

Cost of Living Cost of Smoking: Evidence Brief 3

Language on poverty: moving from stigmatising to empowering?

Stigmatising language around poverty

Individual problem, moral failure, undeserving poor, culture of poverty, developing countries.

- Traditionally, poverty has been viewed as a consequence of individual ineptitude, deficiency or moral failure (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013).²⁹ Thus, according to this view, poverty is a problem of the person (Katz, 2013).³⁰
- In an interview study with sixty men and women in north-east England (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013) with experience of the low-pay/no-pay cycle, participants associated poverty with only developing countries: 'People in poverty? I mean, I've seen poverty in the Philippines . . . it's terrible in this day and age, it really is . . . there's not a great deal of poverty round here but there's hardship. I think that's a better word for it' (Lennie, 57, unemployed). Furthermore, to identify oneself as poor is to identify oneself as having a problem and being in need of help. When the poor were identified, these were the undeserving poor defined by a perceived lack of respectability and inability to manage, a moral failure worthy of blame.
- Another stigmatising term emerging from the literature is that the culture of poverty (i.e., the actions and attitudes perpetuating poverty at the individual and family levels) (Katz, 2013). Among the key features of this culture are specific personality traits including a lack of impulse control, a strong present-time orientation with little ability to defer gratification and to plan for the future.

Moving towards empowerment and an assets-based approach

Complex issue – situational factors at play, fortitude, resourcefulness, contextually appropriate responses, hidden talents.

- Gweshengwe and Hassan (2020)³¹ highlight that poverty i) is a phenomenon with a plethora of local terminologies³²; ii) has multiple dimensions (financial, social, health) which interlink with and reinforce each other; iii) is experienced differently by men and by women and can differ according to a geographical area, social group, and political or economic context; iv) can be absolute or relative³³. This



highlights the complexity of poverty and the many different factors that are at play outside of the individual.

- Shildrick & MacDonald (2013): To describe their own circumstances, participants reached for terms like 'hard up' and things 'being tight' but simultaneously emphasized their ability to 'get by' and 'cope' with limited resources. 'Managing', in particular, was a term that carried great resonance and was frequently used as a counterpoint to 'being poor'. Thus, interviews stressed the





fortitude, resourcefulness, and ability of people to manage.

- Katz (2013) deconstructs the term culture of poverty by offering an alternative explanation, focusing on the situation. Each new generation readopts these values and beliefs, not because they are passed on by their parents, but because they must adapt to similar constraints. The behaviours typically associated with this culture (e.g., impulsiveness, present-time orientation, immediate gratification) are the contextually appropriate responses to their social isolation and specific situation. Therefore, the mechanism responsible for perpetuation of this culture is the lack of improvement in living conditions.
- Pepper and Nettle (2017)³⁴ agree with this idea by emphasising that present-oriented behaviours are indeed a contextually appropriate response to structural and ecological factors rather than a pathology or a failure of willpower.

- Frankenhuis and Nettle (2020)³⁵ take this line of thought further by suggesting that people living in poverty may have developed strengths that enhance their ability to cope with challenges in their lives.
 - **Time preference:** A focus on the present carries long-term costs and might lead to poverty traps, however, such focus is not detrimental for all people. Some people need to use their resources immediately to meet basic needs (e.g., food, shelter) or live in conditions in which future rewards are unlikely to materialise. The “smart” thing to do depends on the expected payoffs of options, which depend on the structure of the environment.
 - **Hidden talents:** 1) People in poverty develop intact or enhanced abilities for solving challenges relevant in their environments; 2) People might become adept at detecting imminent dangers and opportunities; 3) Shifting efficiently among different tasks or mental sets; 4) Tracking rapidly changing conditions; 5) Persisting when pursuing an immediate reward; 6) Reacting faster to, and recovering faster from, negative affect displayed by other people in their environments.

²² [Poverty Talk: How People Experiencing Poverty Deny Their Poverty and Why They Blame ‘The Poor’ \(sagepub.com\)](#)

³⁰ [The Undeserving Poor: America’s Enduring Confrontation with Poverty: Fully ... - Michael B. Katz - Google Books](#)

³¹ Full article: Defining the characteristics of poverty and their implications for poverty analysis (tandfonline.com)

³² For example, in Indonesia, Malay-speaking communities also use varied terminologies to refer to poverty, which include tidak mampu (unable), tidak punya apa-apa (have nothing), tidak cukup (not enough), kurang (lack), hidup susah (difficult life) and wena sa ambai (material lack).

³³ Absolute poverty is a condition of acute deprivation in the form of severe food insecurity, premature death, ill-health, illiteracy, homelessness, lack of clothing, etc. On the other hand, relative poverty is when a person is regarded as poor in comparison to other persons in his or her society.

³⁴ [The behavioural constellation of deprivation: Causes and consequences | Behavioral and Brain Sciences | Cambridge Core](#)

³⁵ [The Strengths of People in Poverty \(sagepub.com\)](#)

