Framing Poverty as a Social Problem

Summary

Psychological research indicates that as with race and gender, people have prejudice based upon class. These biases affect the treatment of people living in poverty, the desires others have to help, and policy efforts aimed at reducing poverty.

Policy Implications

The ways in which people think about the poor and poverty will affect how they feel about policies designed to alleviate poverty. The framing of poverty-related legislation can influence whether it is evaluated positively or negatively.

People tend to attribute poverty to individual responsibility and are unlikely to want to help people who are seen as responsible for their own misfortune. Policies aimed at equality of opportunity may be more appealing than policies aimed at “helping the poor”. Research in this area suggests that policies that are framed in terms of equality and systemic roadblocks to opportunity will be viewed more favorably.

Research Findings

How People Tend to Explain Poverty: The poor are often blamed for their poverty.\(^1\) This may be due to a desire to see the world as a just place.\(^2\) Blaming the person (as opposed to societal circumstances) is particularly likely in the U.S. where individualism is greatly valued.\(^3\)

Classism: Classism is “the oppression of the poor through a network of everyday practices, attitudes, assumptions, behaviors, and institutional rules.”\(^4\) Low income groups are the targets of discrimination partly because people want to distance themselves from poverty.\(^5\)

These biases (e.g., that poverty is due to personal failings) are reflected in public policy and anti-poverty programs.\(^6\) In comparisons across countries, nations where people believe that poverty is society’s fault spend more on social welfare programs.\(^7\)

---

Issue Framing and the Desire to Help: Studies of helping behavior show that victims of circumstance are likely to be helped more than a person who is responsible for needing help.¹⁸

Analysis of news reports suggest that when poverty is framed as a societal problem, society is deemed responsible. Alternatively, when news presentations illustrate poverty with a specific example of a poor person, responsibility is assigned to the individual.⁹

Framing Poverty as a Societal Problem

- Economic inequality is problematic for everyone. The greater the income gap between the poorest and the wealthiest in a society, the poorer the health of the members of that society.¹⁰

- The United States has one of the highest rates of homelessness among industrialized nations. Families with young children are at special risk in the United States.¹¹

- The impact of poverty on children has lifelong effects. Children who experience poverty have limited chances of moving out of poverty,¹² and poor children are at risk of poor nutrition, homelessness, and underfunded schools.¹³

About SPSSI

The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) is an international group of approximately 3000 psychologists, allied scientists, students, and others who share a common interest in research on the psychological aspects of important social issues. In various ways, the Society seeks to bring theory and practice into focus on human problems of the group, the community, and nations, as well as the increasingly important problems that have no national boundaries.

For more information, please contact Jutta Tobias, Ph.D., SPSSI James Marshall Public Policy Fellow, at (202) 675-6956 or jtobias@spssi.org.

Fact sheet created by Carrie Langner, Ph.D.; February 2008.

---


