

Changing the Narrative

Ai-jen Poo and Eldar Shafir

Narratives are stories we rely on to make sense of the world. In America today, inaccurate narratives about poverty too often get in the way of meaningful change. More accurate narratives about poverty and the true nature of upward mobility will lead to more effective policies.

The Problem

In the United States, at least three false—and often conflicting—narratives shape the way people think about poverty:

1. People in poverty have no one to blame but themselves.
2. People in poverty are helpless victims of a larger socioeconomic system in which they have no agency.
3. Exceptional “rags to riches” stories prove the American dream is available to anyone willing to work hard enough for it.

All three of these dominant narratives are misguided and harmful. Their continued popularity constrains our ability to better understand and address poverty.

.....

Narratives are everywhere. They're like the air we breathe. – Ai-jen Poo

.....

The Solution

It is possible to create and promote more accurate narratives driven by three core insights.

1. There is value in bringing together diverse talent, such as professional storytellers and practitioners

with deep experience in communities struggling with poverty.

2. Narratives do not change overnight. Unraveling long-held beliefs will take time. This is long-term work.
3. Current events can create opportunities to reshape mainstream narratives and propel change.

To dispel harmful poverty narratives and promote more accurate and productive ones, we propose investing in the following:

1. **Research.** We need to refine our understanding of the precise interventions that will most effectively dispel harmful poverty narratives and promote more accurate ones. This research should include questions about key audiences, messengers, content, and outreach mediums.
2. **Partnerships.** We believe that pairing storytellers and creative professionals with practitioners in communities and social movements working to address poverty can lead to high-impact, high-potential strategies.
3. **Experimentation and modeling.** We encourage development and testing of stories, images, messages, and other content that can be told many different ways with many different audiences, to find the most effective ways to reshape and replace dominant narratives about poverty.

4. **Impact assessments.** We suggest convening a team of academics and researchers to assess and evaluate the impact of narrative change work in both the short and long term.

Once these building blocks are in place, a variety of projects could be started to promote compelling, accurate narratives about mobility from poverty. Each project should identify the priority messengers and audiences, determine effective content, and identify the most effective distribution channels.

WHAT PHILANTHROPY CAN DO

It is not easy to uncover and change deeply rooted narratives. We must be creative and rigorous in building the research foundation for narrative change. Philanthropy can support that research as well as the creative partnerships and strategy needed to reframe the story of poverty in the United States.

WHAT DOES “MOBILITY” FROM POVERTY MEAN?

The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty’s definition of mobility has three core principles: economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community. These principles drive five mutually reinforcing strategies:

- Change the narrative
- Create access to good jobs
- Ensure zip code is not destiny
- Provide support that empowers
- Transform data use

HOW CHANGING THE NARRATIVE CAN IMPROVE MOBILITY

- **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.

This brief summarizes the paper *Changing the Narrative*. The paper lists sources for the research summarized here.