EVENT SUMMARY

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SPSSI on the Hill: The Psychology of Poverty

Event Summary

*The inaugural event at SPSSI’s Congressional Seminar Series examined how Americans experience—and view—poverty*

“Poverty’s consequences are deep and far-reaching, affecting health and human welfare across the lifespan” psychologist Heather Bullock said at the first of four seminars to be held on Capitol Hill this year by the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI). The series, titled “Psychological Insights into Legislative Issues,” is sponsored by Congressman Jim McGovern (D-Mass.). Its aim: to inform some of today’s most debated policy issues with the latest psychological research.

Bullock, chair of the Psychology Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, spoke to approximately 70 Hill staffers and others on April 16. She focused her talk on two related topics: The impact poverty has on people’s health and well-being, and the ways Americans think about economic inequality and the poor.

Bullock began her talk by outlining the difficulties the poor face. The poor work outside the home, often holding down multiple jobs, and still live in poverty. They suffer from food insecurity. They move frequently and sometimes go homeless. They live in neighborhoods with environmental toxins and in substandard housing that can be a source of lead paint—posing a serious danger to children’s health and intellectual development. Poverty—as any couple struggling with their finances knows—increases marital stress and can lead to divorce; for children, it means attending public schools that are increasingly segregated by race and income, and being subject to stigma and discrimination.

The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) is an association of approximately 3,000 psychologists and allied scientists interested in the application of psychological research to important public policy issues. SPSSI a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that believes that “Sound Science Makes Sound Policy.”
The stress caused by poverty not only diminishes children’s well-being; it causes damage even at the molecular level. According to a recent study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*,¹ disadvantaged children’s telomeres—DNA sequences that protect the ends of chromosomes from fraying over time—are shorter than those of their advantaged peers. Telomere length is regarded as a biomarker of chronic stress.

The nation’s poverty rate remains high at 15 percent, with even higher rates found among children, single-female headed households, and people of color. It isn’t just poverty that we tolerate but widening economic inequality. In recent years, income inequality has hit record levels, and prospects for economic mobility are lower in the United States than other wealthy industrialized countries.

It is impossible to quantify the human impact of poverty. But economists have computed its impact on the overall economy. According to an estimate by Harry Holzer and his colleagues, child poverty costs the U.S. economy $500 billion a year or the equivalent of nearly 4 percent of GDP.² Why then do the nation’s responses to poverty often seem grudging and half-hearted?

One answer, said Bullock, can be gleaned from an experiment by University of California, Berkeley social psychologist Paul Piff, using a traditional board game. Participants were videotaped playing a blatantly rigged game of Monopoly. One person was given twice as much money at the outset of the game, allowed to use two die rather than one, and earned twice as much each time they passed “Go.” Within 15 minutes, the advantaged players were behaving in noticeably different fashion, from moving their pieces more forcefully to eating more snacks to perceiving their “victory” as earned.

“Americans have preconceptions when it comes to thinking about poverty,” said Bullock. In the United States, we are especially likely to believe that we are the authors of our own fate: we favor individualistic rather than structural explanations for poverty and wealth. “Even when the playing field is clearly uneven, we tend to see people as responsible for their socioeconomic


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position,” she says. Thus we often credit the rich with special talents and insights, while blaming the poor for lacking motivation, education, or a work ethic.

Other cognitive biases also come into play, argues Bullock. Racial, gender, and class-based prejudices distance us from the plight of the poor. The belief that we live in a just world—that the world is a fair place where people get what they deserve - allows us to view the plight of the poor with a degree of complacency. Recent research documenting bias against hiring the long-term unemployed underscores how deep the stigma associated with economic hardship runs. “Despite the fact that we are still struggling to recover from the Great Recession and the unemployment rate remains high, there is a widespread assumption that if you are unemployed, there is something ‘wrong’ with you.”

Congress is considering raising the minimum wage and extending long-term unemployment benefits. “Poverty is a structural problem that requires structural solutions. Advancing strong poverty alleviation policies will require challenging attitudes and beliefs that situate responsibility for poverty on low-income individuals rather than social and economic conditions.”

The next SPSSI Congressional seminar will take place on May 14, 2014, and will feature Linda Tropp, UMass Amherst, on Prejudice and Discrimination.