Changing the Narrative

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ABOUT THE US PARTNERSHIP ON MOBILITY FROM POVERTY

With funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Urban Institute is supporting the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty. Led by chair David Ellwood and executive director Nisha Patel, the Partnership consists of 24 leading voices representing academia, practice, the faith community, philanthropy, and the private sector.

The Partnership's definition of mobility has three core principles: economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community. Our collective aspiration is that all people achieve a reasonable standard of living with the dignity that comes from having power over their lives and being engaged in and valued by their community.

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Executive Summary

The world is enormously complex. To help us make sense of it all, we form narratives that help us explain how the world works and why it works that way. A wide range of sources influence the narratives we form, from the evening news to film and television, from childhood memories to casual conversations with friends and strangers. Some of our narratives are rooted in facts. Others are based in powerful emotions. These narratives help shape our beliefs and ideas, including those that inform our opinions of and attitudes toward people living in poverty.

Connected to our personal narratives are larger social and cultural narratives that systemically reinforce and inform one another. In America, there are at least three narratives about poverty and mobility that are widespread, inaccurate, mutually contradictory, and harmful: (1) people in poverty have no one to blame but themselves for their circumstances, (2) people in poverty are helpless victims of a larger socio-economic system in which they have no agency, and (3) truly exceptional "rags-to-riches" stories prove that the American dream is available to anyone willing to work hard enough for it. The continued popularity of these misleading narratives constrains our ability to better understand poverty in America. Absent that understanding, it is difficult to motivate and design effective policies to support people on pathways out of poverty.

To create an environment that motivates effective programs and public policies, we must change the dominant narratives. Instead of narratives that stigmatize people living in poverty and cast them as "others" with whom those with more economic means cannot find common ground, we must offer narratives that recognize our shared humanity and the uncomfortable reality that all of us are vulnerable to economic hardship. Instead of accepting the common misconception that poverty is a result of personal failure, we must highlight the role of circumstances and structural barriers the frustrating reality that the playing field is not level and that people living in poverty are facing an uphill climb significantly steeper and more treacherous than the path faced by those in more economically stable situations. Instead of defining poverty strictly in monetary terms, we must acknowledge that poverty is also profoundly characterized by a lack of power, and by a lack of belonging and social inclusion).[1]

We propose multistage research that (1) identifies and examines the drivers of our understanding of poverty and (2) works through critical questions regarding our perception of the relationships between poverty and race, gender, age, education, geography, and other factors. Once the drivers of poverty narratives have been identified and understood, a second phase of work can begin, which involves creating content that strategically populates the narrative environment with alternative or replacement narratives geared toward high-leverage audiences. Those environments can include everything from advertising to professional sports, media, and entertainment. Storytellers with mass audiences can be particularly helpful as we seek to have a lasting and broad-based impact on how our audiences understand poverty.

By rewriting the narrative of poverty in America, we can bring about the awareness, connection, and determination necessary to spark meaningful change. Whether change comes through community-based movements or public policy, we can increase mobility from poverty by getting the motivation and the story right.

Impact on Three Dimensions of Mobility

The Partnership's definition of mobility has three core principles: economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community.

Investment: We propose multistage research that (1) identifies and examines the drivers of our understanding of poverty and (2) works through critical questions regarding the perceived relationships between poverty and race, gender, age, education, geography, and other factors. Once the drivers of poverty narratives have been identified and understood, a second phase of work can begin, which involves creating content that strategically populates the narrative environment with alternative or replacement narratives with high-leverage audiences.

Impact:

- Economic Success: More accurate narratives about poverty will lead to more effective policy, including approaches that increase access to education, quality jobs, and benefits.
- Power and Autonomy: More accurate narratives about poverty will support development of policies and programs that recognize the agency, dignity, strength, and resilience of people living in poverty.
- Being Valued in Community: Dispelling harmful narratives will reduce the stigma people in poverty face and support social inclusion and mobility.

What Are Narratives, and How Do They Influence Our Understanding of Poverty?

Narratives are stories we rely on to help us make sense of the world. They are rooted in and shaped by many sources, such as television dramas, news reports, political speeches, religious teachings, school textbooks, water cooler conversations, memories, and cultural norms. Narratives are the stories that we formulate to help us understand our everyday experiences. They are the way we make meaning of crime, safety, political events, wealth disparities, and the people implicated in those various circumstances.

Like opinions, narratives may or may not be based on facts. Yet narratives build the foundation of our world view; They are the tools we use to make sense of the world. We look to narratives to give us a way to simplify, organize, and comprehend the large volumes of information we receive daily. As such, they shape unconscious and unconscious ideas about why people are lazy, whether America is a great nation, and why people live in poverty.

The fact that we form narratives is not surprising. The world is an enormously complex place, so it is natural, arguably even necessary, that we find ways to distill and organize it through stories, particularly stories we create with the help of trusted sources such as friends; family; favored political, religious, and community leaders; and preferred news and entertainment outlets. But the accounts we are exposed to reflect relations of power in the world, structural dynamics, and our individual relationships to those dynamics. As a result, two people might receive what seems to be the same information (i.e., hear the same account), interpret it differently, and form dramatically different narratives in response. This is a central challenge facing many of us working to increase mobility from poverty.

The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty convened a narrative learning group to consider the ways that existing narratives influence public perceptions of people living in poverty and public policy designed to facilitate mobility from poverty. Members of the learning group and the diverse experts and leaders we consulted discussed popular narratives about poverty and considered strategies to change these narratives. The ideas in this paper draw from the narrative learning group discussions. The learning group's work made clear the need to replace dominant narratives about poverty with more accurate ones. By doing so, we can lay the groundwork for the type of change necessary to dramatically increase mobility from poverty.

Benjamin Franklin: Founding Father of a Nation and a Narrative

America's love affair with the "rags-to-riches" narrative—the notion that all people have equal opportunities to achieve economic success—dates back to Benjamin Franklin. Born into poverty, the Founding Father spent his childhood making soap and candles before running away as a teenager and eventually opening his own print shop. By the 18th century, Franklin owned a slew of paper mills, where he manufactured most of the paper in the American colonies, largely from old rags he milled into paper. "Franklin literally turns rags into riches. And that's really where the notion comes from," explains historian Jill Lepore.[a]

Franklin not only embodied the bootstrapping myth, he promoted it. But the Founding Father never spoke of his sister, Jane, who spent her life cobbling together odd jobs to try to make ends meet and who never escaped the poverty into which she and her brother were born. Although they were very close—their letters to each other illustrate their intimacy, wit, and intelligence—Jane is nowhere to be found in her famous brother's autobiography, *A Private Life*. He became a world historical figure while her life was circumscribed by the demands of rearing her 12 children and the unequal opportunity afforded women in 18th-century America. Says Lepore, "The historical record is asymmetrical. We know so much more about the people who thrive and so little about the people who don't thrive. And you really have to think hard, what is the story telling me and what is it not telling me? … Who's missing here?"

[a] "Rags to Riches," On the Media, WNYC, October 14, 2016.

The Problem of Inaccurate Poverty Narratives

All of us create narratives about poverty based on the information we are exposed to and the ways we interpret it. We read news reports, hear stories from friends, or see a movie, and those narratives inform what we think of people who live in poverty. Do we empathize with them or judge them? Do we think it's their fault that they are living in poverty, or do we believe they are fighting against social and economic factors more powerful than them? Do we think our country is doing enough to support people living in poverty, or do we think additional resources should be used to help people achieve upward mobility?

Although we each form opinions about poverty individually, we are nevertheless deeply influenced by at least three prominent narratives about poverty and mobility. The first popular narrative asserts that people in poverty have no one to blame but themselves for their circumstances. Underlying this narrative is the notion that people have full control over their lives. But we know that context exerts a great influence. Research shows that the zip code into which a child is born is one of the greatest determinants of economic success in adulthood,[2] even though place of birth is a circumstance completely out of a person's control.

A second common narrative is that people living in poverty are passive victims of a larger socioeconomic system in which they have no agency. Yet we have every indication that people living in poverty work very hard to manage competing demands and limited resources.[3] The final common narrative is that truly exceptional "rags to riches" stories prove the American dream is available to anyone who is willing to work hard enough for it. Of course, some people will achieve success against the toughest of odds. However, these cases are truly exceptional, and their very existence illustrates they are outside the norm, in no way suggesting that such a path is available to most.

All three narratives are overly simplistic and misleading, and their continued popularity constrains our ability to better understand poverty in America. Absent that understanding, it is difficult to motivate and maximize the effectiveness of policies designed to help people in poverty. Specifically, such narratives oversimplify the structural forces that drive poverty in America by assuming that an individual is entirely responsible for their economic situation and disregarding the very real and vast array of factors that contribute to any individual's circumstances, including access to affordable housing, safe neighborhoods, quality jobs, social connections, effective schools, and nutritious food, among many other things. Decades of behavioral research have shown that people tend to attribute too much to people's proclivities and abilities and not enough to their circumstances.[4]

To illustrate the ways narratives can contribute to misguided public policy, consider the nation's child support system. As Heather Hahn, Kathryn Edin, and Lauren Abrahams explain in an idea paper from the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty, the child support system suffers under the fallacy of the deadbeat dad, or the idea that noncustodial parents (often, but not always, fathers) will not support their children unless they are forced to do so.[5] This assumption is used to justify sometimes draconian penalties, such as revocation of driver's and professional licenses, for those who do not comply with child support orders. The reality is that 85 to 98 percent of unmarried parents, mothers and fathers alike, say they want the father to be involved in their child's life.[6] But many child support orders are imposed without considering a noncustodial parent's ability to pay. For a parent with little or no income, this can create an unending, debilitating spiral of noncompliance, penalties, and interest accrual that is also damaging potential coparenting arrangements and the bond between a parent and a child.

Our projection of narratives onto others—assigning someone an identity as good or bad, hardworking or lazy, aggressive or gentle, or any other characteristic—is not limited to people living in poverty. We do this with wealthy people, athletes, teachers, and many other people we meet every day. Consciously or not, we assign people characteristics, and explain their behaviors, largely based on dominant narratives. It is a natural tendency by no means unique to issues of poverty.

However, the problem is especially harmful to the effort to increase mobility from poverty because the false narratives are blocking the justification for and adoption of good decisions and practices by far too many people with the power (and usually the desire) to effectively intervene and implement good solutions.

Poverty: A Rigged Game

"SPENT" is a digital video game created for Urban Ministries of Durham, a homeless shelter and emergency services organization, by Jenny Nicholson, creative director at McKinney Advertising. Designed to dispel the widespread belief that people living in poverty make bad choices, the game challenges users to survive for 30 days on $1,000. SPENT opens by informing the user that they have been laid off, have burned through their savings, have lost their home, and now must secure work. The available jobs are modeled on actual Craigslist postings and North Carolina wage data; they include work at a warehouse, at a restaurant or, if the user has typing skills, in a temporary position at an office. Users face a new challenge every day, each modeled on the experiences of people served by Urban Ministries of Durham and on those of Nicholson herself, who grew up in a 19-foot trailer without electricity or running water. For example, one day the user's child comes down with the flu. The child has a fever and the user, who is supposed to be at work, must decide whether to miss work and risk of losing their job or send their child to school sick. Another day, the user must decide how to handle a credit card bill, which they have relied on to stay afloat since losing their job and now carries a $7,000 balance. SPENT has been played more than 5.5 million times in 227 countries and inspired 45 academic articles.[a]

As Nicholson explains, "The heart and soul of SPENT are the challenges where there is no good answer, where the difference between having a good answer and not having a good answer hinges only on how much money is in your bank account."[b] Some users have found this frustrating and have argued that the game is rigged. "Yes," says Nicholson, "the system is rigged [against people in poverty], and that's the whole point of the game."

[a] Caty Borum Chattoo, and Angelica Das, *Story Movements: Illuminating the Role of Narrative in Contemporary Movements for Social Change* (Washington, DC: American University School of Communication, Center for Media & Social Impact, 2017).
[b] "Story Movements Talk: Jenny Nicholson," YouTube video, 14:43, from the American University Center for Media & Social Impact, posted by "Center for Media & Social Impact," January 18, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lg52PoQrjhw.

Replacing Poverty Myths with Accurate Narratives

We must dispel the incorrect narratives that dominate popular culture in America. To do that, we must not only make clear that existing narratives are misleading but also replace them with more effective alternatives. Doing so is both a challenge and an opportunity. It will require shifting existing narratives to embrace empathy and a sense of connection and identification and recognizing the role of extenuating factors in a person's economic circumstances and opportunities.

Instead of embracing narratives that stigmatize people living in poverty, casting them as "others" with whom people with more economic advantages cannot find common ground, we must offer narratives that recognize our shared humanity and accept the uncomfortable reality that all of us are vulnerable to economic hardships.[7] Instead of accepting the common misconception that poverty is a result of personal failure, we must highlight the role of circumstances, systems, and policies that have created an uneven playing field. People living in poverty are facing an uphill climb significantly steeper and more treacherous than what people with economic security can imagine. Instead of defining poverty strictly in monetary terms, we must acknowledge that poverty is also characterized by a lack of power and autonomy and by not being valued in a community (i.e., lacking belonging or social inclusion).

To brainstorm ideas for changing poverty narratives, the learning group hosted several design and strategy labs that brought together diverse groups of experts, advocates, researchers, storytellers, and leaders in creative industries. As part of our work, we learned about several exciting initiatives worth supporting:

- The Narrative Initiative, a training and networking resource for leaders building more inclusive societies to strengthen their ability to design narrative strategy.

- The Pop Culture Collaborative, a funding collaborative that supports collaboration between social change organizations and popular culture storytellers.

- The Opportunity Agenda, a clearinghouse of communications resources for social justice leaders and policymakers, including a "from poverty to opportunity" initiative that advises advocates and policymakers on how to most effectively discuss poverty and economic inequality.

- There are also social change practitioners and organizations that have begun to build a field of work, deeply integrating narrative change strategy with broader social change efforts. Groups including Color of Change, National Domestic Workers Alliance and GLAAD have developed

strategies that support changing the narrative in the context of social change campaigns and movements.

■ Companies are also beginning to experiment with this. In their #SeePeople campaign, Acumen has compiled some 50 photographs and accompanying stories of people from around the world who are customers of the Acumen investee companies to shed light on the experience of living in poverty.

Although existing narrative change initiatives are exciting and important, further work is needed to dispel widespread poverty myths and introduce more accurate narratives.

#SeePeople

A prominent narrative misrepresents people living in poverty as a problem to be solved, completely ignoring their humanity and agency. In response, the Acumen Fund partnered with acclaimed photographer Martin Schoeller to launch #SeePeople, a series of close-up portraits of people living in poverty. Designed to emphasize our shared humanity, the portraits are stripped of the individual's surroundings—of the circumstances of their poverty—so that they are defined only and entirely by their face and their humanity.

According to the Acumen Fund's description of the project, "how the poor are perceived is critical to how we, as a world, tackle poverty … Poverty can no longer be seen as a distant problem, and the poor can no longer be seen as needy, unvalued members of society. Ending poverty starts with seeing the power of people."[a]

[a] "About #SeePeople," Acumen.org, accessed April 10, 2018, https://acumen.org/about-the-campaign/.

What Philanthropy Can Do

Narratives are powerful, deeply rooted ways of interpreting the world, and changing them requires understanding where they come from and what propels them. To that end, we propose rigorous, multistage research that (1) identifies and examines the drivers of our understanding of poverty and (2) works through critical questions regarding the perceived relationships among poverty and race, gender, age, education, geography, and other factors. Although it is easy to assume that we can intuit the answers to these and other related questions based on what we think we know about people and about poverty, intuition is notoriously fallible. We must be creative and rigorous in building the research foundation for narrative change.

Once the meaningful drivers of poverty narratives are identified and understood, a second phase of work will involve engaging effective storytellers to craft and test strategies for changing poverty narratives with different audiences. Drawing from disciplines such as behavioral science, marketing, and advertising, and from popular culture storytelling, we can develop experiments to better understand and identify key audiences that can drive narrative change and the narratives that can move those audiences. We believe partnerships between behavioral researchers, leaders in creative industries, and advocates and activists working in communities hold tremendous potential to generate fresh new ideas and strategies. Together, these people can draw upon a wealth of information and insight. And we believe that there has never been a better time to engage influential storytellers and meaning makers who want to use their skills and platforms for good to help create new narratives about poverty and the economy.

Our proposal is inspired in part by the Partnership's final narrative change strategy lab, which paired community organizers whose work is rooted in low-income communities with artists, storytellers, and leaders of creative industries to design ideas that could catalyze narrative change about poverty. The teams presented a range of innovative approaches, including short, viral videos targeting evangelical audiences that paint a portrait of individual low-wage workers; a mainstream television series produced in cooperation with organizations working on the front lines of poverty alleviation; an educational campaign that highlights the ways that poverty is manufactured; and a new media company that is a platform for work by and for young people living in poverty. Based on this strategy lab, we believe that work to change narratives about poverty will be iterative, moving back and forth between research and application as strategies are refined to maximize effectiveness.

The narrative strategy lab and other convenings led to important insights and proposed activities for future narrative change initiatives.

Insights

1. **There is value in bringing together professional storytellers, practitioners, and organizers with deep experience in communities struggling with poverty.**

2. **Narrative change is a long-term effort.** Narratives do not change overnight—they evolve and take root over time. Similarly, unravelling long-held beliefs takes time. We must be prepared to invest energy and resources over the long term to see meaningful change.

3. **Leverage points are available, and we should capitalize on them.** Occasionally, current events offer cultural touchpoints that can be used to reshape mainstream narratives. For example, children who have been victims of gun violence are leading a conversation about firearms and public safety, and people who have experienced workplace sexual harassment are successfully challenging norms that often allowed this harassment to go unchecked.

Areas for Investment

1. **Research.** Significant research and testing are necessary to refine our understanding of the precise interventions that will most effectively dispel harmful poverty narratives and promote accurate ones. Important questions include the following: Which audiences should be targeted first to achieve the greatest impact? Who are the most effective messengers for each audience? And through what mediums, such as press, TV, social networks, or Hollywood, might audiences best be reached? Behavioral research shows that intuition, however strong and compelling, can be fallible. The perspectives of others need to be investigated and understood. Empirical data and rigorous research are needed to build the foundation for effective narrative change.

2. **Partnerships.** We suggest funding partnerships between researchers, practitioners or organizers rooted in communities struggling with poverty, and storytellers or people working in creative industries to develop ideas that can be tested in the world. There is no better way to learn than to put content in the world and watch for the reaction. These ideas should be tested alongside and in conjunction with other strategies, such as policy advocacy and campaigning.

3. **Impact assessments** We suggest convening a team of academics and researchers to assess and evaluate the impact of narrative change work. The work would include impact measurements both in the short term, to support learning in real time, and in the longer term, to enable longitudinal research.

4. **Experimentation and modeling for a core story:** If a simple story can be told many different ways to many different audiences, the chances of its propagation and self-replication increase. Perhaps no one simple story can help unlock all the necessary shifts in the narrative environment, but ideas can be tested and refined through experimentation.

Once those pieces are in place, promoting a compelling narrative or system of narratives that support mobility from poverty becomes easier. We envision varied initiatives to address a range of narratives and issues. In all instances, each project should do the following:

1. **Identify priority messengers, audiences, and other key stakeholders** to target for campaigns. This should be in the context of a strategy based on a well-researched theory.

2. **Determine the most effective content.** What content can most effectively promote the narratives we want to catch on? What experiences are most important to uplift and highlight?

3. **Identify strategic distribution channels.** In the same way that certain messengers and content are more or less effective, so are various distribution channels. What channels and mediums (e.g., digital, television, film, or news) should the narratives be transmitted through? Are there campaigns or partnerships that can increase impact?

Conclusion

Narrative change is not about changing people, nor is it about changing which news reports get broadcast. Rather, narrative change is about reworking the stories that come to mind after we hear that news. It's about rerouting the path between what we hear and how we make meaning of the experience of poverty in America, shifting it away from misleading poverty narratives toward more desirable ones. We know it can be done because it has been done: the civil rights movement, post-apartheid South Africa, and the rise of environmentalism are all stories of successful narrative change. These examples remind us that even when stories have been dominant for generations, perhaps centuries, there are always alternative currents and ways to build momentum behind those currents. Every story can be rewritten, and so too can our understanding of people, struggle, and opportunity.

Changing narratives around poverty is not easy, but it is necessary and tremendously important. By reinterpreting the story of poverty in America, we can catalyze the awareness, understanding, and determination necessary to spark meaningful change. Getting hold of the story and getting it right will be fundamental to how we increase mobility from poverty.

Notes

1   David T. Ellwood and Nisha G. Patel, Restoring the American Dream: What Would It Take to Dramatically Increase Mobility from Poverty? (Washington, DC: US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty, 2018).

2   Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez, "Where Is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129, no. 4 (2014): 1553–623.

3   Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein, Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997); Michael S. Barr, No Slack: The Financial Lives of Low-Income Americans (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012); Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer, $2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt,2016); Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, Scarcity: The New Science of Having Less and How It Defines Our Lives (London: Picador, 2014).

4   Lee Ross, Richard Nisbett, and Malcolm Gladwell, The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology (London: Pinter & Martin Ltd, 2011).

5   Heather Hahn, Kathryn Edin, and Lauren Abrahams, Transforming Child Support into a Family (Washington, DC: US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty, 2018).

6   Paula England and Kathryn Edin, *Unmarried Couples with Children* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007).

7   Between the ages of 25 and 60, 61.8 percent of the US population will experience a year below the 20th income percentile, and 42.1 percent will experience a year below the 10th percentile (see Mark R. Rank and Thomas A. Hirschi, "The Likelihood of Experiencing Relative Poverty over the Life Course," *PLoS One* 10, no. 7: e0133513).

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