jobs guarantee or a universal basic income (For discussions of the former, see Harvey, 2011, 2012, and for the latter, see Calnitsky, 2017). Indeed, if one grants my argument about the structural nature of poverty, a perfectly

natural policy response might be some kind of socialistic economy that systematically blocks the existence of poverty through a multiplicity of interlocking mechanisms (for a proposal along these lines, see Roemer, 1994). What these solutions have in common is they disallow the "empty place" of poverty, and aim moreover to facilitate the situational factors that sustain human flourishing. The point of the policy response, whatever it may be, is that nobody—no matter what attributes they have—will end up poor.

That said, the claim about the impossibility of moral responsibility and the desirability of structural solutions to poverty does not mean we want to avoid all individual-level punishments and incentives. Even if we cannot assign moral responsibility, it is still a *pragmatic* truth that people individually respond to the push and pull of social policy. So while we might want to disallow poverty as an available "empty place" for people to end up in, some level of Rawlsian inequality—i.e., inequality that also improves the material conditions for the worst off among us—may be useful as a motivator of action. This point is no capitulation to inequality, because, in my judgment at least, a Rawlsian income distribution is likely to be more equal than any observed in the history of the developed world. In any case, this would be a purely pragmatic rather than a moral justification. And a world of moderate Rawlsian inequality would retain a synthesis of structural and individualist accounts. The structural account tells us that poverty is no longer a possible outcome for anyone, no matter the distribution of individual attributes. It also tells us about the structure of inequality, how many rungs there are on the ladder, and how much space there is between the rungs. Once that structure is understood, individualistic accounts—of both a situational and characterological nature—can help to explain who falls where.

Of course, understanding our own world is more important than understanding some future distribution of resources, and sociologists would do well to clarify the nature of their explanatory apparatuses when they write about poverty. By ignoring the structural nature of poverty, dominant individualistic accounts tend to naturalize it. The objective of social science ought not simply entail adding sophistication to people's spontaneous, individualistic accounts. Rather, it ought to be demystification—to recognize the water that we fish swim in. If this is in fact our goal, we should specify when our analyses play out at the individual level, taking structural accounts for granted, and vice versa. Not doing so risks taking folk psychology to new heights of scientific precision, and consequently ignoring the main objective of social science.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ENDNOTES

[1] See, for example, Kluegel and Smith (1986). For an overview of the empirical literature on lay poverty explanations, see Lepianka, Van Oorschot, and Gelissen (2009). And for a classic statement of our overestimation of the personality in causal explanation, see Ichheiser (1949). There are in fact multiple interpretations of the fundamental attribution error—one version suggesting that people prefer situational explanations for their own behavior and dispositional explanations for the behavior of others, has been criticized on empirical grounds (Malle, 2006). While there is no generally accepted definition, my own interpretation is that structural accounts are harder, less readily available, and less relied on as explanations for behavior and outcomes.

[2] To be fair to Hume, he also would have no problem with normative conclusions as long as they are grounded in additional normative premises, such as "poverty is bad and ought to be eradicated."

[3] I first heard this example in his seminar on equality.

[4] It should be noted that there are scholars of culture who have attempted to rework the role of culture in debates about poverty, allowing it to interact with structure in various ways (see Lamont & Small, 2008). Nonetheless, these attempts have not taken hold, and the individual attributes approach to culture dominates.

[5] It should be said that none of these theories lead *necessarily* to these normative conclusions, even if they often do.

[6] Again, I first heard this example from Erik Olin Wright.

[7] For example, a big decline in poverty in one country may take place among more or less the same individuals—that is, in an unchanged culture and gene pool—making macro-level analyses far more suitable. Likewise, analyses that provide micro-level associations between single motherhood and poverty in one country may dissolve if its macro-institutions change over time.

ORCID

David Calnitsky http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0828-1957

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

David Calnitsky is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Western University. His research interests include work, poverty, social policy, and social theory, and his research has been published in *The Socio-Economic Review*, *Social Problems*, *Canadian Review of Sociology*, *Catalyst*, and *The Sociological Review*.