

Talking of poverty: From the analytical to the political

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journals.sagepub.com/home/das**Keetie Roelen** 

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Abstract

Poverty talk has far-reaching effects at personal and society level. Overwhelmingly negative narratives undermine mental health of people in poverty and forces them in a position to cope with, resist and contradict the fallacious stereotypes that are spread about them. Narratives are not shaped in a vacuum, nor are they value neutral. Power is at the heart of poverty discourse, with words carefully curated to create and reinforce societal hierarchies and inequalities. Building on the contributions in this special issue, this conclusion therefore argues that studies of poverty discourse cannot confine themselves to the analytical but must also engage with the political.

Keywords

Poverty, poverty talk, power, poverty discourse, stereotypes

Introduction

Poverty discourse matters. At a societal level, it shapes the conditions within which poverty is constructed, counteracted or prevented, and feeds welfare, anti-poverty and employment policies (Pellissery et al., 2014). At a personal level, it shapes perceptions of oneself, with negative narratives commonly leading to self-stigma and poor mental health (Inglis et al., 2023). Analysis of ‘poverty talk’, the form it takes, and by whom, how and for what reason it is produced is vital for understanding its impact at these two levels. Studies of poverty discourse, I argue, therefore need to engage with the political as much as the analytical.

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Stereotypes, blame and resistance

It is widely documented that when it comes to poverty discourse, negative narratives prevail, in the UK and elsewhere (Bray, 2020). People in poverty are portrayed as lazy, dependent and unwilling to work, with labels such as ‘scroungers’, ‘skivers’, ‘benefit broods’ or ‘welfare queens’ commonplace (Mould, 2020; Patrick, 2016). Contributions in this issue contribute to evidence of the pervasiveness of negative labelling and stereotyping of individuals living on a low income (Jordan et al., 2024), without a permanent home (Harkins and Lugo-Ocanda, 2024), or out of employment (Tarkiainen et al., 2024) across European contexts.

A common denominator across negative narratives is that poverty and financial insecurity are framed as individual failings rather than structural problems. The appeal for doing so is two-fold. First, it allows for narratives’ producers and consumers to absolve themselves of the responsibility to engage with poverty as a collective issue. Second, it affords them the opportunity to take ownership of their own socioeconomic fortunes. After all, claiming responsibility for one’s own success is merely the reverse of blaming others for their hardship (Sandel, 2020). However, locating the problem of poverty with ‘them’ rather than considering it an issue for ‘us’ lays the foundation for blaming and shaming of people in poverty (O’Hara, 2020), and stripping them of their humanity (Taylor, 2020).

Alternative narratives exist based on analysis of multi-million-word corpora of *The Times* newspaper between 1900 and 2009, Paterson (2024) shows how constructions of poverty that frame it as an issue for groups with limited economic autonomy, such as child poverty or pensioner poverty, suggest diminished responsibility for their predicament. Similarly, typification of fuel poverty that highlight its dynamic and unpredictable nature suggests that suffering this type of hardship is due to factors beyond individual control.

Contributions in this issue also showcase that low-income individuals themselves are influenced but not bound by pervasive negative public discourse in constructing narratives about the reasons for living on a low income. Welfare recipients in the UK hold a so-called ‘shared typical’ in understanding poverty as a largely structural problem and denouncing the widely held perception that a struggle to make ends meet is the result of individual failure (Jordan et al., 2024). Similarly, one of three ways in which participants in the Finnish Basic Income Experiment constructed poverty was to attribute the problem within factors outside of personal control, such as lack of access to well-paid and secure jobs and limited welfare support (Tarkiainen et al., 2024).

However, it is certainly not the case that those on a low income necessarily ascribe to narratives that frame poverty as a structural challenge, for others or themselves.

To manage stigma resulting from negative discourse, ‘othering’ is well-evidenced in the UK as a strategy for low-income individuals to distance themselves from others in arguably similar situations and drive a wedge between explanations for their own and others’ poverty (Hudson et al., 2016; Patrick, 2016). This othering strategy can also be found across low- and middle-income country contexts (Roelen, 2020). In South Africa, for example, low-income women receiving a means-tested child benefit justified their entitlement to government support by attributing their financial precarity to a lack of

jobs, but suggested that other female child benefit recipients were lazy and unwilling to work (Hochfeld and Plagerson, 2011).

Moreover, resistance to prevailing discourse – by proposing a narrative that locates the issue of poverty outside individual control – does not preclude internalisation of fault. Participants in the Finnish Basic Income Experiment, for example, simultaneously constructed poverty as caused by external factors and apportioned a degree of self-blame for their financial insecurity (Tarkiainen et al., 2024). The co-existence of narratives framing poverty as personal fault or structural flaw is also present in representations in media. As Paterson (2024) points out, a move away from conceptualising poverty as a singular construct on a sliding scale of severity – from moderate to extreme poverty, for example – towards the establishment of distinct categories of poverty – such as fuel poverty – allows for those engaging in poverty talk to demonise some (e.g. unemployed or homeless individuals) while simultaneously be sympathetic to others (e.g. children or pensioners) ‘without contradiction’.

Discrimination and power

Analyses of ‘poverty talk’ offer important insight into the types of prevalent narratives and how these co-exist. However, assessments of who says what about poverty cannot be separated from a consideration of how narratives serve to exert and sustain power, especially with poverty discourse so overwhelmingly (re-)producing negative stereotypes.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights Olivier de Schutter speaks of ‘povertyism’ to denote ‘negative stereotyping against the poor’ and how it feeds into discrimination of people in poverty, excluding them of services and support they are entitled to and denying them of their human rights (UNGA, 2022: 4). Povertyism is not accidental. Stories of (people in) poverty are carefully crafted and created in a context of great inequality and power differentials, and commonly serve to maintain and feed the status quo. A narrow focus on personal responsibility and denial of structural processes in the (re-production) of poverty gives way to policies that ‘profile, police and punish’ the poor (Eubanks, 2018). Indeed, welfare and anti-poverty policies across the Global North, and to some extent in the Global South, have become increasingly premised on conditions and sanctions (Gubrium and Lødemel, 2014).

In the case of the UK, Taylor (2020) and O’Hara (2020) argue that stereotyping and stigmatisation was used to justify the hollowing out of welfare as part of the ‘austerity project’. Taylor (2020) notes ‘When we theorise stigma as embedded within political economies – as the lubricant of neoliberal capitalism – we can begin to understand how stigma functions to devalue entire groups of people, with the purpose of fortifying existing social hierarchies, reproducing inequalities and creating new opportunities for capital’ (p. 189). In her analysis of the political use of poverty discourse, O’Hara writes ‘those who advocate for cutting (even eradicating) social safety nets persistently paint programmes established to help the poorest as exorbitantly wasteful of valuable “taxpayers” money, . . . So often do these purveyors of the narrative repeat this fallacy as if fact that the British and American public consistently and vastly overestimate the spend, reach and defrauding of welfare programmes’ (p. 4).

The instrumentalisation of poverty discourse forces low-income individuals to resist and denounce the tropes and stereotypes imposed upon them, and to actively offer and convince the public of an alternative reality. As noted by Harkins and Lugo-Ocando (2024), sellers of *The Big Issue* need to ‘engage in performative cheerfulness’ to counteract negative perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness and entice potential customers to buy the magazine. It places people in poverty in a double bind: First, they stand accused of being in poverty, and witness their support being cut back, conditioned or withheld. Second, the onus for challenging these accusations, and thereby proving their ‘deservingness’ for support, is on them.

Beyond considering how poverty is discussed in public discourse, we must also consider whether the issue of poverty features at all, and what its presence or absence signifies. As evidenced by Ras and Koning (2024), the absence of poverty in Dutch parliamentary debates about responding to the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism (SECTT) reveals a policy shift towards punishing abusers and perpetrators, at the expense of recognising and addressing poverty as an underlying cause of the problem. Doing so, Ras and Koning (2024) argue, facilitated and justified a move away from anti-poverty efforts through international development aid.

The far-reaching consequences of whether and how poverty features in public discourse requires moving away from prevailing negative, and largely fallacious, narratives. Opening space for voices of lived experience experts is vital for doing so. The Changing Realities research project (Jordan et al., 2024) and predecessor COVID Realities project constitute positive and promising examples of meaningful engagement with lived experience experts, and getting policy makers and politicians to take notice and listen. The ‘Merging of Knowledge’ approach developed by anti-poverty activists of ATD Fourth World offers another powerful lived experience-led alternative to the production of poverty talk (Bennett, 2024).

It should be noted that simply offering a platform to voices of those with lived experience does not suffice, it is also about who curates this space. In their analysis of a regular column in *The Big Issue* giving space to the stories and words of its homeless vendors, Harkins and Lugo-Ocando (2024) highlight the power exercised by the magazine’s editors in shaping those stories, emphasising the transformative benefits of being a *The Big Issue* vendor and potentially downplaying stories of structural disadvantage.

In sum, poverty talk is political. The language we adopt is not value-neutral, nor does it occur in a vacuum. Analysis of how poverty is constructed, portrayed, and discussed cannot be detached from a consideration of who stands to win or lose from those narratives. Counteracting widely repeated falsehoods and shifting engrained negative discourse is vital for creating more equal and fair societies. Doing so requires acknowledgement of, engagement with and interrogation of power in the production and use of poverty talk.

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Author biography

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