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**ADVOCACY AND ATTRIBUTION: SHAPING AND RESPONDING
TO PERCEPTIONS OF THE CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS**

GARY BLASI*

I. INTRODUCTION

Organizing people to collective action requires, among many other things, altering their understandings of their own circumstances and the alternatives. Advocacy requires, among many other things, changing how more powerful people understand the circumstances of the less powerful. In both instances, a crucial aspect of understanding itself is the perception of the causes of behavior and of social facts—what psychologists call “social attribution.”¹ If we come upon a well-dressed woman pushing a shopping cart down the sidewalk near a supermarket, we attribute her behavior to the desire to get her groceries to her car for the trip home. If we come upon disheveled woman pushing the same shopping cart down the same sidewalk, we may attribute her behavior to her homelessness. We understand both individual behavior and social problems in terms of causal attributions, and we often use very limited information to make complex causal judgments.

Consider Kim, an apparently homeless person pushing a shopping cart full of plastic bags down the sidewalk near a supermarket in Los Angeles. Neither you nor I know anything about Kim and what has happened in the 40-odd years of Kim’s life before this day. But both of us already have causal theories, both about Kim and about homelessness in general. What we think should be done with regard to Kim, and about homelessness more generally, largely depends on the content of those causal attributions. If we believe Kim’s situation is the consequence of bad choices and individual deficits, we

* Professor of Law, University of California at Los Angeles School of Law. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the International Conference on Public Spaces and Socio-Spatial Exclusion, São Paulo, Brazil, November 1998, and at a conference and meeting of the ABA Commission on Homelessness & Poverty at St. Louis University in March 2000. I am grateful to the participants in both conferences for helpful criticisms. Thanks also to Florence Roisman for correcting some glaring historical errors in an earlier version. Dave Lin provided exceptional research assistance and many useful ideas in conversation. All the remaining errors are, of course, mine alone.

1. Michael W. Morris et al., *Attribution Theory*, in THE MIT ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE COGNITIVE SCIENCES 45 (Robert A. Wilson & Frank C. Keil eds., 1999).

come to one set of feelings. If we believe Kim's homelessness is the product of the failings of our institutions or the fundamental structure of society, we have an entirely different reaction. Our attributional beliefs are also affected by whether we believe Kim is, in fact, homeless or merely very poor. And, for reasons I will explain in this essay, our belief about what has caused Kim to be pushing a shopping cart down the sidewalk on this day is also likely to be affected by what we imagine to be Kim's gender and race.

By now, few careful people would argue that there is a single cause of homelessness, either as a social phenomenon or as the circumstance of one individual.² I will not here engage the various social science literatures that touch on the various causes of homelessness.³ For this essay is not about the causes of homelessness, but rather about beliefs about those causes, and about how advocacy is shaped by, and also sometimes shapes, such beliefs. The general topic of how people understand the causes of the behavior and circumstances of others occupies an entire field within social psychology—social attribution theory—that has been too long ignored by advocates.⁴ I introduce a bit of this literature here, on the way to considering its applications for practicing advocates.

I take as a point of departure what seems to me a quite surprising finding of many polls, surveys, and experiments: While most people blame poverty on the poor, most people blame homelessness on society.⁵ This is especially surprising, given the obviously close connections between homelessness and poverty and given the general disposition of the dominant Western culture to ascribe unpleasant personal circumstances to personal deficits.⁶ In the course of exploring the reasons for the difference in attributing the causes of poverty and of homelessness, I want to suggest four things about social advocacy. First, effective advocacy, whether conducted in an individual courtroom or a national media campaign, always pays close attention to the attributional beliefs of those who matter to decisions. Second, although advocates operate in a world of preexisting beliefs about social causation that are part of the general culture, advocacy can sometimes re-shape widely-held attributional

2. Paul Koegel, M. Audrey Burnam & Jim Baumohl, *The Causes of Homelessness*, in HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA 24-33 (James Baumohl ed., 1995) (arguing for an "integrated" perspective that takes account both of individual variation and social context).

3. I have written briefly elsewhere about the pragmatist's need to situate such inquiries in the context of what might be done about homelessness. Gary Blasi, *What's A Theory For?: Notes On Reconstructing Poverty Law Scholarship*, 48 U. MIAMI L. REV. 1063 (1994).

4. Good introductory texts include ZIVA KUNDA, SOCIAL COGNITION: MAKING SENSE OF PEOPLE (1999); SUSAN T. FISKE & SHELLEY E. TAYLOR, SOCIAL COGNITION (2d ed. 1991).

5. See Section IIIA below for a summary of the evidence on this point.

6. As noted below, this tendency is so strong that it came to be described as the "Fundamental Attribution Error," thought to be a pervasive feature of human cognition—until cross-cultural and developmental studies demonstrated that it is a learned feature of the culture.

beliefs. Indeed, I will argue that one plausible explanation for the attributional differences between poverty and homelessness lies in the work of advocates, particularly in the media, during the period in which the very concept of “homelessness” entered common public discourse in the United States. Third, while courtroom lawyers and skilled policy advocates may intuitively understand the significance and shaping of causal beliefs about problems, there is now a large body of scientific knowledge on this subject also worth considering, for an important reason: our intuitions are sometimes simply wrong. Finally, recent work in the cognitive science of causal beliefs suggests that advocates must deal with a world of beliefs about social problems that are not merely sometimes incorrect, but also inherently irrational and even entirely subconscious. In particular, I will suggest that another plausible explanation for the differences in attribution of the causes of homelessness and poverty relates to often purely implicit connections to race and stereotyped beliefs about African Americans.

II. CAUSATION AND THE ROLE OF ADVOCACY

As both experienced advocates and social theorists know, causation matters. First, causation determines whether blame attaches—to anyone—and whether some remedy should therefore follow. A trial lawyer’s first job is to prove that the damages sustained by the plaintiff were caused by *someone* else and were not the consequence of—in the ancient phrase—an “Act of God.”⁷ Without causation there is no blame and hence no plaintiff’s verdict—even if the defendant happens to be ecstatic at the plaintiff’s misfortune. In the realm of social problems as well, causation is crucial in determining what areas we regard as suitable for intervention, and which interventions we will come to support.⁸ The social advocate’s first job is to prove that the conditions that concern us are not in the natural order of things, but have been caused, and are therefore subject to change—by altering the cause. As Murray Edelman has written, “[p]overty, unemployment, and discrimination against minorities and women are accepted as problems today, but through much of human history they were regarded as part of the natural order. . . .”⁹ Similarly, lung cancer was once thought inexplicable; but once we discovered that tobacco smoke causes lung cancer, then lung cancer became a social problem—a situation “caused by human actions and amenable to human intervention.”¹⁰

7. “The earliest use of the expression “act of God” in law books is by Lord Coke who applied it to death, sudden tempest, and the like. Lord Mansfield later introduced the idea which has been at the basis of the modern conception of the term—namely, that an act of God is one which could not happen by human intervention.” 1 AM. JUR. 2d *Act of God* § 1 (1994).

8. Deborah A. Stone, *Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas*, 104 POL. SCI. Q. 281 (1989).

9. MURRAY EDELMAN, *CONSTRUCTING THE POLITICAL SPECTACLE* 12 (1988).

10. *Id.*

A. *Advocating for a Cause*

Thus, for both individual cases and social controversies, the existence of perceived causation amenable to action is a predicate to further advocacy. But it is merely a predicate: necessary but not sufficient. Most advocacy focuses on *which* cause is chiefly to blame. The trial lawyer's job is not merely to prove that the plaintiff's damages were caused by someone, but that they were caused by the defendant. The policy advocate's burden is to show that, among all the possible causes of a social problem, one cause is especially significant and will be altered by a given policy change. According to the "story model" of juror decision-making of Pennington and Hastie, jurors reach decisions by imposing "a narrative story organization on trial information, in which causal and intentional relations between events are central."¹¹ Judicial decisions, such as sentencing decisions, can be understood in the same terms.¹² The job of the trial lawyer is thus to present the causal story that is most coherent with the evidence. A policy advocate may see her objective in the same terms: to provide to decision-makers and the general public a narrative about the problem that foregrounds a particular cause, and thereby a particular potential change in policy.

Both trial lawyers and policy advocates work in a world of often deeply held, if entirely false, opinions about social causation. Every experienced trial lawyer knows that jurors come to cases with prejudices and preconceptions—certain default assumptions about how people behave and why. One purpose of *voir dire* is to explore the causal theories that jurors have brought with them to the courtroom. Moreover, trial lawyers generally have some idea of what causal theories will be advanced by the litigants in the course of a trial. In the typical two-party case, there are only two basic contending narratives. For example, *either* O.J. Simpson caused the deaths of his ex-wife and her friend and was arrested because he was guilty, *or* their deaths were caused by someone else and Simpson was framed by overzealous or racist police officers (who may or may not have believed him guilty).¹³ Which of those stories seems most plausible depends, of course, on preexisting beliefs about many things, including the probably behavior of police officers toward African

11. Nancy Pennington & Reid Hastie, *Explaining the Evidence: Tests of the Story Model for the Juror Decision Making*, 62 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 189 (1992).

12. ARTHUR J. LURIGIO ET AL., *Understanding Judges' Sentencing Decisions: Attributions of Responsibility and Story Construction* 91 (Linda Heath et al., eds., 1994).

13. In most cases, the causal stories are seen as mutually exclusive: few people seem able to grasp the possibility that the police might plant evidence implicating a guilty man. The very notion of "framing" is associated with the innocence of the framed. That concept seems, somehow, to fit less well a scenario in which police officers, concerned that a person they believe guilty may escape justice, plant additional evidence.

American men.¹⁴ In the constrained arena of a trial, the lawyer's function is to introduce and explain evidence in terms of a causal theory that will, in interaction with the preexisting beliefs of the jury, lead to a particular belief about causation in the minds of the jury.

In contests over public policies and social problems, advocates have a similar function: altering public perceptions of the causes of problems by either injecting new causal stories or emphasizing particular causal stories in the pre-existing public discourse. In the social arena, there are often many contending causal stories, not just the two found in most trials. Sometimes, it seems that there are as many causal stories as there are interests that might be affected by the problematic situation. In the early years of my work on issues of homelessness in Los Angeles, I was invited at various times to speak to groups of psychiatrists, building industry leaders, urban planners, welfare bureaucrats, nonprofit housing developers, religious missions, labor unions, and even one group that carried on the beliefs of Henry George about the need for a single tax on land.¹⁵ Each of these groups had a pretty clear set of beliefs about the causes of homelessness in Los Angeles. Their causal theories were, of course, all entirely different. And to some extent at least, they were all true, or at least plausible (though I remain agnostic about Henry George). One noticed, however, that the most salient perceived cause of homelessness always had something to do with the issues that already concerned the group: psychiatrists saw mainly issues of how society responds to mental disorders; developers blamed a shortage of housing caused by excessive land-use regulation, and so on. We can ascertain the dominant causal theories of various groups by interacting, as I did, with many different kinds of people and groups. And, although policy advocates cannot conduct a *voir dire* of their "jury"—the general public or a subset of decision-makers—they sometimes have a

14. Thus, my colleague Peter Arenella, who was employed by ABC News and others to watch the Simpson trial closely, accounted for the verdict partly in these terms:

Everybody interprets information from their own point of view and their perspective reflects in part their sense of how the world works. Race, gender, and class help to define a person's story of how the world works because these three factors generate so many of one's social experiences. Jurors rely on these stories in interpreting evidence at a criminal trial. Numerous studies point out that "each juror, using her own life experiences, organizes the information she receives about a case into what for her is the most plausible account of what happened and then picks the verdict that fits that story best. Jurors may interpret the same evidence differently depending on which stories they choose." [citing Nancy J. King, *Postconviction Review of Jury Discrimination: Measuring the Effects of Juror Race on Jury Decisions*, 92 MICH. L. REV. 63, 78 (1993).]

Peter Arenella, *Explaining The Unexplainable: Analyzing The Simpson Verdict*, 26 N.M. L. REV. 349, 355 (1996).

15. HENRY GEORGE, *PROGRESS AND POVERTY* 427 (1937). George's ideas are kept in circulation by very 21st century means. See Henry George, *Taxes: What are They Good For?*, at <http://www.henrygeorge.org> (visited Mar. 2, 2001).

functional equivalent: the data gathered from samples of people in surveys or focus groups. Sometimes advocacy resources might be well spent on such inquiries into preexisting causal belief.

B. Ideology and Attributional Belief

Although there are often many different contending causal theories for a social problem like homelessness, virtually all causal theories tend to cluster around one of two kinds of explanation: those that emphasize individual-level characteristics and those that emphasize social and structural conditions. And on this score, most people come to the question with powerful predispositions. Among the early of systematic studies of how people understand the causes of human behavior, one robust finding was this: observers tended nearly always to overestimate how much behavior is determined by the characteristics of the person, compared to the situational context in which the person acted. For example, if I have one encounter with a judge who snaps at me in oral argument, I am unduly likely to assume that this behavior reflects some stable internal disposition of the judge, and to pay less attention to what may have been the frustrating circumstances that gave rise to the anger. So persistent was this error, in experiment after experiment, that social psychologists denoted this the Fundamental Attribution Error, or FAE, and assumed it was a standard feature of human cognition.¹⁶

Further cross-cultural research suggested that the Fundamental Attribution Error might not be so fundamental after all. It appears to operate with particular force in the United States and other individualist Western cultures, as compared to other, less individualistic, cultures like China.¹⁷ In Western cultures, however, the FAE seems to operate with regard to all kinds of perceived behavior and circumstances. If we add to the FAE the effects of the (perhaps not unrelated) dominant ideology in the U.S. concerning the causes of poverty,¹⁸ then we should expect a very strong disposition among Americans (in particular) to attribute poverty to individual failings.

In the case of homelessness, as with poverty, ideologues and advocates of both right and left have long recognized the policy implications of the structural/individualist causal dichotomy. If homelessness (or poverty, or

16. Lee Ross, *The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortions in the Attribution Process*, in 10 *ADVANCES IN EXPERIMENTAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY* 174-221 (L. Berkowitz ed., 1977). See generally SUSAN T. FISKE & SHELLEY E. TAYLOR, *SOCIAL COGNITION* 67-72 (2d ed. 1991).

17. Michael W. Morris & Kaiping Peng, *Culture and Cause: American and Chinese Attributions for Social and Physical Events*, 67 *J. PERSONALITY. SOC. PSYCHOL.* 949-971 (1994). See generally G.J.O. Fletcher & C. Ward, *Attribution Theory and Processes: A Cross-cultural Perspective*, in *THE CROSS CULTURAL CHALLENGE TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY* (M.H. Bond ed., 1988).

18. See, e.g., WILLIAM RYAN, *BLAMING THE VICTIM* 6-7 (1976).

crime, or other unpleasant situations) are the result of individual deficit, moral failing, poor personal choices and the like, then these are merely disquieting phenomena to be managed and controlled by the police. On the other hand, if homelessness is related to social or economic policies, then those policies come into question. Such questions, in turn, may implicate the distribution of wealth and power in society, with consequences not only for the poor and homeless, but also for the wealthy and well-housed—for all those in a position to shape policy and public opinion. In the case of simple poverty, the outcome of this struggle over blame is reasonably well-settled: Although there are variations among countries, cultures, social classes, races, genders, and those with differing educational backgrounds, the dominant popular view is that poverty is caused by the poor—especially their disinclination to work.¹⁹

III. DATA ON ATTRIBUTIONAL BELIEFS ABOUT HOMELESSNESS

Attitudes toward “the homeless” are more complex. As between the homeless and the poor, people feel both more social distance from, and more sympathy for, the homeless.²⁰ People are, for example, far more willing to see public funds go toward ameliorating homelessness than poverty and many other social problems.²¹ These attitudes are related in complex ways to one other belief: *By roughly the same proportions (as high as 2 to 1), people tend to blame poverty on the poor but homelessness on society.* Because these data are both surprising and important to the remainder of this essay, I provide some of the detailed findings of several different studies in this section.

A. *The Data*

Reporting on a survey of residents of Nashville, Tennessee, Lee et al. noted that “[c]ompared to their views on generic poverty, members of the public seem more willing to blame homelessness on external factors than

19. The literature on these topics is summarized briefly in Anup K. Singh, *Attribution Research on Poverty: A Review*, 32 *PSYCHOLOGIA* 143 (1989). There is a good deal of cross-cultural and other empirical work on the issue as well. See, e.g., Goktug Morcol, *Lay Explanations for Poverty in Turkey and their Determinants*, 137 *J. SOC. PSYCHOL.* 728 (1997); Shanto Iyengar, *Framing Responsibility for Political Issues: The Case of Poverty*, 12 *POL. BEHAV.* 1 (1990); Serge Guimond & Douglas Palmer, *Type of Academic Training and Casual Attributions for Social Problems*, 20 *EUR. J. SOC. PSYCHOL.* 61 (1990); Stuart C. Carr & Malcolm MacLachlan, *Actors, Observers, and Attributions for Third World Poverty: Contrasting Perspectives from Malawi and Australia*, 139 *J. SOC. PSYCHOL.* 189 (1998).

20. Robert J. Pellegrini et al., *Political Identification and Perceptions of Homelessness: Attributed Causality and Attitudes on Public Policy*, 80 *PSYCHOL. REP.* 1139 (1997).

21. Bruce G. Link et al., *Public Knowledge, Attitudes, and Beliefs About Homeless People: Evidence for Compassion Fatigue*, 23 *AM. J. COMM. PSYCHOL.* 533, 542 (1995).

individualistic ones.”²² They found that almost three-fifths of respondents attributed homelessness to structural forces, while less than two-fifths thought homelessness resulted from personal choice.²³ Their data was consistent with reports from a national sample survey conducted in 1988 by Media General, which found that among those with opinions, 58% blamed society for homelessness, compared to 42% who blamed the homeless themselves.²⁴

Notably, the 1988 national survey had forced respondents to choose between social and individualist explanations. In their local survey in Nashville, Lee et al. used a 40-question instrument to probe at a range of beliefs. Only 10% of the sample selected a single cause; the remaining 90% reported 51 different combinations of multiple causes.²⁵ Nevertheless, when subjected to factor analytic techniques, the greatest number of respondents attributed homelessness to a variety of “structural forces.”²⁶ The data from Nashville was consistent with that from a similar study in Erie County, New York, done at about the same time by Toro and McConnell.²⁷ Using the same questions as had been used in the Media General survey, Toro and McConnell found that respondents blamed society rather than the homeless themselves by an even wider margin (65.6% to 34.4%) than in the national sample.²⁸ Another local study, this time of undergraduates at San Jose State University in California, found similar emphasis on structural attributions when the question was presented in dichotomous form. Also in 1992, the Gallup Organization reported in a national survey that large majorities of respondents identified as factors contributing to homelessness the following: unemployment (78%), job loss (67%), lack of affordable housing (55%), while most believed mental illness and laziness were *not* the causes of homelessness.²⁹

Finally, in a provocative and very useful study, George Wilson surveyed causal beliefs among adults in Baltimore, Maryland, in order to compare beliefs about three forms of what Wilson termed “extreme socioeconomic failure”: welfare dependency, homelessness, and migrant labor.³⁰ He found that respondents were much more inclined to attribute welfare dependency

22. Barrett A. Lee et al., *Public Beliefs About the Causes of Homelessness*, 69 SOC. FORCES 253, 262 (1990).

23. *Id.* at 257.

24. *Id.* at 262.

25. *Id.* at 257.

26. *Id.* at 262.

27. Paul A. Toro & Dennis M. McDonell, *Beliefs, Attitudes, and Knowledge About Homelessness: A Survey of the General Public*, 20 AM. J. COMM. PSYCHOL. 53, 60 n.1 (1992).

28. *Id.* at 61.

29. GALLUP ORGANIZATION, HOMELESS BUT NOT HELPLESS: A LOS ANGELES MISSION REPORT ON WHAT AMERICANS BELIEVE ABOUT HOMELESS PEOPLE, THEIR PROBLEMS, AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS, at <http://www.iugm.org/statistics/homerpt1.html> (Feb. 10, 2000).

30. George Wilson, *Toward a Revised Framework for Examining Beliefs About the Causes of Poverty*, 37 SOC. Q. 413 (1996).

than homelessness to “lifestyle choice” (70.4% vs. 44.9%), and in general preferred structural explanations for homelessness but individualist explanations for welfare dependency, with migrant labor status occupying a middle ground.³¹ Wilson did not force respondents to a dichotomous choice, but offered instead a menu of 8 nonexclusive causal possibilities.

All of these survey data are, of course, summary statistics reflecting averages among often quite disparate subgroups of respondents. There are considerable differences among respondents of differing political beliefs, academic training, gender, and so on. Conservatives prefer individualist explanations of homelessness, whether in California³² or Great Britain.³³ Students trained in social sciences are more likely to prefer structural accounts.³⁴ American women are more likely than American men to credit structural accounts of homelessness. For example, in a national survey study, Lee et al. found that, while men preferred structural explanations by barely a percentage point (39.3% to 38.1%), almost twice as many women attributed homelessness to structural factors (50.3% to 27.9%).³⁵ Toro and McDonnell found the same gender gap in their Erie County, New York study.³⁶ And, of course, these factors can interact. Sixty nine per cent (69%) of Republican men locate the causes of homelessness in individual homeless people, compared to thirty two per cent (32%) of Democratic women.³⁷ Thus, reports on “average” attributions of cause should be understood as masking significant variations among various demographic and political groups within the broad class of respondents.

Attitudes toward the homeless are complex and go well beyond beliefs about causation. Although the surveys mentioned above have suggested that people view “the homeless” more favorably than “the poor,” things are a bit more complicated than that. Phelan et al. conducted a “vignette” study with a national sample.³⁸ Respondents were read a description of a particular man, with information about his mental health status and homelessness being varied. They found that the label “homeless” resulted in significantly higher ratings for social distance and assessments of dangerousness. They found no statistically

31. *Id.* at 419.

32. Pellegrini, *supra* note 20, at 1146.

33. Adrian Furnham, *Why Are the Poor Always With Us? Explanations for Poverty in Britain*, 21 BRIT. J. SOC. PSYCHOL. 311 (1982).

34. Serge Guimond & Douglas L Palmer, *Type Of Academic Training And Casual Attributions For Social Problems*, 20 EUR. J. SOC. PSYCHOL. 61 (1990).

35. Barrett A. Lee et al., *Are the Homeless to Blame: A Test of Two Theories*, 33 SOC. INQ. 535, 541 (1992).

36. Toro & McDonnell, *supra* note 27, at 73.

37. Pellegrini et al., *supra* note 20, at 1143.

38. Jo Phelan et al., *The Stigma of Homelessness: The Impact of the Label “Homeless” on Attitudes Toward Poor Persons*, 60 SOC. PSYCHOL. Q. 323 (1997).

significant variation in whether the man in the vignette was to blame for his situation.³⁹

Although we have vastly more information on attributions of homelessness than we did in 1991, there are still too many degrees of freedom in the research designs of the various studies, even when they are considered together, for us to be entirely certain of explanations. First, there is some reason to believe that attitudes toward homelessness have changed over time, so that apparent contradictions between results of 1989 surveys and 1997 surveys may accurately reveal historical trends rather than conflicting evidence. Second, lay people (like social scientists) do not have an easy time sorting out the multiple connections between homelessness and other phenomena: mental illness, welfare, poverty, alcoholism and substance abuse, and so on. Forcing respondents to a choice between the social and the individual may suppress the complexity of real respondent beliefs. Third, people respond differently to questions about the abstract category of “the homeless” than to vignettes about a particular homeless person described in some detail.

Finally, as I explore in greater depth below, one cannot probe attitudes toward “the homeless” or one hypothetical individual in the same way one can assess reactions to simple stimuli like colors or geometric shapes. One of the findings of modern cognitive science is that our beliefs, categorizations, conceptual schemes, and so on are not well represented by set theory or other clean categorizations, even in seemingly simple cases. Rather, such mental representations are more accurately represented as emergent properties of connectionist networks, in which many different things interact simultaneously. Thus, the “vignette” study by Phelan et al. portrayed a hypothetical “Jim” in a text that highlighted numerous social categories in addition to homelessness. “Jim” was described as having always been “a poor man having come from a large family that had to get along with a very small income” who “quit school before finishing high school in order to get a job at a fast food restaurant.”⁴⁰ Contemporary theories of discourse comprehension⁴¹ suggest that subjects could not thereafter disentangle all the other associations and images created by this text from whether “Jim” was homeless or poor but housed.

Having raised these methodological quibbles, I want to set them aside for now. I will assume for purposes of this essay that there is in fact a greater general tendency on the part of many Americans to attribute homelessness more than poverty to societal or structural causes, and to focus on three further

39. *Id.* at 331.

40. *Id.* at 329.

41. *See, e.g.*, Walter Kintsch, *The Role of Knowledge in Discourse Comprehension*, 95 *PSYCHOL. REV.* 163 (1987). *See generally* T. A. VAN DIJK & W. KINTSCH, *STRATEGIES OF DISCOURSE COMPREHENSION* (1983).

questions: Are these findings surprising? What accounts for them—to what do we attribute these attributional beliefs? Finally, does any of this matter to advocates?

B. *Reasons These Findings Are Surprising*

There are many reasons to be surprised by the greater causal attribution of homelessness to society. First, as has been very well documented in many studies, if homelessness is seen as connected to poverty, the dominant ideological conception of poverty, especially in the United States, greatly prefers individualist explanations.⁴²

In addition to being poor, however, homeless people have several other features that should strengthen individualist explanations. First, a distinct subset of the homeless individuals—those with evident mental disorders and substance abuse problems—are highly visible. There are good reasons to think that people will generalize from these “available” instances to reach more general conclusions about homelessness in general.⁴³ These most visible homeless individuals have problems that are generally seen as individual. Sophisticates might blame crack addiction on international economic forces in Latin America or alcoholism on advertising, but surely most people believe substance abuse is the consequence of personal choices. Similarly, some people may attribute a publicly visible mental disorder to the lack of an adequate mental health care system, but most people must certainly see serious mental illness as a property of individuals, and not something caused by social forces. For these reasons in 1994, I felt comfortable in assuming that the dominant ideology and concomitant individualist explanations for poverty would obtain with even greater force in the case of homelessness.⁴⁴ But I was wrong.

C. *Some Possible Explanations*

In preparing this paper, I asked a number of colleagues and students how they might account for the disparity between attributions of causation for poverty and for homelessness, in effect conducting an informal survey of attributions of attribution. I recount the more common explanations here.

42. See generally JOE R. FEAGIN, *SUBORDINATING THE POOR* (1975); Carr & MacLachlan, *supra* note 19, at 189; David J. Harper, *Accounting for Poverty: From Attribution to Discourse*, 6 J. COMMUNITY & APPLIED SOCIAL PSYCHOL. 249 (1996); Patrick C.L. Heaven, *Economic Locus of Control Beliefs and Lay Attributions of Poverty*, 41 AUSTL. J. PSYCHOL. 315 (1989); Janak Pandey et al., *Right-left Political Ideologies and Attribution of the Causes of Poverty*, 12 EUR. J. SOC. PSYCHOL. 327 (1982); Furnham, *supra* note 33, at 311.

43. Amos Tversky & Daniel Kahneman, *Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability*, 5 COG. PSYCHOL. 207 (1973).

44. Gary Blasi, *And We Are Not Seen: Ideological and Political Barriers to Understanding Homelessness*, 37 AM. BEHAV. SCI. 563, 581 (1994).

First, it is possible that people develop causal theories by the commonsensical method of trying to place himself or herself in the situation of a prototypical poor or homeless person. People may find it easy to imagine circumstances that might result in being poorer—preferring leisure to work, for example. But if they can imagine no circumstance under which they would themselves make choices that would result in homelessness, then homelessness must be the product of something else. The “something else” might well be a diffuse notion of “structural” or “social” causation, as a general residual possibility rather than an articulated social theory.

Second, as compared to poverty, homelessness is seen as a relatively recent phenomenon. While the poor we may have always had with us, not until the early 1980’s was homelessness identified in the media and broader culture as a significant problem. And then, it appeared as a “new” problem. Indeed, the phrase “the new homeless” was contrived to describe a class of homeless persons whose demographics and life trajectories appeared significantly different from the “traditional homeless”—older men, typically alcoholics, concentrated in urban cores.⁴⁵ The dominant ideology supplied individualist explanations for poverty, but the “new homeless” were not part of the social landscape already mapped by that ideology. Again, in reaction, many people may have thought that something structural must have happened to account for the new phenomenon. This need for a residual, and possibly structuralist, explanation increased the more the “new” homeless varied from the older stereotypes accommodated by the dominant ideology.

A third explanation for the relative pervasiveness of structural explanations for homelessness is cultural and historical. Although “the homeless” category in its current form is of fairly recent vintage, it did not arise in a culture in which forms of homelessness were completely alien. The last period in American history when homelessness was so salient a feature of the culture was the Great Depression, which produced not only mass homelessness but also great literature about homelessness. Christina Sheehan Gold argues that the novelist John Steinbeck and essayist Carey McWilliams produced works

45. The term “new homeless” was quickly adopted both by social scientists and the popular media. See, e.g., Constance Holden, *Homelessness: Experts Differ on Root Causes*, 232 *SCIENCE* 569 (1986); *The Shanty Builders*, *PEOPLE*, Feb. 17, 1986, at 94. The latter article demonstrates in its opening paragraph how far the framing had gone in the popular (as in *PEOPLE*) literature:

This is the final article in *PEOPLE*’s series on the homeless in America, who now number two million by some estimates. We have looked at the plight of 95 percent of these men and women—the “new homeless”—people suddenly out of work, out of housing they can afford or discharged from mental hospitals without a place to go. This concluding story describes the life of more familiar figures, the country’s hoboes. Ironically, although they make up only 5 percent of the homeless population nowadays, they remain the stereotype for all.

Id.

during the Depression that facilitated “a permanent shift in many Americans’ conception of the homeless.” The force of these cultural works, Gold argues, was such that “Many Americans, but by no means all, came to pity, rather than fear, the homeless.”⁴⁶

A fourth reason people may privilege structural explanations for homelessness relates to the connection, or lack thereof, between homelessness and welfare. Of all the groups that have some potential relation to homelessness, Americans are most hostile toward welfare recipients.⁴⁷ More than any other group, welfare recipients are seen as being responsible for their own plight.⁴⁸ One simple explanation for this fact is the success of the ideologues and polemicists employed to disparage welfare recipients as a means of reducing transfer payments (and thereby taxation). Although homeless people have more recently become the focus of animosity and disparagement, primarily as threats to decency and public order, there is a significant difference in the content of the attacks. The fundamental difference between “the homeless” and “welfare recipients” is that “the homeless” are not (at least in any salient way) getting something for nothing, i.e., receiving benefits without working for them. This diminishes the pragmatic reasons for the voices of the wealthy to attack them, and thereby both the volume and intensity of the propaganda directed toward them.

The differences in attitudes toward the welfare poor and the homeless may also have far deeper, even evolutionary, roots. A full exploration of this point is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth noting that careful experiments demonstrate that people have particularly acute cognitive abilities to detect “cheaters”—people who take but do not contribute. Evolutionary psychologists suggest that this ability must necessarily have evolved during the vast reaches of human history when our ancestors lived in hunter-gatherer bands, as a defense to another tendency with great survival value—the ability to obtain the fruits (and nuts and game) of the labor of others.⁴⁹

All of these explanations have at least a superficial plausibility. But there are two other explanations I want to explore in some depth, because they may have particular relevance to the work of advocates for homeless and poor people. First, I will suggest that current attributions of the causes of homelessness may themselves be the product of past advocacy, much of which

46. See generally CHRISTINA SHEEHAN GOLD, *THE CHANGING FACE OF HOMELESSNESS: JOHN STEINBECK & CAREY MCWILLIAMS* (1998), abstract available at <http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/steinbec/abstract.html> (Feb. 12, 2000).

47. MARTIN GILENS, *WHY AMERICANS HATE WELFARE* 28 (1999) (comparing attitudes regarding public spending for the unemployed, the poor, the elderly, welfare, and other social needs).

48. *Id.* at 32-39.

49. Leda Cosmides, *The Logic of Social Exchange: Has Natural Selection Shaped How Humans Reason? Studies with the Wason Selection Task*, 31 *COGNITION* 187 (1989).

tried very explicitly to locate the causes of homelessness in social structure and social policy. Second, I will suggest that differential causal attributions for homelessness and poverty may also be the product of the interaction of a hidden, or at least unspoken, process: the differential racialization of homelessness and of poverty and welfare. Put simply, attributional beliefs about the poor and about the homeless are mediated by both conscious assumptions about the racial composition of the two groups, and by unconscious processes, the power of which cognitive scientists have only recently begin to document. Finally, of course, unlike the typical juror, we need not choose between narratives of causation. For example, there is some evidence that the work of advocates had something to do with the differential racialization of “the homeless” as compared to “the poor.”

IV. ADVOCACY AND THE SHAPING OF ATTRIBUTION: DID HOMELESS ADVOCATES DO IT?

One possible explanation for the attributions of causes of homelessness is that these pervasive public attitudes are the product of conscious advocacy, aided by the mass media, during the time that “the homeless” took shape in contemporary American popular culture. Although homelessness may have long existed in many different forms in the United States, the modern construction of homelessness began in New York City and Washington, D.C. in late 1970’s and early 1980’s. In Washington, D.C., Mitch Snyder, Mary Ellen Hombs and others at the Center for Creative Non-Violence (CCNV) brought homelessness into public view with a series of brilliantly conceived acts of civil disobedience and public education.⁵⁰ In New York City, consciousness of homelessness increased as the result of well-publicized litigation against the City of New York conducted by an advocacy group, the Coalition for the Homeless. Sympathetic articles, first in the *New York Times* and then in other media, highlighted the seriousness of the problem and gave voice to one view of its causes.

The National Coalition for the Homeless, of which Hayes was the best known spokesperson,⁵¹ produced studies, papers and polemics on the causes of homelessness. Hayes, a brilliant lawyer and publicist, was frequently quoted as saying there were three reasons people were homeless: “housing, housing and housing.”⁵² Hayes would later write that, “[h]omelessness, of course, is

50. See, e.g., MARY ELLEN HOMBS & MITCH SNYDER, HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA: A FORCED MARCH TO NOWHERE (1982). Victoria Rader has also written a sympathetic account of CCNV’s work in SIGNAL THROUGH THE FLAMES: MITCH SNYDER AND AMERICA’S HOMELESS (1986).

51. Candor requires the disclosure that I was then a member, and later President, of the Board of Directors of the National Coalition for the Homeless.

52. See, e.g., *Homeless Ranks Swell*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT, Feb. 1987, at 10.

nothing more than the most radical symptom of everything else that has not worked, the most dire example of poverty caused by any number of things—bad housing, bad education, bad industrial development and so on.”⁵³ Although the “three things” that cause homelessness were no longer confined to housing, they remained at the societal or structural level.

Other advocacy groups throughout the country were making the same causal arguments, often in less nuanced form than that just quoted. The media was entirely receptive to these ideas. Content analysis of articles on homelessness in five major newspapers between 1989 and 1993 is very revealing.⁵⁴ Only 4% articles attributed individualistic causes to homelessness, compared to 63% of articles on welfare dependency.⁵⁵ A sociologist friend once observed to me that polls and surveys are much like multiple choice examinations given to students: The media provide the instruction to the public, and surveys determines how well the lessons have been learned. The plausibility of this explanation increases when one learns that even in New York City, where personal encounters with homeless people are frequent, most people state that they have relied on the media in forming their opinions about the homeless.⁵⁶

This framing of homelessness in structural terms by advocates and the media has been mentioned by several researchers on causal attribution. Thus Lee et al. observe, “Unlike other contemporary forms of poverty, or even its own skid-row incarnation in the past, homelessness today has been “framed” as a structural phenomenon sufficiently often in the news and other “arenas of public discourse” to mute traditional beliefs about the individualistic roots of socioeconomic failure.”⁵⁷ The reference to “arenas” comes from the “public arenas” theory of social problem construction.⁵⁸

The public arenas theory is sometimes juxtaposed against the theory that most people accept the causal attributions embedded in the “dominant ideology,” which serves to maintain stratification by attributing what might otherwise be seen as troubling inequalities to the deficiencies of those in the lower classes.⁵⁹ By contrast, public arenas theory suggests that particular causal views emerge in the course of a contested public discourse, in which

53. Robert Hayes, *Litigating on Behalf of Shelter for the Poor*, 22 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 79, 80 (1987).

54. George Wilson, *Toward A Revised Framework For Examining Beliefs About The Causes Of Poverty*, 37 SOC. Q. 413 (1996).

55. *Id.* at 425.

56. Annette Benedict et al., *Attitudes Towards the Homeless in Two New York City Metropolitan Samples*, 17 J. VOLUNTARY ACTION RES. 90, 92 (1998).

57. Lee et al., *supra* note 35, at 547.

58. *Id.*; Stephen Hilgartner & Charles L. Bosk, *The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arenas Model*, 94 AM. J. SOC. 53 (1988).

59. Wilson, *supra* note 54, at 413.

various issues and conceptions of issues compete for public recognition as “problems.” Wilson’s comparative study of attitudes toward the homeless, welfare recipients and migrant laborers tends to support the public arenas theory.⁶⁰ The dominant ideology theory accounts less well for variations in attitudes toward the poor, as variously described and situated. Further, the public arenas theory has perhaps great pragmatic utility, in suggesting ways in which dominant attributional schemes can be affected by conscious actors, including advocates. Challenging the dominant ideology seems, almost by definition, an impossible task, short of major social upheaval.

Ironically, the supposed contest between the dominant ideology and public arena theories replays at a new level of analysis a familiar discursive theme. Are the most important causes of homelessness structural *or* individual? Should attitudes toward the homeless be explained as the consequence of long term and large scale ideological dispositions toward the lower social strata *or* as the product of actions and choices of actors in arena of public discourse? One is reminded of the observation that there are only two kinds of people: those who classify people into two kinds and those who do not. Plainly, just as the homelessness of any particular person or group can be fully accounted for only considering simultaneously the operation of historical/sociological forces and biographical/psychological factors, it seems unwise to fix too early on any single causal explanation of popular causal explanations for homelessness. While resisting the temptation ourselves, we might note in ourselves the seeming universality of poles of argument.

Perhaps it is in the nature of ideologies (rather than social theories) to force causal attributions to one extreme or another. The “dominant ideology” thesis suggests that the outcomes of these contests are preordained. But the case of American homelessness suggests otherwise. The relative “success” of structuralism in the case of homelessness can be gleaned by comparing two articles by the conservative scholar Thomas Main. Writing in the neo-conservative *The Public Interest* in 1983, Main criticized advocates and structuralists among the social sciences, concluding:

For the fact of the matter is that the homeless, like the poor, we will always have with us. The only question is how to help them without encouraging them in their pathologies and dependency.⁶¹

A mere decade later, Main was writing fairly plaintively (if entirely reasonably) that,

... no account of [the] problem can be entirely structural or entirely individualistic. To see these accounts as polar opposites and then come down on one side or the other is to oversimplify.⁶²

60. *Id.*

61. Thomas J. Main, *The Homeless of New York*, 72 THE PUBLIC INTEREST 3, 28 (1986).

What the history of the homeless issue suggests for concerned citizens is that the dominant ideology, though powerful, has no inevitable grip on how the public will come to understand a social problem. Within the dominant ideology, there may be ideological lacunae in which conscious citizens can act to some effect. It may be that the dominant ideology operates less powerfully to constrain conceptualizations of poverty that do not fundamentally contest social inequality. For one can, though perhaps not easily, subscribe simultaneously to the beliefs that (a) great inequality is both natural and efficient, and (b) that homelessness and utter destitution are neither inevitable nor desirable.

Other legal scholars have noted that the strategic advocacy choices made by lawyers may have affected perceptions of homelessness beyond those of causal attribution. Lucie White has suggested that the choice of advocates to focus on homelessness itself (rather than a “diverse and ugly” poverty) resulted in the proliferation of “simplistic, indeed invidious, images of the poor” that can be linked to “disturbing trends in housing and welfare policy.”⁶³ Wes Daniels has argued that the particular characterizations given to homelessness by litigators gave rise to later judicial hostility toward the homeless.⁶⁴ Daniels notes that the attributed causes of homelessness in judicial opinions have changed—from early cases about helpless “derelicts,”⁶⁵ to later cases emphasizing “recurring misfortune”⁶⁶ and “economic hard times”⁶⁷ to the most recent cases—all of them lost by homeless litigants—that portray homelessness as a “lifestyle choice.”⁶⁸ I fear, however, that Daniels may himself be making an attributional error here: Legal Realists would suggest that the political backgrounds and ideological dispositions of the judges in the cases Daniels discusses—the consequence of shifting political tides for which homeless advocates can probably not be blamed—fully accounts for the differences in causal attributions reflected in their opinions. In any case, I do accept White’s point that emphasizing homelessness

62. Thomas J. Main, *Analyzing Evidence for the Structural Theory of Homelessness*, 18 J. URB. AFF. 449, 452 (1996).

63. Lucie White, *Representing The Real Deal*, 45 U. MIAMI L. REV. 271, 312 (1991) (arguing that “‘Homelessness’ is an intrinsically negative way to conceptualize shelter uncertainty. It too easily suggests images of absence and depletion, of defeated human beings.”).

64. Wes Daniels, ‘Derelicts,’ *Recurring Misfortune, Economic Hard Times and Lifestyle Choices: Judicial Images of Homeless Litigants and Implications for Legal Advocates*, 45 BUFF. L. REV. 687 (1997).

65. *Id.* at 698. Notably the first “homeless case,” *Callahan v. Carey* No. 79-42582 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. 1979), in which, as Daniels notes, the trial court judge referred to those before him no less than 7 times in 900 words as “derelicts.”

66. *Id.* at 696 (citing *Hodge v. Ginsberg*, 303 S.E. 2d 245, 250 (W. Va. 1983)).

67. *Id.* (citing *Pottinger v. City of Miami*, 810 F. Supp. 1551, 1564 (S.D. Fla. 1992)).

68. *Id.* (citing *Tobe v. City of Santa Ana*, 27 Cal. Rptr. 2d 386, 389 (Ct. App. 1994)), *rev’d*, 892 P.2d 1145 (Cal. 1995); *Church v. City of Huntsville*, No. CIV.A.No. 93-C-1239-S, 1993 WL 646401, at *2 (N.D. Ala. Sept. 23, 1993), *vacated and remanded*, 30 F.3d 1332 (11th Cir. 1994).

brings up unpalatable images of poverty and hence may result in less public support for the poor. But I find implausible Daniels' particular argument that by emphasizing external causes of homelessness and portraying homeless people as "unfortunate victims of forces beyond their control," homelessness litigators adopted an approach that "carried the seeds of its own destruction," leading to the more recent cases that assume or assert that homelessness is a matter of personal choice.⁶⁹

V. HOMELESSNESS, POVERTY, RACE AND WELFARE: ATTRIBUTION THEORY AND AUTOMATIC BELIEFS

Thus far our analyses and the various arguments discussed have effectively treated attributional beliefs as if they were simply beliefs about facts. It is possible that beliefs about the causes of homelessness are similar in kind to beliefs about the causes of winter or sunspots. If this is the case, then the job of advocacy is primarily education, the correction of mistaken empirical belief. As I explain in this section, however, such a perspective gives far too rational a gloss to attributional beliefs, and fails to take account of powerful and predictable, if irrational and unconscious, processes of social cognition.

A. *What We Think About When We Think About "The Homeless"*

Let me begin by turning back to the empirical studies and surveys already reported. When we conduct surveys or experiments in which people respond in various ways to questions or vignettes containing words like "homeless," are we really measuring in some way the responses to a fairly simple linguistic stimulus? Although we are accustomed to making quite a lot of the distribution of answers we receive, we should perhaps be more cautious. Certainly, no trial lawyer would consider accepting at face value a prospective juror's response to a single question like, "Do you believe homelessness is mainly the fault of individual homeless people or of society." A litigator would persist in a more extended interrogation, exploring any answer with more questions before being satisfied that she had obtained an accurate picture of a witness' true beliefs about causation. Such a procedure might elicit, for example, that on hearing the word "homelessness," different people have quite different things come to mind, that people have quite different implicit assumptions about the age, family status, race, mental disability, and so on of people who are homeless. Lay people and social scientists alike understand that etiologies of homelessness may vary across the different subgroups within "the homeless." Thus, answers regarding the causes of homelessness might reflect more about assumptions and beliefs about the composition of "the homeless" than about attributions of cause or implicit social theories.

69. *Id.* at 708.

B. *Prototypes and Bad Information*

Some theories hold that we understand concepts or categories like “the homeless” with reference to a prototype or a set of exemplars, which define the “best example” of the category.⁷⁰ The structure of these concepts can be probed by measuring how long it takes people to assign candidate objects to a category. For example, for North Americans, the prototypical bird is a robin, the prototypical fruit a red apple.⁷¹ According to modern cognitive theory, when any of us thinks about the concept “homeless,” we also retrieve a prototype or set of exemplars. Prototypes and exemplars have the same types of features, as do real-world instances of the category: gender, disposition, age, race, and so on. If you are like most people, if I ask you to imagine a carpenter, and then ask you to imagine the color of her hair, two things will happen. First, you may be a bit surprised when you encounter the pronoun “her” in the previous sentence, and then you will likely respond with “brown.”

Something similar probably happened when you read about a hypothetical, apparently homeless person named Kim, pushing a shopping cart near the beginning of this essay. If you are like most people, you assumed Kim was a woman, of early middle age, and that she was in fact homeless. You probably did that because of (1) your experience as to the gender of persons named Kim—which might not include Kim Hopper, a noted scholar (male) on the subject of homelessness, (2) your assumptions about the gender and apparent age of seemingly homeless persons who push shopping carts, and (3) your assumption about the living arrangements of persons who “appear” to be homeless. What we think about social categories as well as hypothetical individuals is affected by our reactions to what we take to be prototypical features of those in the category. If our prototype of “the homeless” is male and black, our reactions will be affected by what we think, both consciously and unconsciously, about men, African Americans, or African American men.⁷²

C. *Prototypes and Attribution*

There are a couple of additional significant experimental findings worth noting about prototypes and attributional belief. First, people tend to see “out-groups”—groups to which one does not belong and with which one does not

70. There is some controversy about whether categories are represented by prototypes, by sets of exemplars, or whether in fact such an account of categories can fully account for all the kinds of categories people use. See, e.g., Brian H. Ross & Valerie S. Makin, *Prototype Versus Exemplar Models in Cognition*, in *THE NATURE OF COGNITION* 205-241 (1999).

71. Edward E. Smith, *Categorization*, in *THINKING: AN INVITATION TO COGNITIVE SCIENCE* 44-46 (Daniel N. Osherson & Edward E. Smith eds., 1991).

72. Eliot R. Smith & Michael A. Zarate, *Exemplar-Based Model of Social Judgment*, 99 *PSYCHOL. REV.* 3 (1992).

identify—as more homogeneous than “in-groups.”⁷³ This “out-group homogeneity effect” is related to the perceived “entitativity” of the group—the degree to which the category of persons is perceived as a single entity. Members of “out-groups” are also more likely to be represented by singular prototypes than members of “in-groups.”⁷⁴ The more entitative a group—the better represented by a singular prototype—the more we attribute individual behaviors and situations to individual dispositions rather than situational factors.⁷⁵ Given the seemingly greater social distance survey respondents feel toward “the homeless” (compared to the merely poor), these phenomenon should result in more individualist accounts of the causes of homelessness. Moreover, the processes of social discourse that have transformed a more undifferentiated group into “*the* homeless” would have amplified these effects.⁷⁶ This might be the case, but for other powerful countervailing forces, described below.

D. *Associations and Automaticity*

In order to get to the main point of this section, I need to explain a bit more about recent findings about the architecture of human cognition. Classic studies in cognitive science suggest that, unlike digital computers, human beings do not store information in neatly labeled memory registers, but rather in the connections within immensely complex associative networks.⁷⁷ These theories suggest, for example, that I can influence how you will respond to a stimulus like “Name an Ivy League university” merely by exposing you to objects colored pale blue or crimson red. We would expect, then, that asking someone about “the homeless” or a person described as homeless will also activate concepts, words or images associated with the word “homeless” in semantic memory. Our reactions—both attitudes and behavior—will be affected not merely by the stimulus word or concept, but also by the entire web of associated concepts.

73. David L. Hamilton & Steven J. Sherman, *Perceiving Persons and Groups*, 103 PSYCHOL. REV. 336, 349 (1996).

74. *Id.* (citing M.B. Brewer & A.S. Harasty, *Seeing Groups as Entities: The Role of Perceiver Motivation*, in 3 HANDBOOK OF MOTIVATION AND COGNITION: THE INTERPERSONAL CONTEXT (R. Sorrentino & E.T. Higgins eds., 1996)).

75. Vincent Y. Yzerbyt et al., *Group Entitativity and Social Attribution: On Translating Situational Constraints into Stereotypes*, 24 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. BULL. 1089 (1998).

76. There is sometimes significant evidence of social categorization and entitativity in the language people use. I do not recall the first time I ever read or heard the term, “the homeless,” but I recall an immediate sense of unease, one more easily explained to others, perhaps, by analogy to terms like “the Irish,” or “the Jews.”

77. An early example is A.M. Collins & E.F. Loftus, *A Spreading-activation Theory of Semantic Processing*, 82 PSYCHOL. REV. 407 (1975). This “connectionist” paradigm is now pervasive throughout cognitive science, including social psychology.

Some recent experiments are highly suggestive of the power of these associational networks for affecting both beliefs and behavior. Consider for a moment the concept and category “elderly.” The “elderly” stereotype is associated with many qualities, some of them unique to individuals but many of them common throughout a culture. Experimental subjects in one study were asked to solve “scrambled sentence” puzzles involving large numbers of words, a few of which were associated with the “elderly” stereotype, including: “worried,” “Florida,” “lonely,” “wise,” “bingo,” etc.” Another feature of the “elderly” stereotype *not* mentioned in any of the words in the puzzles is slowness of gait. Nevertheless, when subjects left the experiment room, those who had merely unscrambled sentences containing words like “worried,” “Florida,” “lonely,” “wise,” “bingo,” walked substantially more slowly down the hall toward the elevator.⁷⁸ Merely activating the web of associations connected with “elderly” had produced a dramatic behavioral result.

In a similar experiment in the same study, subjects were asked to perform a tedious, demanding computer task. During the computer work, pictures of Caucasian and African American men were flashed on the computer screen for a few thousandths of a second, well below the level of conscious perception. Then, after 130 tedious entries, the computer flashed an error message: “All data lost—please begin again.” A video camera mounted above the screen captured the facial expressions of the experimental subjects, which were then independently rated as to the anger they displayed. Remarkably, those subjects who had merely been exposed to subliminal pictures of African American men exhibited substantially more anger than subjects who had been exposed either to no pictures or pictures of white men. Psychologists describe these processes as “automatic” because they operate entirely below the level of consciousness: subjects in both experiments reported no awareness of having seen the stimuli, the “elderly” words or the flashed face pictures. In effect, the subjects’ associational networks had demonstrably controlled behavior and emotion directly, without conscious processing by the subjects. Plainly, then, when we ask survey respondents about “the homeless” or any other social category, any response will be affected by the entire web of related associations. Further, the content of those associations seems to play out at a subconscious level, beneath the level we commonly think of as holding our beliefs about facts and causation.

E. Homelessness, Poverty, Welfare and Race

What, then, are the associational networks in which “homeless” and “poor” are embedded? The networks of individuals vary some, of course. For example, for some social scientists, but few lay people, the term “homeless”

78. John A. Bargh et al., *Automaticity of Social Behavior: Direct Effects of Trait Construct and Stereotype Activation on Action*, 71 J. PERS. & SOC. PSYCH. 230 (1996).

may activate “disaffiliation.” Without doing experiments, we cannot describe the semantic networks in which the notion “homeless” is embedded for most people. But I would hypothesize that among the ideas activated in American minds by sentences containing the word “homeless” are the following (in no particular order): poverty, mental disorder, drug addiction, welfare, alcoholism, begging, racial minority, public disorder, and so on. Of course, the strength of the associations will vary, and the associated concepts are themselves also all interconnected. The concepts “poor” and “welfare” will activate different, albeit not completely dissimilar, associational networks. Might the differences in those associations account for differences in observed attributional belief?

In particular, we know that Americans’ perceptions and prejudices about welfare; race and poverty are deeply intertwined.⁷⁹ In the United States, the hostility toward welfare is thoroughly racialized. Despite the empirical data to the contrary, welfare is seen as mainly benefiting African Americans.⁸⁰ Belief that most people on welfare are African American correlates strongly with the belief that welfare recipients’ circumstances are due to “a lack of effort on their own part.”⁸¹

In the case of “the homeless,” popular stereotypes significantly understate the prevalence of African Americans among the homeless. In fact, African Americans are far more likely to be homeless than other groups.⁸² But surveys of beliefs about the racial composition of “the homeless” consistently underestimate the proportion of African Americans, as compared to the best local data. For example, respondents in Erie County, New York underestimated the percentage of African Americans among the local homeless population by 18%.⁸³ In a national survey by the Gallup Organization, a quarter of respondents were unsure whether the “average homeless person” was white or nonwhite; and of those with an opinion, most (54%) believed that the average homeless person was white.⁸⁴

These beliefs about the demography of homelessness strongly affect what people think about “the homeless.” A national survey examining the relation

79. For an excellent study of the development of welfare policy and the complexity of attitudes toward welfare, see JOEL F. HANDLER & YEHESEKEL HASENFELD, *THE MORAL CONSTRUCTION OF POVERTY: WELFARE REFORM IN AMERICA* (1991).

80. GILENS, *supra* note 47.

81. *Id.* at 140.

82. Kim Hopper & Norweeta G. Milburn, *Homelessness Among African Americans: A Historical and Contemporary Perspective*, in *HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA* 123 (Jim Baumohl ed., 1996) (summarizing more than 60 studies finding that African Americans comprise an average of 39-44% of the homeless population in the samples studied); Susan Gonzalez Baker, *Homelessness and the Latino Paradox*, in *HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA* 133 (Jim Baumohl ed., 1996) (comparing the racial/ethnic composition of samples of homeless people in 24 studies conducted in 18 U.S. cities to the general population data for the same metropolitan areas).

83. Toro & McDonell, *supra* note 27, at 64.

84. GALLUP ORGANIZATION, *supra* note 29, at 26.

between subjective estimates of the proportion of African Americans among the homeless and the application of racial stereotypes to the homeless found what we might expect: the higher the estimate, the more racial stereotypes were applied to the homeless.⁸⁵ And, in a direct test of the racialization hypothesis, George Wilson used regression techniques to measure the connection between the perceived racial composition of “the homeless” and perceived causes of homelessness. He found very strong evidence among his Baltimore respondents that attributional beliefs derived from perceptions of the racial composition of the groups identified in his survey (welfare recipients, homeless persons, and migrant laborers).⁸⁶ Wilson summarizes his findings on this issue as follows:

[P]erceptions that African Americans constitute the welfare dependent population is a powerful predictor of individualistic beliefs about the causes of welfare dependency, while perceptions that the homeless are white strongly influence the adoption of structural beliefs about their economic plight.⁸⁷

There are at least two ways to make sense of these data. First, it may be that people apply a kind of logical syllogism to their racist stereotypes. If one believes that African Americans are generally individually responsible for their circumstances (owing to out-group effects or simple prejudice), and one believes that most homeless people are African American, then simple logic compels a particular attributional belief, albeit one deriving from false premises. But the cognitive science literature on the associational and often automatic character of attitude formation suggests a process other than simple deduction.

Consider the formation of an attributional belief of a another kind: You observe two people you do not know engaged in an energetic conversation, the

85. Arthur Whaley & Bruce G. Link, *Racial Categorization and Stereotype-based Judgments About Homeless People*, 28 J. APP. SOC. PSYCHOL. 189 (1998). The study by Whaley and Link, using national sample survey data, examined the relationship between estimates of the proportion of different racial groups among the homeless population and beliefs about homeless people, including their perceived dangerousness and the degree to which “laziness/irresponsibility” is a cause of homelessness. Their data and regression analyses are hard to interpret because of the research design. On the one hand, they find that subjective estimates of the percentage of African Americans in the homeless population correlates with the perceived dangerousness of homeless people. *Id.* at 197. But they find that a positive correlation between subjective estimates of the percentage of African Americans and belief that laziness/irresponsibility causes homelessness disappears when they control for “other psychological variables.” One of those “other psychological variables” is the “extent to which respondents believe that homelessness is caused by structural factors.” *Id.* at 194. Since structural attributions and attributing homelessness to laziness or irresponsibility are, almost by definition, highly inter-correlated, it is difficult to interpret regression equations in which they are on either side of the equation.

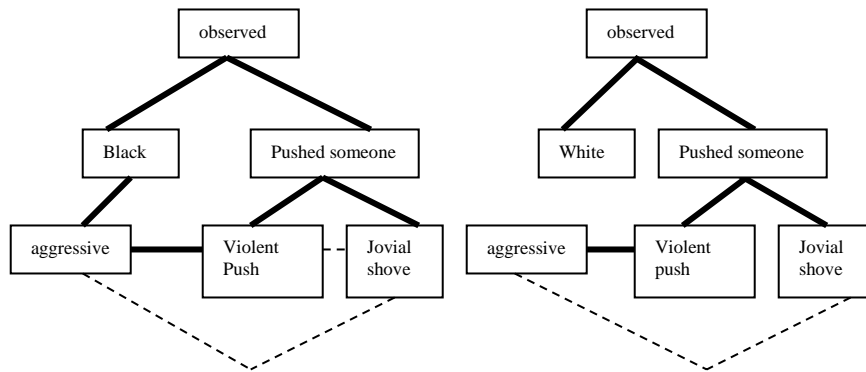
86. Wilson, *supra* note 54, at 421.

87. *Id.* at 423.

contents of which you cannot hear. Suddenly, one of them pushes the other. A classic study finds that precisely the same “push” is interpreted differently: the “push” of a white person is seen as a jovial shove, while that of a black person is perceived as a “violent push.”⁸⁸ Thagard and Kunda interpret these findings as the consequence of the differential activation of a network of associated concepts, as indicated in Figure I:

FIGURE I⁸⁹

STEREOTYPES AND THE MEANING OF BEHAVIOR



Within cognitive scientific theory, the power of such network models is that the complex interaction of many different factors, acting simultaneously can be simulated on computers and the results predicted. An exposition in that form is not feasible here. The prose explanation of the mathematical model that simulates these results is, however, as follows:

When one observes that a person pushed someone, *pushed someone* activates both *violent push* and *jovial shove*. If one also observes that the pusher is Black, at the same time, *Black* activates *aggressive*, which further activates

88. H.A. Sagar & J.W. Schofield, *Racial and Behavior Cues in Black and White Children's Perceptions of Ambiguously Aggressive Acts*, 39 J. PERS. & SOC. PSYCHOL. 590 (1980) (cited in Paul Thagard & Ziva Kunda, *Making Sense of People*, in CONNECTIONIST MODELS OF SOCIAL REASONING AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR 7 (Stephen J. Read & Lynn C. Miller eds., 1998)).

89. Ziva Kunda & Paul Thagard, *Forming Impressions From Stereotypes, Traits, and Behaviors: A Parallel-Constraint-Satisfaction Theory*, 103 PSYCHOL. REV. 284, 290 (1996). Thick lines indicate a positive, or excitatory link; thin dotted lines indicate a negative or inhibitory link.

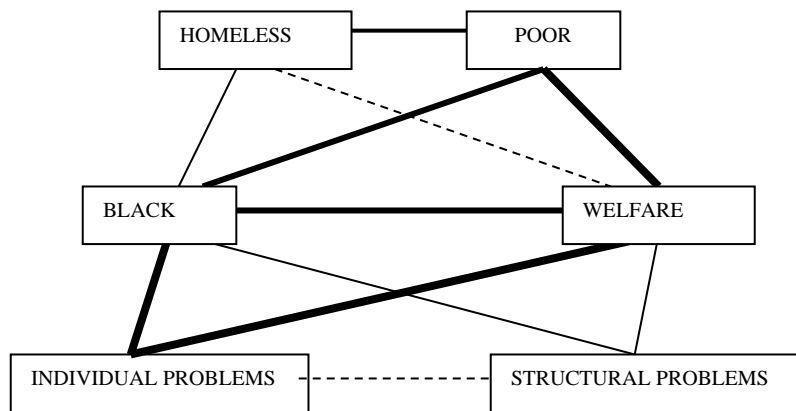
violent push while deactivating *joyful shove*. If, on the other hand, one observes that the pusher is White, *White* does not activate *aggressive*. Therefore, both *aggressive* and *violent push* end up with less activation when the pusher is White than when the pusher is Black. In this matter, stereotypes color (sic) one's understanding of a person's behavior and one's impression of that person.⁹⁰

Notably, such models of social cognition do *not* assume that the associations come in the form of conscious, propositional beliefs about empirical facts. Subjects may not consciously adhere to propositions like, "African American men tend to be more aggressive than white men." Indeed, the research on automaticity of beliefs described above suggests that subjects may truthfully deny any such subjective belief, and still exhibit the same differences in the attribution of the ambiguous event.

To extend these ideas to the subject at hand, we can hypothesize the simultaneous interaction of related concepts and stereotypic beliefs in the model depicted in Figure II:

FIGURE II⁹¹

A CONSTRAINT NETWORK FOR THE CONCEPTS OF HOMELESSNESS AND POVERTY



90. Thagard & Kunda, *Making Sense of People*, *supra* note 88, at 8.

91. Solid lines indicate positive or excitatory links: thicker lines indicate stronger links. Broken lines indicate negative or inhibitory links. This graph is for illustration purposes only. It does not reflect a formal model that has been tested, although it is sufficiently simple that its behavior can be predicted by inspection. At the moment, this model of the role of race and welfare in attributional beliefs about poverty and homelessness is merely empirically plausible, based on a compilation of different existing studies. It would be possible to test the model more directly, by vignette studies in which subjects respond to hypothetical situations in which the characteristics of the fictional protagonist vary.

In prose form: poor activate both *Black* and *welfare*, which in turn activate *individual* attributions. But *homeless* activates *Black* far less, and probably inhibits *welfare* (most people believing—incorrectly—that *welfare* recipients can always avoid homelessness), thereby activating individualist attributions less and *structural problems* more.

In sum, observed differences between causal attributions of homelessness and of poverty may be entirely, as they seem. These differences may be traceable to the work of advocates and the operation of the mass media in the early 1980's. It is also possible, however, that these differences are not entirely as they seem, and that most of the differences in how the causes of homelessness and poverty are perceived are accounted for by differences in the assumed racial composition of the categories activated in survey questions about "homelessness" or "poverty." Like most important questions, an answer requires empirical investigation. No doubt there is *some* connection between differential racialization of the two categories; an equally important question is: how *much*? I hope in future work to begin to answer this question, using vignette studies in which the race, poverty, and homeless status of the characters in the vignettes are systematically varied and controlled.

VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVOCATES

Near the end of any article written in part for practicing lawyers and other pragmatists, both author and reader come to the inevitable question: "So what?" What implications are there for the ways in which lawyers and other advocates go about their work? The following are four implications I take from the evidence already discussed and contemporary attribution theory.

A. *Effective Advocacy and Attribution*

Every skilled lawyer already knows that advocacy is aimed at audiences, and that one must know something about how each audience thinks the world works, whether in order to craft an opening statement or to design an entire advocacy campaign. The decisions of jurors and of policy makers are the product both of preexisting beliefs and of the information and reframings that advocates bring to them. No careful lawyer would consider how to present a case without taking into account those preexisting beliefs, particularly as to the crucial dimension of causation.

Most lawyers think they know what those preexisting beliefs are, based on their common experience and intuition. In this respect, lawyers are often wrong—as I was in 1994 in assuming that individualist attributions regarding poverty would carry over to homelessness.⁹² But lawyers can learn about the

92. Blasi, *supra* note 44, at 41.

actual contours of preexisting attributions and attitudes. In the case of homelessness, for example, we now have a rich literature on the topic produced by skilled and sophisticated scholars, much of it referenced here. Where the empirical evidence has not already been gathered, advocates can work with social scientists to collect and analyze it. Not to do so is akin to trying a case to a jury, having waived *voir dire*.

B. *Shaping Attributions*

I do not claim to have proven beyond doubt that the work of homeless advocates is responsible for current popular understandings of the causes of homelessness. But it does seem plausible that advocates at least contributed to the ways in which homelessness and its causes came to be understood by the general public, particularly during the period in which homelessness took shape as a social problem. It also seems plausible that the resulting configuration of common beliefs about homelessness has persisted in the culture, long after the initial shaping took place in public discourse. There is evidence from other sources that attributional beliefs about social problems that sometimes crystallize during periods of intense interest can live on for decades. For example, Lawrence Friedman has described how Progressive reformers in New York shaped perceptions of the causes of slum housing into the “persistent model of the evil slumlord.”⁹³ In my experience those attributional beliefs continue quite strongly a century later in the causal understandings of other reformers in Los Angeles.⁹⁴ Advocates, therefore, have perhaps both more opportunities and greater responsibilities than they can now fully appreciate.

C. *Opportunity and Opportunism*

That advocates can take account of attributional beliefs, and sometimes even shape them, suggests both opportunity and considerable risk. Sometimes the seemingly easiest path leads into the quagmire. A colleague in the National Coalition for the Homeless, tiring of the effort to “re-present” homeless people in an appealing light to reporters, once suggested that perhaps we should focus attention on “homeless blonde white girls with AIDS who are

93. LAWRENCE M. FREIDMAN, *GOVERNMENT AND SLUM HOUSING: A CENTURY OF FRUSTRATION* 42 (1968). Friedman writes, “It was convenient . . . to assume that landlords were a class of evil men, overcharging ignorant tenants and callous to the point of criminality.” *Id.* at 40.

94. Since 1996, I have served as research director, and later member, of a Los Angeles Citizens’ Blue Ribbon Committee on Slum Housing, whose work resulted in substantial reforms in the way slum housing is regulated in Los Angeles. Hector Tobar, *Council OKs Apartment Inspection Reform Plan*, *LOS ANGELES TIMES*, July 1, 1998, B-1. Although my students and I presented as full an account as we could of all the factors contributing to the increase in slum housing, members of the Committee—all sophisticated lawyers, landlords, tenant activists and political figures—quickly gravitated toward a law enforcement focus aimed at “slumlords.”

Vietnam veterans.” The point is that it is important for advocates not to fool themselves into believing that they have achieved real support for policies to help homeless people when those supporting those policies have quite another version of “the homeless” in mind. For support can dwindle, as Martha Burt has written, “when middle-class Americans come face to face with the facts,”⁹⁵ or at least, a different version of the facts than they have hitherto believed. Indeed, one could combine the accounts in Sections IV and V above to argue that to the degree that homeless advocates altered attributional beliefs about homelessness, they may have done so in part by downplaying the great overrepresentation of African Americans in the homeless population.⁹⁶ This has likely had consequences for public discourse about both race and civil rights that advocates never took into account. Hence, the greater responsibility that comes with greater knowledge.

D. Islands of Advocacy: Whatever Happened to “The Movement”?

Which brings me to the last lesson I take from the evidence and history recounted here. In recent times, reformers and advocates have tended to work on fairly narrowly construed issues. Indeed, even within homeless advocacy, most advocates now conceive themselves as advocates for subgroups: homeless families, veterans, the chronically mentally ill, and so on. Among reformers generally, Balkanization—or at least a fairly fine division of political labor by issues and groups—is seemingly universal. Advocates tend to specialize: on race discrimination and affirmative action, gender equity, low wage work, welfare reform, child care, housing, education, trade globalization, and so on. In truth, there may never have been a time when advocacy was conceived differently, when social advocacy tended to link issues rather than to distinguish them ever more finely. The cultural mythology of progressives locates such episodes in the Progressive era, in the 1930’s and again in the 1960’s, but an empirical assessment of the myth is well beyond my scope here. On the other hand, advocacy on behalf of homeless people has always had significant potential—sometimes fulfilled—for bringing together people whose initial interests were more narrowly focused on housing issues, welfare, education, and so on. But most advocacy work remains more narrowly focused and rarely framed in a way that enables those most concerned about housing or AIDS or mental health or welfare reform to understand their daily work as part of a common, and greater, enterprise.

It should also be clear by now that homelessness is not a social problem that can be either understood or ameliorated without attending more directly to a range of other problems. In particular, it is clear that we cannot deal with

95. MARTHA BURT, *OVER THE EDGE: THE GROWTH OF HOMELESSNESS IN THE 1980’S*, at 81 (1992).

96. Blasi, *supra* note 44, at 575-579.

homelessness in the twenty-first century without trying as hard as we can to solve what W.E.B. Dubois characterized as “The problem of the twentieth century . . . the problem of the color line.”⁹⁷

The problem of homelessness *is* the problem of civil rights, as that concept was itself initially constructed in the century just ended, and not merely as a right to be let alone, free of police harassment. And, of course, homelessness *is* many other problems as well. And none of those problems can be understood or solved in isolation either. We may not have a grand theory of everything, as Marxism was once misunderstood to be. But neither we can merely tend our separate gardens of concern. By their very existence on the streets of America, and increasingly on the streets of other advanced countries as well, homeless people continue to silently signal that *all* is not well. How we collectively understand and respond—and whether we can respond collectively at all—will continue to define this generation of advocates and the next.

97. See generally W.E.B. DUBOIS, THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK 1903.

