

Poverty as a Social Relation¹

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ABSTRACT. This chapter argues that there are theoretical benefits to understanding poverty as a kind of social relation: that is, a social position defined by the character of the interpersonal relationships a person is susceptible to losing or falling into in virtue of occupying that position. I begin with a methodological question: how, if at all, can philosophers *as such* make a valuable contribution to theoretical work on poverty? After sketching an answer to this question, I outline and motivate the general proposal that poverty can be understood as a social relation. In doing so, I draw an analogy to Sally Haslanger's analysis of gender as a social position. Then I illustrate this proposal with two examples of the kinds of interpersonal relationships that figure in the content of poverty as a social relation: one positive (social networks) and one negative (invidious stereotyping). Finally, I conclude by considering an objection and sketching a few practical proposals.

I.

What can philosophers, as such, contribute to our understanding of poverty? There's an uncharitable parody of philosophical reflection on poverty that is worth pausing to consider. The parody depicts a group of middle-class, well-educated professionals with a fair amount of time on their hands asking themselves *what poverty is* or *what it means to be poor* in the same way that they might ask *what knowledge is* or *what it means to know something*. The suggestion is that there is something absurd, even morally suspect, about doing philosophy of poverty. It appeals to the yawning gap between the conditions of reflection on poverty and the subject of reflection itself. It calls into question the usefulness of abstract theorizing about poverty. And it does so by implicitly invoking a distinction between concepts where abstract theoretical

¹ Forthcoming, Poverty as a Social Relation. For feedback, I'm grateful to audience members at the Justitia Amplificata Conference on Poverty at the Free University of Berlin and the Workshop on Poverty and Human Dignity at the University of Salzburg.

reflection seems appropriate and concepts where the only sort of reflection that seems worthwhile is fundamentally action-oriented.

Of course, this parody is uncharitable in part because philosophers working on poverty are keenly aware of the problem. But it is a problem. What, exactly, can philosophers *qua* philosophers offer?

One thing philosophers *as such* can offer is a novel conception of an existing concept. In order to spell out this idea, it is necessary to say a bit more about what it means to offer a conception of a concept. Here it is useful to distinguish three different approaches to philosophical conceptualization, following Sally Haslanger's important work on race and gender. Each kind of conceptualization corresponds to a different way of understanding the "What is X?" question. Under one interpretation, when we ask "what is X?", we are asking what our shared concept of X means. A natural way to approach this question, though by no means the only way, is through some process of reflective equilibrium.² A second approach to conceptualization does not aim to articulate the meaning of our shared concepts. Instead, it calls for tracking the *extension* of the relevant concept, regardless of whether this coheres with pre-theoretical intuitions about what the relevant concept means. Finally, a third approach does not aim to explicate the meaning of our shared concepts, nor the things in the world those concepts are intended to track. Instead, it asks a more practical question: what conception does the best job doing the kind of work we have reason to want that concept to do? Haslanger dubs this an *ameliorative* approach to conceptual articulation.

In this paper, I adopt the third approach to conceptualizing poverty. Clearly, this means that I need to make some assumptions about the kind of work we have reason to want the

² Haslanger, Sally. 2012, 223.

concept of poverty to do. What is the point of having such a concept in the first place? Although there's no unique answer to this question, of course, I submit that one important role played by the concept of poverty is *identifying those whose economic position makes them disadvantaged in a sense that generates moral reasons in favor of mitigating their condition*. As Wolff et al. point out, "poverty" is an emotive word.³ Among other things, saying that someone is "in poverty" carries at least the strong suggestion that this person is badly off in such a way that other people have moral reasons, whether of charity or justice, to render assistance. Moreover, when we turn to theoretical accounts of poverty, we see a close connection between poverty and a morally laden conception of disadvantage. Perhaps the clearest example is Sen's proposal that poverty be understood in terms of capability deprivation.⁴ Capabilities are a kind of freedom – the freedom to achieve valuable functionings, or states of "being or doing", in which a person's life goes well. For Sen, capabilities are the currency of justice. Hence, identifying poverty with capability deprivation entails that being poor *just is* being in a state in which one is deprived with respect to the currency of justice. This, in turn, entails that there are moral reasons – namely, reasons of justice – to mitigate the condition of those who are poor.

The assumption that poverty is conceptually connected to morally relevant forms of disadvantage can also be seen to motivate more positivistic conceptions of poverty that do not employ moral notions in their explicit content. To give just one example, consider Brian Barry's proposal that poverty be defined as having no more than half the median income in one's society. One reason he gives for adopting this definition is that "you are not excluded if the people in the

³ Wolff, Jonathan, Edward Lamb, and Eliana Zur-Szpiro. 2015, 15.

⁴ Sen, Amartya. 1999.

middle of the income distribution have only twice as much as you have.”⁵ Whether or not that’s true as a matter of fact, Barry’s reference to *exclusion* makes it clear that he is defining the poverty level partly by reference to a moral ideal of how people should relate to each other. Of course, his reference to “exclusion” also brings to mind Smith’s famous remarks about what we now call “relative poverty.” While entertaining the thought that poverty for the purposes of taxation should be understood in terms of lacking “necessities,” Smith observed that although a linen shirt is, strictly speaking, “not a necessary of life,” it is nonetheless true that in the Europe of his day “a creditable day labourer would be ashamed to appear in public” without one.⁶ Here Smith is pointing out that if poverty means lacking necessities, the concept of a necessity must *itself* be understood in partly moral terms, as what one needs to avoid the *harm* of public shame. To that degree, Smith’s point is not only that poverty is a relative notion. It’s also that poverty is in part a moral notion.

So stated, the point may seem banal. But once we draw attention to the fact that poverty is in part a moral notion, several significant implications follow for how to approach the theoretical project of conceptualizing poverty. First, insofar as we want our concept of poverty to help us identify those among us whose economic position makes them badly-off in a morally relevant sense, we cannot entirely separate the descriptive question of *what poverty is* from the moral question of *what’s wrong with poverty*. For in asking what poverty is, we are *also* asking what it is to be disadvantaged in a sense that generates moral reasons. Second, on this way of understanding the ‘point’ of the concept of poverty, different conceptions of poverty are relative to different conceptions of disadvantage. If you think that being disadvantaged in a sense that

⁵ Barry, Brian. 2005, 174.

⁶ Smith, Adam. 1976, 879-80.

generates moral reasons means lacking certain kinds of capabilities, whereas I think that being disadvantaged in a sense that generates moral reasons means lacking opportunities for welfare, our substantive normative disagreement about the meaning of disadvantage will lead us to have different understandings of what it means to be in poverty, unless we can locate a conception of poverty that both conceptions of disadvantage converge on. Finally, insofar as the concept of poverty “builds in” morally laden assumptions about what it means to be disadvantaged, philosophers *qua* philosophers do have an important role to play in theoretical discussions about the definition and measurement of poverty. For the question of what it is to be disadvantaged in a sense that generates moral reasons is, of course, a first-order question of normative ethics. In itself, no amount of empirical investigation will tell us what the correct answer is.

At this point, several qualifications are in order. First, it bears emphasis that the ameliorative approach is not the only approach we can take to understanding the concept of poverty. We can also explore the meaning of our shared concepts of poverty and the things in the world referred to by these concepts, among other things. And it may turn out that at least some of our shared understandings of poverty don’t build in morally laden assumptions about disadvantage. Second, even if we do take an ameliorative approach, we should remember that just because at least *one* important “job” we have reason to want a conception of poverty to perform is the job of identifying those among us who are disadvantaged in a morally relevant sense, it does not follow that this is the *only* job we have reason to want a conception of poverty to do. We should leave room for purely descriptive conceptions of poverty that do not appeal, either explicitly or implicitly, to moralized notions of harm, disadvantage, and the like. Third, with respect to ameliorative conceptions that do articulate poverty in terms of morally significant forms of disadvantage, there is room for debate about whether we should conceptualize poverty

as *just being* disadvantaged in a morally significant sense or whether we should restrict its application to people who are disadvantaged in a morally relevant sense due to lacking economic resources (i.e., income or wealth). In this paper, I proceed on the assumption that Wolff et al. are correct when they say that we overextend the concept of poverty if we generically define it as disadvantage with respect to the currency of justice.⁷

Let me review. I began this section with a question: What role is there, if any, for philosophers *qua* philosophers when it comes to theorizing about poverty? I proposed that philosophers can contribute to the conceptualization of poverty. Focusing specifically on ameliorative conceptions, I then argued that the concept of being disadvantaged in a morally relevant sense is built into the conceptions of poverty we have reason to want in our repertoire. To that degree, poverty is already a moralized concept, and ethical reflection is needed to articulate its content. In the next section, I will focus on a particular kind of morally significant disadvantage associated with poverty: *relational disadvantage*. This leads to the thought that one conception of poverty we have reason to want in our repertoire is a conception of poverty as a *social relation*.

II.

To get a feel for what it would mean to conceptualize poverty as a social relation, let's return to the work of Sally Haslanger. She explicitly adopts an ameliorative approach to understanding the concepts of race and gender. As a point of departure, she takes on board the assumption that one important "job" we have reason to want the concept of *woman* to do is the

⁷ Wolff et al., 2015, 25.

job of identifying and ultimately mitigating gender-based injustice. With that goal in mind, she articulates the following conception, which she proceeds to qualify and refine:

S is a woman iff_{def} S is systematically subordinated along some dimension, and S is “marked” as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female’s biological role in reproduction.⁸

Here, Haslanger defines *woman* as a social position defined by susceptibility to certain kinds of interpersonal relationships. Clearly, subordination can encompass a wide range of harmful interpersonal relationships, including exploitation, domination, and disrespect. On her view, a woman is a person who systematically suffers these relational disadvantages in virtue of having or being perceived to have the characteristics associated with a female role in reproduction. The general schema this definition instantiates is that someone counts as a member of a certain group (woman) if she is susceptible to certain kinds of interpersonal relationships (subordination) in virtue of possessing or being thought to possess a certain “target” trait (specific bodily features).

Can we apply this schema to the concept of poverty? Consider the following proposal:

Poverty as a Social Relation (PASR). S is in poverty if S is systematically susceptible to losing access to valuable interpersonal relationships or being made party to negative interpersonal relationships in virtue of lacking income or wealth.

Now let’s break this down.

First, I treat PASR as a *sufficient* condition of being in poverty. I do not treat systematic susceptibility to loss of valuable relationships or membership in negative relationships due to

⁸ Haslanger, 2012, 230.

lack of resources as necessary for being in poverty. Nor do I make the even stronger claim that this represents a *definition* of poverty. In these respects, I am making a significantly weaker claim about poverty than Haslanger makes about gender. Nonetheless, if PASR does represent a sufficient condition of being in poverty, this conception contributes to the overarching goal of identifying those among us who are disadvantaged in morally relevant ways due to lack of resources. A conception need not identify *all* those among us who are so disadvantaged in order to identify an *important class* of those among us who are so disadvantaged.

Second, I follow Haslanger in understanding *systematicity* as an important part of what it means to occupy a disadvantaged social position. Suppose an affluent tourist is temporarily locked out of her bank account due to identity theft. She might find herself cut off from various instrumentally valuable relationships in virtue of lacking money to pay for certain goods and services she needs while traveling. She might also find herself temporarily trapped in negative relationships of dependency as she is reliant on borrowed money or the good will of others to make ends meet until access to her account is restored. Nonetheless, it would be misleading to describe her as “in poverty” except in a one-off, temporary sense: a few days of interrupted vacation. To genuinely occupy the social position of being in poverty, the relational disadvantages one suffers due to lack of resources must track the subject through different areas of social life over an extended period of time: employment, commerce, public space, and so on.

Third, the notion of being “susceptible...in virtue of lacking resources” requires clarification. I define it such that (i) S is at a significant risk of losing valuable relationships or falling into negative relationships, where (ii) a significant part of the explanation for (i) is the fact that S lacks income or wealth. Note that this way of spelling out the idea of susceptibility does not entail that *actual* loss of valuable relationships or membership in negative relationships

is necessary for being “in poverty” in our relational sense. For a substantial risk of incurring these disadvantages is itself a kind of disadvantage. With respect to clause (ii), I assume that S’s lacking resources is a “significant part of the explanation” for her relational disadvantage when it is reasonable to think that *were* S to possess more income or wealth, either in absolute terms or relative to some comparison group, S’s susceptibility to loss of valuable relationships or membership in negative relationships would be significantly reduced. Clearly, there is room for disagreement about how to understand and specify the placeholders “significant part” and “significantly reduced,” just as there is room for disagreement about how to assess the relevant counterfactual. Nonetheless, I take this to be a plausible point of departure for thinking about what it means to suffer relational disadvantages in virtue of lacking resources.

Fourth, perhaps the most important element in this conception of poverty as a social relation is the idea of losing “valuable” relationships or falling into “negative” relationships. How should we understand these judgments of value? In answering this question, I am guided by the overarching desideratum – most explicitly endorsed by Nussbaum – of finding standards of human well-being that can be the object of an overlapping consensus.⁹ Accordingly, I think that we should fill in the content of “valuable” relationships by asking: what kinds of relationships tend to make one’s life go better, all things equal, regardless of the details of one’s particular conception of the good life? Similarly, I think that we should fill in the content of “negative” relationships by asking: what kinds of relationships tend to make one’s life worse, all things equal, regardless of the details of one’s particular conception of the good life? If we can identify what some of these relationships are, and we can demonstrate that a person’s susceptibility to losing or falling into these relationships is explained in significant part by lack of resources, then

⁹ Nussbaum, Martha. 2000.

we have strong grounds for thinking that such a person stands to others in the social relation of poverty.

Finally, it is worth underlining another important difference between Haslanger's conception of gender and this conception of poverty in addition to the ones mentioned. Haslanger's conception identifies women as people who suffer relational disadvantages on the basis of "observed or imagined" bodily features. Hence, a male person whose appearance or self-presentation leads others to relate to him as a woman, where that entails various forms of subordination, would plausibly count as a woman on Haslanger's view. By contrast, this conception of poverty as a social relation is restricted to people who suffer relational disadvantages due to *actual* lack of income or wealth. On this view, a scruffy multi-millionaire who's mistreated by store clerks because his appearance leads them to conclude that he doesn't have much money does not count as being in poverty. And this seems like the right result. That said, perceptions do matter. In particular, some relational disadvantages accrue to people due to actual *and* perceived lack of resources, whereas other relational disadvantages accrue to people due to actual lack of resources, regardless of whether others perceive that lack. We'll explore that distinction further in the next section.

In the next section, I will identify one example of a positive relationship that people can be vulnerable to losing due to a lack of resources: social networks. I will also identify one example of a negative relationship that people can be vulnerable to falling into due to a lack of resources: invidious stereotyping. Before I do so, however, two related caveats are necessary. First, it is an empirical question what kinds of interpersonal relationships a lack of resources tends to make people susceptible to within a given social context. There is evidence that losing access to social networks and being the object of invidious stereotypes are relational

disadvantages that many people suffer due to lack of resources. But it is also clear that there are many other kinds of relationships that lacking resources makes a person susceptible to. And there may be contexts where these other relationships loom larger than stereotypes and loss of social networks, if indeed the latter figure prominently at all. This underscores the second point. The main, programmatic proposal of this paper is that we should include a concept of poverty as a social relation in our repertoire if we think that one purpose of the concept of poverty is identifying individuals who are disadvantaged in a morally relevant sense due to lack of resources. This main proposal can be separated from the more specific claims I make about stereotypes and social networks. These specific claims are intended to illustrate the programmatic proposal. But ultimately, the plausibility of the latter does not hinge on the plausibility of the former.

III.

a. *Loss of Social Networks*

Very generally, *social capital* refers to the benefits that result from having access to various kinds of social networks, including cooperation, reciprocity, and information flow.¹⁰ More recently, Chiara Cordelli has drawn attention to the idea of “relational resources:” goods like trust, reliance, and care that either partly constitute valuable interpersonal relationships or are distinctively produced in these relationships.¹¹ To avoid committing to the technical details of either notion, I’ll simply talk about *social networks*: the valuable interpersonal relationships a

¹⁰ For a canonical discussion of declining social capital in the American context, see Putnam, Robert. 2000.

¹¹ Cordelli, Chiara. 2015.

person has access to. These can be valuable intrinsically, as with friends, family members, and so on. Or they can be valuable instrumentally. Or both.

Regardless of a person's conception of the good life, having access to social networks generally makes a person's life go better. In that sense, everyone has an interest in at least having *access* to social networks. It seems clear that even someone with monastic inclinations will be better-off, all things equal, if he at least has the option of connecting with friends, relatives, neighbors, and so on. Moreover, a familiar finding from social science research on social capital is that low-income people have on average a *weightier* interest in having access to social networks than their more affluent counterparts.¹² That is because they are dependent on interpersonal relationships to satisfy basic needs and interests which more affluent people either do not need to satisfy or can afford to pay others to satisfy. If money's short one month, they borrow from relatives; if crime's on the rise, they rely on nearby residents to keep an eye out; instead of visiting a therapist during an emotional crisis, they fall back on close friends; rather than hire a babysitter, they call upon a trusted neighbor.

Yet in spite of having a weightier interest in social networks, poor people are especially vulnerable to losing them. The most dramatic illustration is *homelessness*. As Margaret Radin points out in her defense of residential rent control, having a stable place of residence is important partly because it enables you to stay anchored to a particular community.¹³ But homelessness, by definition, implies the absence of a stable residence: even a relatively undisturbed encampment could be "busted" at any moment, as the various moves to criminalize

¹² Mark Warren, J. Phillip Thompson, and Susan Saegert. 2001.

¹³ Radin, Margaret. 1986.

homelessness demonstrate.¹⁴ Moreover, even poor people who have a legal residence are vulnerable to losing it if the market price exceeds their ability to pay. For example, when urban neighborhoods gentrify, low-income residents are subject to considerable *displacement pressure*. If they are forced out, they may lose access to valuable social networks, either because their network of friends, family, neighbors, and so on is itself broken up by displacement or because they simply have to move so far away that continued access to these relationships is significantly hindered. Furthermore, even if these ills do not come to pass, the simple knowledge that one's access to valuable relationships could be broken up by forces beyond one's control is itself a psychological burden that threatens to fray those bonds.

There's a more general point. There are innumerable ways that social institutions can promote or undermine different social networks. As we've seen, these encompass laws and policies governing access to *housing*. But they also encompass practices governing access to *public space* and recognition of different *kinship structures*. For example, poor neighborhoods often lack spaces hospitable to building the kinds of networks undergirding social capital and relational goods: the streets and parks aren't safe, the schools are inadequate, there are no community centers to speak of, etc. Furthermore, the Internet is an important medium for building valuable social networks. But it's not free: computers and WiFi cost money. So the privatization of the Internet also undermines poor people's access to social networks. Second, laws governing recognition of family structures tend to favor the affluent at the expense of the poor. Poor people often rely on social networks that include the extended family, and yet the law tends not to recognize these networks *as* family: the presumptively middle-class nuclear family remains the gold standard, at least in the American context. There is also considerable evidence

¹⁴ For an overview, see The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. No Safe Place: The Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S. Cities. Available at < https://www.nlchp.org/documents/No_Safe_Place>

that marriage is increasingly an institution favored by the rich.¹⁵ The upshot is that affluent family structures tend to get more material benefits and social recognition than poor people's family structures. This is another way in which institutions generate inequalities in relational goods and social capital between poor people, who need them most, and affluent people, who need them least.

b. Invidious Stereotypes

Poor people's vulnerability to loss of social networks does not depend essentially on being perceived *as* poor. For example, the mere fact of being homeless implies that one's social ties will be precarious in various ways, over and above whatever additional disadvantages one may incur as a result of being perceived by others as poor. In this section, I want to focus on a kind of relational disadvantage that *is* essentially connected to the perceptions of others: *invidious stereotyping*.

Let me begin with a familiar insight from Axel Honneth about the recognition order of modern capitalist societies. The basic thought is that having money is not only valuable as a means to satisfying one's needs and interests. Having money is also valuable because it's a token of *recognition* for one's achievements.¹⁶ However spurious the correlation may in fact be between wealth and a concept of achievement we have reason to recognize morally, it is part of the ideology of modern capitalist societies that more money means more achievement and less money means less achievement. More specifically, one's *share* of the social product is often conceptualized as a sign of one's social *contribution* – an ideological sleight of hand that

¹⁵ For a popular overview of this phenomenon in the American context, see Rampell, Catherine. 2012.

¹⁶ See, for example, Honneth, Axel and Fraser, Nancy. 2003.

conveniently obscures the expropriative reality of exploitation. What does this mean for poor people? Among other things, that poor people are vulnerable to being *stereotyped* in ways that make them socially invisible or cast them as social inferiors. Let me take each of these ideas in turn.

First, what are social stereotypes? Regardless of content, all social stereotypes are *generalizations* that associate one or more attributes with a certain social group. Although some stereotypes are benign and may even serve a useful heuristic function, they tend to make membership in the relevant group an especially salient characteristic in interpersonal interactions, while simultaneously exaggerating similarities between members of the stereotyped group and differences between members of the stereotyped group and other groups.¹⁷ With this in mind, consider the caricature of *the bum*. The bum is an idle, vaguely threatening character who lives off the hard work of others and is best avoided. His close cousin is *the welfare queen*, a figure who paradoxically combines poverty with an extravagant lifestyle bought and paid for with other people's hard work. Obviously, these caricatures embody stereotypes like "poor people are lazy," "poor people are parasitic," and so on. Stereotypes such as these play prominent roles in the social imagination of contemporary neoliberal societies. This makes poor people vulnerable to two distinct species of relational harm.

The first is *invisibility*, understood more specifically as the failure to acknowledge the existence or full importance of another person's interests. For example, consider norms of address governing low-wage service workers versus affluent professionals. It is socially permissible in many contexts to simply order from a service worker without exchanging greetings, whereas this behavior would be considered rude in more white-collar settings. Low-

¹⁷ Among others, Larry Blum emphasizes these features of stereotypes in Blum, Larry. 2004.

wage service workers are often invisible in the settings where they work: unseen and unacknowledged.¹⁸ In part, this reflects the fact that poor people are often regarded from the point of view of stereotypes that reduce them to a purely instrumental role and fail to represent them as having significant human interests. A second relational harm is *disrespect*. If invisibility corresponds to *not being seen*, disrespect corresponds to *being seen and looked down on*. The criminalization of homelessness and poverty more generally, as well as more pernicious caricatures like the *welfare queen*, encourage the view that poor people's interests aren't *owed* the same consideration as those of the more affluent.

Clearly, invisibility and disrespect are not mutually exclusive. No doubt they often reinforce each other. Taken together, these two phenomena produce relationships between poor people and the more affluent that are marred by failures of consideration. Insofar as more affluent people think about poor people as *bums*, *welfare queens*, and so on, they will fail to give appropriate weight to their important human interests, either because they regard those interests as less important than they in fact are or because they don't register the existence of those interests in the first place. And if these stereotypes are widely circulating, so that poor people are systematically regarded by the more affluent as *bums*, *welfare queens*, and so on, then poor people's interests will be systematically discounted relative to their actual weight and importance. Such a scenario not only tends to produce harmful outcomes for the fulfillment of poor people's interests. It also embodies, in itself, a systematic failure of respect for persons.¹⁹

¹⁸ For a first-person discussion of this phenomenon, see Ehrenreich, Barbara. 2001.

¹⁹ Even if it is too strong to say that respect for persons "consists in" giving appropriate weight to their interests (Raz, Joseph. 1986. *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 188), I take it that just about any plausible theory of respect holds that such a response is at least a necessary condition of respect for persons.

IV.

Clearly, social networks and invidious stereotypes are just two of the many kinds of interpersonal relationships that lacking resources tends to make people susceptible to losing or falling into. But I hope the previous section, albeit brief and suggestive, gives some concrete sense of what it would mean to fill in the content of poverty as a social relation. The endeavor is both sociological and normative: sociological, because it is an empirical question what kinds of relationships people are susceptible to losing or falling into in different social contexts as a result of lack of resources; and normative, because the importance we attribute to losing or falling into these relationships depends on prior assumptions about what kinds of relationships are valuable or negative, independently of the details of one's particular conception of the good life. In the space that remains, I want to consider an objection to the proposal that poverty can be productively understood as a kind of social relation. I will then say a bit more about the kinds of moral considerations generated by loss of social networks and invidious stereotyping. Finally, I will briefly mention a few practical proposals these considerations count in favor of.

The objection I want to consider begins by pointing out that it is hardly news that lacking resources often has bad consequences for one's interpersonal relationships. To give just a few salient examples, following Smith, Sen has emphasized that relative material deprivation can beget absolute capability deprivation when having far less money than others prevents you from buying the clothes you need to appear in public without shame according to prevailing social norms.²⁰ Similarly, Martha Nussbaum explicitly builds interpersonal relationships into her account of the capabilities approach by listing *affiliation* and *control over one's political*

²⁰ Sen, Amartya. 1983, 159

environment as among the canonical ten, where these include things like not being disrespected or discriminated against and enjoying freedom of association.²¹ Given this, one may wonder whether we need anything so grand as a conception of “poverty as a social relation.” Why not treat relational disadvantages due to lack of resources as simply one aspect of poverty-as-capability-deprivation? Indeed, one may press the objection further. Positing a distinct conception of poverty as a social relation not only seems otiose and unparsimonious. It suggests a deeper worry: that on the ameliorative view, there is a multiplicity of conceptions of poverty, each corresponding to different “jobs” we have reason to want the concept of poverty to do, leaving us without any clear handle on what the phenomenon is that we’re trying to understand in the first place.

In response, let me begin by saying that this is, to some degree, a semantic issue. Whether articulating a conception of poverty as a social relation amounts to articulating a distinct conception of poverty, or whether it amounts to merely articulating an important facet of poverty-as-capabilities-deprivation, the substantive enterprise remains the same: enumerating the valuable interpersonal relationships one is susceptible to losing and the negative relationships one is susceptible to falling into if (and in virtue of the fact that) one lacks resources. In that sense, I have no bone to pick with the capabilities approach. Indeed, I am happy to re-describe this proposal as an elaboration of the relational dimensions of the capabilities approach to poverty, for those who are persuaded by that approach. Similarly, I do not think anything substantive turns on the question of whether we “count” poverty as a social relation as a distinct conception or as one facet of a more general, ameliorative conception of poverty as disadvantage due to lack of resources that generates moral reasons in favor of mitigation. I do, however, want

²¹ Nussbaum. 2000.

to resist the idea that there is one (and only one) correct conception of poverty. The spirit of the ameliorative approach is to reject this quasi-Platonic assumption, emphasizing the fact that concepts serve practical ends, and that there's value in having different conceptions of a concept depending on how we understand the point of having such a concept in the first place.

Of course, I haven't yet identified a *positive* reason for framing poverty as a social relation as a distinct conception of poverty. Briefly, here are three. First, it encourages us to be more *fine-grained* about the kinds of relationships that poverty exposes people to losing or falling into. I think there is some risk of underspecification if we subsume relational disadvantages under very broad headings like affiliation, control over one's political environment, etc., which in turn are understood as several among many broad categories of human well-being. This underscores the sociological aspect of poverty as a social relation and the non-ideal methodological orientation of this project. A second reason to frame poverty as a social relation as a distinct conception of poverty is that this encourages us to see patterns of causal interdependence between different kinds of positive and negative relationships. For example, if we start with the basic thought that poverty is a social position defined by positive and negative interpersonal relationships, we can more easily see how relationships of domination between landlords and tenants can undermine (or be mitigated by) community-based social networks. A third, more theoretical reason is that explicitly conceptualizing poverty as a social relation contributes to a relational understanding of justice. Relational approaches to justice are sometimes objected to on the grounds that they are purely formal or devoid of substantive implications.²² Demonstrating that poverty can be productively understood as a kind of social

²² For a discussion of this objection, see Scheffler, Samuel. 2015.

relation allays that worry by example. Given the salience of debates about distributive versus relational approaches to justice, this result is arguably of independent theoretical interest.

For these reasons, I think there is a positive case to be made for framing poverty as a social relation as a distinct conception of poverty. But again, I don't think anything substantive ultimately hinges on that individuation. The basic point is that poverty is in part a moral concept, denoting people who are disadvantaged due to lack of resources in ways that generate moral reasons, and that an important class of these disadvantages are relational in kind.

I now want to briefly consider the kinds of moral reasons generated by the specific relational disadvantages discussed in this paper. In particular, I want to suggest that loss of social networks and exposure to invidious stereotypes generate reasons of *justice* in favor of mitigation. Clearly, it is beyond the scope of this paper to defend a general view about when moral considerations are reasons of justice. I will simply register the thought that if major social institutions are properly held *accountable* for a particular harm, then there is a case to be made that this harm generates reasons of justice. I understand major social institutions to encompass the Rawlsian basic structure, as well as informal social practices that exert a significant degree of influence on the workings of major institutions. With respect to social networks, it is clear that major social institutions are directly implicated in many of the harms to social networks that arise due to lack of resources. For example, when someone loses access to valuable social networks because she is evicted from her home on grounds of nonpayment, that harm is the *direct and foreseeable result* of the threat or application of *state coercion*.²³ In addition, legal institutions are directly responsible for conferring symbolic and material recognition on different kinship structures. And although accountability for harmful stereotypes is more diffuse and

²³ A point vividly brought home in Desmond, Matthew. 2016.

difficult to assign, it seems clear that there is such a thing as a stereotype's being *institutionalized*, in the sense that the representation of social groups embodied by the stereotype guides institutional deliberation about actual members of those groups. Concretely, such deliberation includes the practical reasoning of citizens and legislators about how to vote, of judges about how to decide cases, of police and prosecutors about whom to target for arrest and prosecution, of employers about whom to hire and fire, and so on. Much more would need to be said to fill in the details, of course, but considerations like these support the thought that the relational disadvantages under discussion do generate reasons of justice.

I want to conclude this chapter with a few practical suggestions. First, the fact that poor people are disproportionately reliant on social networks whilst also being especially vulnerable to losing them indicates that there are weighty *pro tanto* reasons of justice in favor of investing in social capital and relational goods for the poor. Concretely, this means improving public spaces, public accommodations, and public services in poor neighborhoods, as well as rethinking family law's preferential treatment for the nuclear family. Stereotypes are harder to correct, and the best remedy may simply be the byproduct of policies directly tailored to more material harms. But one way to change a stereotype is to increase the prominence of *counterstereotypical exemplars*. Reducing the ghettoization of poor people and the stigma attached to "coming out" as poor or formerly poor would decrease both the literal and the metaphorical distance between the poor and the affluent, making it harder for dehumanizing stereotypes like the *bum* and the *welfare queen* to take hold. Given the role these stereotypes play in obscuring or discounting the interests of poor people, this could promote a positive feedback loop where policymaking is better-informed by an appreciation of poor people's interests, which in turn leads to outcomes that further erode dehumanizing stereotypes.

What, more specifically, can we as academics do? Here I want to enter somewhat more uncomfortable terrain, by considering the phenomenon of poverty *within* academia. Specifically, I want to consider the phenomenon of contingent or “adjunct” faculty in the United States. In short, the past generation has seen increasing reliance on faculty who are paid on a per-course basis, receive little or no health insurance, and often fall at or below the federally-defined minimum wage. One study found that American adjuncts earn a median of \$2700 per course, while another found that a majority of adjuncts earn less than \$20,000 per year from teaching.²⁴ The relational harms discussed in this paper characterize the reality of life for many adjuncts. Because adjuncts’ contracts are up for renewal every semester, their ties to students and colleagues are necessarily provisional. At the same time, because they usually lack institutional support for research and aren’t paid enough to subsidize their own professional expenses to a significant degree, attending conferences and building relationships with colleagues at other institutions is often impossible. In this respect, they share the predicament of low-wage contingent workers in any field. Finally, although adjuncts are less likely to be stereotyped as “bums” or “welfare queens” simply in virtue of their education, there are other pernicious stereotypes about adjuncts that may cause their interests to be obscured or discounted, like the stereotype that adjuncts are not dedicated to their work, have “failed” due to lack of talent, and so on. The upshot is that adjunct faculty are susceptible to many of the relational harms poor people in general are vulnerable to. It seems to me that philosophers working on poverty have a special obligation to support their adjunct colleagues. Assisting with unionization efforts,

²⁴ For an overview, see McKenna, Laura. 2015.

lobbying for procedural protections for contingent faculty, and destigmatizing academic labor that takes place outside the traditional tenure track are all measures we should take seriously.

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