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Justifying Inequality: A Social Psychological Analysis of

Beliefs about Poverty and the Poor

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A news story reports that the national poverty rate rose to 12.7 percent in 2004, up from 12.5 percent the previous year. No demographic information is provided and you wonder who "the poor" are. Who do you imagine?

You watch a television program about low-income mothers struggling to make ends meet. You feel less empathy for the Latina single mother of three than a similar European American mother. Would you label your response racist? Classist? Sexist?

While visiting the city you give a homeless man a dollar. Your friend scolds you saying that handouts only encourage laziness. Do you regret giving him money?

When you were growing up you believed that with hard work anyone can move up the socioeconomic ladder. Lately, however, you wonder if this is really true, particularly when you reflect on the disproportionately high number of low-income students of color from your high school that did not attend college. How level is the socioeconomic "playing field?"

Each of these scenarios raises everyday questions about inequality and our responses, particularly the beliefs that inform them, play an important role in justifying or challenging economic disparity. In the United States, the dominant ideological context in which these judgments are made emphasizes individualism and meritocracy. The denial of race and class privilege further maximizes the tendency to see poverty as a personal failing and to judge those who don't prosper as "undeserving" of public support.

This chapter explores the ideological foundation of inequality, focusing on the unique role of classist, racist, and sexist attitudes and beliefs, in constraining upward mobility and support for antipoverty policies. Throughout this analysis, classism is used to refer to prejudicial attitudes and stereotypes that derogate poor and working class people. Similarly, the terms sexism and racism, are used to refer to attitudes and beliefs

that devalue women and people of color, respectively. Attitudinal similarities and differences across socioeconomic and racial groups are discussed as well as how these beliefs challenge or uphold economic and racial inequality. Emphasis is placed on understanding how perceptions of poverty and opportunity influence political mobilization, and educational expectations of low-income people of color. Critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2001), and social psychological theories of intergroup relations (Apfelbaum 1999), racism (Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Gilens 1999) and collective action are used to ground dominant constructions of inequality, and to analyze the potential development of intra and inter-class coalitions and support for progressive antipoverty poverties.

Beliefs about Poverty, Wealth, and Opportunity in the United States

Although income inequality in the U.S. has reached historic levels (Johnston 2005), economic disparity incites relatively little public protest in contemporary U.S. society. As Madrick (2003, p. 242) notes, "America is now more unequal than at any time since the 1920s, and it has happened with hardly any discussion." Although lack of knowledge about inequality or its abstractness may contribute to this silence, findings from national opinion polls underscore the crucial role that judgments of deservingness play (McCall 2003). When asked, "Do you feel that the distribution of money and wealth in this country today is fair, or do you feel that the money and wealth in this country should be more evenly distributed among a larger percentage of the people?" the majority of respondents agree that money and wealth should be more evenly distributed, but the supporting percentage dropped significantly from 84 percent in 1974 to 60 percent in 1984 (McCall 2003). Recent polling data shows public support holding steady at 63

percent leading McCall to conclude that tolerance for inequality in the U.S. has grown as disparity itself has risen.

Quantitative and qualitative research offers insight into how acceptance of economic inequality generally, and poverty, more specifically, is driven by beliefs about who the poor are, stereotypes about what the poor are like, and attributions for why some people are poor. In the United States, single mothers and ethnic minorities, most notably African Americans, are the public face of poverty. Consequently, poverty is viewed not only as a "minority" problem (Gilens 1999; Quadagno 1994) but a reflection of weak sexual mores and the decline of the nuclear family (Lind 2004; Orloff 2002). Stereotypes about the poor and ethnic minorities mirror each other with intersecting characterizations including laziness, sexual promiscuity, irresponsible parenting, disinterest in education, and disregard for the law. This fusion is especially pronounced for certain subgroups of the poor such as welfare recipients and the urban poor (Gans 1995; Henry, Reyna, and Weiner 2004). Shorthand terms like "underclass," "cadillac queen," and "trailer trash" call to mind specific ethnic groups, further illustrating the association of class and race in popular discourse and public consciousness.

The media exaggerates the relationship between minority status and poverty by overrepresenting people of color, particularly African Americans, in news stories about poverty (Gilens, 1999). In Clawson and Trice's (2000) content analysis of photographs published in five major news magazines between 1993 and 1998, blacks were pictured in 49 percent of stories about poverty yet they comprised only 27 percent of the poor. Whites, on the other hand, were significantly underrepresented, appearing in only 33 percent of photos when they were 45 percent of the poor. Other ethnic groups were also

underrepresented, with Hispanics underrepresented by 5 percent and Asian Americans rendered completely invisible, appearing in none of the images analyzed. The absence of images depicting Asian Americans in poverty may reflect their stereotypical association with industriousness and intelligence, whereas stereotypes about the weak work ethic of African Americans may contribute to their overrepresentation in stories about poverty (Clawson and Trice 2000). Although media analyses cannot determine the mechanisms that drive these representations, they reveal the racial coding of poverty.

Experimental research shows how racial biases intersect with and are reinforced by visual representations. For instance, after viewing videotaped vignette, Gilliam (1999) found that white respondents were less likely to recall seeing a white than a black welfare recipient. It appears that for many European Americans negative attitudes toward the poor and acceptance of inequality are as much a reflection of racism as classism (Gilens 1999; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Quadagno 1994).

Research examining causal attributions for poverty and wealth offers further insight into how inequality is perceived. Three primary explanations for poverty are documented in the research literature: individualistic explanations, which emphasize the role of characterological flaws among the poor in causing poverty (for example: alcohol and substance abuse, lack of thrift, laziness); structural attributions, which focus on the causal significance of societal factors (for example: discrimination, inferior schools, low wages), and fatalistic attributions (for example: bad luck, unfortunate circumstances). These conceptualizations guide much of the research on public attitudes toward the poor, although researchers are expanding this framework to assess support for other explanations, most notably culture of poverty beliefs (Bullock, Williams, and Limbert

2003; Cozzarelli, Tagler, and Wilkinson 2001). Updating measures to reflect contemporary constructions of poverty is crucial as is developing alternative less overt measures of beliefs about the poor.

In one of the first large U.S. studies of attributions for poverty, Feagin (1975) found that individualistic attributions were supported more strongly than other explanations, a finding that is indicative of the national tendency to view poverty as a sign of personal and moral failure (Katz, 1989; Shirazi and Biel 2005) and the individualism characteristic of western cultures (Norenzayan, Choi, and Nisbett, 1999). However, closer inspection of these data reveals considerable demographic variability in beliefs about poverty. In Feagin's analysis, white Protestants and Catholics, people with middle-income earnings, and those with moderate levels of education favored individualistic over structural explanations whereas the reverse pattern emerged for African Americans, low-income earners, and those with less education.

Research in the United States (Kluegel & Smith 1986; Cozzarelli et al. 2001; Hunt 1996) and internationally (Funham 1982; Carr and MacLachlan 1998) continues to shed light on demographic patterns, revealing greater support for structural causes among women, liberals, and welfare recipients than men, conservatives, and those who have not personally experienced poverty. Predictive analyses are examining how demographic variables influence the causal beliefs of diverse ethnic groups. For example, Hunt (1996) found that education was a stronger predictor of individualistic attributions among European Americans and Latinos than African Americans; income was a stronger negative predictor of individualistic explanations for blacks than whites or Latinos; and being a woman was a stronger predictor of structuralism for whites than Latinos.

Social psychological analyses of group differences focus on how these patterns illustrate common attributional biases, most notably the "actor-observer effect" whereby individuals attribute their own (negative) outcomes to situational factors but the (negative) outcomes of others' to personal causes (Ross 1977). Differences in support for individualistic and structural attributions among the poor (actors) and nonpoor (observers) reflect this discrepancy. However, social-cognitive analyses provide only a partial understanding of intergroup differences because they frequently overlook contextual and power-based dimensions of these patterns (Harper 1996). The fact that those who hold more social power (for example: European Americans, middle income groups) are more likely to attribute poverty to laziness than discrimination has significant implications for the maintenance of inequality. As Kane and Kyyro (2001) observe, "By masking the existence of inequalities, defining them as good, or construing them as inevitable, ideologies and the beliefs derived from them can legitimate and perpetuate unequal relationships between social groups" (p. 710).

Critical race theory (CRT) and critical race feminism (CRF; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Wing 1997), as well as theories of social control (Piven and Cloward, 1993) are powerful frameworks for analyzing the role of ideology in the (re)creation of inequality. Both CRT and CRF treat race as a social construct that is (re)created to maintain white privilege and regulate the economic and political power of people of color. From this vantage point, stereotypes about the poor are weapons of race and class warfare, not benign misperceptions, an argument that is supported by analyses of political rhetoric and social policy (Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Every 2005; Limbert and Bullock 2005). Similarly, social control theories offer insight into the function of stereotypes,

highlighting how the stigma associated with devalued groups inhibits identification with them. The stigma associated with welfare receipt may keep eligible poor and working class people from applying for benefits, particularly publicly visible forms of aid such as food stamps. It also makes low paying jobs appear more desirable than public assistance, a function that benefits businesses and corporations, not service and other low-wage workers (Piven and Cloward 1993).

Viewed through this lens, attributions for poverty are but one dimension of an interrelated network of hierarchy enhancing or attenuating beliefs, a perspective that is well documented by social psychological research. Individualistic attributions are correlated with a constellation of beliefs emphasizing personal responsibility and the perception that people "get what they deserve" including belief in a just world (Cozzarelli et al. 2001), the Protestant work ethic (Wagstaff 1983), social dominance (Lemieux and Pratto, 2003), political conservatism (Zucker and Weiner 1993), and stereotypes about welfare recipients (Bullock 1999). Conversely, structural explanations are correlated with political liberalism and the rejection of these "blame the victim" beliefs.

Dominant beliefs about wealth also support the perception that class position is based on merit. As with attributions for poverty, individualistic explanations for wealth (for example: drive, ability/talent, willingness to take risks, hard work) enjoy greater support in the United States than structural attributions (for example: economic bias, political influence/pull, inheritance; Hunt 2004; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Smith and Stone 1989). Thus, it is not simply the poor who are seen as deserving their economic status. In one of the few intergroup comparisons of Latino, African American, European Americans' beliefs about wealth, individualistic attributions for wealth were preferred

over structural causes across all three groups (Hunt 2004). This "remarkable consensus" (Hunt 2004, p. 841) did not extend to structural attributions for wealth, which received greater support from African Americans and Latinos than whites.

Beliefs about wealth have received less attention in the research literature than beliefs about poverty, a bias that may be indicative of the tendency to see poverty, not wealth, at the core of inequality. Yet, attributions for wealth have important implications for redistributive policy. In an investigation of attitudes toward the dividend tax (Bullock and Fernald 2005), attributing wealth to personal initiative and having "warm" feelings for the wealthy predicted support for its elimination. Attributing wealth to privilege is associated with supporting progressive welfare policies (Bullock et. al., 2001).

Dominant attributions for wealth and poverty illustrate how social class, unlike race/ethnicity and gender, is regarded as an achieved or earned status rather than an ascribed characteristic (Weber 1998). The high value placed on individual accomplishment is inexorably tied to beliefs about class mobility and equal opportunity. From this vantage point, economic disparity is acceptable as long as mobility is possible. Alexis de Tocqueville aptly described this fundamental tenet of U.S. ideology when he asserted that, "What is most important for democratie, is not that there are no great fortunes, but that great fortunes do not remain in the same hands" (cited in Schleifer 1980, p. 268).

Rising inequality has not abated belief in the possibility of upward mobility: more Americans than 20 years ago believe it possible to start out poor, work hard and become rich (Scott and Leonhardt 2005). Upward mobility has not increased over the past 30 years, nevertheless, 40 percent of respondents in a New York Times poll (cf. Scott and

Leonhardt 2005) believed that the likelihood of moving up from one class to another had

increased during this time frame. Thirty-five percent believed that prospects for upward

mobility were unchanged, while 23 percent believed it had decreased. Indeed, the belief

that anyone can advance is so central to our national identity that it is the heart of the so-

called American dream, "the promise that all Americans have a reasonable chance to

achieve success as they define it – material or otherwise – through their own efforts, and

to attain virtue and fulfillment through success" (Hochschild 1995, p. xi). As with

attributions for poverty and wealth, however, ethnic minorities are more likely to see

systemic inequities and express skepticism about equality of opportunity than whites

(Hochschild 1995).

The following section delves deeper into the complex nature of beliefs about

poverty, race/ethnicity, and opportunity, with the aim of understanding how these beliefs

may affect political mobilization, aspirations and achievement, and ultimately, the

maintenance of racial and economic inequality.

The Persistence Inequality and the Impact of Legitimizing Beliefs

Beliefs about poverty and poor are crucial to our understanding of intergroup

relations and social inequality, but dominant methodological, conceptual, and theoretical

shortcomings compromise the development of more nuanced analyses of classist and

racist beliefs and their consequences. Substantive critiques of this literature include that it

employs an exclusionary conceptualizing attributional patterns (characterizing groups as

exclusively individualistic or structural); narrowly focuses on stereotypes about the poor

that neglects how favorable attitudes toward the wealthy also legitimize inequality;

evaluates generic judgments of "the poor" rather than specific subgroups;

compartmentalizes discriminatory beliefs rather than looking at their intersections; decontextualizes and depoliticizes interclass and interracial differences in perceptions; lacks subtle or covert measures of classism; and relies heavily on quantitative measures of attitudes and beliefs and reductionist methodologies. Beyond policy preferences relatively little research examines the relationship of beliefs about poverty to interpersonal behaviors in naturalistic settings such as caseworker/client relationships.

In the face of growing inequality, changing racial and ethnic demographics, and persistently high poverty rates among people of color, the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological shifts needed to address these shortcomings take on heightened urgency. The remainder of this chapter focuses on two areas in which beliefs about poverty, race/ethnicity, and opportunity are especially likely to contribute to the persistence of poverty: political mobilization and achievement.

Beliefs about the Poor, Anti-Welfare Attitudes, and Implications for Political Mobilization

The impact of beliefs about poverty on the lives of low-income people has been most closely examined in relation to policy attitudes and preferences, particularly among the white middle class. These preferences represent signifiers of behavioral intent (for example: cutting or expanding welfare programs), and as such can be seen as an indicator of political mobilization for or against the status quo. The most recent large-scale illustration of anti-welfare mobilization occurred in the 1990s among voters who resonated with then-presidential candidate Bill Clinton's pledge "to end welfare as we know it" (1996, p. 80). Prior to the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), welfare was among the most

unpopular social programs (Jacoby 1994; Weaver, Robert, and Shapiro 1995) and welfare recipients one of the most disliked and disrespected groups (Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, and Glick 1999). The low regard with which welfare recipients are held is illustrated by polling data showing greater support for "assisting the poor" than welfare, leading Smith (1987) to conclude "that which we call welfare by any other name would smell sweeter" (p. 75).

What accounts for welfare's unpopularity? Part of the answer lies in the long tradition of categorizing the poor in terms of their "deservingness" (Katz 1989; Piven and Cloward 1993). Historically and today, these distinctions are largely based on whether individuals are held personally responsible for their poverty (Weiner 1995). Widows, children, people with disabilities, and veterans are considered among the "deserving" poor, while single mothers, welfare recipients, people with substance abuse issues, able-bodied men, and high-school "drop-outs" constitute the so-called "undeserving" poor. Experimental studies document how policy preferences are affected by this differentiation. For example, Appelbaum (2001) found that participants were more likely to recommend no benefits when targets were from "undeserving" groups and when their poverty was attributed to personal causes. Survey and questionnaire research similarly find that individualistic attributions for poverty are correlated with opposition to welfare spending and progressive welfare policies (Bullock et al. 2003; Kluegel and Smith, 1986).

Individualistic beliefs are consistent with the stereotype that "welfare recipients," unlike "the poor" prefer welfare to work (Henry et al. 2004). This perception positions welfare recipients as violating cultural beliefs equating work with morality, a view that undoubtedly shapes policy attitudes. For instance, initiatives to increase the minimum

wage, unlike proposals to expand welfare benefits, enjoy strong support among the general population (Pew Research Center 2005), a difference that may be partially attributed to their perceived associations with work. Among European Americans, the "outsider" or "other" status of welfare recipients is furthered by both racism and sexism, leading some researchers to identify welfare's perceived association with people of color, particularly African Americans, as the primary source of its unpopularity (Neubeck and Cavenave 2001; Smith 1987).

Indirect and direct effects of racism on white opposition to welfare are well documented. For instance, an analysis by Henry et al. (2004) found that the impact of anti-Black attitudes on opposition to welfare was mediated by the stereotype that welfare recipients are personally responsible for their poverty. Other studies find direct effects. Various measures of racism, mostly focusing on European American attitudes toward African Americans, are positively correlated with anti-welfare attitudes (Kinder and Sanders 1996). In Gilens' (1999) analysis of national survey data, stereotyping blacks as lazy and the poor as undeserving emerged as the strongest predictors of white opposition to welfare, followed by individualism and conservativism. Stereotypes about black welfare mothers were nearly twice as strong in predicting anti-welfare attitudes than stereotypes of white welfare mothers (Gilens 1999). A 30-point difference in opposition to welfare spending separated racist whites from those with the most favorable views of black welfare mothers; a gap that dropped to 15.9 points when responses to white welfare mothers were considered. These biases are manifested in the "real world" adoption of restrictive welfare policies, such "family cap" regulations, in states with higher percentages of recipients of color (Soss, Schram, Vartanian, and O'Brien 2001).

Theories of the ideological underpinnings of stratification and symbolic racism ground these findings (Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Kinder and Winter 2001; Schuman and Krysan 1999). Ideology-based theories draw their evidence from the relationship of anti-welfare attitudes to individualistic attributions, belief that equality of opportunity is preferable to equality of outcomes, and the notion that inequality is an inevitable consequence of life in meritocratic democracies. Theories of symbolic or "modern racism" explain white opposition to welfare policies as "racial hostility that is vented indirectly, e.g., agreeing with statements such as 'the government pays too much attention to blacks,' or 'blacks who receive welfare could get along without if they tried" (Bobo and Kluegel 1993, p. 446).

Researchers have tried to tease apart the relative predictive power of racial attitudes and beliefs about poverty and opportunity by pitting them against each other in regression analyses, or a set of beliefs is implicitly positioned as more important by being the exclusive focus of a study. With widespread consensus that a range of beliefs fuel anti-welfare sentiment, further pursuit of these models may glean less intellectual insight than those capable of examining the fusion of racist, classist, and sexist beliefs. Although feminist conceptions of intersectionality focus primarily on subjective experiences and the navigation of multiple identities, the underlying message of this scholarship, that complex social constructs cannot be easily isolated, is applicable here as well (McCall 2005). Positioned at the nexus of race, class, and gender bias, responses to welfare recipients and welfare policy cannot be understood in an isolated manner. As such, references to "responsibility" and "values," must be analyzed in terms of their potential to activate intersecting not solo biases.

The challenge for researchers is to develop measures and refine analytical techniques that do not reduce complex biases to atomistic components but look instead at their intersections. White versus black paradigms must be expanded to examine attitudes and beliefs among and toward ethnic majorities and minorities at national, state, and local levels. In states such as California, attitudes toward Latinos may have a stronger influence on whites' policy preferences than other ethnic minority groups. Fox's (2004) contextualized analysis of stereotyping, ethnic context, and anti-welfare attitudes underscores this point. In areas of the U.S. with fewer Latinos, whites stereotyped Latinos as having a poor work ethic, and opposed welfare spending on these grounds. In states with a higher percentage of Latinos, whites perceived Latinos more positively but these favorable attitudes did not translate into greater support for welfare programs; the more hardworking Latinos were perceived to be, the less whites wanted to spend on welfare. Similar findings did not emerge for African Americans, who were viewed as lazier than Latinos, regardless of ethnic context. To explain the counterintuitive relationship between perceived industriousness and opposition to welfare spending, Fox draws on comparative processes, speculating that Latinos may be the model minority against which African Americans are judged. She asserts, "Since Latinos can make it without welfare, so the logic goes, so can blacks, and therefore spending on welfare should be decreased. Alternatively, whites may fear that Latinos will follow what they see as the path of blacks and become lazy if the welfare system is allowed to grow too large" (p. 616). These findings highlight the need for further research that examines policy preferences in relation to racial/ethnic context as well as immigration trends, unemployment rates, and other micro and macro economic indices.

It is also crucial that social location and relation to privilege not be lost in research examining belief systems. Legitimizing ideologies have different social and political implications across diverse groups, a factor that theories of self-interest draw on to explain mobilization against progressive welfare programs. Self-interest theories explain policy preferences in terms of their ability to maximize personal and/or collective group gains and minimize losses. In its most simple form, it is a matter of economic practicality that those who are less likely to draw on social programs organize against them (Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Kinder and Winter 2001). Indeed, across racial groups, support for welfare programs decreases as earnings increase, but the greater support found for welfare spending among middle income voters of color relative to their white counterparts, speaks to the necessity of more complex group-based constructions of "self interest," particularly those that take into account the personal salience of group belongingness. Group loyalty or identification, regardless of accrual of direct personal benefits, has proven, in some instances, to provide a stronger explanatory variable than simple group membership (Luttmer 2001).

Disidentification from stigmatized social groups, such as "welfare recipient," may lead even those who would benefit from more generous assistance programs to oppose them. In Epstein's (2004) review of national polling data, even the poorest respondents, to a surprisingly large degree, shared the upper quintiles' preference for personal responsibility, limited welfare payments, restrictive reform initiatives, and hostility toward welfare recipients. In the 21 polled years between 1973 and 1998, differences between the poorest and wealthiest quintiles were only 23.2 percentage points on the item, "we're spending too much money on welfare." This difference, which is

relatively small in light of the sizeable resource gap between these groups, illustrates that

simple self-interest alone is not a sufficient explanatory variable.

Legitimizing beliefs and their implications for social policy and political

mobilization has received more attention among middle than low-income groups, yet they

undoubtedly contribute to the absence of a sustained grassroots welfare rights movement.

Interviews with low-income women document the humiliation and degradation

associated with welfare receipt (Seccombe 1999). Welfare stigma may lead recipients to

disidentify from others receiving aid and even facilitate disidentification from the poor

among those who are not aid recipients. The psychological underpinnings of social

distancing are illustrated in Fine and Weis' (1998) analysis of poor and working class

white men feeling the consequences of deindustrialization. Explaining that he "never had

to" apply for public assistance, Ron reveals a personal history of food stamp use, while

also distinguishing himself from other recipients:

> You know, we look at welfare as being something less than admirable… I think it
> [falling back on the government] is more common for black people…I mean social
> services, in general, I think, is certainly necessary, and Sheila [wife] and I have
> taken advantage of them. We've got food stamps several times…But you know, as
> soon as I was able to get off it, I did (Fine and Weis1998, p. 26).

Racialized judgments about the work ethic of African Americans underlie this

remark. As the researchers observe, "A logical extension here is that 'black' programs are

abused; 'white' programs are deserved" (p. 27). Other qualitative studies of white low-

income participants find similar distancing, typically by disparing the work ethic or

integrity of welfare recipients of color (Seccombe 1999). With positive group identity a

strong predictor of collective action, such findings have meaningful consequences for the

maintenance of economic inequality and the formation of strong interracial alliances

among the poor.

Even structural critiques of inequality by low-income groups, most notably African Americans, may be tempered by strongly held convictions about personal responsibility and belief in upward mobility through hard work (Hochschild 1995; Fine and Weis 1998). These seemingly incongruent beliefs often co-exist (Hunt 1996; 2004). In Bullock and Limbert's (2003) study of welfare recipients enrolled in a community college program for low-income individual and families, poverty and wealth were attributed to structural sources and income inequality was regarded as unjust, but "American dream" ideology was also supported with respondents expressing confidence in their own prospects for upward mobility. Similarly, poor Mexican American farm workers have been found to perceive racism as a significant barrier to advancement and to believe that Mexican immigrants as having fewer opportunities than other ethnic groups, but also to see their families as upwardly mobile and as having a good chance of "getting ahead" (Bullock and Waugh 2005).

With perceived impermeability of group boundaries among the strongest predictors of collective action (Kelly and Breinlinger 1996), the belief that poverty is transitory may neutralize structural critiques of inequality. It is also likely that belief in personal mobility is self-protective, allowing individuals to negotiate, even find hope, when confronting deprivation and institutional discrimination. The tendency for disadvantaged individuals to perceive less discrimination against themselves than the groups to which they belong, or the "denial of personal discrimination" (Crosby 1984), helps explain why marginalized groups believe in personal advancement when formidable barriers are present.

The concept of "dual consciousness" is also used to explain belief in personal agency and structural inequality, particularly ethnic minorities' endorsement of both structural and individualistic attributions for poverty (Hunt1996; 2004). Although research finds stronger support for structural than individualistic attributions among people of color, support for individualistic causes is often relatively strong as well. This pattern may allow disadvantaged groups to maintain a sense of personal control over their economic situation while also acknowledging the role of larger structural forces in the maintenance of inequality. Among first generation Mexican American farmworkers, support for structural attributions is likely rooted in the recognition of widespread poverty and discrimination, individualistic beliefs may be a way of acknowledging the personal resolve needed to survive immigration (Bullock and Waugh 2005).

Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of studying perceptions in all their complexity and seeming contradictions. Social judgments are rarely binary and should not be treated as such. It is equally crucial that beliefs not be stripped from the systems of power in which they exist. Beliefs have the potential to legitimize or disrupt class and race hierarchies and must be examined with an eye toward whose interests are served by the acceptance of dominant ideologies, in this case widespread belief in upward mobility, individual responsibility for poverty, and the permeability of class boundaries. Understanding how support is gained for policies and institutions that are not in one's best interest remains, at best, a little understood issue. Critical race theory and critical race feminism, and other overtly "political" theories of intergroup relations should inform such analyses. Equally important are questions pertaining to the development of counter-hegemonic beliefs and their relationship to economic justice movements. With much of

the research skewed toward understanding the legitimizing function of beliefs, questions

related to critical resistance and the promotion of social justice remain understudied.

Beliefs about the Poor and Implications for Closing the Achievement Gap

Perceived as a social equalizer and a route to upward mobility, education holds a

special place in the mind of the American public. Support for educational spending has

soared compared to other national priorities, with education emerging as the top national

priority in public opinion polls (Plutzer and Berkman 2005). Yet, the very system widely

believed to "level the playing field" is rife with race and class based inequities

(Hochschild 2003; Kozol 2005). The highest numbers of deficiencies are reported in

schools that serve more than 50 percent minorities and/or 70 percent poor students

(National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, 2000). Overcrowding, high student to

teacher ratios, teacher turnover, and lack of funding for the most basic resources persist.

In light of these conditions as well as other factors that contribute to educational

inequity (see Farkas, this volume), failure to close the achievement gap is not surprising.

Significant differences on standardized tests and classroom performance continue to

divide across race/ethnicity and class lines (McLoyd 1998; Suzuki and Aronson 2005).

High school completion rates also differ, with young adults who live in the poorest

quintile leaving high school at six times the rate of their peers in the top quintile of the

income distribution (NCES 2001). Ethnicity is also associated with rates of secondary

school completion. In 2000, 64.1 percent of all Hispanics between the ages of 18 and 24

had completed secondary education compared with 91.8 percent of whites, 83.7 percent

of blacks, and 94.6 percent of Asians. For those who complete high school, significant

barriers to higher education remain. Despite popular beliefs about the accessibility of

postsecondary education, financial hardship restricts college attendance. Of all

undergraduate students, only 26 percent are from low-income families (NCES 2000); 29

percent are racial/ethnic minorities.

Resistance to addressing the structural sources of these inequities surfaces in

debates about school funding (for example: "throwing money at the problem won't help")

and affirmative action (for example: "special programs for poor ethnic minorities unfairly

rewards mediocrity;" Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Every 2005). Dominant cultural beliefs

situate responsibility for the achievement gap on the backs of poor ethnic minorities.

Despite being largely discredited by the scientific community, genetic arguments about

the intellectual inferiority of people of color and the poor still make their way into public

discourse (Herrnstein and Murray 1995; Rushton and Jensen 2005). In Herrnstein and

Murray's controversial but widely read book, *The Bell Curve,* arguments about the racial

and class heritability of intelligence are used to justify eliminating Head Start programs.

Cultural deficit models similarly locate responsibility for the achievement gap within

individuals, but the focus shifts from nature to nurture. Deficit models (e.g., "culture of

poverty;" "cultural underclass") contend that poor whites and ethnic minorities endorse

values that are at odds with mainstream culture (e.g. devaluing education). The

transmission of these values from parent to child is seen as perpetuating low educational

and occupational attainment (for a comprehensive review of cultural models, see Lamont

and Small, this volume). From this vantage point, it is the devaluation of education by

poor ethnic minorities that is the source of low achievement.

Low-income parents' educational and occupational aspirations (the ideal or

highest level hoped for) and expectations (more realistic or accessible options) challenge

the central tenets of deficit models. Low-income Latino/a and African American parents are consistently found to value education and hold high (college level) aspirations for their children (Azmitia, Cooper, Garcia, and Dunbar 1996; Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, and Garnier 2001; Solorzano 1992), undercutting deficient parental values as a primary cause of achievement gap. Low and middle-income parents share the same hopes for their children – to lead healthy, happy, and fulfilling lives.

This is not to suggest that beliefs are unaffected by social position, access to resources, economic realities, or social context. This point is illustrated by research showing low-income parents' educational expectations for their children are lower than their aspirations (Goldenberg et al. 2001), and that parent and child expectations decline with progress through the school system. Lowered educational expectations are buttressed by occupational expectations and the perception of some careers as more "class appropriate" than others. Both poor and middle-income children perceive socioeconomic (SES) status as affecting career opportunities. When low and middle income children were asked about the future career of a hypothetical poor and middle class child, the hypothetical middle class child was easily expected to be reach her/his goals, but financial constraints were predicted to undermine the poor child's achievement (Weigner 1998). These perceptions influenced children's own career expectations. Although both groups anticipated achieving their career goals, poor children, perhaps as a consequence of anticipated financial barriers, chose careers that require less education than their middle class counterparts. They were three times more likely to see themselves as police officers or laborers than their middle class peers, who were twice as likely to choose professional careers.

Theories of cultural and social capital explain this so-called "dimming" of expectations in terms of low cultural and social capital rather than dysfunctional socialization practices (Bourdieu 1986). Schools (and other institutions) reproduce inequality by valuing and rewarding the cultural capital (for example: types of knowledge, language practices) of dominant classes and devaluing the skills and resources associated with less powerful groups. From this perspective, it is not a question of parental disinterest but navigating institutions and networks that differentially privilege diverse economic and racial/ethnic groups. Thus, reduced or constrained expectations, may contribute to the persistence of poverty, but must be understood primarily as the consequence or extension of existing inequities and economic constraints, not the exclusive cause of them.

Stereotypes about race/ethnicity, class, and intelligence as well as discriminatory treatment from teachers, other relevant authorities, and peers may also influence educational goals, school involvement, and ultimately, the persistence of inequality (Hauser-Cram, Siren, and Stipek 2003; Lott 2001). A large body of social psychological and educational research examines the impact of teachers' expectations on children's academic performance (Ferguson 2003; Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968; Rosenthal 2003). According to the so-called Pygmalion effect, teachers act on classist and racist stereotypes about student competence; in response, student performance confirms these lowered expectations, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Numerous critiques of the measurement of this phenomenon such an overreliance on experimental procedures and debates about the magnitude of expectancy effects (.30) plague this literature (Jussim and Harber 2005), however, consistent effects have been observed among African American

students, students with low socioceconomic status, and perceivers who have a greater

need to influence others (Smith, Jussim, and Eccles 1999).

Even if teachers do not act on biased attitudes, research documenting deep-rooted

prejudice raises important questions about fairness in the classroom (McCombs and Gay

1988). In Neal et al.'s (2003) study of 136 middle school teachers watched videotapes in

which student ethnicity (African American versus European American) and walking style

("standard" erect posture versus a stylized "stroll" associated with African Americans)

was manipulated. Targets of both races with an African American style "stroll" were

rated as lower in achievement, higher in aggression, and more likely to need special

education than students of either ethnicity with a "standard" walk. These findings

illustrate the association of intellectual inferiority with "acting black" and the academic

risks for these students. Concerns about teachers' low academic expectations for "bad

kids" or kids "who start trouble" are also voiced in interviews with low-income ethnic

minority youth (Rosenbloom and Way 2004).

Perhaps, the strongest evidence that stereotypes diminish the academic

achievement of marginalized groups comes from research on stereotype threat described

by Steele (1997) as

> "…the social-psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing
> something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies. This
> predicament threatens one with being negatively stereotyped, with being judged
> or treated stereotypically, or with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype….
> And for those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant,
> this predicament can be self-threatening (p. 614)."

The possibility of confirming negative stereotypes may impair performance or lead to

disidentification with the area in which the stereotype is relevant, such as school.

Support for stereotype threat comes from experimental studies documenting diminished math scores for women and reduced standardized test scores for African Americans and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Spencer, Steele, and Quinn 1998; Croizet, Desert, Dutrevis, and Leyens 2001; Fregner, Huguet, and Monteil 2002). In a series of related studies, Steele and Aronson (1995) asked black and white college students to complete a test of difficult GRE items. To vary the relevance of stereotypes about intellectual ability, the test was described as "ability-diagnostic" or "ability-nondiagnostic." Strong evidence of stereotype threat was found with black participants underperforming white participants in the diagnostic condition but equaling them in the non-diagnostic condition. In a second experiment, the same pattern of results emerged by manipulating whether participants reported their race on a demographic questionnaire immediately before taking the test. Salience of racial stereotypes was sufficient to depress the performance of identified black students. Parallel findings have emerged for socioeconomic status. When low SES students were led to believe that a test was diagnostic of their intellectual ability, they answered fewer items correctly, but performed just as well as high SES students when they thought the test was non-diagnostic (Croizet and Claire 1998).

While negative stereotypes clearly harm the performance of some groups, "positive" stereotypes may confer some "benefits." As so-called "model minorities," Asian Americans are stereotyped as " being untroubled and compliant, excelling in math and science and succeeding in spite of racial barriers and discrimination" (Asher 2002, p. 268). It can be argued that even when valued qualities are posited, stereotyping is not a "positive" phenomenon. Nevertheless, cultural assumptions touting the skills of ethnic

groups such as Asian Americans and Indian Americans may confer a "stereotype boost."

In a study documenting both stereotype "boost" and "threat," Shih, Pittinsky, and

Ambaby (1999) found that Asian-American women performed better on a math test when

their ethnic identity was made salient, but worse when their gender identity was

activated, compared with a control group who had neither identity activated. These

findings not only highlight the potential of stereotypes, depending on their valence, to

enhance or deflate test performance, but also the importance of examining stereotype

"boost" and "threat" in terms of multiple rather than single identities. Most empirical

studies of stereotype threat and boost examine a single dimension of identity, such as

race, gender, or class, but people possess multiple intersecting identities. Research

examining "stereotype boost" inadvertently risks reifying monolithic constructions of so-

called "model minorities" if the diverse realities of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and

immigration histories is ignored (Asher 2002).

At best, "positive" stereotypes must be considered a double-edged sword and

stereotype "boost" as a highly conditional and relatively limited phenomenon. Unlike

Shih and her colleagues (1999), Cheryan and Bodenhausen (2000) found that focusing

Asian-American participants' attention on their ethnicity created difficulties with

concentration, not improved test performance. Procedural differences used to make

ethnicity salient in these two studies appear to underlie these disparate outcomes. In Shih

et al.'s (1999) analysis, subtle, indirect prompts, such as asking about language use, were

used to promote private reflection about one's ethnicity, whereas Cheryan and

Bodenhausen (2000) encouraged participants to focus on public perceptions of their

ethnic group. Discussing their findings, they explain:

This focus presumably led them to contemplate the possibility of failing to exhibit the positive quantitative skills commonly expected of Asians. Just as fear of confirming a negative stereotype can undermine performance, so can fear of failing to confirm a positive stereotype. However, the latter effect appears to be limited to conditions in which public expectations of success are salient…. p. 401

Fear of not living up to widespread public assumptions about "model minorities" appears well founded. Ho, Driscoll, and Loosbrock (1998) found that Asian-American students who performed poorly on a mathematical test were awarded fewer points by graders than European-American students with identical scores.

Many questions remain about the pathways through which stereotype inhibit or enhance performance. It is clear, however, that stereotype threat, is such a powerful and problematic phenomenon because it is not contingent on individual endorsement of negative beliefs, but rather simple awareness of their presence in society. Research on children's economic socialization documents early awareness of social class and class-based stereotypes and that with age, children's conceptualizations grow more similar to adult beliefs (Chafel 1997). In research with children ranging in age from 5 to 18, Leahy (2003) found that as children grew older descriptions of the rich and poor shifted from physical characteristics (appearance, possessions) to emphasizing characterological differences in abilities and traits. Similarly, individualistic attributions for poverty and wealth became more common with age as did the perceived legitimacy of inequality. By age 11, inequality was less likely to seen as a problem that could be ended by having the rich give to the poor, whereas belief that poor people could work harder increased substantially. These trends, although present across demographic groups, were less pronounced among low-income and African American children. These groups expressed greater concern for the poor and willingness to challenge the economic structure than

their white middle class peers. Similarly, Chafel and Neitzel (2005) found that low SES and black/biracial children were more likely to talk about the need for more humane treatment of the poor than financially secure white children.

By adolescence, class-based stereotyping is common, particularly among white middle class teens. Skafte (1989) showed photographs of poor, neutral, or wealthy strangers to a predominantly white sample of middle class adolescents and asked them to rate the target along a series of character traits. Poor strangers were judged to steal more often, feel worse about themselves, and make friends less easily than either neutral or wealthy strangers. Wealthy strangers were described as being more intelligent, earning higher grades, more likely to be successful in the future, and happier than poor or neutral strangers. Although poor strangers of both sexes were evaluated less favorably than wealthy strangers, poor girls received the lowest ratings.

Collectively, these studies confirm the salience of class in young peoples lives and the prevalence of classist stereotypes, particularly among middle class youth; however, they tell us relatively little about subjective experiences, understandings, and manifestations of class privilege. This gap in the literature is being filled by a growing body of ethnographic and qualitative research that examines the intersections of race and class in educational contexts (Bettie 2000; Fine, Burns, Payne, and Torre, 2004; Jones 2003; Weis 2003; Weis and Hall, 2001). In terms of understanding the impact of dominant beliefs on low-income groups, these methodologies as well as other socially embedded analytical strategies are advantageous because low-income youth are active agents in the construction of identities and beliefs, not passive receptacles of dominant

conceptions. As such, beliefs about poverty may emerge as a potential source of shame and humiliation or a site of critical resistance.

This point is illustrated by two conceptually and methodologically different studies, both of which raise provocative questions about the meanings low-income youth attach to dominant beliefs about poverty. In the first study (Weinger 1998), 24 European American and African American low-income children between the ages of 5 and 13 were shown photographs of a well maintained suburban home and a run-down home and then asked a series of interview questions related to the photos that probed their perceptions of socioeconomic status, societal messages about poverty, and their own feelings about the poor. Children were found to be acutely aware of class, describing poverty in terms of crisis and hardship and middle class status as relatively worry-free. Concern about lacking toys and friends, meeting basic survival needs, and teasing by more affluent peers were frequently mentioned. Perhaps, most tellingly, children spoke of the poor positively, but when asked how poor children feel about themselves, half of the participants described poor children as thinking of themselves as "bad," "dumb," or "unequal." These findings highlight the stigmatizing aspects of poverty and albeit inconclusively, suggest that negative beliefs may be internalized.

Flanagan, Ingram, Gallay, and Gallay's (1997) study of students attending inner-city (poor), urban ring ("blue collar"), and suburban schools (affluent) offers an alternative perspective, illustrating the importance of critically examining the context and function of beliefs. They found that inner-city adolescents were more likely than their peers in urban ring and suburban areas to attribute both poverty and affluence to individualistic causes. In contrast, urban ring and suburban youth were more likely to

make structural attributions or to give explanations that included both structural and

individualistic causes. Inner-city youth also perceived the school system as more

alienating and reported receiving more intense message from their families about the

need for social vigilance, self-reliance, and academic success compared to their peers in

other communities.

Flanagan and her colleagues conclude that systemic blame poses little threat to

suburban adolescents because institutions tend to work for them, whereas, adopting

structural explanations may imply bleak prospects for those living in economically

depressed communities. Emphasis on self-reliance and individualistic explanations can be

interpreted as belief that it is "incumbent on the individual to create his or her own

success and that those who rely on the system may be disappointed" (Flanagan et. al.

1997, p.62). As with adults, the adoption of individual centered explanations may, in this

case, serve an important self-protective function allowing poor adolescents' to hold long-

range career and education plans in the face of adversity. As these authors observe,

"Although minority youth from poor neighborhoods may be aware of the system's

failure, it may be necessary for them to disregard those failures in order to remain

committed to education and the American Dream" (1997, p. 61).

Supporting this claim, Taylor and his colleagues (1994) found that black youth

who attributed difficulty finding work to systemic causes were more likely to abandon

education. It is possible, however, that the endorsement of structural causes serves other

important functions. For example, support for structural explanations by low-income

youth may be associated with a critique of power relations that promotes political

engagement without comprising educational attainment. Further research that probes these relationships, in context of school resources and local economies, is greatly needed.

In sum, the research reviewed here points to the significant role of beliefs about opportunity, the poor, and ethnic minorities in maintaining the achievement gap. It is important to keep in mind, however, that differences in achievement cannot be reduced through cognitive change alone. For this reason, it is crucial that researcher remain focused on the interface of structural inequities and beliefs, attending to the social landscape as closely as they attend to internal psychological processes.

<div align="center">Reducing Prejudice and Stereotyping: Possibilities and Challenges</div>

Many attempts have been made to reduce racial prejudice and improve intergroup relations through cognitive restructuring (for example: breaking down "us" versus "them" distinctions, fostering inclusive multiple social identities; see Dovidio, Glick, Rudman 2005; Oskamp 2000) and enhancing empathy for disadvantaged groups (Batson et. al., 1997). Theories of intergroup contact, however, have received the most attention by researchers. At the heart of this body of work, is the notion that intergroup contact, if carefully constructed, can reduce negative affect and/or reduce negative stereotypes. A number of optimal conditions for successful intergroup contact have been identified including equal status between the groups, a common intergroup goal, and interacting in a context that promotes cooperation and the potential to disconfirm stereotypes (Pettigrew 1998). The very nature of these conditions belies the difficulty of creating successful intergroup contact situations outside of carefully controlled experimental situations. Unequal status, for instance, is the very core of race and class inequity and not easily "manipulated" or controlled in "real world" situations. Concern regarding the

generalizability of positive attitudes across situations and from individuals to groups raise further questions about the promise of intergroup contact, as do critics' claims that ethnic hatred or animosity is not the root problem.

Despite these limitations, positive effects of contact on European Americans' attitudes toward African Americans are well documented by psychological and sociological research (Dovidio, Glick, and Rudman 2005; Pettigrew, 1998). As a consequence, intergroup contact is used as a strategy for attitudinal change in wide range of "everyday" settings: desegregated classrooms, service learning programs that provide opportunities for interracial and interclass interactions, and "walk a mile in my shoes" programs that partner welfare recipients with nonpoor community members.

In recent years, focus has shifted from identifying the conditions that optimize prejudice reduction to understanding the processes by which contact contributes to attitude change (for example: learning about the outgroup; generating affective ties; Pettigrew 1998; McClelland and Linnander 2006) and the differential impact of contact on majority and minority attitudes (Tropp 2005; Tropp and Pettigrew 2005). Of particular interest is the impact of contact on minority group members, an understudied area relative to majority attitudes. For example, Tropp (2005) found that even a single experience of prejudice negatively influenced how members of devalued groups felt in intergroup settings and their expectations for future interactions. Perceiving oneself as a target of discrimination reinforced these negative outcomes, while having close relationships with outgroup members facilitated more positive attitudes toward cross-group interactions. These findings are a powerful reminder that contact must be studied from multiple vantage points; while the focus of prejudice reduction efforts necessarily remains on

dominant groups, individual and social consequences of contact on marginalized groups
should not be overlooked.

<center>Concluding Thoughts About Inequality and Beliefs about the Poor</center>

In the weeks immediately following Hurricane Katrina, it was impossible to avoid
images of the storm's destruction or the plight of those who bore the brunt of the storm's
wrath: poor African Americans. As a Newsweek cover succinctly proclaimed, "Poverty,
Race, & Katrina: Lessons of a National Shame." If a "silver lining" is to be found in the
wake of such tragedy, it is the potential of the inequities exposed by Katrina to spur
national interrogation of U.S. acceptance of race and class disparities. Research on the
ideological foundations of inequality suggests that the legacy of this disaster will be
partially determined by whether the plight of those most affected is believed to be a
matter of structural inequality rather than fate or character. As the financial struggle of
those displaced by the storm continues, will the public support extended benefits or argue
that the time has come for these families to pull themselves up by their bootstraps? Will
we choose to take on the systemic roots of inequality, including dominant beliefs about
race, poverty, and opportunity, address the superficial symptoms of inequality, or ignore
these problems entirely? With disparities in income and wealth reaching historic levels,
post-Katrina New Orleans is but a microcosm of larger inequities facing the United
States, and our response to it carries broader social and political implications.

Much remains to be learned about the prevalence, dynamics, and consequences of
legitimizing ideologies, particularly the processes that contribute to critical resistance
among both privileged and marginalized groups. As we study the beliefs that maintain
inequality, we must also direct our energies toward understanding how personal and

situational variables contribute to the rejection of pejorative stereotypes and the

development of counter-hegemonic frameworks for understanding inequality. In doing

so, we may gain a foothold in the struggle to reduce persistent race and class-based

disparities.

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