

*A New
Paradigm*

Progress is impossible without change; and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.

George Bernard Shaw

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IN 1984, JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH gave a commencement address titled "The Convenient Reverse Logic of Our Time" to the graduating students at American University. The central theme of Galbraith's talk was that, rather than moving from diagnosis to remedy in social policy, we have witnessed with greater frequency the rise of a reverse logic, moving from a preferred remedy to an appropriate diagnosis. As Galbraith explained,

Increasingly in recent times we have come first to identify the remedy that is most agreeable, most convenient, most in accord with major pecuniary or political interest, the one that reflects our available faculty for action; then we move from the remedy so available or desired back to a cause to which that remedy is relevant. (1986: 35)

Galbraith went on to illustrate with the example of poverty. Referring to poverty as "our most devastating social failure in this greatly affluent age and land" and "the heaviest burden

on our social conscience," he noted that rather than devising social policies that would address the root causes of poverty, we have instead defined the causes of poverty in a way that is consistent with our preferred policy strategies. These strategies have included cutting back on the role and scope of the federal government, seeking policies that are relatively inexpensive, shifting responsibility to the state and local levels, stressing personal responsibility, and so on. Galbraith observed,

From this need as to remedy we move back to the new cause of poverty. It is that the poor lack motivation—and they lack motivation because they are already unduly rewarded. That cause, once agreed upon, then calls for reduced expenditure on public services and less aid to the disadvantaged. So, in the recent past we have had, as an antipoverty measure, a broad curtailment of income and services to the poor. (1986: 36)

This tendency to view the nature of social problems in terms of a desired policy was anticipated one hundred years earlier by the French historian Albert Sorel, who observed, "There is an eternal dispute between those who imagine the world to suit their policy, and those who correct their policy to suit the realities of the world" (Platt, 1989: 258).

The argument in this final third of the book is that the old strategies for addressing poverty have rested on an imagined world that reflects a preferred set of myths, agendas, and policies, whereas a new approach to poverty alleviation must put in place a set of policies that reflects the realities of the world. These policies should be grounded in a new understanding of the nature and meaning of American poverty. This chapter is intended to provide the details of such a paradigm.

The premise for beginning here is a simple one—that how we view poverty is critical to guiding how we will address it. Part of America's ineffectiveness in reducing poverty during the past three decades stems from its skewed and incorrect perception of impoverishment. Imagine a doctor treating a patient on the basis of the wrong diagnosis. The chances are that the prescribed cure will have a negligible effect on the illness and perhaps make the patient worse. Such has been the case with U.S. poverty.

In short, we have followed a paradigm that has reflected a view of the world as many would like to see it, rather than being led by a paradigm that reflects the world as it really is. Fundamental change must therefore begin

with a shifting of our understanding of poverty from one based upon the old ways of thinking to one based upon a new conceptualization.

I begin this chapter by briefly describing the major tenets of the old paradigm. Much of this will be quite familiar, since variations of it can be heard in political sound bites, mainstream policy research, the popular media, and informal discussions with one's neighbors. I then describe the foundations of a new paradigm for comprehending poverty. This paradigm is based upon several of the major themes found within the first two-thirds of this book and represents a sharp break from the old ways of viewing poverty. Finally, I conclude with several examples intended to illustrate that a paradigm shift in thinking can occur within a relatively short span.

The Old Paradigm

The old paradigm has been the dominant poverty perspective over a prolonged period of time. Indeed, aspects of it have been with us since the beginnings of the country. It is to a large extent a reflection and affirmation of both the free-market economic structure and the culture of individualism which have profoundly shaped the ideology of the United States. It has experienced ebbs and flows over time but appears to have been gaining in ascendancy since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. At its core is the belief that both the causes and the solutions to poverty are to be found within the individual.

This paradigm begins with the key assumption that the American economic system generates abundant economic prosperity and well-being for all. The familiar phrases "rags to riches," "the land of opportunity," and "the American Dream" are emblematic of this. The assumption is not that everyone will be rich, but that with enough hard work and initiative, nearly everyone is capable of achieving and sustaining a modest and comfortable lifestyle. Given this assumption, poverty becomes understood largely as a result of individual failure.

According to this view, both the causes of and the solutions to poverty can be found within the context of the individual. The causes of poverty are seen primarily as individual inadequacies. There is a conservative and a liberal version of this. The conservative version of individual inadequacies tends to focus more heavily on personality characteristics. These include various

character flaws, such as an absence of strong morals, failure to exert responsibility, laziness, an inability to save and plan for the future, a lack of intelligence, or addiction to alcohol and/or drugs (Gilder, 1981; Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Schwartz, 2000). These are typified by Charles Murray's comments, noted at the beginning of chapter 2, in which he characterized poor unmarried women as rotten mothers who would rather party than take care of their children. As a result of these character flaws, individuals are thought to be unable to take advantage of the opportunities that are readily available. It is also believed that government policy exacerbates these problems when it puts in place social programs that do not encourage morality or work (Mead, 1986, 1992). As Robert Rector and William Lauber wrote in their Heritage Foundation report, *America's Failed \$5.4 Trillion War on Poverty*,

The welfare system has paid for non-work and non-marriage and has achieved massive increases in both. By undermining the work ethic and rewarding illegitimacy, the welfare system insidiously generates its own clientele. . . . Welfare bribes individuals into courses of behavior which in the long run are self-defeating to the individual, harmful to children, and increasingly a threat to society. (1995: 23)

Consequently, according to the conservative version of the old paradigm, badly designed social welfare programs can encourage people into making destructive decisions during their lives, such as dropping out of school, having children out of wedlock, not getting married, failing to take a low paying job, or engaging in crime.¹

The liberal version of the old paradigm tends to focus more on the lack of marketable skills, training, and education, as well as on other characteristics that put the poor at a disadvantage in competing in the labor market. The focus is largely on the inadequate human capital that the poor have acquired. This, in addition to particular characteristics (such as being a single parent or having large numbers of children), hinders the ability of particular Americans to compete in the economy and thereby raises their risk of poverty. Rather than focusing on individual inadequacies as represented by character flaws, the liberal version views individuals as inadequate in terms of their skills, training, and education. As noted in chapter 3, the mainstream research community has basically reinforced this approach

by focusing on individual and demographic attributes to explain behavior such as impoverishment.

What follows from either version is that the poor are by and large at fault for their poverty. This is the result of their not having enough fortitude and morality for getting ahead, making bad judgments in life, and/or failing to acquire the skills necessary to compete in today's economy. The concept of blame permeates the old paradigm.² The age-old distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor, mentioned in chapter 6, is of course central to this—unless the working-age poor have a very good reason to explain their poverty (such as a debilitating illness not brought on by their own doing), they are seen as largely undeserving of help from others. Rather, they have only themselves to blame.

Closely connected to the issue of blame is the fact that the poor are viewed as different from mainstream Americans. They are frequently perceived as not being motivated enough, dropping out of high school, having children out of wedlock, failing to have the qualified skills for a higher paying job, and so forth (rather than as working steadily at low-paying jobs, trying to be good parents to their children, and paying taxes throughout their lives). Not only are the poor to blame for their impoverishment, but they are portrayed as not playing by the rules and therefore outside the mainstream American experience. These differences can be seen within the popular media, where the poor are often depicted as inner-city minority residents, women on welfare, street criminals, the homeless, or taken together, as synonymous with what has been labeled the underclass. Such images graphically convey a sense of their physical separation from middle America.

In addition to this physical separation, the human dimension of poverty is rarely discussed within the old paradigm, once again creating a distance between the poor and the rest of America. The pain of poverty is largely wiped away. Rather, poverty is viewed through the lens of individual inadequacy. Much of the empirical literature has also reinforced this superficiality. Poverty has routinely been reduced to a set of numbers and correlations.³ The old paradigm tends to treat poverty in a one-dimensional fashion, either as an unflattering stereotype or as a set of regression coefficients.

Turning to solutions, the key according to the old framework is to address personal inadequacies. Again, there is a conservative and a more liberal version of this. The conservative view is that encouraging and rewarding

individual initiative and responsibility is critical. The desired behaviors include working harder, staying married, and not having children out of wedlock. Social policy should reinforce and encourage such behavior. Indeed, the title of the 1996 welfare reform act was the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.

On the other hand, cash assistance and generous welfare programs are believed not to be the answer because they may create disincentives for engaging in responsible behavior. Such was the argument made by Alexis de Tocqueville in his 1832 address to the Royal Academic Society of Cherbourg (1983), and such was the argument popularized 150 years later in Charles Murray's book *Losing Ground* (1984). As President George W. Bush noted, "Many are learning it is more rewarding to be a responsible citizen than a welfare client" (Bush, 2002). The distinction between responsibility on the one hand and the use of welfare on the other is critical from this perspective. Mainstream economic studies have also devoted considerable attention to the issue of incentives and disincentives within the welfare system, and, although the effects have been small, the fact that such a large body of work continues to focus on this question serves to legitimate the issue.

The liberal solution to poverty according to the old framework is to provide greater opportunities and access to job training and education, while demanding personal responsibility and motivation in return. The concept of the New Democrat epitomizes this view. As Bill Clinton stated in his 1992 Democratic National Convention acceptance speech in New York City, "We offer our people a new choice based on old values. We offer opportunity. We demand responsibility" (Clinton, 1992: 226). Or as former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle said ten years later regarding welfare reform, "As we demand responsibility, we need to provide greater opportunity" (Toner, 2002). The focus is thus on providing opportunities intended to upgrade the poor's limited human capital, with the strong expectation that individuals will make the most of these opportunities.

From the viewpoint of the old paradigm, our collective responsibility toward poverty is somewhat limited. Since poverty is viewed as the problem of the individual, it is up to the poor themselves to improve their condition. From the conservative view, society and those in authority should use their positions as a moral bully pulpit to encourage the poor to behave in responsible ways. Welfare programs and social policy should be structured in a manner that supports such behavior. Within the liberal version of the old

paradigm, society should ensure that the poverty stricken have access to the means of building their education and skills. It is then up to the poor to take advantage of such opportunities.⁴ As John Kingdon writes in describing this American approach,

If unfortunate people were regarded as the victims of forces beyond their control, or simply down on their luck, then we could see our way clear to having government provide for them: "There but for the grace of God go I." But if, in the land of opportunity, they're responsible for their own condition, then self-help rather than government help is the appropriate prescription. At most, government programs should be designed to enhance opportunity, but nothing more. (1999: 37)

Ultimately, the old paradigm reflects and reinforces the myths and ideals of American society—that there are economic opportunities for all, that individualism and self-reliance are paramount, and that hard work is rewarded. Although poverty may be regrettable, it would be a mistake to call it unfair. It should not be surprising that the dominant paradigm of poverty is a reflection of the overall dominant ideology of America. While there are conservative and liberal versions of this paradigm, both reflect these ideals and myths.

It is particularly ironic (and indicative of its strength) that even those in poverty tend to adhere strongly to this paradigm. The example of Denise Turner in chapter 1 is typical. In my conversations with Denise, she repeatedly emphasized that hard work and effort would allow her to make it in spite of the formidable obstacles and hardships she had suffered. Surveys have consistently found that the poor tend to reiterate the mainstream values reflected in the old paradigm. Furthermore, those in poverty are often quick to characterize the overall situations of the poor and welfare recipients along the lines of the old paradigm, while carefully characterizing their own circumstance as different from this pejorative view (Rank, 1994). The paradox of believing in yet distancing oneself from the common stereotype is often the case for members of stigmatized groups (Goffman, 1963).

One of the reasons that American poverty is so severe is precisely the result of this mindset. The old paradigm offers little in the way of ideas for truly understanding and addressing poverty and, in fact, provides a justification for doing little. The one task that is undertaken is the never ending

charge of reforming and analyzing welfare. Yet as we continue to modify the incentives and disincentives that are embedded in the social safety net, U.S. poverty remains the worst in the industrialized world. This appears to be a modern version of Nero fiddling while Rome burns. Fundamental change in confronting poverty must begin with a fundamental change in how poverty is viewed and understood. We now turn to what such a new paradigm might look like.

A New Paradigm

A new paradigm must be built not upon the myths of America but upon its realities. It should reflect a fuller appreciation of the meaning of poverty, rather than the one-dimensional view to which we are too often exposed. It must ultimately stimulate a fundamental shift in how we conceptualize and act toward the problem of poverty. Drawing on the various arguments and evidence presented in the first two-thirds of this book, I develop several themes that are intended to lay the foundation for such a paradigm.

Poverty Results from Structural Failings

The starting point for a new paradigm is the recognition that American poverty is largely the result of structural failings. As we discussed in chapter 3, there simply are not enough viable opportunities for all Americans. Individual deficiencies, such as the lack of human capital, help to explain who is more likely to be left out in the competition to locate and secure such opportunities, but it cannot explain why there is a shortage of opportunities in the first place. In order to answer that question, we must turn to the inability of the economic, political, and social structures to provide the supports and opportunities necessary to lift all Americans out of poverty.

The most obvious example of this is the mismatch between the number of decent-paying jobs and the pool of labor in search of such jobs. As was demonstrated in chapter 3, the failure of the labor market to lift all households out of poverty was substantial—between 9.4 and 32.7 percent of household heads were unable to raise their families out of poverty or near-poverty through their job earnings. Nearly one-third of household heads were in jobs that paid less than \$10.00 an hour. It should be noted that these percent-

ages do not include discouraged workers who have dropped out of the labor force or the approximately two million Americans incarcerated. The inability of the economy to produce enough viable job opportunities can also be seen in the levels of unemployment, which have ranged between 4 and 10 percent during the past forty years.

Exacerbating this situation is the fact that the American social safety net is extremely weak, resulting in sizable numbers of families who fall through its rather large holes. The United States has also failed to offer the types of universal coverage for child care, medical insurance, child allowances, or affordable housing that most other developed countries routinely provide. The result is an increasing number of families at risk of economic vulnerability and poverty.

Let us return to the analogy of musical chairs (introduced in chapter 3) to illustrate the relationship between these structural failures and the fact that those who experience poverty tend to have certain characteristics such as low levels of education or devalued skills. Picture a game of musical chairs in which there are ten players but only eight chairs available at any point in time. Those who are likely to lose out at this game tend to have characteristics that put them at a disadvantage in terms of competing for the available chairs (e.g., less education, fewer skills, head of single-parent families). However, given that the game is structured in a way such that two players are bound to lose, a deficiency in marketable attributes explains only who loses out, not why there are losers in the first place.

The critical mistake that has been made in the past by those who employ the old paradigm is that they have equated the question of who loses out at the game with the question of why the game produces losers in the first place. These are, in fact, distinct and separate questions. While deficiencies in human capital and other marketable characteristics help to explain who in the population is at a heightened risk of encountering poverty, the fact that poverty exists in the first place results not from these characteristics but from the lack of decent opportunities and supports in society. By focusing solely on individual characteristics, such as levels of education, we can shuffle people up or down in terms of their being more likely to land a job with good earnings, but we are still going to have somebody lose out if there are not enough decent-paying jobs to go around. In short, we are playing a large-scale version of musical chairs in which there are many more players than there are chairs.

The recognition of this dynamic represents a fundamental shift in thinking from the old paradigm. It helps to explain why the social policies of the past two decades have been largely ineffective in reducing the rates of poverty. We have focused our attention and resources on either altering the incentives and disincentives for those playing the game or, in a very limited way, upgrading their skills and ability to compete in the game, while at the same time we have left the structure of the game untouched.

When the overall poverty rates in the United States do in fact go up or down, they do so primarily as a result of impacts on the structural level that increase or decrease the number of available chairs. In particular, the performance of the economy has historically been important. Why? Because when the economy is expanding, more opportunities (or chairs) are available for the competing pool of labor and their families. The reverse occurs when the economy slows down and contracts. Consequently, during the 1930s and the early 1980s, when the economy was doing badly, poverty rates went up, while during periods of economic prosperity, such as the 1960s or the middle to late 1990s, the overall rates of poverty declined.

Changes in various social supports and the social safety net available to families also make a difference in terms of how well such households are able to avoid poverty or near-poverty. When such supports were increased through the War on Poverty initiatives in the 1960s, poverty rates declined. Likewise, when Social Security benefits were expanded during the 1960s and 1970s, poverty rates among the elderly declined precipitously. Conversely, when social supports have been weakened and eroded, as in the case of children's programs over the past 25 years, children's rates of poverty have gone up.⁵

The recognition of poverty as a structural failing also makes it quite clear why the United States has such high rates of poverty compared to other Western countries. These rates have nothing to do with Americans being less motivated or less skilled than citizens of other countries but have everything to do with the fact that our economy has been producing a plethora of low-wage jobs in the face of global competition and that our social policies have done little to support families compared to policies in European countries. From this perspective, one of the keys to addressing poverty is to increase the labor market opportunities and social supports available to American households. Chapter 8 goes into detail regarding the specifics of such an approach.

In sum, a shift in thinking about the causes of poverty from an individually based explanation to a structurally based explanation allows us to distinguish and make sense of two specific questions. First, why does poverty exist? Second, who is more likely to experience poverty? The structural vulnerability explanation, with its musical chairs analogy, answers both questions. Poverty exists primarily because there is a shortage of viable economic opportunities and social supports for the entire population. Given this shortage, a certain percentage of the population is ensured of experiencing poverty. Individuals with a heightened risk of being on the short end of the economic stick will be those who are least able to effectively compete for the limited number of decent economic opportunities. This includes those with fewer marketable skills, less education, or ill health, as well as single parents, racial minorities, and residents in economically depressed areas. A new paradigm recognizes the fundamental distinction between understanding who loses out at the game and understanding how and why the game produces losers in the first place.

Poverty Is a Conditional State That Individuals Move In and Out Of

A second major premise underlying the new paradigm is the recognition of poverty as a conditional state that individuals move in and out of. Within the old way of thinking, we have talked and written about poor people. Yet the term *poor people* is in many respects a misnomer. As we have seen, individuals and households move in and out of the state of poverty, rather than remaining *poor people* throughout their lives. In addition, a majority of Americans experience impoverishment at some point during the life course.

Rather than framing the issue as one of poor people, our focus should be on the condition of poverty. This condition affects a very large percentage of the population at some point across the lifespan. The typical pattern is that individuals experience poverty for a year or two, get above the poverty line for an extended period of time, and then perhaps experience another spell at some later point. This was illustrated in chapter 2, as well as in the life course patterns discussed in chapter 4. The recognition of poverty as a conditional state into and out of which a majority of the population will move is fundamentally different from the static notion of poor people.

One way to illustrate this is with the concept of sickness. Most people are healthy for varying periods of time but periodically experience some kind of illness, such as a cold or the flu. In such cases, we would not define these individuals as sick people (even though they have experienced sickness) but rather would say that they are individuals who occasionally experience the condition of being ill. The appropriate focus is on recognizing the episodic nature of the condition, rather than defining the lives of such individuals in terms of the condition.

Certainly it may be the case that some people are more prone to sickness (just as some people are more prone to poverty). But even in these cases, we do not generally define such individuals as *sick people*. Only in the case of a chronic disease might we characterize such a person in terms of their illness.

The dynamics of poverty are much like those of sickness. Yet the old paradigm of poverty often lumps everyone who experiences poverty into the category of *poor people* or the *underclass*. The point I am making here does not deny that people experience periods in their lives when they are poor but argues that the label *poor people* reinforces a very static and unchanging image of who encounters poverty. Returning to our analogy, it would not make much sense to define everyone who at some point in the past has experienced a sickness as a sick person. But this appears to be what we do when we define those who have experienced poverty as poor people.

An additional consequence of such labeling is to solidify poverty as a dividing line that separates the population. The old paradigm strengthens the separation between the notions of poor and nonpoor. It fails to recognize the critical point that most Americans are actually both. Rather than pulling us together, the old paradigm pulls us apart.

Conversely, a new paradigm recognizes that poverty is a conditional state and an economic risk that many Americans will encounter. There is an awareness of the fluid nature of poverty and of the fact that a majority of Americans will experience poverty at some point during their lives. Individuals typically move between the states of being nonpoor and poor during their life course.

A new paradigm considers the condition of poverty, rather than those who occupy the condition, as harmful and deleterious. Poverty has the potential to undermine human well-being and development. It creates a number of problems for those who occupy its ranks. It can result in long-term

consequences, depending upon the severity and the length of poverty experienced. This appears to be particularly true in the case of children's development. Children who grow up with extended bouts of severe poverty may experience permanent scars in terms of their health, educational attainment, or acquisition of skills and abilities.

Once again we can return to our illness analogy. On the one hand, ill health creates temporary pain and suffering for those who experience it. Yet individuals generally pass through such conditions, returning to a state of relatively good health. On the other hand, severe health problems such as a heart attack or stroke may produce more lingering damage. Here there may be permanent harm to the heart or brain that undermines the individual's future quality of life. The dynamics of poverty can be understood in a similar fashion. Severe poverty over a prolonged period of time may create permanent damage to individuals and their families.

A second important building block for a new paradigm is therefore the recognition of poverty as a conditional state that individuals move in and out of. It represents an economic risk that most Americans will encounter. The appropriate focus is upon the condition of poverty and the temporary and sometimes long-term effects that such a state has on the individuals who pass through it.

Poverty Constitutes Deprivation

A third component of the new paradigm broadens the scope and meaning of poverty from that of low income to the wider concept of deprivation. As we have seen in chapters 2, 4, 5, and 6, poverty acts to deprive individuals and families in a number of ways. A new conception of poverty must recognize that impoverishment represents more than just a shortage of income. This has recently been emphasized in the attention that European governments and scholars (particularly in England, France, and the Netherlands) have been placing upon the concept of social exclusion, or "the inability to participate in the activities of normal living" (Glennester, 2002: 89; see Aguinik et al., 2002; Barnes et al., 2002; Bhalla and Lapeyre, 1999; Burchardt et al., 1999; United Kingdom Department of Social Security, 1999).

We have seen many illustrations of this point in prior chapters. Poverty undermines the quality of life for those in its ranks. As discussed in chapter 2, it results in serious compromises and struggles as people try to acquire

basic resources such as food, clothing, shelter, health care, and transportation. These struggles produce considerable stress in the lives of the poverty-stricken and their families.

Poverty results in a reduction in the quality of one's health. Poverty is associated with a host of elevated health risks, including undernutrition, heart disease, dental problems, diabetes, lead poisoning, and mental illness. The result is a decline in one's physical well-being, culminating in a death rate for the poverty-stricken that is substantially higher than that for the affluent.

Another area of reduced capabilities lies in the stunted or diminished life chances for children and adults. Growing up in poverty-stricken neighborhoods can result in an inferior education. Both the quality and the quantity of education received are often substandard. There is also a greater exposure to other risks, such as crime. These risks in turn result in a lowered likelihood that students will acquire the skills necessary to compete effectively in the labor market.

In addition, poverty undercuts the ability of adults to build their economic assets, which can affect later life chances. The old saying that it takes money to earn money is certainly true and applies to financial and property assets as well. The ability to build equity in a house or a retirement fund is severely constricted by poverty.

Impoverishment is also closely associated with deprivation in the area of work. Those in poverty may be out of work or employed at part-time or dead-end jobs that simply do not pay enough to support a family. Such work is often physically demanding and intellectually taxing (for example, see Ehrenreich, 2001). Employment and work have historically been a central part of the American identity. The failure to have a job that allows one to support oneself and one's family is a major source of frustration.

Finally, poverty undermines the capability of individuals to fully partake of the freedoms, rights, and opportunities to which all citizens are theoretically entitled. As touched upon in chapter 5, poverty diminishes an American's ability to fully exercise specific rights, such as the right to a fair trial, or to participate in the democratic process.

A new paradigm of poverty must therefore recognize that impoverishment encompasses more than just low income. The lack of income is clearly a critical component of poverty and represents a convenient, logical, and pragmatic starting point and measuring stick. But we must go beyond think-

ing of poverty solely in terms of low income.⁶ This involves incorporating a wider set of experiences and deprivations into our understanding. As Amartya Sen writes, "poverty must be seen as the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely as lowness of incomes, which is the standard criterion of identification of poverty" (1999: 87). He goes on to note,

Policy debates have indeed been distorted by overemphasis on income poverty and income inequality, to the neglect of deprivations that relate to other variables, such as unemployment, ill health, lack of education, and social exclusion. Unfortunately, the identification of economic inequality with income inequality is fairly common in economics, and the two are often seen as effectively synonymous. If you tell someone that you are working on economic inequality, it is quite standardly assumed that you are studying income distribution. (108)

An example of bringing several aspects of deprivation to bear upon the measurement of poverty is the United Nations development of a human poverty index for industrialized countries (United Nations Development Programme, 2003). This index incorporates four measures: (1) deprivation in survival (the percentage of people not expected to survive to age 60); (2) deprivation in knowledge (the percentage of people ages 16–65 who are functionally illiterate); (3) deprivation in income (the percentage of the population below the income poverty line); and (4) social exclusion (the percentage of the total labor force that has been unemployed for twelve or more months). Such an index begins to reflect the wider meaning and scope of poverty.

It also reveals variations and differences that may not be apparent if we rely on a single measure of income poverty. For example, we have seen in chapter 2 that the United States does quite badly in comparisons of income poverty and inequality across developed nations. The United States tends to have the highest overall rates in the industrialized world. Yet if we examine deprivation in terms of long-term unemployment, the United States does exceedingly well. While European countries have much lower levels of income poverty and inequality than the United States, they also have significantly higher levels of long-term unemployment. A focus upon various measures of deprivation offers a more nuanced perspective on poverty. It suggests that there are different dimensions to poverty and that there may be some important variations across these dimensions.

Finally, conceptualizing poverty in terms of deprivation brings with it a more humane and accessible image. It is sometimes difficult to imagine what \$18,392 really means (the poverty line for a family of four). It may be more intuitive to talk about long-term unemployment, illiteracy, or a shortened life expectancy. Broadening our focus to include deprivation brings a more human dimension and scale.

Poverty as an Injustice

Whereas the old paradigm's moral compass has been largely centered upon individual blame, the moral compass of a new paradigm rests upon the notion of injustice. There is a recognition that poverty constitutes an injustice of substantial magnitude. This view is based largely upon a juxtaposition of the first and third premises discussed earlier.

We have seen that poverty represents severe deprivation and hardship. This has been documented in countless studies, not to mention millions of human lives. The question of justice centers on whether such deprivation is deserved. From the perspective of the old paradigm, the answer is largely yes, with the blame for poverty lying with the poor themselves.

In contrast, the new paradigm views the condition of poverty as undeserved and unwarranted. As discussed in the first premise (and in greater detail in chapter 3), its roots can be traced back to the lack of economic opportunities and social supports. There simply are not enough decent-paying jobs and mechanisms in place (such as affordable health care, housing, or child care) to adequately support all American households. The condition of poverty represents an economic wrong that falls upon too many of our fellow citizens. What makes this injustice particularly grievous is the stark contrast between the wealth and abundance of America on the one hand and its levels of destitution on the other.

Let us employ Adam Smith's thought experiment of what this might look like to an "impartial spectator" (1759). Smith asks what an impartial spectator would make of a particular scenario—in this case the high levels of U.S. poverty within the context of vast material resources and wealth. As the impartial spectator delved into the current situation, he or she would soon learn that at any point in time more than one-third of the poor are children, and another 10 percent are elderly. Those of working age who encounter poverty have labored most of their lives but are often employed

at jobs that do not pay enough to raise their families above the poverty line. Health care and child care assistance for such families are minimal. Those who are not working often suffer from physical disabilities or illnesses that prevent employment. In fact, nearly 40 percent of the poor between ages 25 and 64 have some type of disability. The impartial spectator would also see isolated cases of individuals who appear to have brought their poverty upon themselves. He or she would observe that these cases are often used to characterize the entire population that experiences poverty.

On the other hand, the impartial spectator would see the vast amounts of American prosperity and wealth. The standards of living for families in the upper portions of society surpass those of all other nations in the world. The impartial spectator would note that such families enjoy many tax benefits and public policies that further strengthen their economic position. He or she would be able to observe that, although many of these individuals work hard, much of their wealth has been inherited. Yet the impartial spectator would rarely hear this factor being invoked to characterize the affluent portion of the population. Rather, hard work and ingenuity are the key words used to account for their success. He or she would also note that there are scattered cases in which individuals have indeed risen from rags to riches.

The impartial spectator would soon learn that, in spite of the material resources of American society, and in spite of the assistance for the well-to-do, the U.S. government does the least of any nation in the industrialized world to help its economically vulnerable escape from poverty. Rather, it resorts to encouraging the poor to engage in moral and responsible behavior, while at the same time cutting back its social safety net and economic supports. While doing so, it argues that it is helping the most vulnerable in society to escape poverty.

What would an impartial spectator make of all this? I believe that the answer would be a moral outrage at the injustice of the situation. The impartial spectator would be able to see this for what it is—a masquerade that gives to the economically comfortable while taking away from those who have the least and then justifies the whole process in terms of virtue. The injustice of this situation would be abundantly clear.

A new paradigm acknowledges this. Injustice, rather than blame, becomes the moral ground on which such a perspective is based. Poverty is viewed as a societal injustice and an economic wrong. It is particularly glaring

ing because it is both unnecessary and preventable. As mentioned in chapter 5, if the United States were an extremely impoverished country with a broken economy, widespread poverty would be regrettable but certainly understandable. Yet this is not the situation we face. The United States has both the means and the resources to address and substantially reduce its high levels of poverty. For reasons touched upon at various points in this book, the nation has chosen not to act. This inaction is simply unconscionable, given that we have the ability to confront such deprivation and human misery.

This type of injustice constitutes a strong impetus for change. It signals that a wrong is being committed that cries out for a remedy. The Revolutionary War, the abolitionist movement, women's suffrage, civil rights—all have been fueled by an understanding of the need and a passion to correct specific injustices that were taking place within particular historical times. The existence of poverty amid widespread prosperity must be seen in similar light.

The new paradigm recognizes this and is premised on the idea that change is essential in addressing the injustices of poverty. This is in sharp contrast with the old paradigm, in which the moral focus is on individual blame. This has had the effect of simply reinforcing the current policy of doing little, resulting in continued rates of elevated poverty. A new paradigm allows us to actively engage and confront poverty, rather than comfortably settling for the status quo of widespread impoverishment.

The Condition of Poverty Affects and Undermines Us All

A final building block of a new paradigm is the recognition that poverty impacts and undermines us all. Indeed, the subtitle of this book—*Why American Poverty Affects Us All*—reflects this central theme. In the past, we have viewed poverty as primarily affecting those who experience it, and occasionally their proximate neighborhoods. The old paradigm has consistently failed to recognize the connections that all Americans have to poverty. This failure is epitomized by the distinction that we often implicitly make between *them* and *us*—that is, the poor versus the nonpoor.

The new paradigm breaks down this distinction by demonstrating that virtually all Americans are affected by poverty in one way or another. In

chapter 4 I discussed several of the economic costs that are incurred by the entire population as a consequence of excessive poverty. Impoverishment produces severe health problems, inadequately educated children, and high rates of criminal activity. As a result, we pay more for health care, produce less productive workers, and divert needed resources into the building and maintaining of correctional facilities. In each of these cases, money is being spent on the back end of the problem rather than on the front end, which is assuredly a more expensive approach to take. To argue that we do not pay a steep price for our widespread poverty is putting our head in the sand.

It was also demonstrated in chapters 3 and 4 that a majority of the American population will encounter poverty and the welfare system at some point during their lifetimes, by age 75 three quarters of Americans will experience poverty or near poverty while two-thirds will utilize some type of safety net program by age 65. These numbers drive home the fact that poverty casts a very long shadow across the population. Rather than its being a question of *them*, poverty is clearly a question of *us*.

We are also connected to poverty in a somewhat different fashion as well. Its presence undermines us as a people and as a nation. It diminishes us all by tarnishing the integrity of our values. For example, the presence of widespread poverty juxtaposed against immense material prosperity appears to contradict much of what the Judeo-Christian ethic stands for. The Judeo-Christian ethic emphasizes that the barometer for a just and compassionate society lies in its treatment of the poor and vulnerable. As a nation and as a people, we appear to be badly failing at this test. Similarly, we have seen in chapter 5 that poverty impedes the ability of lower-income Americans to enjoy the full blessings of liberty, equality, and justice. The words "liberty and justice for all" ring hollow when a significant percentage of the population is economically and politically disenfranchised. This undermines every citizen, for it suggests that the American ideals we profess to believe in apply to some more than others. The very core of the American promise is compromised, diminishing us all.

Just as each of us is affected by poverty, each of us also has a responsibility for ending poverty. The concept of a collective responsibility was discussed in chapter 6. The new paradigm suggests that the alleviation of poverty will require a collective commitment from all Americans. This is in sharp contrast with the old paradigm, where the poor are basically left to fend for themselves. The new paradigm recognizes that poverty is an issue

of public policy and requires a broad-based commitment. Within the old paradigm, the public's apathy toward the poor has been part of the problem. Within the new paradigm, the public's engagement in alleviating poverty is part of the solution.

A new paradigm suggests that we understand the condition of poverty within the wider context of an interconnected environment. This shift in thinking can be illustrated in the way we have begun to think about environmental protections. Until recently, we had failed to recognize the harm that befalls us all as a result of air, water, and ground pollution. These had been seen as having little consequence beyond the immediate location of the pollutants. However, mounting evidence suggests that this way of thinking about pollution is incorrect and dangerous. We have begun to understand the impact that pollution has within a wider environmental context. Pollution that occurs in one community may very well affect those in communities downwind or downstream. The use of coal in midwestern power plants results in acid rain in northeastern forests. The burning of fossil fuels or the use of chlorofluorocarbons can have a profound impact upon the world's climate, causing global warming or the loss of the atmospheric ozone layer. The physical environment is increasingly being understood as an interconnected system. What occurs in one part of the system may very well affect other parts.

As our awareness of these interconnections have increased, we have begun to realize that we all have a role to play in the solution. The increased popularity of recycling programs illustrates this. The very small individual act of bringing newspapers or aluminum cans to the curbside for a weekly pickup can have a large collective impact on environmental quality. At the same time, we have also realized the necessity of regulation and governmental controls to help curb pollution. Leaving the problem solely up to the individual polluters is no longer viable. Structural changes are increasingly needed in order to help alleviate levels of national and global pollution.

In a similar fashion, we must begin to understand poverty within the context of an interconnected environment. Here, however, our environment consists of the social, economic, and political institutions of society. Poverty must be understood as having profound ripple effects that denigrate and diminish those environments. This understanding also allows us to appreciate the fact that we all have a role to play in the alleviation of poverty. Individual actions over a sustained period of time can result in sizable

changes. Yet as with our environmental problems, it is vital to recognize the importance that local, state, and federal governments must play in providing the resources, supports, and structure needed for a sustained effort.

Can the Shift Occur?

The question that naturally arises, of course, is whether such a shift in thinking can occur. Let us first take stock of what has been discussed so far. In the case of poverty, I have argued that the manner in which we have typically understood the issue has been both erroneous and a hindrance to constructive change. One of the motivations for this book has been to provide a new approach for understanding American poverty. This chapter has outlined several of the premises behind the formulation of a new paradigm.

The basic shift in such thinking begins by moving from a perspective that interprets poverty as an individual failing to one that recognizes the structural inadequacies that result in poverty. Second, the focus is upon poverty as a conditional state that individuals move in and out of, rather than on the static concept of poor people. Third, the human meaning of poverty is reinforced by going beyond the traditional emphasis on low income and adopting the broader concept of deprivation. Fourth, a new perspective points its moral compass toward injustice, rather than blame. There is a conviction that poverty amid American prosperity is a moral outrage. Finally, a new paradigm recognizes that we are all affected and undermined in countless ways by the existence of widespread poverty within our communities. Likewise, a new paradigm asserts that we are each a part of the answer.

It would be quite naive of me to suggest that this type of shift will occur overnight. It most certainly will not. The old paradigm and ways of thinking have been with us for a very long period of time, demonstrating a remarkably strong and lasting appeal. As Peter Edelman notes,

Low-income people and their allies will have to articulate a bold new vision for poverty reduction and create the public will to realize it. This is a daunting task. Good anti-poverty policy has never been a hallmark of the American social fabric. (2002: 20)

But it would also be wrong to ignore the fact that change does occur. What was once considered appropriate and in fashion, with time and

evidence, can become antiquated. What was once considered just can one day be reviled as unjust. What was once considered truth can eventually be recognized as myth. Thus, while we should not underestimate the staying power of the old paradigm, neither should we be immobilized by its apparent strength.

Let me conclude by mentioning several examples that illustrate the fact that profound changes in individual and societal attitudes and behaviors can occur over relatively short periods of time. The first is that of the appropriateness of smoking, and in particular, smoking in public spaces. Over the past fifteen years, there has been a remarkable change in the societal norms and behaviors regarding smoking. As the dangers of cigarette (as well as cigar and pipe) smoking have become more apparent, and in particular the dangers of secondary smoke, significant changes have occurred in society. Nonsmoking sections in restaurants are universal, with a growing number of restaurants becoming smokefree. Smoking is now against the law in a number of public and retail spaces where people smoked frequently in the past. For example, when I lived in North Carolina during 1984 and 1985, smoking was commonplace in both supermarkets and department stores. Today, it is unheard of in such public spaces. Likewise, when I first moved into my current office building at Washington University, students routinely smoked in the hallways. Today, students must go outside the building in order to light up. It is hard to even imagine a student smoking inside the building, given the powerful norms and sanctions against doing so. The same is true for smoking aboard a passenger airliner. The point is that a profound change has occurred within a relatively short period of time in our attitudes toward the acceptability of smoking in enclosed public spaces.⁷

A second example of changing attitudes and behaviors is the remarkable transformation that took place, both morally and legally, regarding the legitimacy of civil rights for black Americans. Between the mid-1950s and the late 1960s, the civil rights movement revealed the hypocrisy of America's Jim Crow laws, its legally segregated school systems, its denial of voting rights, and a host of other inequities that brutally impacted upon black Americans. Opinions about the civil rights movement were transformed within a relatively short period of time.⁸ At the beginnings of the movement, the asserted rights and claims were largely disregarded. By the end of the movement there was widespread recognition of the legitimacy of the de-

mands made by those within the civil rights movement. Equally important, a host of significant legal changes were signed into law during the mid- to late 1960s that reflected the magnitude of this profound change. These included the Voting Rights Act, the Fair Housing Act, and the Civil Rights Act.

A final example of rapid changes taking place in how an issue is viewed and acted upon is that of the physical environment. Prior to 1960, public concern over the environment was limited and weak. Yet after publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* (1962), concern for the environment increased dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s. The public began to see graphic examples of the consequences of unchecked pollution. Reflecting this concern, between 1969 and 1976, seventeen separate pieces of federal environmental legislation were passed, including the Clean Air Act of 1970, the Clean Water Act of 1972, and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency. Today, environmental protection is an issue that the public consistently places near the top of its overall concerns.

In each of these cases, the old ways of thinking had been dominant over extended stretches of time. Yet dramatic shifts occurred within relatively short time frames. A transformation took place in terms of how each of these social issues were viewed. As the dangers of the status quo became apparent, Americans realized the importance of paying closer attention to these concerns. By no means have we solved all of the problems or gone the necessary distance. Nevertheless, there has been a fundamental shift in the dominant paradigm applied to each of these social issues.⁹

Such a shift is now needed in the case of poverty. Widespread poverty amid prosperity must be seen as unacceptable. The status quo of an exceedingly high risk of poverty during the life course must be recognized as detrimental to us all. This chapter has sketched out a rough framework for what a new understanding into this issue might look like. Building on this paradigm, let us now turn to a particular set of strategies and policies designed to alleviate and reduce the risk of American poverty.